

Matthew 18:7-14

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[0 : 00] Good morning. For those of you that I've not met yet, my name is Dave.! I'm one of Shoreline's pastors, and I get to preach Matthew chapter 18 to you today.

! So if you'll turn with me to Matthew chapter 18, we're going to be continuing our series in the book of Matthew. We're going to start in verse 10. And as you turn there, and if you need a Bible, they're on the back table.

By the way. As we turn to Matthew chapter 18, what do you imagine God's attitude is towards you? Is it good, or is it bad? And why do you think that? Is he happy with you, and why might that be? Or is he angry, and why?

Is he skeptical, right, standing there with his arms crossed, waiting to see if you'll mess up? Is he disinterested in you?

[1 : 09] Have you sinned too much to gain a hearing in his ear? Or maybe are you too lowly to have earned his care?

And what do you imagine that God's attitude is towards the rest of the world? I wonder. In today's passage, Jesus tells us exactly what God's heart is towards his people.

For all who have trusted in Christ, I pray that this serves as a great comfort to you. For those who have wandered far away, I pray that seeing God's heart towards you draws you back to him.

And it's also a window into his heart for those who do not yet know him. If you don't yet know and love Jesus, if you've not yet turned from your sins and trusted in him, well, let him tell you about how God feels about you.

And I pray that it serves to draw you to him for the first time. So let's pray. Father, show us your shepherd's heart.

[2 : 24] And when we see it, will you kindle our hearts to love you and your flock just as you do. I pray that in the name of Christ. Amen.

Jesus says, Matthew chapter 18, verse 10, See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?

And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So, it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.

This is God's word. Last week, if you were with us as we looked at verses one through nine, the disciples asked Jesus which one of them was going to be the greatest in heaven.

[3 : 40] Jesus told them that that attitude, a focus on their own merits in God's eyes, was the opposite of the gospel. In fact, verse 3, No one who in their own eyes is worthy of God's honor will enter the kingdom.

He called his followers little ones to indicate that they had humbled themselves like children. He warned that leading his little ones into stumbling, that's into sin and into doubting their faith, was really serious to God.

And that's what we see him continue this week, where again he speaks of these little ones. The same humble believers, regardless of their age, who have realized their own spiritual poverty and become little in their own eyes.

Little enough to cry out for salvation from the only source it can be found. Jesus Christ and him crucified. And so Jesus continues in verse 10 and says, See to it that you do not despise one of these little ones.

He's reinforcing that idea that God cares about his children. And he will take a full accounting of every harm that comes their way.

[4 : 58] And to demonstrate how serious he is about this, Jesus continues, For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

And so, ladies and gentlemen, we have reached it. This is the guardian angels verse, sort of, right? Now, before we dig into that, stop and ask yourself, is this what you would expect to hear next? Did you say today, Oh, of course it's the guardian angels verse. Did last week's passage naturally lead us to think of this?

Probably not. It's not where I would have gone, right? But that's where Jesus goes. And the question is, Why? And the answer is actually pretty cool.

Jesus is ratcheting up the importance of even the most humble, the least worthy Christian. And that's because this is a window into the heavenly realm, right?

[6 : 04] The Bible is pretty sparse on details about the heavenly host and their activities. But when scripture does tell us about the heavenly host, they have, well, they're connected to people and groups of people.

And here we see that tying to these little ones, to those who have humbled themselves and become Christians, though they have angels, who always see the face of God the Father.

What does that mean? And what does it have to do with Jesus' charge not to despise even the lowliest believer? However, there's no indication how many of these angels there are, except that it's in the plural, so there's more than one.

Now, there could be one per person, right? You might have your own guardian angel. Each Christian could have multiple angels. Or, and this is how I take it, there might be a group of angels who represent all Christians.

But we're not given enough information here to know. But what we do know, where are these angels? Right? They're not on your shoulder like Jiminy Cricket, right?

[7 : 15] Arguing with a little devil on the other side, like the cartoons show. They aren't hovering over you to make sure you don't get in a car accident. My mother used to say that when she and her sisters were young and in a cramped space, like the backseat of a car, they'd always say, make room for my guardian angel, just to get some personal space, right?

Jesus says, where are the angels? Where are these angels? They're in heaven. They're not on our shoulder.

They're in heaven. And what are they doing there? He says they are always seeing the face of God the Father. And that might not seem very helpful to you or to me, but it's actually the very reason Jesus brings up the angels.

The picture he's painting is of a throne room, specifically the throne room in heaven, where God the Father is seated. And so to see the face of the king is to have an audience with him, or to be his advisor.

In other words, it's access to the king. And if Jesus says they always see his face, he means that God has granted these angels, the ones who represent Christians, a perpetual audience, right?

