

Logan Smith  
Bread of Life Baptist Church  
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### **Matthew 18:1-14**

#### **God's Love For His Children, Our Love For Each Other**

I love my children. I love my children more than I can express with words. I love my children, not because of what they have to offer me, but simply because *they are my children*; my love for them is not based on how they perform or what they do - I love them, no matter what, and always will. Since having kids, I understand my own parents' love for me and my siblings on a deeper level. And it has also helped me understand the Lord's love for me, for us, on a deeper level, too.

And this is because one of the most *glorious realities* of the gospel - one of the most *glorious truths* that God reveals in this Bible - is that we, *everyone of us who repents and trusts in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, is adopted into God's own family; we are the beloved children of Great, glorious, almighty God!* And this passage before us this morning, Matthew 18:1-14, unpacks just how wondrous that truth; it unpacks for us just how much God loves us - even us, who are sinners. This passage reminds us that we could never earn His love, and yet He offers His love freely; and He calls us to rest in His grace just like children resting assured in their parents unmerited love for them. But this passage also calls us to remember that being part of God's family, as children, brings responsibilities with it; we're called to live out this relationship as God's children, not only between ourselves and God individually, but also *towards one another*, as siblings, brothers and sisters in Christ. So let us walk through this passage and see the glorious love God has for us, as His children, and the love He calls us to have for each other.

First,

#### **I. We Are God's Children Only If We Confess our Sin, Turn from Self-Righteousness, and Trust God with Child-like Faith (18:1-4)**

In the first verse, we see the disciples asking a question that seems so out of place, so ridiculous, that it seems comical: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" This reveals their pride; they hunger for glory, they each want to be seen as better than the other. They each want to be the greatest; or at least, second to Jesus. But Jesus cuts through their pride and

humbles them - and all of us - by calling a child over, in verse 2. He then says, in verses 3-4: “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

They completely missed the whole point; *pride* and self-righteousness will never get us into heaven, nor increase our status or value in God’s sight - they reveal just how sinful, foolish, and spiritually immature we really are. Jesus’s point is that we must *be like children* - we must have childlike faith that humbly recognizes we have nothing to offer GOD, nothing in ourselves to offer or make ourselves *worthy* of being His children; but rather, we must accept His fatherly love for us, just as a child rest in his parent’s unearned love for him. We enter into the kingdom, we enter into God’s own family, simply by receiving His free, gracious love by believing in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For this reason, when Jesus uses the words “child” and “little ones” throughout the rest of this passage, he simply means “believers; Christians” - children of God. The child is an example because we only belong to the Kingdom as *children*; not based on who we are or what we do our own “greatness,” but rather based on humble trust in the Lord’s grace; greatness in the kingdom is not about us, but about Christ; we receive his grace not through pride or self-righteous works and boasting, but through humble, childlike trust and faith. And true faith requires humble *confession*: humbly recognizing just how spiritually poor, desperate, and needy we are; realizing that our only hope is *grace* - the unmerited favor of God that only comes in Christ Jesus. As he says, “unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” We’re called to *repent* - to turn away from our pride, to turn away from trusting in ourselves, our own righteousness, and our own efforts - and to instead *humbly confess our sins* and *humbly trust in the Lord’s grace*. This is our only hope for salvation.

And when we do so, we enter the family of God, as God’s beloved children.

Next, we see that...

## **II. We Must Take Great Care Not to Tempt Fellow Believers to Sin (18:5-7)**

In verse 5, Jesus continues, but shifts directions a bit, saying: “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.” Welcoming “one such child *in my name*” does not refer to a literal child, but to a *believer*; as we just saw in verses 3-4, one such child refers to “those who

humble themselves to become like children.” As verse 6 will say, these “little ones” are those who “believe in me,” who believe in Jesus.

We who belong to Christ are to welcome one another “in CHrist’s name” as *family* - we are all fellow children of GOd, because we all believe in the same gospel and come in the same name: Jesus Christ. So we are to welcome one another, belong to one another as the same family, and *love each other in Christ*. And this comes with responsibilities.

And so, Jesus continues, saying, “but whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” In other words, Jesus gives a sobering **warning**: Whoever causes a fellow believer to *stumble, sin, or fall away* stands in peril of the fearsome judgment and wrath of God. God loves His children very much; to cause a believer to stumble is to *cause serious spiritual harm*; and like a good dad who loves his children, God loves and protects us. “Whoever” refers to, literally, *everyone*: this is a warning to the *unbelieving world* against causing believers to stumble and sin; but it is also a warning to *us*, warning us against *causing each other, as fellow believers, to stumble and sin against the Lord*. The same warning is reiterated even more explicitly in v.7: “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!”

