

Teachings Concerning Greatness and Forgiveness

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon emphasizes the teachings of Jesus on greatness through humility and the importance of forgiveness among believers.

Scripture: Matthew 18:3-35

Topics: "Humility And Service", "Godly Forgiveness"

Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the disciples' misguided focus on greatness in the kingdom of heaven, prompting Jesus to teach them about humility and the importance of serving others selflessly. Jesus uses a child as an example of the kind of faith and humility required to enter the kingdom. He emphasizes the value God places on every individual, especially children, warning against causing harm to them. Jesus also teaches about forgiveness, urging his disciples to forgive others as God forgives them, illustrating this with a parable about a king and his servants.

Transcript

The disciples had gathered in the home which Jesus had established in Capernaum (Mt 17:24; Mk 9:33). The incident that followed is recorded also in Mark 9:33-50 and Luke 9:46-50. As the disciples gathered, the question was raised, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Mt 18:1). According to Mark 9:33, Jesus had raised the question, "What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way?" Apparently, they did not answer immediately, for Mark 9:34 states, "But they held their peace: for by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest." Breaking the awkward silence, apparently one of the disciples asked the question recorded in Matthew 18:1. As Ironside says, "It is a question that no truly noble soul would ever ask."⁸⁷

In answer to their question, Jesus called a little child to Him, possibly a neighborhood child whom He knew well. When the disciples observed the little child standing in their midst, Jesus then took the child in His arms (Mk 9:36) and said to the disciples, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:3-4).

Undoubtedly, the disciples had been unduly concerned about their status in the coming kingdom. It is clear that they were still anticipating an earthly kingdom, in which Jesus would be the King and they would be

His privileged servants. In asking the question concerning who would be the greatest, they did not mean that one of their number should have charge over the others, but rather that probably several of them should take precedence. Jesus had previously singled out Peter, James, and John, as in Matthew 17:1, for special honor. What would the role of each of the disciples be?

Jesus, in effect, was saying that they were asking the wrong question. They should have been asking, How can I best serve the King? rather than, How can I best serve myself? The child in the arms of Jesus was a graphic illustration of loving trust, immediate obedience in coming to the arms of Christ, and in seeking only the position of being loved. True greatness involved taking an attitude of unpretentious humility instead of seeking a position of power. These were great lessons for the disciples to learn.

Jesus used the occasion, however, to speak of the importance of human personality, as illustrated in the child who has no position or wealth and no power. Instead of seeking greatness in the kingdom, the disciples should be seeking how they can serve ordinary human beings, such as this child. Jesus stated that if they received a child in His name, it signified that they were in a proper relationship of faith in Christ Himself.

These teachings of Jesus were in sharp contrast to that which was popular in the heathen world, where children were often used as human sacrifices and often suffered cruelty and neglect. The disciples, accordingly, were warned not to offend a child. It would be better to be drowned in the deep sea with a millstone around one's neck than to offend a little one. It would be better to have a hand or foot cut off or an eye plucked out than to offend one of these, especially in spiritual things.

Jesus concluded His exhortation in 18:10, "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven." The Scriptures do not teach that each child has a particular angel, but apparently, angels are assigned the care of children in general. These angels have immediate access to God the Father. Some have suggested the possibility that angels refers to the spirits of children who have died.⁸⁸ In either case, however, the importance that God gives to the welfare of children is clearly taught. As Criswell expresses it, "God sees in the lowliest believer such value that He will take infinite pains to save him."⁸⁹

The passage continues in verse 11, "For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost." Most manuscripts omit verse 11, and many regard it as inserted from Luke 19:10. Whether or not it was in Matthew's original text, it is, of course, true.

To illustrate the importance of one child, Jesus used a shepherd who has a hundred sheep. If one goes astray, he does not argue that one out of a hundred is unimportant, but rather leaves the ninety and nine and seeks the lost sheep. When he finds the sheep, he rejoices over it more than over the continued safety of the ninety and nine. If a shepherd has such regard for one sheep, how much more regard does God the Father have for one little one? The statement of Matthew 18:14 summarizes the teaching, "Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish."

Commentators, such as Lenski, sometimes interpret this as justifying infant baptism, or the thought that all little ones who die before reaching the age of accountability are saved.⁹⁰ The term, "the will of your Father," must be taken in the sense of desire, not the sovereign will of God (cf. 2 Pe 3:9). The fact is that some little ones grow up and perish. There is justification, however, on the basis of other Scripture for the doctrine that all children who die before reaching a responsible age go to heaven (2 Sa 12:21-23). The thought here is the loving concern of the Father, not the doctrine of election or the question of infant

baptism. A disciple who is seeking the true interest of the kingdom of God would have concern for the child rather than for his own position of authority in the kingdom.

Sermon Concerning Forgiveness, 18:15-35

Having related the disciples to children in the preceding context, Jesus then related the disciples to children of God who may be adults physically, even though they are immature spiritually. He introduced first the case of a brother or child of God who has injured one of the disciples in some way (cf. Lk 17:3-4). What should a disciple do in such an instance?

Jesus instructed him first to go alone to the brother, tell him his fault, and seek an adjustment. The implication is that this may bring the matter to proper solution. If, however, the brother would not heed such an admonition, the disciple was instructed to take two or three witnesses with him and attempt to get the matter resolved by this means. This was in keeping with the law as stated in Deuteronomy 19:15, to which allusion is made in the New Testament also (Jn 8:17; 2 Co 13:1; 1 Ti 5:19).