[8 : 34] They have constant access to God. And it's probably better to call them advocate angels rather than guardian angels, because God the Father has granted an unending audience, an open-door invitation, right?

A go straight past the secretary policy for these angels who represent God's children. And in fact, the advocate angels don't even get a break from this duty.

They always see the face of the Father. What does that mean? It means that God is constantly thinking about his children.

These little ones aren't something that he gets around to when he has time. They aren't on the back burner. He isn't trying to push them off his plate, right?

He pays attention to his children. He is about the redemption of his children, because his purpose in creating the universe was to create a people to make his family and to shower his blessings on.

[9 : 46] He made the earth and the galaxies and the laws of physics so that he could make you his own. So do you matter to God?

Do you have his attention? Jesus says, You matter to God so much that he has a council of angels who never depart his presence as advocates in the heavenly courts.

And that's why Jesus says, See to it that you don't despise one of these little ones. Even the lowliest child of God has a constant advocate in the throne room of God Almighty. They have royal emissaries in the highest court of all, higher than the kings of earth. And so, is your heart tempted to look down on a lowly saint?

Perhaps one from a different socioeconomic class or who doesn't dress well or who doesn't have education or chooses to live life differently than you.

[10 : 54] Friends, they have angels attending their case and their cause. Are you tempted to look down on a lowly saint?

Jesus says, See that you do not despise one of these little ones. He who has ears to hear the Savior, let him hear. And if you are a child of God and you feel less than others in the kingdom of heaven, or if you have been made to feel lesser, remember two things.

First, remember that your Father in heaven has placed angelic representatives in his court standing for you. That's how much he cares for you.

And actually, he cares a lot more than that, and that's what we're about to see in a minute. But secondly, remember that your adequacy does not come from you. It comes from Christ.

Charles Spurgeon put it this way, We must care for drunkards while they still pass round the cup. Swearers, even while we hear them swear, and prostitutes, while we mourn to see them polluting our midnight streets.

[12 : 15] We must not wait till we see some better thing in them, but feel an intense interest for them as what they are, straying and lost.

Such was our Savior's love to us. Such be our love to lost ones. Right? And friends, this is what separates Christianity from every other religion.

Right? We don't work our way up to God as if we ever could. No. He came for us.

He gives us His righteousness. Take stock of your heart right now. Jesus is calling us to.

Are you looking down your nose on another Christian? Will you repent of it today? Because friends, none of us is worthy of God's grace and love.

[13 : 21] We have nothing to look down with. So what we see here isn't some random switch to angels in verse 10. Right? What we see here is an escalation of God's care and concern for His people.

Chapter 18 then looks like this. Verses 1 through 4, Jesus says, these little ones who humbled themselves and asked for God's mercy in Christ Jesus are precious to Him.

Therefore, verse 5, we welcome them. Right? We love other Christians with a radical hospitality. Even those we would, by our normal human inclinations, dislike or have nothing in common with. And then, therefore, verses 6 through 9, we must not lead them to stumble. And therefore, verse 10, we must not despise them.

God has assigned them angels in His heavenly host. What we see next, verses 12 through 14, is the climax. The crescendo, right?

[14 : 25] So far, He has told us to treat them well, the little ones. So far, He has charged angels with our advocacy. And now, in verses 12 through 14, the shepherd leaves His hill.

God leaves His throne behind and goes after them Himself. Hear now God's heart for you.

what do you think? Verse 12. If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?

And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

No servants, no messengers, no emissaries. The great shepherd of the sheep goes Himself. So, our impulse at first might be to think that this passage is about evangelism and missions, right?

[15 : 43] calling the world to come to Christ. And it absolutely has something to say about that, but this is first about, and chiefly, about God's attitudes towards wandering and wayward Christians, right?

These little ones, verse 6, who believe in me, and that's who he's been talking about this whole way through. This parable is about a shepherd who lost a sheep that started in his fold.

and wandered away, right? This is a picture of someone who's already in the church and wanders away. This passage shows us that when you have strayed from your faith, maybe you've stopped participating in the life of the church, you can't remember the last time you prayed, or whether

you're deep in sin, or mired in doubt, or the crushing burdens of this world and this life has made you lose all hope.

what is your father's attitude towards you then? Does he stand in his court with arms folded and an indignant expression on his face?

Or is he out on the streets calling you to come home with a ready embrace? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, he says, we don't like big faceless corporations, do we?

[17 : 33] Right? Why? I'm just a number to them. Right? That's our attitude towards it. And in the church, right, you might want to blend in unnoticed.

I don't know. or because you think so lowly of yourself, you think you don't deserve to be noticed. Or because of your sins, you might think that you deserve to be cast out and forgotten.

But friends, you are noticed. Though he has a multitude of sheep, the shepherd notices when even one, just one, is missing.

The father knows his children. He knows who they are. He knows where they are. You are not just a number to the king of heaven.

