

Wandering sheep

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[0:00] Okay, so tonight we're going to be looking at Matthew 18. But you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you that the angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

David, could I ask you just for a quick prayer?

Thank you. Amen.

Okay, so we're in Matthew 18.

[1:54] And usually I would read out a quick road map of where we are and where we're going with the text tonight, but I seem to have not actually written it down in any form.

So here's what we're going to do by memory. So we're going to look at the context of the verses. We're going to see how they fit in. We're going to look a bit about this word despise and try and dig out what happens if we're despising people.

We'll see what that looks like. And we'll walk through the text as we usually do, verse by verse, and see what that means. And we're going to take a little bit of a detour.

And we're going to look a bit about angels, because I think it's quite critical that we see exactly what's going on there. This is mentioned in the text and seems to be a very prominent piece. And then we'll go back into the parable, and then we'll finish with one or two conclusions.

Okay. So we're in Matthew 18. We're joining Jesus as he teaches his disciples. And the chapter opens with his disciples asking this question to Jesus.

[3:06] He says, They say, Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus responded with this section of teaching on how we are to relate to one another as Christians.

So the teaching takes place in a house in Capernaum. Luke 9.46 and Mark 9.33 tells us that the disciples were arguing amongst themselves on the way there.

As to which one of them would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. In Mark 9, Jesus, bear in mind Jesus is the son of God.

He knows every word that's been spoken. He knows everything they were talking about. They get to the house, and Jesus says to them, By the way, what were you talking about back there on the road?

And Mark tells us that they suddenly went very quiet. They felt ashamed by their arguing. They felt ashamed because they treated each other quite poorly, and they were being quite proud.

[4:11] There's probably a short time after this awkward silence that the disciples approached Jesus, and they asked, Who then is the greatest? So despite feeling ashamed, they still felt this need to ask.

I bring this up for two reasons. So the first reason is that it shows us how Jesus had actually commanded this situation to bring about this very important teaching of how we connect with one another as Christians, as believers.

And it's a good lesson for us when we get things wrong, isn't it? So the disciples knew they got this wrong. They still wanted to know the answer, so they took it to Jesus.

I think that's a valuable thing that we can take from that text. So Jesus answers the question, and he also begins to set up these teachings on how we relate to each other as followers of him.

So in verses 1 to 5, there's a center point of Jesus' example which lingers throughout the chapter, and his example is a child, and he tells his disciples that in order to become people of the kingdom, they must become like children.

[5:26] As we heard from David last week, the children have certain characteristics that we should take note of. So obviously not stamping our feet when things go wrong, that's counterproductive, I think.

But by being, I think the words were teachable and authentic. Is that right, David? So Jesus is using this language of children and little ones to refer to believers, followers of Christ.

So if you follow Christ, that's you and me tonight. And then it goes on to a next phase of teaching, and this is a somewhat fierce warning.

Jesus speaks about how our activities affect one another as brothers and sisters. So we learned that as we go about the Lord's business from day to day, we are to reflect on our activities, and if they are causing us or our brothers and sisters to sin, we need to be actively avoiding those situations.

So we are to actively guard ourselves and each other. And that needs conversation, doesn't it? In order for that to happen, we need to be communicating with each other.

[6:44] We can't just ignore each other. If a brother or sister is causing you to stumble, if there are problems there, we need to very kindly communicate that, for your sake and for theirs.

Jesus says, of the people that cause stumbling to his little ones, this is verse 6 of the chapter, it would be better if they were drowned in the depths of the sea, and that is set in comparison to verse 9, and that's the danger of judgment.

So this sets up a few principles for us that we can take throughout our study tonight, and we'll just recap them quickly. So we know that little ones equals believers, that's you and me.

The subject is relational, so this is how we relate to one another. And this isn't a passive comment. This isn't something that's just said in passing, but it's a firm instruction.

It's a very, very firm warning. Okay, so we're going to have a look at the, we're going to take an overview of the verses. So tonight's section of Christ's teaching is combined of three parts.

[8:04] Verses 10 and 11 outline Jesus' main command. See that you do not despise one of these little ones. Then have a reason, for I say to you.

And in verses 12 to 14, Jesus gives us an example or a parable so that we might better understand this point that he's making. And then finally, Jesus makes a closing comment.

He closes the parable with these words, in the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. So if your Bible is missing verse 11, it's because some manuscripts included words from Luke 19.10, which say, for the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.

