

LEAST AND GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM.

– MATT. 18:1-14. – AUGUST 5. –

GOLDEN TEXT: – "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such [like] is the Kingdom of God."

THE GOLDEN TEXT chosen for this lesson is most inappropriate and misleading. It was spoken respecting children, and as indicating our Lord's sympathy and love for them. Indeed, we cannot think of any truly great man or woman who would not look upon childhood with loving sympathy and interest; and viewing the blank pages of the life represented in them be awakened to tender feelings respecting the trials and difficulties and disappointments which must lie before them in the path of life, and with hopes and good wishes respecting their possible victories and attainments of desirable characters, as a result of those experiences and conflicts. That Jesus loved children, yea, loved everything guileless and pure, is not to be questioned, and our Golden Text substantiates this conviction.

The Kingdom of God will not be composed either wholly or in part of infants who died without either knowledge, experience or character attainments. Had such been God's purpose it would not have required nearly nineteen centuries to complete the "little flock" of "one hundred and forty-four thousand;" nor would it have been said that a good fight must be fought and victory achieved and graces of the spirit attained by "patient perseverance in well doing," and that all in all it must be through much tribulation to the flesh, voluntarily and joyfully accepted, that any can enter into the Kingdom. Infants can have no share under this Gospel call; but they will surely share the great world-blessing that will speedily follow the completion of the Church and its glorification as God's Kingdom.

This text is misleading, in connection with this lesson, because in the latter the expression "little ones" is used in a figurative sense, not literally, – the Lord referring to his humble and trustful disciples as God's little ones, God's children, whom he pities and cherishes as do earthly parents their little ones. Nor is this an exceptional case, for we find that repeatedly in the Scriptures the young Christian and the less developed are likened to babes, to children. Thus the Apostle Paul exhorts: "Brethren, be not children in understanding; howbeit, in malice be ye children, but in understanding be ye men." And the Apostle Peter exhorts the brethren, "As new born babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby." – 1 Cor. 14:20; 1 Peter 2:2.

It was apparently after the journey back from the Mount of Transfiguration to Capernaum that the discourse of this lesson occurred. Comparing the accounts as given by Mark and Luke, we gather that the apostles on the way had a discussion respecting who of their number were the greatest, and who would be the greatest or most honored in the Kingdom which the Lord had promised and in which they hoped to share. This discussion quite probably was instigated by the fact that only three of their number had been specially favored by being with the Lord in the mount. The discussion between them, altho carried on probably in subdued tones, not intended for the ears of Jesus, had become animated as the various sides and claims were advocated. It was a little later that our Lord inquired of them what had been the subject of their earnest and animated converse as they followed him in the way. According to Luke's account they were reticent, not liking to answer his question and to tell of their dispute, no doubt feeling rather ashamed of it. But, realizing that they could not hide the matter from the Lord, and some of them evidently anxious to have his decisive word on the subject, they asked him to settle the question for them.

Our Lord desired just such an opportunity for presenting to his faithful ones a needed lesson along this line; and according to his usual

custom he illustrated it. Calling a little child, and seating it in the midst, [R2660 : page 206] he made the astounding declaration that only such as would become childlike could enter the Kingdom at all. As natural men, and most of them rather unlearned, the disciples had no doubt been aiming as far as possible from childlike simplicity, and striving rather to assume the dignity of mind and of bearing which would suggest itself to the natural man as being appropriate to those who hoped soon to share regal honors in the Kingdom of God. What astonishment it must have caused them to learn that the Lord was looking rather for simplicity, meekness, teachableness, child-likeness, than for astuteness, wisdom, dignity, etc.!

Yet our Lord's words were not merely a condemnation of the spirit which they had been cultivating, but a lesson of instruction regarding a change in this respect, his words intimating not merely the possibility, but the necessity of a change of course on the part of those who desired a share in his Kingdom. If, instead of reading our Lord's words as in the Common Version, "Except ye be converted," we read them as in the Revised Version, "Except ye turn," more will get the true thought our Lord wished his followers to learn, the word "convert" having lost its primary meaning to many by reason of misuse. They must turn their ideas on the subject, and study and practice lessons in the opposite direction – lessons of meekness, of humility, of child-likeness: and our Lord's declaration that those who attain to the greatest development in meekness and simplicity of heart will be greatest in the Kingdom, implies that those who strive after simplicity and meekness will be granted a share in the Kingdom, but that none who are self-seeking and boastful will have part or lot in this matter.

Having thus defined the humble-minded and unostentatious amongst his followers as those upon whom he would bestow the highest honors and dignities of the Kingdom, Jesus proceeded to give a general lesson respecting such "little ones" of his followers, saying that all who receive such humble disciples in his name will be

reckoned as having received him, and whoever stumbles or injures one of these humble or "little ones" will thereby commit a crime so serious that it would be better for him to have lost his life – better that a millstone were fastened to his neck and he be cast into the sea, and thus all hope of saving his life effectually destroyed – better that this great calamity should come upon one than that he should do an injury to one of the Lord's "little ones" – one of the humblest of the disciples, child-like, meek, following in the way of the Lord.

As we thus see how great a value the Lord places upon humility it should encourage all true disciples to cultivate this quality daily, that thus they might grow more and more guileless, honest, truly humble, and in the sight of the great King become more and more great, more and more fit for the high exaltations of the Kingdom to come. Seeing that without this meekness none can enter into this Kingdom, we need not wonder that the Scriptures everywhere exhort the Lord's people to humility – "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God [now] that he may exalt you in due time" in the Kingdom. Yet notwithstanding all these exhortations of the Scriptures the perversity of human nature seems to be such that those who become the Lord's people and who engage to run in his way seem to find more trouble, more to contend against, in this matter than in any other. And some who feel themselves to be little enough seem very anxious that others of the brethren shall esteem them very highly. Would to God that all of the Lord's dear people, and especially all who seem to be leaders, and who have some natural qualifications for leading, and helpfulness in the Church, **[R2661 : page 206]** would study well this lesson, and learn from it how to advance themselves in the Lord's favor, and how to be truly great according to his standard, which alone shall prevail.