It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. If your family doesn't care about you, if the church has made you feel forgotten, your employer thinks you're just a number, right, a cog in the wheel, or if the world doesn't even know that you're there at all, none of that.

[18 : 45] affects your father in heaven who has numbered every hair on your head. Normally, when Americans read scripture, we have to work against our western individualism and learn to read the scriptures together as a community.

But here, Jesus is emphasizing the one, you, the individual. God knows who you, even you, are. He knows how you are doing, what you need, all because he loves you individually. He knows where all his sheep are.

Are they safe and secure among the flock, or are they absent and alone and vulnerable? And what Jesus means by that is more than just, are you at church on Sunday?

Right? Certainly, church attendance, it's a helpful thing, a commanded thing, but a person can be physically present in this room or any other church gathering, right, and be spiritually gone, right?

[19 : 51] Going through the motions. We ought to be looking out for one another, right? Our brothers and sisters in Christ, as we gather together, who might be suddenly just going through the motions.

Or unusually withdrawn. Or moving away from the truths of Scripture into dangerous false teachings. Friends, if we love God, we're going to learn to love what he loves.

And he loves his flock. Every sheep, individually. It doesn't matter if we think, well, that's not a particularly beautiful or useful sheep, right?

the whole point of verses 1 through 4 is that none of the sheep are all that attractive, right?

God loves every individual Christian anyway, right? And they are lovely because he loves them. so let us with our father watch carefully, friends, over our brothers and sisters in Christ, not with suspicion, not with a skeptical and accusing eye, but with loving care and concern for one another.

[21 : 08] so ask ourselves, if someone among our church family went astray, would we notice? This is the first thing that happens in verse 12.

Would we notice? And what might we do to change that in our own hearts? When the shepherd notices a sheep going astray, as he's watching over his flock, what is his attitude towards that sheep?

Verse 13. Jesus says, if he finds the wandering sheep, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it. Now, Jesus could have said, he rejoices over the sheep, right?

He could have said that. He could have said, truly he rejoices over it. But he said, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it.

Right? He doesn't want us to miss this, so he emphasizes it. And then he emphasizes it again. He wants to call out to us, this is the Father's heart towards all who wander.

[22 : 19] It is his love, and when he gets them back, he rejoices. His attitudes towards wayward Christians when they repent and return is joy, not bitterness or resentment, not harsh words and a skeptical eye, joy.

Christians are loved with a pure, unyielding, unadulterated love by the greatest being in all the world.

one pastor put it this way, the shepherd seeks while the sheep strays, seeks because it strays and needs seeking.

Many of the Lord's redeemed are even now going astray, and even now is the shepherd going after them.

The Savior seeks those who are even now sinning. That he should have a love to those who are repenting, I can well understand, but that he should care for those who are willfully going astray is far more gracious.

[23 : 41] Jesus seeks those whose backs are towards him, who are going further and further away from the fold. Herein is grace most free, most full, most sovereign.

Have you willfully gone astray into sin and selfishness even this moment? Have you turned your back on him and are afraid to come to him?

Have you wandered far away from the flock? Are you unsure if you're welcome back? Jesus seeks those whose backs are towards him.

He seeks them. And think about it. He who knew all your sins before you took your first breath, will you surprise him now?

No? He who willingly shed his blood for you to cover all those sins, will he stop loving you now?

[24 : 54] He who promised to complete his work in you, will he be unfaithful now? He who has already adopted you, will he ever disown or leave you on your own?

This passage is not here to shame you, it's here to show you the bottomless love of our Lord. God. And when you see it, when you see just how great his grace is, to have that draw you back to him. So friends, when you're caught up in sin, don't delay repentance, feel like, oh, I'm just so unworthy. Yes, you're so unworthy, that's the whole point. You aren't coming home to a stern talking to or a dad taking away the car keys, right?

You're coming home to trumpets and feasting and a father with a smile on his face and tears of joy in his eyes. That's Christ's message today to all who have strayed.

This is the grace and the love of God. And if you've never entered in to a living relationship with God, this God, what stands in your way?

[26 : 23] the loving, watchful, attentive, warm care that belongs to every, even the lowliest child of God, but could belong to you this day.

His fatherhood and provision and care and his welcome, arms wide open. And it is given freely, freely by the work of Jesus.

We don't deserve any of it, but we deserve his judgment for our sin, but he delights to give it anyway. And he gives it in this way. Every person who ever lived has strayed, turned our backs, and walked away from God to pursue our own ends and follow our own desires.

And we can't come back because that's earned for us judgment, justice for our sins. And the Bible says the wages of sin against this high God is death. But our shepherd did not want that to be the end of the story.

Our shepherd came for us. In love, he entered the world as the man, Jesus of Nazareth, and lived the perfect life that we won't. And he was the best kind of shepherd.

