

Matthew 18:1-14*NIV Harmony 124-26; Loyal 159-62***Introduction**

1. Warren Wiersbe observes, “Why do some of God’s children have such a difficult time getting along with each other? A poem I heard states the problem perfectly:
To live above, with saints we love
Will certainly be glory.
To live below, with saints we know—Well, that’s another story!
With so much division and dissension among professing Christians these days, we desperately need what Matthew 18 has to teach. Jesus rebuked His disciples for their pride and desire for worldly greatness, and He taught them the...essentials for unity and harmony among God’s people (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Loyal*, 159).
2. The first and perhaps most important essential necessary to achieve unity and harmony among God’s people is humility.
3. Jesus taught His disciples an important lesson about humility and its application in kingdom ministry.
4. **Read Matthew 18:1-14.**

A. An Object Lesson in Humility (1-5)

1. The disciples had been arguing among themselves about which of them would be the greatest in Jesus’ coming kingdom.
 - a. I can imagine that Peter, James, and John were making a case for their higher positions based on being with Jesus at the Transfiguration.
 - b. Peter may have even pointed out that he was the first to openly confess Jesus as God’s Son at Caesarea and that Jesus had chosen him to walk with on the water and had also miraculously paid his temple tax.
 - c. We don’t know who said what, but we do know they were arguing about which of them was greatest.
 - d. Wiersbe writes, “The selfishness and disunity of God’s people is a scandal to the Christian faith. What causes these problems? Pride—thinking ourselves more important than we really are. It was pride that led man into sin at the beginning (Gen. 3:5). When Christians are living for themselves and not for others, then there is bound to be conflict and division (Phil. 2:1ff)” (Wiersbe, 160).
2. The disciples came to Jesus seeking a resolution to their self-centered argument which is documented not only in Matthew’s gospel but also in Mk 9:33-37 and Lk 9:46-48.
 - a. They asked Jesus, “‘Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’” (1).
 - b. Jesus did not answer them with words as much as with an object lesson in humility.
3. Jesus “...called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven....’” (2-3)
4. Wiersbe writes, “True humility means knowing yourself, accepting yourself, and being yourself—your *best* self—to the glory of God. It means avoiding two extremes: thinking *less* of yourself than you ought to (as did Moses when God called him, Ex. 3:11ff.), or thinking *more* of yourself than you ought to (Rom. 12:3). The truly humble person does not deny the gifts God has given him, but uses them to the glory of God. An unspoiled child has the characteristics that make for humility: trust (Matt. 18:6), dependence, the desire to make others happy, an absence of boasting or selfish desire to be greater than others. By nature, all of us are rebels who want to be celebrities instead of servants. It takes a great deal of teaching for us to learn the lessons of humility. The disciples wanted to know who was greatest in the kingdom. But Jesus warned them that, apart from humility, they could not even enter the kingdom! They had to be converted—turned around in their thinking—or they would never make it” (Wiersbe, 160).

B. The Key to Humility: Self-Sacrifice (6-9)

1. Jesus, most likely with child still in their midst, said, “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” (6)
 - a. Craig Blomberg observes, “In first-century thought children were often very little esteemed. Jesus ascribes to them great value, but here his more immediate point is that would-be disciples must share their condition of utter dependence, in this case, on God. Without a recognition of one’s fundamental inability to save oneself and without a subsequent complete reliance on God’s mercy, no one can enter the kingdom of heaven. Conversely, those who most clearly perceive their helplessness and who respond accordingly are the greatest in the kingdom....” (Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* in NAC, 273).
 - b. However, the term “little ones” (Gk., *mikron*) refers not only to children but to believers of all ages since Jesus qualifies the term by adding “those who believe in me” (Gk *pisteuouton eis eme*).
 - c. Wiersbe observes, “It seems that Jesus is, in these verses, blending two concepts: the human child as an example of humility, and the child of God no matter what his age might be. As Christians, we must not only accept the little children for Jesus’ sake, but we must also receive *all* of God’s children and seek to minister to them (Rom. 14:1ff). It is a serious matter to cause a child to sin or to lead him astray. It is equally as serious to cause another believer to stumble because of our poor example (Rom. 14:13ff.; 1 Cor. 8:9ff). True humility thinks of others, not of self....The truly humble person helps to build up others, not tear them down. He is a stepping-stone, not a stumbling block” (Wiersbe, 160-61)
 - d. We must never to cause another believer to “stumble” (Gk., *skandalise*) due to our direct actions, inactions, or poor witness.
 - 1) In our last lesson, Jesus paid the temple tax for Himself and Peter lest their failure to pay may “cause offense” (Gk., *skandalisomen* in Mt 17:27) such that the Jewish tax collectors stumbled in their faith.
 - 2) Paul also addressed this issue in his instructions to the Corinthians about not misusing their great freedom in Christ in a manner that causes others of weaker faith to stumble (cf., 1 Cor 10:23-33).
 - e. A better alternative for the one causing another to stumble in their faith would be “to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”
 - 1) That would be a horrible way to die, but better than facing the just and righteous wrath of God.
 - 2) The horror of this imagined death points to the seriousness of causing another to stumble.
 - 3) Wiersbe also adds, “In these days of child neglect and child abuse, we need to take Christ’s warning seriously. It is better to drown with a heavy millstone around one’s neck, than to abuse a child and face the judgment of God (Matt. 18:6)” (Wiersbe, 161).
2. Mt 18:7 is unique to Matthew: “Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!”
 - a. This is both a strong warning and a reality check.
 - b. Blomberg writes, “Verse 7 recognizes the inevitability of seduction in a fallen world but at the same time affirms the accountability of all offenders....God in Christ offers a way out of this otherwise hopeless situation, so that those who reject Jesus have only themselves to blame” (Blomberg, 275).
3. Radical action is needed to avoid causing others to stumble. (8-9)
 - a. Jesus’ teaching hear repeated His radical commands to avoid falling into the trap of sin through lust and adultery in the context of His Sermon on the Mount in Mt 5:29-30.
 - b. Here, Jesus reapplied that radical command to the avoidance of causing another to stumble.
 - c. Is Jesus really talking about physically maiming oneself to avoid sin or causing another to stumble?
 - d. Wiersbe comments on the meaning of this radical command when he writes, “Therefore, anything that makes me stumble must be removed from my life, for if it is not, I cause others to stumble. Jesus had uttered similar words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:29-30). Paul used the eye, hand, and foot to illustrate the mutual dependence of members of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:14-17). Humility begins with self-examination, and it continues with self-denial. Jesus was not suggesting that we maim our bodies, for harming our physical bodies can never change the spiritual condition of our hearts. Rather, He was instructing us to perform ‘spiritual surgery’ on ourselves, removing anything that causes us to stumble or that causes others to stumble. The humble person lives for Jesus first and