You'll bear that in mind as we go through. Okay, so let's take a walk through the text. Verse 10.

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. Straight away we have this command. See that. That means, it's a word meaning behold, to watch, to be vigilant.

[9:21] This is calling on the things that we heard last week. That we need to be perceiving and reflecting on the things that happen and on our actions.

Jesus is saying, keep constant watch over these. That you do not despise your fellow believers. So we'll look a bit now about this word, despise.

It's a very strong word, but it can be used very casually, can't it? I've said many, many times in the past, I despise sprouts and cheese. But it's a very strong word, in actual fact, and it has a lot of ramifications in our everyday life if we, if it's something that we do.

So, we'll just take a quick look at what happens if we despise people. It's a very, very serious thing. So, how is despising a person manifested? What does this look like?

So I'm going to say, let's say we have an imaginary person. Okay, this is no one in particular. Let's say his name is Jazz. Okay, let's say there's something about Jazz that we really don't like.

[10:34] For the sake of argument, we could say, he makes too much noise. Okay, so Jazz makes far too much noise. We don't make lots of noise, do we? You know, we're very quiet and very humble.

So, we have strong negative feelings towards Jazz because Jazz isn't like us. We've got a much better grip on social etiquette than Jazz has.

so now we have pride creeping in, don't we? So this despising, starts off as despising, we've got pride creeping in because we think we're better in some way than Jazz.

Jazz. And, it's not long before these thoughts and these feelings cease to become internal and start externalising themselves as well, don't they?

What's the first thing you do? If you really don't like something, you're going to start telling people, aren't you? You say, you know what? I really don't like Jazz. Did you know that?

[11:44] He starts clapping in the middle of hymns. It's a little Jazz joke. So now, we're telling people, we're gossiping too, aren't we?

And if it gets to that point, you're really, you're just being unkind and impatient. And, if you look at the two people on the screen, look at what a state we've got ourselves into.

Just by something that started off in our heart, this little seed, something we didn't like, has turned us into actually quite a not very nice person. So it's not just a throwaway feeling that we're talking about, of being vigilant of, it's despising, it's an extremely damaging action that affects not just us, but everybody around us as well.

this is why we have to be so vigilant over these feelings and that they aren't nurtured. I wonder if anybody can finish this for me. Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not, I don't know who said that, I can't see anybody's mouth moving, I'm quite short-sighted, well done, proud.

So we need to be doing the opposite of despising, don't we? So as a side note, I just wanted to add that despising someone is not the same as despising something, is it?

[13:13] They're two very different things, I think, it's okay to despise theft, or to despise hate, or more broadly to despise sin, I think that's an okay thing to do.

So we can despise the sin, not the sinner. Jesus tells us not to enter into this state of despising people.

So who is it we're not despising? Exactly, the little ones. So the believers. So that takes us to the next part of the verse and Jesus gives us a reason, or a reason slash warning.

For I tell you that the angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. So when I first looked over this text a couple of days or a few days ago, I kind of just took this on face value, didn't really see the depth of it, been wrestling with it since.

It's actually quite a complicated and quite an unusual verse when we really look at it. And there's a lot of variation from commentators and people on YouTube about what this could mean and how people interpret it.

[14:35] And, yeah, I think we'll disassemble that text and we'll have a look at that in detail. So, first, we have a bunch of characters, don't we? So, we've got the believer, the little one we know about this one.

Connected to the believer are angels so we've got the believer and then we have some angels and they always see the face of or are always in the presence of, never disconnected from, Jesus' father in heaven.

That's God. So, this is popular idea that this verse is actually talking about guardian angels. angels. I read about it quite frequently.

Every time I was looking it up on the internet, I kept coming across guardian angels, guardian angels. It seems to be everywhere. So, we're going to take a little bit of a look at that. So, it's often connected to Psalm 34, verse 7, where it says, the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and he delivers them.

people have linked these two verses together and they've concluded that there is this personal angel that sits right next to us all the time and protects us.

[15:53] So, one of God's creatures is here invisibly and always sees us out of trouble. So, in the Old Testament, the angel of the Lord also appears with the authority of God.

In Genesis 16, 10, the angel of the Lord tells Hagar, I will increase your descendants so much they will be too numerous to count. This angel of the Lord speaks as one who has the same authority as God.

God's created angels don't do that, do they? In Genesis 16, 13, a few verses on, Hagar says to the angel of the Lord, you are the God who sees me.

For she said, I have now seen the one who sees me. This reveals to us the angel of the Lord is both sent by God and is God.