[27 : 41] He said in John chapter 10, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, which means that on the cross, he suffered the wrath that we earned in order to spare us from death and hell.

And for everyone who repents and believes, that is, turns from self and sin and entrusts their souls to Christ, the Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus so that we are joined to him in his perfect life.

His righteousness becomes our own, and his death is our substitute. What's more, we're joined to him in his resurrection. He lives forever, and so will we in the house of the loving shepherd.

And on that day, the angels won't have to stand for us as our representatives in his court any longer, because we will stand there in the house of the Lord ourselves. So if you're a wandering sheep, a member of the Lord's flock who has wandered away in search of lesser things, and remember, you can be in this room and wandering away in your heart.

Come home. Come home today to a God who rejoices over your return. And if you've never become a sheep in the flock of God, why not today?

[29 : 18] His heart is towards you, not against you. Will you see in this short passage the heart of the love above all loves?

Will you find in this shepherd the home you need, also the one you want? Friends, there is a God in heaven. for everyone who repents and believes there is a welcome embrace, a smile on his face, love in his eyes.

This day and every day, will you run to him? And finally, this passage is a message to the church, isn't it? What's our attitude towards those who wander?

In fact, that's how he began in verse 10, right? it's written to shape the attitude of our hearts towards those who wander.

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. So, church, here are five heart checks for us from this passage.

[30 : 39] First, is your heart tempted to look down on a lowly saint? Someone who is lowly in your eyes, not in Christ's eyes, but yours, right?

From a different socioeconomic class, or struggling with a burden that you don't think Christians should have to struggle with, or a sin that you don't like?

Second, what's our attitude towards those who are wandering outside the flock of God, right?

Those outside the church. Is there anyone that you think shouldn't be offered the gospel because they're not worth it, or too far gone, or not a good addition to the church?

Is there someone who has wronged you, or sinned in a manner that's particularly offensive to you, that you don't believe God should offer them grace? The whole point of the cross is that we don't deserve it, right?

Third, if a Christian that you know goes astray, wanders away, do I despise them in my heart, thinking, I would never forsake my faith like that?

[31 : 56] Do I say, good riddance, I didn't like them anyway? Do I say, we're better off without him, we're better off without her? Do I say, nothing, because I'm not even paying attention?

Let us never cease to thank the Lord that he keeps us safe, right? The sheep that doesn't need a shepherd, or thinks that it doesn't need a shepherd, quickly finds itself being the sheep most in need of a shepherd.

Fourth, you can despise someone, verse 10, not just by insulting them, but by refusing to heed them, right? To heed their warnings. We're called as the people of God to keep watch over each other, care for each other.

If your Christian walk begins to slip, who could correct you? Is there anybody in the church who's off limits in your heart?

They don't get access to call me out on sin. Would you ignore a new Christian? If they said, hey, I'm new to all this, but it doesn't look like you're living faithfully in this area.

[33 : 14] Would you reject correction about your life from a Christian you think has less theological knowledge, knows less about the Bible? Would you reject correction about your life from a Christian who has a lower socioeconomic status, or is a different gender, or a different race?

A Christian who votes differently than you? Could they call you out on sin? If someone is too old or too young? Friends, that would be despising one of the least of these.

And last, if a wandering sheep returns, what's your attitude towards that person?

Do you celebrate it? Or do we roll our eyes? Like, oh, great, they're back. Or, do we envy them?

Right? Oh, well, they got to go indulge in all that fun sin stuff, and now they're back, like nothing happened, and that's danger, right? Wishing we could indulge in sin, that's a danger zone.

[34 : 28] And getting upset that the wanderer is welcomed home, that's the heart of the elder brother, who needs to be restored to the father too. All these attitudes, all these heart checks, they're confronted and dismantled by the gospel of God's grace, right?

No one deserves God's love and mercy, me included, you included. Let us not despise anyone. No one is great in the kingdom of heaven, except by humility, so don't despise them.

We're saved not by our strength, we remain in his flock not by our strength, but by his, so let us not despise them. We remain in the faith not because we are so great, but because God is, if I could lose my salvation, I would.

Friends, the great shepherd loves his flock with a passionate, pursuing, sacrificial love. We are the beneficiaries of that.

Let that shape our hearts towards those who stray and those who are lost, and may it draw the wanderer home. Friends, let's pray to our great shepherd.

[35 : 54] Father in heaven, thank you that you gave us this passage to reveal who you are, and thank you that this is who you are.

Lord, for all who stray, for all who are far away, for those who have never yet belonged to your flock, will you show them your heart and draw them to yourself?

And will you develop this same loving, pursuing, sacrificing heart in all your people so that your church honors you as it builds itself up in love?

we pray this in the name of the great shepherd, Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for his flock.
Amen.