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## **GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM.**

– MATTHEW 18:1-14. – JULY 1 –

**"It is not the will of your Father which is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."**

AFTER the vision in the Holy Mount representing the coming glories of Christ there followed temptation. And this has not been an unusual course of events with the Lord's people ever since. Our highest and most glorious views of the heavenly things which the Lord has in reservation for his people are quickly followed by earthly trials and difficulties, which serve to test and to prove us whether or not we be of the Kingdom class – whether or not we will be submissive to the heavenly moulding and fashioning, that we shall be made meet, fit, for the Kingdom – whether or not, by full submission to the divine instructions in the school of Christ, we shall make our calling and our election sure to a place in the Kingdom to which he has called us.

The disciples had the same thought that all Jews entertained [R3796 : page 186] respecting the Messianic Kingdom, that it would be established by a great Messiah, a great King, who would bear rule over all the earth; that God's favored people Israel would be his special charge and nearest to him in association in his Kingdom, and that through this Kingdom all nations, all peoples, all kindreds, would be blessed even as God had promised and sworn to Abraham. These sentiments had been quickened in the minds of the people by the appearance of Jesus, his wonderful words of life and his wonderful works witnessing that "never man spake like this man," and that Messiah could do no greater works than Jesus did. Israelites in general were in perplexity because their chief priests and teachers and rulers in the synagogues, etc., all rejected Jesus and were his opponents. The disciples, however, believed on him, followed him and hung

upon his words that they and all of his followers should yet be associated with him in his Kingdom glory.

Probably the disciples who were not with the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration felt a little envy of those who had seen the vision and who subsequently told them. Could this mean that Peter, James and John, who were with the Lord on the Mount, would be more highly favored than the remainder of the discipleship when the Kingdom should be established? As they journeyed, following Jesus at a little distance, the dispute grew quite warm with arguments on the one side and on the other respecting which should be the greatest in the coming Kingdom. Our Lord doubtless knew at the time their arguments in the dispute, but instead of administering a personal rebuke to those most at fault, he chose rather to make of the matter a general lesson, profitable, helpful, strengthening to them all. And is not his example valuable to all of his followers? Is it not wise on our part so far as possible to avoid personalities and the holding up of any individual to special criticism? All mankind have faults and blemishes, some in one particular and some in another, and it is very rarely wise to single out an individual in the body of Christ for a special reprimand; it is generally better to do as our Master did in this instance – to give a general lesson on the subject which will be helpful to all, not only to those who are taking the wrong course, but also to those who are more nearly right in their views and conclusions.

### **"AS A LITTLE CHILD"**

Our Lord inquired of the disciples what topic was so greatly absorbing their attention and leading to such warm discussion. It is to the credit of the apostles that they were ashamed to acknowledge that they had been disputing concerning which should be chief or greatest in the Kingdom. The whole matter was to be a favor to them anyway; they realized that they had

done nothing to merit so great an honor, that the call to a place in the Kingdom was of grace, of favor. Why should they quarrel with each other respecting the Master's distribution of his royal favors? They felt abashed, and Jesus did not press the question. Knowing of the matter he allowed them to see that he had a knowledge, not only of their words, but also of their very hearts and intentions. Most skilfully, most gently, did he administer a rebuke; not in coarse, harsh terms did he berate those [R3796 : page 187] who were inclined to be self-seeking; he did not threaten them.

A child was near – he took it and set it in their midst. Afterwards, says Luke, he took it in his arms. Their attention riveted by this peculiar proceeding, they were prepared for the lesson – which many today misunderstand when they suppose that our Lord meant that the Kingdom of heaven would be composed mainly of little children. No such words were uttered by our Lord and no such thoughts were communicated to his disciples. On the contrary, Jesus never called little children to be his disciples; he himself did not begin his ministry as a child, but when he was thirty years of age. Nothing in this, however, signifies that our Lord had not a deep sympathy with children, as is illustrated by his taking some of them into his arms and blessing them and saying, "Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such [like] is the Kingdom of heaven." Our Lord loved the innocency and simplicity of a little child, and was quite willing to show his own humility in acceding to the wishes of the mothers that he notice their children and give them his blessing. Indeed we can rest assured that no good man or woman could be without love for the innocency and simplicity of childhood.

