

Parables Of The Millstone And The Lost Sheep

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In Matthew 18, the disciples ask Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Thinking that He was about to set up a great temporal kingdom, they want to know who would hold the primary offices and posts of honor and profit. Mark informs us that they had disputed this subject while traveling (Mark 9:34). Jesus asks them what they had been arguing about. Luke adds that Jesus perceives their thoughts (Luke 9:47). The disciples, conscious that Jesus is aware of their dispute, are at first embarrassed into silence, but they eventually ask Him to decide it for them. Jesus' reply are the parables found in Matthew 18:1-14.

1. What does Jesus mean by "unless you are converted and become as little children"? Matthew 18:1-5; 25:35-40; Mark 9:35; Psalm 51:10-13, 17; I Corinthians 14:20.

Comment: The word "converted" means to change or turn. Specifically, it means to change from one way of life or set of beliefs to another. Sometimes it means "regeneration"—beginning to live a new spiritual life. Jesus tells the disciples that their attitudes of ambition are wrong, and they must change or have no part in His Kingdom. To do this, they must be like small children, who, for the most part, lack arrogance and pride. Children are characteristically humble and teachable.

According to Mark, Jesus teaches them that, "if anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." The most humble Christian will be the most distinguished, and he who is willing to be esteemed last and least will be esteemed first. To regard oneself as God regards us is humility. One who receives and loves someone with an innocent child's humble attitude, who may be weak in the faith, displays true Christian character and loves Jesus Christ. "Receive" in Matthew 18:5 means to approve, love, or treat with kindness; to aid in time of need.

2. How serious is an offense against a weak Christian? Matthew 18:6-9; Mark 9:42-50; Romans 14:19-23; I Corinthians 8:9-13; I John 2:1, 18-19, 28.

Comment: Anyone who causes a Christian who manifests this childlike attitude to sin, or who places anything in his way to impede his faithfulness, would be better off being weighted down and thrown to his death into the sea. It would be better for him to die before committing such a sin. Christ regards injuring or causing a weak Christian to sin as a very serious offense. We are all human, so offenses will happen, but our Savior pronounces woe on the person who offends and causes others to sin. Anyone who leads others into sin bears great guilt. Only a deep-seated wickedness attempts to confuse and destroy another's potential.

A Christian's potential is so fabulous that he must do whatever he can to ensure it. No matter how important they are to us, we must abandon any worldly attachments, friendships, and employments that will lead us into sin, or we will receive eternal judgment. Of course, Jesus' illustrations of cutting off a limb or plucking out an eye are not literal, but He wants us to understand the stakes. It is far better to attain to eternal life

without enjoying the pleasures of sin, than to enjoy them here in this life and be lost. Thus, Jesus emphasizes that we must remove temptation and avoid sin at all costs.

3. Why are weak Christians valuable to God? Matthew 18:10-11; Romans 14:1-4; 15:1-3; I Corinthians 1:26-29; Hebrews 1:14.

Comment: The explanation of why we should not despise weak Christians relates to the care Christ gives to them. First, God's angels watch over and aid His followers. Some of the universe's highest and noblest beings, who enjoy the favor and fellowship of God, minister to even the most obscure Christians! They are that precious to God.

Second, Christ Himself came to save the weak. He came in search of the weak and base that were lost, found them, and redeemed them, according to God's great purpose. They may be obscure and little in the eyes of the world, but they cannot be objects of contempt if Christ sought them and died to save them.

4. Is something lost and then found more valuable to us than those things that we have with us? Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:4-10; James 5:19-20.

Comment: To demonstrate further the reason why we should not despise weaker Christians, Jesus illustrates the joy one feels when a lost possession is found. A shepherd rejoices over the recovery of one of his flock that had wandered away more than over all that stayed with him. Similarly, God rejoices when a person who has gone astray from His truth turns back to His way of life. In like manner, we rejoice most in our health when we recover from a serious disease. We rejoice more over a child rescued from danger than over those who were never at risk. We rejoice more when property is saved from fire or flood than when all was well and we took it for granted.

Certainly, God's desires all to have salvation according to His joyful plan. He takes the most joy, however, from those who seem to defy the odds to grow and overcome more than others who are more naturally strong. The strong must "bear with" the weak (Romans 15:1), and together they will glorify God!