The word rendered "offend" in verse 6 and onward would be better rendered "stumbled," the thought being that of placing a stumbling-block in the path. The Lord intimates most distinctly that there will be plenty of such stumbling-blocks in the way of those who are truly his, and that too in proportion as they are "little" – humble.

He declares it necessary that these difficulties, these trials, these "offences," shall come. It is necessary, because it is the divine will that all the elect Church shall be thoroughly tested and developed in character, that thus they may become strong characters, copies of God's dear Son, willing to suffer for the truth's sake, and that gladly, joyfully, the loss of earthly things, that thereby they might please the Father which is in heaven, – thus developing humility and obedience, that by and by they may be ready for the exaltation which he has promised to those only who faithfully follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

Yet however necessary that the stumbling-blocks shall be in the way, and that the Church, the body of Christ, shall be tested thereby, this does not lighten the responsibility of those who, as the agents of the Adversary, lend themselves to his influence in placing those stumbling-blocks before the feet of the saints; and our Lord's words, without indicating exactly the nature of their punishment, assure us positively that such evil-doers will have a reward from him who says, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay."

In all probability many to-day are putting stumbling-blocks before the Lord's little ones, his faithful little flock, who do not realize what they are doing, – just as Peter unconsciously became a stumbling stone, [R2661 : page 207] a rock of offence, to the Master, when he attempted to dissuade him from the performance of his consecration vow. Those who place stumbling-blocks before the Lord's "little ones" now similarly seek to lead them from the narrow path of full consecration and self-sacrifice – seeking to persuade them that another and an easier way, a way less humbling to the natural man, a way more politic, more crafty, more wise according to the course of this world than the narrow way, is just as good as or a great deal better than the narrow way. Such testings are necessary, and it is also necessary that all who do not walk closely in the footprints of the Savior shall be sifted out, for the Lord seeketh only a little flock, – all of them copies of his dear Son. But there is a great responsibility upon those who aid in turning aside any of the flock – who to any extent are stumbling-

blocks, causes of stumbling or "offence" in the pathway of the Lord's people.

Following this line of thought, that offences or trials and testings must come to all, our Lord urges that tho these tests mean the sacrifice of pleasure or hopes or aims or customs or privileges, precious to us as a right eye or a right hand, or useful to us as our foot, they must nevertheless be overcome, if we would enter into the Kingdom. This is another way of saying what he at another time expressed in the words, "Through much tribulation shall ye enter the Kingdom." Whoever has gotten the thought that the Kingdom is to be granted merely on condition of *believing* in Jesus has gotten a wrong thought that is not imparted by the Scriptures. Faith is necessary to our justification, before we can do anything in the nature of self-sacrifice that God could accept; but whoever stops with the faith without the works, without the self-sacrifice, loses every hope and privilege in connection with the Kingdom. To attain it we must "strive," must "fight the good fight," must "endure hardness as good soldiers," must be willing to cut off, not only sinful pleasures, but all things that would interfere with our full devotion to the Lord's service and our fulfillment of our covenant to be dead with him; must "work out our salvation with fear and trembling," – assisted by divine grace sufficient for every time of need, and by the exceeding great and precious promises of God's Word working in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

We are not to understand that any may be lacking a foot or a hand or an eye in the Kingdom; but rather we should understand that as the offending eye represents besetments which appeal to our natural tastes as beautiful and likely to charm and attract us to earthly things, and as the offending hand would represent the doing of things that would be contrary to our highest spiritual interests, and as the offending foot would represent the going into forbidden paths of sin of self-gratification, so the lopping off of these would properly signify that it would be better that we should enter the life eternal and into the share

in the Kingdom without having enjoyed certain earthly privileges and gratifications, than that having enjoyed all the earthly gratifications we should thereby have missed our calling and failed to make our election sure.

The "everlasting fire" and the "hell-fire" mentioned are equally symbolical with the other parts of the figure, and undoubtedly refer to the destruction which is the wages of sin to be visited upon wilful sinners – "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power." That fire is used here and elsewhere in the Scriptures to represent not torture, but destruction, is clearly set forth in a pamphlet entitled, "What say the Scriptures About Hell."*

**We will supply these free to applicants who so request.*

Branching out further along the same lines, our Lord gives the general caution to us all: "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones" – these humble ones that belong to the Lord. They may seem humble and insignificant when viewed from the worldly standpoint, but they are God's friends; yea, they are God's children, for whom he cares; and hence whoever does injury to them is insulting and antagonizing their Father which is in heaven. Moreover, our Lord assures us that each of his little ones, his faithful, humble little flock, have a constant representation in the Father's presence. There is a guardian angel for each of the Lord's people, and we are to get the thought that there is no delay in the bringing of any and everything which pertains to their welfare and interest before the attention of the great King. What a thought is here for those who are inclined to be heady and to despise or in any manner over-ride or mistreat the humble ones of the body of Christ! And what a lesson is here also for the humble ones – that they are the special objects of divine care and providence, for whom, therefore, all things must work well, because they belong to the Lord!

The remaining four verses seem not to be properly a part of this lesson, and inasmuch as they will come up in another lesson later on and in their proper connection, we omit the discussion of them here.
