

## Chapter 73: Leaving the Ninety-Nine

*Matthew 18:10–14*

In the previous passage, Jesus had redefined greatness by insisting that his disciples should learn to recognize a little child who believes in him as great in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:1–9). In the course of that section, Jesus not only encouraged his disciples to do everything that they could to receive children, but also to avoid harming those children. Now, Jesus extends this teaching to show us how precious God considers these children to be. Indeed, Jesus explains the very reason why he himself came from the Father into the world: *Jesus came to seek and to save the lost.*

### The Hope of the Gospel (Matt. 18:10)

Jesus continues his discourse, saying, “See that you do not despise one of these little ones” (v. 10a). Lenski explains that the idea of “despise” in this word is very literally “to think down on,’ as though these little ones could be disregarded, as though they amounted to little or nothing. This is the attitude that runs roughshod over the little ones, that neglects their spiritual needs and works them harm in all sorts of ways.”<sup>1</sup> As France notes, “To ‘despise’ is the opposite of the ‘welcome’ in v. 5. It is the natural way of the world to ‘despise little ones,’ in the sense of not taking them seriously or giving their interests priority.”<sup>2</sup> Negatively, then, Jesus warns his disciples about thinking about the little ones in the kingdom of heaven as lowly and unimportant.

Positively, Jesus then explains that all of heaven regards children with extraordinary importance: “For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven” (v. 10b). This is a controversial text, since many have taken this verse as a proof for the existence of guardian angels (“their angels”). Although some have gone to great lengths to extrapolate an extensive doctrine of guardian angels, commentators like Morris offer probably the most reasonable version of this interpretation: “We can say no more than that the passage looks like a reference to guardian angels but comes short of proof, and in any case we have no further information on who such angels are or what they do.”<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Carson (following B. B. Warfield) offers a persuasive minority view that the “angels” are a reference to the spirits of children after their death, on the basis of a text like Acts 12:15, where the group of Christians praying for Peter believe that Rhoda has only heard the voice of Peter’s “angel” (i.e., his spirit after his death).<sup>4</sup>

In either case, the extraordinary part of this verse hinges on the fact that these “angels” (whoever

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<sup>1</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 691.

<sup>2</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 686.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 464–65.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 454–55. Carson also points to Jesus’ teaching that human beings will be “like the angels in heaven’ as to marriage (22:30) and immortality (Lk 20:36)” (p. 455).

they are) are permitted to “see the face of my Father who is in heaven.” To see God’s face is the highest privilege for any creature, especially since no human being can see God’s face and live (Ex. 33:20). If the former view is correct, then Jesus is speaking about the importance of these guardian angels by acknowledging their privileged access to see the face of God. If the latter view is correct, then Jesus is talking about the Father’s bringing the children themselves into his presence after their deaths.

In my mind, both of these interpretations have merit as to explaining the precise nuance of what Jesus says. Regardless of which interpretation we may take, then, we should recognize the larger principle at play here. Hagner helpfully comments, “A more general idea is in view, namely, that angels represent the ‘little ones’ before the throne of God. The point here is not to speculate on the *ad hoc* role of angels in aiding disciples of Jesus but rather simply to emphasize the importance of the latter to God.”<sup>5</sup> The Father assigns the greatest priority and privilege to even the most (seemingly) insignificant believers, a fact that should prompt all believers to evaluate how they estimate “greatness” within their ranks.

Before moving to the next section, we should note in passing that, while some manuscripts include a v. 11, “for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Metzger writes, “There can be little doubt that [these] words...are spurious here, being absent from the earliest witnesses representing several textual types (Alexandrian, Egyptian, Antiochian), and manifestly borrowed by copyists from Lk 19:10. The reason for the interpolation was apparently to provide a connection between ver. 10 and verses 12–14.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, if we realize that the texts we have found surviving in a certain region had been copied at some point from other texts available in that certain region, then it is telling that the manuscripts that include this text are only found in one area. This suggests that the original Gospel of Matthew did not include this verse, so that as copies were taken and spread throughout the ancient world, most of those copies did not include v. 11. In one area, however, a copyist inserted the verse from Luke 19:10, and then all the subsequent copyists copied that incorrect addition. In these cases, we should notice that even this “error” in certain manuscripts makes no theological difference to the text, but only imports a verse from elsewhere in the Scriptures. Those who argue that these kinds of scribal errors are proof that we cannot trust the Bible are not honestly representing the reality of the matter.