### **"GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN."**

Neither should we understand that because Jesus' ministry began at thirty, and because those whom he called to be his

disciples were of mature years, that this would limit the age of any who might become the followers of Christ during this Gospel age. Quite to the contrary, we believe that some of very tender years have reached a sufficiency of information respecting our Lord and his work of redemption and his invitation to followers to intelligently take their stand with Jesus' disciples by full consecration of heart and life and every interest, with apparently quite a clear conception of what they were doing. Indeed, we feel like encouraging those of the young who are disposed to make a full consecration of their lives to the Lord to believe that in so doing they are not only acceptable, but that additionally they the sooner enter into the rest of faith, and are spared many of the unfavorable experiences which come to those who first seek the world and the pleasures thereof.

In this lesson, however, we should distinctly note that the Lord is neither addressing little children nor discussing them, except as an example or illustration of simplicity, docility and teachableness, and freedom from pride and ambition. This was impressed upon the disciples as they looked at the little child sitting there unconscious of the great honor thrust upon it, unconscious of being used by the glorious King of kings to illustrate a lesson. The thought of our Lord is clearly given in the fourth verse, which says, "Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Let us not lose sight of the fact that it is the Kingdom of heaven that the Lord is discussing and not the world. This was the same thought the apostles had, not which of them would get into the Kingdom of heaven and which would not get into the Kingdom, but – supposing that all were going to be in the Kingdom – which would be the greatest? The Lord's reply to this question is along this line, namely, that the one of them who would be the most childlike, most humble, most unpretentious,

most willing to be taught and guided, would be the one who would be greatest. This thought applies to the Church both in its present and in its future conditions. At the present time, the Church, the Kingdom, is in an embryo condition, not glorified, not recognized even by the world, but recognized by each other and by the Lord. Humility and childlikeness amongst the brethren now should be esteemed as a mark of true greatness from the Lord's standpoint. Such as are of this childlike class we may know assuredly will be proportionately highly honored in the future, when the Kingdom shall be established in power and great glory as God's agency for the blessing of all the families of the earth.

In harmony with this thought that the humble, the teachable, the simple, the unpretentious should be esteemed the greatest, we should expect to find in all the ecclesias, in all the companies of the Lord's people, that those chosen to the place of eldership and prominence in the Church would be amongst the most humble of mind and of conduct in the whole company. Any other condition than this would imply that the congregation had not rightly understood and appreciated and obeyed our Lord's sentiments expressed in connection with the incidents of our lesson.

This does not mean, however, that the brother possessing five talents should be entirely unconscious and neglect to use them. It does not mean that he should be blind to the fact that some others of the brethren have fewer talents, but it does mean that he should have such love, such humility, that his only desire in connection with his talents would be to use them for the good of the Lord's cause – that he would be so humble minded, so zealous for the Lord, that he would not for a moment think of using his talents to serve personal ambitions, to vaunt himself or to in any measure or degree seek to suppress the talents, opportunities and privileges of others that his own talents might

alone be recognized. It does mean that if he have five talents, and if of the right, childlike, humble spirit, he will have such interest in the dear brethren that he will do all reasonably within his power for the good of the whole cause, for the exercise of the various talents of the different brothers and sisters in such manner as will be to their upbuilding, strengthening and mutual edification, that the whole body of Christ may thus minister to its wants and necessities and comforts in faith and hope and love.

### **"EXCEPT YE BE CONVERTED"**

The word converted signifies to turn about, to experience a change, but many fail to recognize this broad meaning of the word, and instead think of it as signifying the leaving of a relationship to the world and the devil and coming into relationship with God. The Lord did not mean to say to his apostles that they were not converted in this latter sense – that they were aliens, strangers and foreigners from God. He already knew them to be Israelites indeed. In his prayer he declares, "Thine they were and thou gavest them to me, and I have kept them." What he did mean was that they must be turned from their present attitude of mind in respect to ambition for place and honor in the Kingdom, else they would never enter into it. Already they were **[R3797 : page 188]** in his embryo Kingdom, and hence his meaning was that unless in the embryo Kingdom his followers should develop a childlike, humble spirit and turn from the selfish and ambitious spirit, they would utterly fail of getting into the Kingdom of glory, the Millennial Kingdom.

