

“These Little Ones”

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Instead of excuses to exclude sinners, look for strategies to restore them.

Matthew 18:10-20

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Caption

The past week has not been a normal one, not for me anyway. Last Sunday, Dr. Doug Eller, 56, died of a heart attack, leaving behind his wife Cathy and his children, Olivia, 19, and Davis, 18. The best day for the memorial service was Friday, but Linda and I had planned to visit our daughter and son-in-law in Wilmington. Because of his own love and commitment to his family, Cathy said she knew Doug would want me to be with mine. Because we have an amazing team here, I was able to videotape my part of the memorial service while Paul, Amy, Lori, Peter, Reagan, Barb, Julie, Katie, Patter, and other staff and volunteers took care of all the details.

Linda and I drove to Wilmington Thursday to celebrate Jeni’s birthday (which is actually today, except it’s not because she was born on Leap Day), and participate in this modern ritual called a gender reveal (It’s a girl!). While Linda prepared dinner and birthday cake, I got to use power tools! Following Jeffrey White’s direction, I constructed a HOPE Garden-like garden box for Jeni to have an easily accessible vegetable garden, even while being great with child.

The combination of sharp blades and electricity in “power tools” can do great things, but their potential for harm is significant. The Bible has the same potential for good and harm. The right to own, read, and interpret the Bible for ourselves can stimulate spiritual growth. But it can also destroy.

The passage before us is one of those biblical texts that can be and has been misused, even badly. Each paragraph is subject to a common misunderstanding.

In Matthew 18 the parable of the shepherd with 100 sheep is not about evangelism. Verses 15-17 are not a checklist for orderly excommunication of a member of the church. Binding and loosing doesn't mean that if you discipline a member God won't let them into heaven. The prayer section isn't a guarantee that God will give you anything you want if you can get one or two others to join you in asking for it.

Matthew is different from the other gospels in that he organizes Jesus' life thematically. Chronological precision is less important to him. Matthew pieces together the parts of Jesus' public ministry in sections – miracles, parables, and sermons. Chapter 18 is not one sermon, but it's a collection of Jesus' teachings on one theme – how to respond to "little ones." If you don't catch that theme and read the rest of the chapter in context, you'll not only miss what Matthew says, you might misuse it.

The chapter begins with Jesus calling a little child to himself and saying that whoever becomes like a child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. His followers are to become humble, like children. Those who take advantage of the weakness and vulnerability of children are to be judged strictly.

All who follow Jesus are "these little ones." If we're not humble and weak, then we don't belong to him. It is a prerequisite for dealing with the weakness of others that you remember the weakness of you. This chapter's like a Preschool class lesson. Jesus is talking to little ones about the other little ones. Be kind to your friends. Share. Don't hurt anybody. Play fair. Hold hands and stick together.

What does that look like?

Seek the wanderer (10-14)

Jesus says you must not "despise" someone who's spiritually weaker than you are. That person has a "guardian angel" with a direct connection to Almighty Power. Don't mess with them.

The parable of the 100 sheep is not about unbelievers, as it is in Luke. This parable is about those who "wander." They are weaker brothers and sisters in faith.

The parable is powerful precisely because the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine "on the hills." Don't mix up Jesus' other teaching or try to synchronize this with John 10. There's no "sheepfold" here. The fact that the other sheep are left vulnerable in the open field is the point.

There's a risk. Jesus is specifically teaching about "the little ones." Remember, we are all that category. And he says when one member of the community wanders away, the rest of us shouldn't be saying, "Well, what about me?" At the moment the spotlight, the energy, needs to be on the one who wandered. All the sheep are vulnerable, but one at the moment is most vulnerable.

Pursue them. Why? The Father doesn't want them lost. He hasn't given up on them. How? Jesus continues...

Restore the sinner (15-17)

But what if they are weaker in sin? What if they are voluntarily choosing sin?

Many Christian traditions have seen this passage as a formula for Christian discipline – that these are “steps” to take to properly remove an unrepentant sinner from your community. In context of this chapter, that's not it. Nor does the rest of the New Testament ever refer to these verses and say, “Don't forget the steps to shun or exclude someone.”

It is true that this is about someone who “sins” (though not necessarily “against you”). That's why they are among the “little ones.” They are prone to wander. This is about the one sheep who goes astray. What should you do?

The goal is to “win them over,” to restore them to fellowship. You want them to “listen.” Listening is critical to any community, especially Christian community.

If that's your goal, start one on one. Why? Because shaming someone publicly, especially without notice, invites denial and defense. Always, always appeal privately first if you want to win them over.