We see the same language with Moses and the burning bush. In Exodus 3, 2 tells us, the angel of the Lord appeared to him, that's Moses, in the flames of fire from within a bush.

[17:03] When Moses goes over to investigate, verse 4 says, God called to him from within the bush. Moses, Moses, God called to him.

Again, we have that angel of the Lord and God, one in the same. If we were to fast forward to John 1, we're told of Jesus, in the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God and the Word was God.

In verse 14, John 1, it says, the Word became flesh and made his dwelling amongst us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth. So we've got the same pattern, haven't we? With the angel of the Lord and with Jesus. So, Jesus was God in the flesh. I would posit the notion that the angel of the Lord is one and the same.

In these examples, he is in fact Jesus. He's not one of God's creature messengers. So that leads me on to my second set of points which is misplaced characteristics.

[18:17] Deuteronomy 31.8, this is one of my favorite verses in the Bible. The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid.

Do not be discouraged. God certainly isn't passive in his care for us. He doesn't post a guard and then pop out for an hour.

That characteristic of being ever present and ever protecting, it doesn't belong to the angels. It doesn't belong to the creature angels. It belongs to God himself.

There's a couple more examples. The angel Gabriel said to Mary in Luke 1.28, the Lord is with you. And he delivered the message that God had commanded him to give and the angel left.

In Acts 12, the Lord sent an angel to bust Peter out of prison. The angel left after the job was done. God does command his angels, that much is clear.

[19:19] And maybe there are times where he assigns angels to look after us, to do things, to do his will, to do his commands. And maybe we don't realize that, most likely not.

But the glory and praise doesn't go to the angel. It goes to God because God is the one that is ever present, ever listening and ever protecting.

So let's put it this way. If somebody sent you a really beautiful letter, handwritten letter, they sealed it up and they put little stickers on it. It doesn't happen much these days, does it?

And it's so beautiful you've moved with joy. You don't then chase after the postman and give him a big kiss and say thank you. I'd hope you wouldn't do that. Don't do that.

Where was I going with that? Yeah. The messenger is not the one that gets the glory. It's not the one that does all the hard planning and the work. This is God.

[20:22] It's God who's there. It's God who's ever present. It's God that never leaves. It's God that always protects you. Okay, so now we know that much about angels. Let's come back to our text.

So we are not to despise God's little ones because God the Father himself himself is present and active in their lives.

He has declared that he will personally care for them and he has the whole host of heavenly beings that stand in his presence at his command.

So if God himself personally cares and ministers to the little ones, to our brothers and sisters, I think what the text is saying is who are we to then go against God and start despising them?

Especially since this is in the context of warning in verse 6. Jesus then gives us an example to follow and that's where we go on to the parable.

[21:30] So verse 12, Jesus opens the illustration by inviting his disciples to think. He says, if a man owns a hundred sheep, here we have a man who is shepherding a bunch of sheep and one of them wanders off.

I don't often laugh at my own illustrations but that one got me. So the word in the Greek for wandering is also commonly translated as gone astray.

It has implications of being misled or deceived. So the sheep, he's seen something he thinks might be better than staying with the shepherd and the other sheep and he wanders off.

And the man reacts to this. Now notice the shepherd knows all of his sheep. He knows how many there are. He knows when one of them goes missing, he notices that.

I would ask, would we be so observant? Probably not. I know I couldn't count a hundred sheep.

[22:39] I'd be asleep by the time I got to ten. Jesus is drawing something of a parallel with himself in this verse, I think. He says in John 10, I am the good shepherd.

I know my sheep and my sheep know me. The sheep would be his followers, the little ones, the believers, it's you and me. So the shepherd's response to the sheep wandering off from the flock is what?

What does he do? He searches for his lost sheep and anybody?

He does. Exactly. Exactly. Exactly what I was looking for. He leaves the 99 on the hills and he searches for the lost sheep. You might be asking a question, why would the shepherd leave the 99? This is the first question I had when I read the text. I thought that's unusual. It's not something we're used to when we're talking about Jesus, is it? Especially after everything we've just studied. I don't think that's what the text is saying.

[23:54] I think what Jesus is doing is he's simply saying there will be special particular care for this sheep that wanders off. At their time of need, there will be that care there in place.

And the rest of the sheep are safe on the hill. These aren't sheep that have been left on their own without a shepherd. These are sheep that have been put to safety.