## The Help of the Gospel (Matt. 18:12–13)

To illustrate Jesus’ point further, he offers a simple parable: “What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?” (v. 12). The question, “does he not...” is phrased in such a way that “expects an unhesitating affirmative answer.”<sup>7</sup> The reason for such an expectation

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<sup>5</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 527. Hagner takes a modified view of the guardian angel position by thinking that Jesus speaks of angels not mainly as deployed for action in the field of human affairs, but as representatives of human beings in the presence of God. They “presumably look after their [the little ones’] welfare primarily through intercession, but perhaps also in other ways” (p. 527).

<sup>6</sup> Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 694.

seems to hinge on the economic loss that the loss of one sheep would represent, even for a man of such significant wealth as to own ninety-nine other sheep: “at whatever economic level one operates, one percent of one’s wealth is normally treated as significant.”<sup>8</sup> This man is not a “hired hand” (John 10:11–15), but the owner who stands to lose much wealth and therefore “takes action to recover it before it is too late.”<sup>9</sup> The language of “went astray” is related to the verb “to deceive” or, in a passive form, “to be deceived,” so that Lenski writes, “This is precisely what may happen to an inexperienced child or some other believer: deceit causes them to stray away.”<sup>10</sup>

As Jesus concludes his parable, he suggests that the man would not begrudgingly go to rescue the sheep, but that he would celebrate greatly over its recovery: “And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray” (v. 13). On the one hand, we should be careful to avoid suggesting that the shepherd does not care about the other ninety-nine. Morris captures the idea well when he explains that, instead, Jesus is talking about “a peculiar joy over bringing one that is lost safely into the fold. The flock then has not lost one of its members.”<sup>11</sup> The point Jesus is emphasizing here does not demean the ninety-nine, but only elevates the importance of the one.<sup>12</sup> In the wider context of Matthew 18 so far, Jesus is saying that the Father will spare no effort to reclaim even the little ones whom the world counts as insignificant and unimportant.

### **The Heart of the Gospel (Matt. 18:14)**

Jesus then concludes this parable with an extraordinary statement: “So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (v. 14). Most directly, this tells us something important about the heart of God. Here, Jesus is explaining the reason that his Father had sent him into the world, as well as the lengths that the Father will go to reclaim his wandering sheep.<sup>13</sup> While Jesus never explicitly mentions the cross in Matthew 18, he spends the entire chapter giving the background explanation for why he must ultimately go to the cross, as he has been telling his disciples repeatedly since Matthew 16:21. Here, then, Jesus reveals the Father’s breathtaking love for those whom the world thinks down upon.

At a practical level, Hagner observes that this parable lays down an important principle for “right conduct in the church. That is, because every little one is so important to the Father, the way one acts toward any one of them is extremely important in God’s sight.”<sup>14</sup> Calvin also observes a special responsibility of pastors in the church toward the little ones: “Christ therefore intended to show that a good teacher ought not to labor less to recover those that are *lost*, than to preserve those which are in his possession; though according to Matthew the comparison proceeds farther, and teaches us not only that we ought to treat with kindness the disciples of Christ, but that we ought to bear with their

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<sup>8</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 742.

<sup>9</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 687.

<sup>10</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 694.

<sup>11</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 466.

<sup>12</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 695.

<sup>13</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 696.

<sup>14</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 525.

imperfections, and endeavor, when they wander, to bring them back to the road.”<sup>15</sup> God loves the little ones, and his example in sending his only Son to die for these little ones should motivate us to do whatever we can to protect and preserve them as well.

## Discussion Questions

1. What does Jesus mean when he warns us not to “despise” the little ones (v. 10a)? In what ways are we tempted to despise those whom the world counts as insignificant? What do you think that Jesus means when he talks about “their angels” in v. 10b? What kind of esteem does this suggest that the Father has for little children? How does the Father’s fierce love for “these little ones” affect your own thinking about them?
2. What kind of a man would have owned one hundred sheep (v. 12)? Why is the one, lost sheep so important to the shepherd? What would you do to reclaim 1% of your own wealth? Would you go to the same lengths to pursue and to reclaim one wandering, errant sinner? How does this parable teach us to love little children like God does? How does the Bible teach us that we can grow in our affections for whatever God loves?
3. What does Jesus mean when he says that it is not the will of his Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish (v. 14)? How does this statement relate to the biblical doctrine of predestination? Why should our doctrine of predestination not override the biblical statements of God’s desire that all should be saved? How do those doctrines fit together? Here, what does Jesus teach us about the Father’s love in sending Jesus into the world for sinners?
4. To what degree does God’s heart to save sinners, as Jesus reveals in this passage, weigh on you? When you think of the love of God, do you imagine God’s love toward you to be as committed, desirous, and deliberate as Jesus suggests here? Or, when you think of God’s love, do you recognize the intensity of God’s love toward the lost who do not yet know him? How might God’s burning desire to save sinners prompt you to share the gospel with others?

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<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:340–41.