What a lesson there is here for the Lord's followers – his "little ones." He shows us that while he has invited us to the greatest and grandest of all honors and privileges, nevertheless the attainment of this high calling, the making of this calling and election sure, will depend upon the way in which we receive the honors, privileges, blessings, the call. If it stirs up in us selfish

ambition for greatness and power and honor amongst men, it is having the wrong, the undesigned effect. The effect which God designs is that we should realize our own insignificance and unworthiness of such great honors; that we should feel ourselves very little indeed in the sight of God, and wonder that he would so condescend as to take from the fallen race a little company to constitute the Bride, the Lamb's wife in glory, joint-heirs in his Kingdom. As in the school of Christ they grow in grace and grow in knowledge, this humility, this childlikeness, must not depart, but rather it must increase more and more. They must realize their own unfitness and unworthiness of such great honor, they must receive all of God's favors as of his bounty, his grace.

The moving power with the proper disciples of Christ, who would maintain the love and favor of their Lord and ultimately make sure their calling and election in his Kingdom, must not be selfishness, love of position and power, name and fame. What, then, must it be? We reply, the moving power must be love – love for God, love for the brethren, and at least sympathetic love for the whole world of mankind, even including our enemies, many of whom are doubtless such because of blindness. The Apostle expresses this ruling, propelling power in the true followers of Jesus, saying, "The love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge that if one died for all then were all dead: and that he died for all that they which live should henceforth not live unto themselves but unto him which died for them and rose again." – 2 Cor. 5:14,15.

### **"HE THAT RECEIVETH YOU RECEIVETH ME"**

Our Lord's discourse continues on the same lines when he says, "Whosoever receiveth one such little child in my name receiveth me." He is not referring to the receiving of infants in his name but the receiving of disciples in his name – the receiving of such disciples as have this child-like character and

thus have the mark of being the true followers of Jesus. Whoever receives one of these humble, faithful, unpretentious ones, not because of worldly name or fame, not because of boasts of being some great one, but because they are the Lord's, because they give evidence that they have his Spirit – whoever receives such, the Lord says, should be considered and rewarded as though they had received the Master himself.

Reversely, the Lord says that whoever will do injury to one of these little ones – these that are little or humble minded, these that are meek and loyal of heart – it were better that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he be drowned in the depths of the sea. The word here rendered "offended," and in the revised version "stumbled," is derived from the Greek word "skandalon," and is closely related to our word scandal, which originally meant, "the stick in a trap on which the bait is placed, and which springs up and shuts the trap at the touch of the animal." Hence our Lord does not mean whosoever will anger or ill-use one of these little ones of my discipleship, but whosoever will entrap, injure, hurt one of these spiritually, etc.

If a person were drowned in the sea it could do him no further harm and be no barrier in any sense of the word to his future life in the resurrection time; but should he entrap, scandalize, injure one of the Lord's little ones, to the spiritual damage of the latter, he will thereby subject himself to certain losses beyond the present life – he will suffer loss or injury in the resurrection life provided for all mankind through the great redemptive sacrifice. Our Lord does not state what will be the character of the loss or punishment or stripes that such an one will have, but does intimate that its bearing upon his future and eternal interests will be so great that it would have been far better for him to have had his earthly life shortened instead; and we all know how all mankind clings to every year of earthly life permitted.



## WOE UNTO THE WORLD FROM SNARES

After telling us in verse 6 how serious a matter it will be for anyone to injure one of the Lord's little ones, one of his specially consecrated disciples, the Great Teacher in verse 7 applies his lesson to the world, and declares that a large part of the world's difficulty and woe comes to it along similar lines – "skandalon." These snares or traps or injurious misrepresentations, etc., cause a large part of the world's present discomfort, but they must needs be, they are a necessary part of the general trouble through sin, which are to cause mankind to ultimately hate sin and to long for the rule, the reign of righteousness, the Kingdom. But our Lord adds, while these offences or stumblings will cause special woes to many throughout the world, they will be specially injurious to the ones who started them, "To that man by whom the stumbling cometh."