others next—he puts himself last. He is happy to deprive himself even of good things, if it will make others happy. Perhaps the best commentary on this is Philippians 2:1-18 [which documents the radical steps Jesus took to give up heaven for the cross that bought our salvation.]” (Wiersbe, 160-62, brackets mine).

C. An Example of Humble Care (10-14)

1. Jesus said, “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.” (10)
 - a. Jesus repeated the command to “not despise” (Gk., *me kataphronesete*) these “little ones” (Gk., *micron*)
 - 1) He is still focused on the relationship of a believer to other believers.
 - 2) Again, the focus is on how one must act in humility in response to the needs of other believers.
 - b. Blomberg notes, “Verse 10b proves somewhat cryptic. It may or may not imply the idea of guardian angels, that each person has an angel watching out for and representing him or her before God.” (Blomberg, 276)
 - 1) Do you believe in guardian angels?
 - 2) Whether we have a designated angel watching over us or not, we know that God Himself is looking out for us (cf., Dt 31:6; Hb 13:5 – “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”)
 - 3) Jesus is the Good Shepherd (cf., Jn 10:11-18), and He calls us to join Him in seeking out the lost.
 - 4) Sometimes God’s angel (Gk., *angelos* – “messenger”) watching over another may be you or me.
 - 5) We all need those who seek us and watch out for us with godly love.
2. Mt 18:12-14 echoes the teaching of Jesus in Lk 15:3-7 but applies it in a unique way here in Matthew.
 - a. Blomberg notes, “Jesus proceeds with the well-known parable of the lost sheep. The main plot unfolds exactly as in Luke 15:3-7, but most of the details differ. These two passages probably represent similar teachings of Jesus from two separate settings in his ministry. In Luke Jesus uses the lost sheep to represent unsaved sinners. In Matthew he applies the parable to errant disciples, as the distinctive framework of the passage (vv. 10,14) makes plain” (Blomberg, 275-76).
 - b. Wiersbe concludes, “Like the good shepherd, God seeks the lost and saves them, and we must not cause them to perish. If the shepherd goes after an adult sheep, how much more important is it that he protects the lambs!” (Wiersbe, 161)
 - c. Blomberg adds, “The three main points associated with the main characters of the parable apply equally to the unbeliever (Luke) and backslidden Christian (Matthew): (1) God takes the initiative to go to great lengths to bring back to himself those who are estranged from him. (2) Reclaiming such people should lead to joyous celebration. (3) The faithfulness of the majority may never excuse us from ignoring anyone who still remains distant from God” (Blomberg, 277).

D. Reflections

1. Achieving godly humility in life is difficult for sinful, selfish human beings, even for believers.
2. We must consider others first and place their needs before our own.
3. We must give up those actions or activities that destroy our witness for Christ and which may cause another believer to stumble.
4. Jesus is the ultimate example of godly humility. We must look to Him and follow His example as He helps us to be humble.
5. We have each been the lost sheep needing to be found. Thank God for the ones who sought you out when you were lost. They were led to you by Jesus, the Good Shepherd.
6. In humility, we must seek those who are lost or backslidden from the Lord so that we may rejoice in their and our salvation in Jesus Christ.