If this form of entreaty failed, then he should tell it to the "church" or "assembly." Obviously, church organization, as seen in the New Testament, had not yet been established, and it is more probable that He was referring here to a Jewish assembly, with which the disciples were familiar. If the offender refused to correct the matter in front of the whole assembly, he was then to be considered an outsider and was no longer worthy to be considered a brother. It is significant that there was no recognition of church authority, such as a bishop or elder, or even the authority of the disciples themselves.

However, Jesus went on immediately to discuss the authority of the disciples. In Matthew 18:18, He declared, "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." It should be noted, first of all, that ye is plural. This authority was not given to Peter individually as a pope, but rather it belonged to all of the disciples, and they shared it, according to the preceding verse, with the assembly. The idea was that collectively they had a right to apply the spiritual principles of divine judgment to those who ignore such truth. In applying them correctly, they were recognizing a situation which God had established, whether this referred to binding or loosing, and they were serving as God's representatives. It should be obvious that their binding or loosing was true only as God confirmed it.

Proceeding from the matter of judging a brother, the importance of two or three agreeing was then applied to prayer. Here, instead of the necessity of an entire assembly agreeing, even two or three who agree may be assured that God would answer. There is no instance in Scripture in which two or three of the disciples of Jesus agreed in prayer and the answer was not forthcoming. Only when they prayed singly, as in the case of Paul seeking removal of this thorn in the flesh, was there divine disapproval. This rule must not be applied in extreme literalness, as obviously, two or three may sometimes be wrong; and in the church today, the general principle of 1 John 5:14-15, that our prayers must always be subject to the will of God, is operative. When spiritual-minded Christians, however, agree as to an objective to be realized through prayer, there is greater assurance of the answer than if they come to God singly.

Peter returned to the question of forgiveness and asked the Lord in Matthew 18:21, "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?" Lenski observes, "The old Jewish teaching was that three times was enough," based on Amos 1:3 and 2:6.⁹¹ Peter was attempting to be generous in doubling the usual limit of forgiveness.

Jesus replied, however, "I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven (Mt 18:22). There is some discussion in commentaries on this figure because of a mistranslation of Genesis 4:24, which Lamach is to be avenged seventy and sevenfold, that is, seventy-seven times.⁹² The Septuagint translates it "seventy times seven," omitting the Hebrew and. There is no clear evidence that Christ was referring to the Septuagint rendering of Genesis 4:24, but it is evident in Matthew that Jesus meant seventy times seven, or four hundred and ninety. This meant that Peter should go on forgiving without counting the number of times, following the example of God himself, who does not impute sin to those who have trusted in Him.

To illustrate the necessity of forgiveness on the human plane in light of the grace of God in forgiving sinners, Jesus used the illustration of a king who called his servants to account. This would be a normal instance for a monarch in Christ's day. The first servant owed the king ten thousand talents. The value of a talent could be as little as three hundred seventy-five dollars for a small, silver, Attic talent, or as much as thirty thousand dollars for a gold talent. Len-ski believes that what was in view here was the Attic talent, worth twelve hundred dollars.⁹³ If this figure is used, ten thousand talents would be equivalent to at least twelve million dollars. If a Hebrew silver talent was in view, it could amount to as much as twenty million dollars. A gold talent would have been worth much more. In any case, a large sum is intended.

Because of the enormity of the debt, the king commanded the man to be sold as a slave along with his wife and children. This was common practice. Faced with this summary judgment, the servant, falling down, worshipped his lord and pleaded, "Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all" (Mt 18:26). On the basis of his urgent plea, the king was moved to compassion, released him, and forgave his debt.

Continuing the account, however, our Lord described how this same servant, forgiven by the king, found another servant of the king, who owed him a hundred pence, or one hundred denarii, each worth about sixteen cents and amounting to about one day's wages for a laborer. Taking the servant by the throat, he demanded payment. When his fellow servant fell down at his feet and pleaded for patience, he was remanded to prison until he paid the debt. The amount owed was too small to justify selling him into slavery, and being cast into prison was a normal procedure.

Other servants of the king who had witnessed both incidents reported the matter. The king, outraged, summoned the servant before him and reminded him how he had been forgiven and how this should have given him like compassion on his fellow servant. In the light of the circumstances, the king then delivered him to tormentors until he should pay what was due. Such action was not uncommon in the ancient world, and the punishment involved included imprisonment, heavy labor, meager food, and even torture.

It is clear that this is a story which has only partial fulfillment in God's dealings with His disciples. There is no justification here for the doctrine of purgatory or the concept that a believer can lose justification once bestowed. The penalties refer to this life rather than the life to come in both instances, and chastisement can be experienced even by those who are the objects of God's grace, if they do not judge their own life in the light of God's forgiveness (cf. 1 Co 11:27-32; Heb 12:5-10). The illustration, however, enforces the exhortation of Jesus to Peter not to stop forgiving a brother, a truth which is supported by many scripture references (Ps 18:25; Mt 5:7; Lk 6:37; Eph 4:32; Col 3:13; Ja 5:9).

Translated into terms of Christian profession today, it is clear that a believer in Christ should be occupied with how graciously God has forgiven his wrongs rather than with how the world or the church recognizes his rights. Emotionally, we should be occupied with the love of God and should be seeking to express our

love for Him in obedient service, however lowly and however unrecognized we remain by the church or the world.

87 H. A. Ironside, Expository Notes on the Gospel of Matthew, p. 222.

88 W. H. Griffith Thomas, Outline Studies in the Gospel of Matthew, p. 268.

89 W. A. Criswell, Expository Notes on the Gospel of Matthew, p. 107.

90 R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel, pp. 696-97.

91 Ibid., p. 708.

92 W. C. Allen, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of S. Matthew, p. 199.

93 Lenski, p. 712.

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