Next, take someone with you. This tempers your word. Might I not have said it correctly? Are my motives right? I remember a church member who had told his side of the story and brought a friend. When he came to see me and heard the other side, the friend rebuked him, not me. Take the right friend who will listen objectively and tell you the truth. Remember, you're both among “these little ones.” You might have sinned.

Then invite them into a larger community. Keep your eye on the goal here. Sometimes two or three can't get to the bottom of the issue. You might have taken that friend who shares your blind spots. We're not talking about churches of 500 or 10,000 here. In Matthew's day these were largely what we would call small groups. Bring your larger community together to work through this issue as “little ones.”

The singular nouns here keep the focus on the one-on-one. Not “let him be to the whole church like a Gentile...” – that would be the language of church discipline. “Let him be to you (singular) like a Gentile....” You're still trying to restore the relationship of a “brother.” The family analogy is appropriate here. If you can't get along with your sibling, sit down one on one. If that doesn't work, maybe other siblings can help. If that doesn't work, call a family meeting. Don't kick them out of the family!

If none of that is effective, treat them as an unbeliever – a pagan (Gentile) or a tax collector. How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? Who's writing this gospel anyway? Matthew is saying, “If they won't listen to you, treat them like Jesus treated

me.” Jesus befriended Matthew, invited Matthew, hung out at Matthew’s house with his friends.

His gospel ends with Jesus telling his disciples to pursue the Gentiles. This sinner unwilling to repent may not be part of the community, so you start over – with friendship, presence, listening to them because they didn’t listen to you. The goal is the same – to win them.

What about church discipline? Is there a time to excommunicate and shun? Yes. But it’s not over any sin. It’s not over relational sins within the church. It’s not even over unrepentant sin. This is neither permission nor formula for addressing any issue you see in a Christian’s life.

Then when do we excommunicate? 2 Corinthians 5 gives us one example. Blatant, open, flagrant incest. Paul says if even the world won’t tolerate it, the church shouldn’t either. The world looks at us when we discipline over just any sin, and they see division and hate. But there are some sins that even the world would say, “Why would you tolerate that?” Good examples today would be child pornography or human trafficking – openly and flagrantly. But don’t assume the world will be more drawn to the church if we’re constantly exercising “church discipline” over any sins.

Release the prisoner (18)

The language of “binding” and “loosing” is graphic and appropriate. Jesus has changed the metaphor from the shepherd’s field to the prison. You have the opportunity to partner with God to set people free. If I extend that metaphor, the world’s system is a system of child trafficking – taking vulnerable “little ones,” lying to them, kidnapping them, binding them. It’s hard to reverse that. Partner with heaven.

It’s not that when you kick someone out, God does too. Instead, Jesus is saying that this life in the church family is a partnership. You realize in retrospect that God was there all along.

Don’t get hung up on predestination here. Focus on “the little ones” – the vulnerable, the weak. Don’t you realize that heaven’s strategy is you? 99.9% of the time when God goes “looking” for the little ones, he does it through you.

Prioritize prayer (19-20)

The quest for restoration is not just about what *you* do. Your primary strategy is prayer. Prayer refines your motives and hones your strategy. Prayer humbles your approach. Prayer helps you wait because haste makes waste with the little ones.

If heaven is so interested in this, then implore heaven to join you. If you pray about that person’s sin – even praying out loud – you pray better. And if you pray better, you will reach out better. Praying imprecatory psalms is about turning your

anger over to God to let him deal with the person and situation. The “Father” is prominent in this passage. You want his heart – his sorrow over sin, his passion for seeking and restoring the lost.

If you pray with two or three others, you pray even better. Remember, you’re praying for transformation. Your goal in prayer is to “win them over.” Confronting someone is about loving them like the Father loves them. We look for excuses to exclude them. The Father looks for ways to restore them.

Repentance

This is hard! So hard that when Jesus finishes this part, Peter asks, “Well, how many times do I have to do this? You realize, don’t you, Jesus, that what you’re really talking about is repeat offenders here. Those who choose to be little over and over again. How many times do I have to be willing to ignore their sin, especially if it’s against me, and start over with them?”

You remember Jesus’ response, don’t you? Seventy times seven, which is another way of saying “Infinitely.” You don’t count. You don’t stop.

And all along, we remember WE might be the ones who need to repent – for pride, for blind spots, for lack of faith that they can be restored, for impatience, for prayerlessness, for lack of forgiveness, for presuming that we are better or stronger or more secure. We have to hold hands and stick together. Amen.