For this reason all who are the Lord's people are to be specially on guard that, whatever others may do in the way of injuring, scandalizing, wounding, stumbling, causing trouble now, they must refrain from this, and remember that they are the followers of the meek and lowly One who did harm to none, but on the contrary laid down his life in the interests of others. The Lord suggests as an illustration that the tendency to wrong doing which would prove "skandalon" or stumbling, an injury to others, might be a quality of character that would seem as close and precious to us as a right hand or a foot or an eye – it might be one form of wrong doing or injury or another form; but in every case those who would be followers of the Prince of Peace and ultimately be his joint-heirs in the Kingdom must, as good soldiers of righteousness, fight against all such sinful, selfish, injurious tendencies of the flesh. These must be mortally combatted, to the extent that the New Creature would be willing, yea anxious to utterly destroy that element of his **[R3797 : page 189]** fallen disposition which is contrary to the Master's

pleasement, even though it be at a sacrifice that would be illustrated by the loss of an eye, a hand or a foot.

We are to put away such practices, that we may be truly our Lord's footstep followers and be counted worthy to enter into and share his Kingdom. If we will not so do we cannot enter the Kingdom. If we will hold on to these tendencies of the fallen nature they will mean ultimately our destruction in the Second Death, for every person who has and who maintains an injurious character, a tendency to scandalize or injure others, will be esteemed of the Lord wholly unfit for any part in his Kingdom – yea unfit for eternal life at all. Hence the Lord's declaration that such would go into the fire or destruction eternal – the Second Death. No wonder, then, that our great Teacher urged all who would be his disciples to put away from them, to mortify, the deeds of the body, the selfish instincts of the fallen nature, at any cost, no matter how dear, that they might enter into life with him as participants in the Kingdom, as members of the Bride.

Our Lord urges that such a loss of an eye or a hand or a foot, as representing earthly advantages and privileges of the present time, would be far better than, possessing these privileges, to be ultimately destroyed in Gehenna fire. Gehenna fire here and elsewhere, as we have pointed out, referred primarily to the valley outside the city of Jerusalem, where all the offal was destroyed (not preserved or tortured), and this, as we have seen, symbolized or prefigured the general destruction of the Second Death associated with the New Jerusalem government of the Millennial age – in which all the unworthy, all the offal, all the unfit, will be utterly destroyed in the Second Death, that the Lord may have a clean universe in which every creature would praise and honor him and exemplify his law and character and government of love.

## **"DESPISE NOT THESE LITTLE ONES"**

Continuing to discuss his followers as "little ones," our Lord intimates that some who might not seek to entrap, ensnare and to "skandalon" them might nevertheless despise them, and so he gives a warning against this also. Amongst the Lord's "little ones" are not many great, not many wise, not many learned, and they are chiefly the poor of this world, rich in faith; and hence many might be disposed to despise them, to slight them, to evil entreat them, etc., because their despisers know them not, because they realize not that they are united to their hidden Lord – they know not us as they knew not him, the Forerunner and Captain. – 1 Cor. 1:26-28; James 2:5; 1 John 3:1.

When our Lord would intimate why his humblest followers should not be despised, the illustration he uses implies that they are the special objects of the heavenly Father's care and love, and that to despise them or to do anything demeaning toward them would surely bring some kind of retribution either in the present life or in a future one. The matter is put as though the Lord would say, You cannot **[R3798 : page 189]** even despise one of my "little ones" without the Father knowing it very quickly. He says, "In heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father." These angels have no difficulty in bringing to his attention the difficulties, trials or persecutions of his faithful ones. Some, from this statement, have presumed the Lord to mean that every human being has a guardian angel looking after his interest, and that as now the world numbers 1,600,000,000, it would imply that there is a similar number of angelic beings looking after the interests of these.