They're still given that safety. Have you ever seen sheep on a hill? The text actually says mountain. Quite easy to spot, aren't they? You can see them for miles. Especially if there's 99 of them, you can see them.

And you know they're sheep. Unless you're like me, if you're really short sighted, they just look like really low clouds. So the sheep aren't left alone.

The 99 aren't left alone. The sheep are still in a place of safety and the shepherd searches for his lost little one. So the image continues into verse 13 and it says, and if he finds it.

[25:01] So this is an uncertain thing with humans. We don't know everything. I had a really nice hat once. It was my favorite hat. It was brown and on the front of it it was like a beanie and it said gone fishing.

Had it for years. Picked it up in a car boot sale for a pound. And I lost it. Lost it last year. Absolutely gutted. And I don't know where it is. I hope someone nice appreciates it if they found it.

So it's an uncertainty image, isn't it, with humans. But the uncertainty in the picture is simply there to serve the image of joy that the man feels when he finds the sheep.

The parallel with Jesus has a far, far richer depth. Jesus is omniscient, which is all-knowing. He knows where his sheep are at all times.

As we said earlier, Jesus knows his sheep. He knows the 99. And that highlights the most beautiful promise, what I think is the most beautiful promise.

[26:11] If we really are part of Jesus' flock, if we really belong to him, there is nowhere that we can wander where it will be impossible for him to find us.

If we get lost, it's not impossible to get back to Jesus. He'll always come and find us. You can get misled, deceived, find yourself in trouble.

That happens to you. Call out in repentance. Jesus, by his grace, he will not reject you. He will come and find you. Psalm 139 says this, Where can I go from your spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me.

Your right hand will hold me fast. If I say surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me. Even the darkness will not be dark to you.

[27:25] The night will shine like the day, for the darkness is as light to you. What a wonderful, wonderful promise that is.

Next part of this verse, 13, And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over, that one sheep, more than over the 99 that did not wander off.

And this is where we start tying things back to verse 10, and our attitudes towards other believers and our brothers and sisters. The shepherd rejoices over, celebrates, the lost one returning. And he forgives the lost one returning. And it shows that at every stage of this issue, every part of it has been handled with love and compassion.

salvation. And we have Jesus closing the parable in verse 14. He says, in the same way, it's not God the Father's will that his little ones should perish.

[28:40] So God's care for us, his presence, his attentiveness is perfect and it's permanent. This doesn't change. And we all, as brothers and sisters, we all have a part to play in this.

By reflecting the love of Jesus the shepherd and God the Father in that same style with forgiveness and compassion. That's not to say that we simply accept sin.

We heard that last week and I think Ben, maybe it's Ben who's going to elaborate on that next week as we come to the next set of verses. We must know, as we saw with this gentleman, Jaz, actually we're all sinners.

We're all inclined to wander. We've all fallen short of the glory of God. So I'll just draw some conclusions. I'll be brief because I think what we've heard speaks for itself tonight.

So we'll just recap some points. So firstly, don't despise your brothers and sisters. Guard yourself and others against this evil.

[30:00] None of us are perfect. I'm sure if we tried we could always find a reason to despise somebody if we were inclined. Instead, love them. Love them as Jesus does.

Love them as God the Father does. love them and for that blank verse. For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. My second point, second of three.

There are many ways for us to wander off. You know you can get lost and not even realize that you're lost. I went on a road trip with my brother once.

This is before the days of smart technology and we were going to Gloucestershire. we ended up in Wales. We didn't realize who we got there. I went into a service station.

This little guy behind the counter went, hello. Okay, where are we? Check your maps. See where you are.

[31:05] Check each other's maps. Keep close to the good shepherds. people. If someone is going astray, you see one of the flock wandering into dangerous territory.

It's all of our responsibilities to love that person and to do our best to help that person. Don't think, oh, I'll do it tomorrow. A few weeks ago when I was speaking, we saw just how far sin can take you in an hour, let alone 24 hours.

You leave it to tomorrow. Tomorrow might be too late. My second point was this. Check your maps. See where you are. Check each other's maps. My third final point is that if we've seen anything from these verses, we've seen that God loves us.

So we can forget about guardian angels. It doesn't mean we have to forget about angels. They're there. They're in the text. They're real. But God is your personal God.

Jesus is your personal savior. They will never leave you nor forsake you. Jesus loves you. Jesus died for you.

[32:29] Jesus will always be with you. Jesus will protect you. Jesus overcome the world for you. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. Amen.