

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 18 (PART 1)

Matthew 18 begins the 4th large discourse in the gospel of Matthew. This section focuses on interpersonal relationships and the new community that Jesus is forming.

Matthew 18:1-4 - The Kingdom & Kids

Q - “Who Is the Greatest?” **Why do you think the disciples ask that question?**

“Like a child”

Q - What are some of the qualities of a child that Jesus hopes his disciples will model?

Q - What are some of the qualities that a child loses as they become an adult?

v. 3 - “Unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

This is a very typical Jesus’ response. The disciples ask a question, Jesus turns things around on them. They ask “*who is the greatest*” and he essentially answers “*forget about who is the greatest, why don’t you focus on what is required to even enter to begin with!*” In the time of Jesus, children had no status or rights. The disciples are asking about ranking in the coming kingdom and Jesus highlights someone with the lowest rank in their thinking.

Then Jesus answers that whoever humbles themselves like a child will be greatest.

Matthew 18:5-7 - Loving & Offending

Jesus builds on his teaching on childlike humility to reinforce his value that how you care for others is an indication of how you care for him. If you welcome and receive a child, you’re welcoming and receiving him. If you, as his disciple, humble yourself as a child and are welcomed by others, they are welcoming Christ. Conversely if anyone rejects one of Jesus’ disciples, they are rejecting him.

He also makes a pretty confronting statement about those who put stumbling blocks in the way of his people. (He uses the phrase “these little ones who believe in me”). If anyone is causing these little ones to stumble, it’s better for them to be dead! This is the first instance of Jesus using hyperbole (intentional exaggeration) to stress the seriousness of an issue.

v. 6 - stumble - Greek word *skandalizo* (σκανδαλίζω). It means “to put a snare (in the way), hence to cause to stumble, to give offense”

Jesus is clear on how he feels towards those who put obstacles in the way of people walking with him. These obstacles could be in the form of add-ons - additional man man traditions or

practices that people teach must be done in order to be right with God. Think: the tradition of the Pharisees.

These obstacles would also be in the form of side of the road detours and distractions - people that are trying to tempt the disciple of Jesus to stop following him. These might be temptations to sin, temptations to quit, deceptions to pull people away from truth. Think: the world, the devil, evil people.

Jesus doesn't shrink back on this issue. He takes seriously the things/forces/people that might be against his people. I think we ought to have a similar zeal towards those things that are potentially in our way. Jesus isn't naive to think that there won't be difficulty in this world (it's inevitable that stumbling blocks come) - but he is targeting those who cause them.

Matthew 18:8-9 - Take Sin Seriously

This is the second hyperbolic statement of this section. It echoes what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:30). Here Jesus isn't so much talking about other people who inhibit entrance into the kingdom of God, but our own difficulties which may end up being self-inflicted stumbling blocks.

Jesus is really serious when it comes to *anything* that might stand in our way of following him and entering the kingdom of God. And he is calling his disciples here to also now take these things seriously.

Too often Christians can take temptation, sin and the effects of sin too casually. We can rationalize sinful behavior. We can attempt to negate our own issues because we point to the issues of others. We can wrongly emphasize the power of God's grace by confusing God's kindness with a license to sin instead of a motivator for us to not sin. Sometimes we wrongly overvalue some sins and devalue others (ex: we know physical abuse or immoral sexual behavior is sinful but don't feel the same way about being judgmental, holding unforgiveness or speaking evil of other people).

Jesus challenges us to consider whether or not we are bothered by the things in our life that slow us down, things that sever us from our Father and our family, and things that may ultimately keep us outside of the Kingdom of God.

Q - So we know Jesus isn't advocating literal mutilation, but what does it look like to take our own sin seriously in light of the way Jesus speaks in these verses?

v. 9 - fiery hell - ESV Study Bible - "The Greek for hell in 18:9 is gehenna, a name derived from the Valley of the Son of Hinnom near Jerusalem (cf. 2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 7:31; 19:2; etc.), where rubbish was constantly burned so that it came to be seen as a metaphor for the fire of hell (cf. Matt. 3:12; Rev. 20:15; etc.)."

Hands and feet represent where we go and what we do. Our eyes represent what we see, what we think about. Those are the areas Jesus is concerned about.

Matthew 18:10 - Angels

The word “despise” means “to think little of” (*kataphroneo*, καταφρονέω). This call isn’t to the world - it’s to the disciples, it’s to us.

Remember, children were not ranked or taken seriously in their day. Jesus is saying, that’s not a good thing. They have value even if they don’t add measurable value to the things the world values.

Who in your life do you think little of? Why? Who do you look at as a nuisance or who gets in the way of things that really matter? Who is ignorable? Who is marginalized?

Jesus isn’t saying that bad or rude behavior is okay. He’s not really even talking about the behavior of the children. He’s talking about the heart posture of the adults! And he adds this curious line to finish this thought when he says “their angels in heaven continually the face of my father who is in heaven”. Whatever this means we learn that these little ones, who we should not think little of, are being valued and cared for by angelic hosts close to God himself.

This doesn’t necessarily teach that each person has a specifically assigned “guardian angel” but rather that these little ones are known, seen, cared for and defended by heavenly forces. So we shouldn’t mess with them.

As we step back and consider the opening movement of Matthew 18, we’re reminded that life in the kingdom of God looks radically different than life in the kingdoms of this world. Greatness isn’t found in climbing higher. It’s found in stooping lower. Jesus invites His followers to adopt the posture of children: humble, dependent, and without status. He warns us that true spiritual danger often comes not from outside opposition, but from the pride, carelessness, and sin that dwells within us and among us. Whether it’s the temptation to exalt ourselves, to dismiss others, or to minimize our own sin, Jesus calls us to see these as serious stumbling blocks that must be dealt with intentionally and radically.

This section challenges us to examine both how we walk with Christ and how we walk with one another. Do we welcome the weak, the overlooked, the spiritually young? Do we take responsibility for the ways we might lead others - or ourselves - into sin? And are we willing to fight against whatever might sever us from the life God intends for us? In a world that celebrates self-promotion and dismisses the lowly, Jesus redefines community around humility, holiness, and heavenly value. His words invite us into a different kind of greatness, the kind that looks like childlike faith, radical repentance, and deep care for every person made in the image of God. And he calls us to take seriously anything that might be in the way of our walk of faith and keep us from following our Lord wherever he leads.