This is wholly erroneous; the Lord does not anywhere intimate any special guardianship of the interests of the world. He does tell us that he has arranged for the redemption and restitution of mankind in due time; but any special supervision

intimated in the Scriptures is only over those who belong to the Lord in the sense that is mentioned in this Scripture, namely, as his "little ones." It is respecting these "little ones" that we read, "The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them." (Psa. 34:7.) And again, "The angels are ministering spirits sent forth to minister [serve] to the heirs of salvation." (Heb. 1:14.) It would not at all surprise us if there were a guardian angel for each member of the Lord's little flock, the Lord's consecrated, his "little ones." However, we are to remember that the word angel is one of wide significance, and might include all the powers of God both animate and inanimate, by which he could take knowledge of and render assistance to those who are his.

In any event, however, the thought of the picture the Lord here shows is that his "little ones" are never forgotten, and that all their trials and difficulties are speedily brought to the Father's attention through the angels or agencies of divine arrangement. What a comfort this is to those who are seeking to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and who find themselves frequently misunderstood or slandered or despised or neglected! Any good done to this class will never be forgotten by the Lord; any injury done to them will also be known and will not go unpunished, and the punishment will be in proportion to the degree of intelligence and wilfulness of the wrongdoer. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord." Therefore, brethren, avenge not yourselves; leave all in the hands of the Lord as you suffer injury patiently and learn advantageous lessons therefrom; but at all times be careful, vigilant, that you yourself shall stumble, injure, none.

### **THESE "LITTLE ONES" NOT TO PERISH**

Verse 11 is omitted from the revised version because it is not found in the oldest manuscripts, and this is good authority

for omitting it. The same words do occur in Luke 19:10, and they represent an eternal truth. They were probably introduced here by some one who thought that Matthew had overlooked the words and that this would be an appropriate place for recording them. However, there are various diversions between this account of a hundred sheep and the other account of Luke 15:3-7. The one was apparently made to the Scribes and Pharisees; this narrative on the contrary was made to the disciples. We have elsewhere discussed the parable addressed to the Pharisees, showing that the hundred sheep properly represented the entire family of God, and that the one sheep that went astray represented properly enough humanity, which fell [R3798 : page 190] from divine likeness and favor through Adam's disobedience.

The parable shows the Lord's love and mercy in pursuing after the lost sheep, humanity, and intimates its recovery in the end – not that all will be universally and everlastingly saved, but that all will be brought to conditions of salvation, to a clear knowledge of the truth and to a full opportunity for accepting the same, so that the rejection will be a just cause for their sharing the Second Death.

This statement respecting the hundred sheep is applied in a totally different manner, as the context shows. Here it refers to all of the Lord's "little ones," all who become his followers, his sheep. Should one of them be stumbled, should one of them stray, the Lord in his providence will not abandon him, but will purify him if possibly he may be recovered. And all who are in harmony with the Lord should have this same thought and interest in one another, that they would be willing to spend and be spent in the recovery of a brother from the snare of the adversary. Verse 14 sets the matter forth very clearly, saying, "Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." Hence, as the Apostle

explains, he that recovereth a sinner from the error of his ways, saves a soul from death and hides a multitude of sins. (Jas. 5:20.) This is not referring to the souls of the world in general, which are still under the sentence of death, but it is referring to the souls of believers, who through faith have been justified and consecrated to the Lord. If they shall fall away, shall stumble by any means, all the faithful are to be energetic in their endeavors to recover such, to bring them back into full accord with the Lord.

Its assurance further is that it is not the will of the Father that they should perish, and hence we may rely upon it that any and every reasonable and proper thing in their interests will be done rather than that they should be abandoned. This same spirit at work in the household of faith amongst the "little ones" would lead them, not to strive as to which of them would be greatest, but rather lead them to mutual helpfulness, that each and all might gain the prize of the high calling. It is in accordance with this thought that the Lord does not wish these to perish that he provides that those of his consecrated ones who do not follow voluntarily in the work of sacrifice shall not be abandoned, but shall be put through trying experiences, as represented in the "great company," who will wash their robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb. It would, of course, have been better had they been so loving and loyal and zealous as to joyfully sacrifice earthly interests to gain the heavenly; but even though they do not thus do all in their power to fulfil their Covenant the Lord is merciful toward them and unwilling that any should perish. He will see to it that they are brought through such experiences as will eventually test and prove them, and, if they are faithful under the test, bring them off conquerors.

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