**(Illustration)** Because I love each of my children, I care deeply about their safety and well-being (physically, emotionally, spiritually, etc.). I will not stand for anyone harming them and will protect them. Why? Because I deeply love them; not because of what they do for me or because they have anything to offer me - simply because they are my children, and no matter what, I will love them. But this also means that I want to protect them *from each other*. My love for one child does not give that child a free pass to hurt the other; because I love *both of my children*, I take it very seriously if one tries to harm the other; again, this is a sign of my love *for both*. So if my son hits his sister, for example, I tell him, “Son, I love you so much. I would never let anyone hurt you. But I also love your sister very much. Just like you’re my son, she’s my daughter. I won’t let anyone hurt her, either; and that includes you. Because I love both of you so much, I will not stand for either of you hurting each other.”

And so it is with us. Each one of us, as a believer, is a child of God. We’re siblings. God loves us more than we can possibly imagine! He bought us with the blood of His own Son in order to adopt us as His beloved children! He cares about each of His children - each believer -

*to a profoundly intense degree.* If you're resting in the gospel of Jesus Christ today - trusting that you are forgiven of your sins and reconciled to God because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in your place, purely by grace - then *you are God's beloved child.* He loves you! And this means *he cares about what happens to you;* He cares deeply about your life, your heart, your soul!

And this means that he also deeply loves and cares about *your fellow church members.* Your fellow believer is your *sibling;* your sister, your brother, is also *God's beloved child,* whom God cares about to an incredible degree!

Just like an earthly dad won't let his children hit each other, so our Heavenly Father will not stand for us harming each other by *tempting and causing each other to sin.* We must care about each other's holiness. We must love each other enough to *guard each other* from temptation. If we know our fellow brother or sister is weak or vulnerable in an area - maybe because of past hurt or scars, or past sins, trauma, or addictions - we need to be aware of that, and help guard them from temptation and stumbling once more into those old patterns of sin (whether that sin be addiction, drunkenness, lust, adultery, gossip, or any other sin that we might be tempted towards). We are all weak and frail; we all have different areas we are vulnerable in. Therefore, we need to be mindful of this, and strive to help protect each other and aid each other in the fight against sin. We should take great care not to cause one another to stumble. We should take great care not to lead others astray - either into wrong ways of thinking, or into wrong ways of living. We should hold one another accountable; not because in a way that is self-righteous, judgmental, or condescending; but as fellow stumbling sinners who *love each other enough* to help each other in our areas and moments of weakness.

We're family; we're brother and sisters in Christ, beloved children of God; therefore, let us *love each other just like God loves each of us;* let us love each other enough to *actively guard one another from sin and work towards each other's holiness, sanctification, and spiritual good.*

[Transition] Because, after all, *sin is very harmful for each one of us;* and this is where Jesus turns next; so let's do the same...

### **III. We Must Take Great Care to Fight Against our own Sin and Temptations (18:8-9)**

Even more serious than our physical well-being is our *spiritual health*: the condition of our hearts, our relationship with Christ. When we stumble, give into temptation, and willingly sin, we're running away from the Lord and towards everything that is *evil, harmful, and incredibly dangerous for our souls*. When we give into sin, we're hardening our hearts in unbelief and running away from God. God loves us dearly, as His children.

Therefore, Jesus *warns us* against the grave peril of giving in to sin: "And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire." (*Matt. 18:8-9*)

We've seen a similar warning before, back in the Sermon on the Mount (5:29-30) There, it was in the context of lust; here, in the context of pride and humility. I think we can safely conclude that this applies to any sin in general. Jesus is telling us here to *fight, resist, and wage war* against our sin as if our lives depended upon it; as if our *souls* depend upon it; in fact, *as if our sinful desires and temptations are trying to pull us into Hell itself, for all of eternity!* Because, that is, in fact, *exactly what it is trying to do!* Sin is not of faith, but of *unbelief*. Sin is rebellion against God and hardens our hearts. It destroys us and those around us. Sin leads not to life, but to death. And true faith is *repentant faith*. True, godly sorrow over sin - true *faith and repentance* - strives to *turn away from sin and be dead to it*. If we continue on in our sin, willingly living in sin and refusing to acknowledge, confess, or repent from specific sins in our lives, that is a very dangerous place to be; it is a sign of *unbelief*, not of faith. Don't get me wrong; we are not saved by our obedience, nor can we lose our salvation. We are saved by grace alone; but true saving faith is *never alone*. If we claim to be a believer but live in habitual, unrepentant sin and rebellion, then *our sin is dragging us into Hell* - because that very well may mean that we aren't believers at all.

Therefore, as God's true children, we must *let our faith drive us to truly humble confession, repentance, and obedience*. We must *wage war* against our sin, by whatever means necessary.

That's what Jesus means here when he uses very strong, colorful, even exaggerated language: "If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away." "If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away." This isn't a *literal* command; I don't think Jesus

intends for all of us to walk around as blind amputees. After all, every single one of us will sin, using our eyes, our ears, our tongues, our hands, our feet - even our minds and hearts! But the exaggerated language here is meant to drive home the point, in an exaggerated way, that we must *take great care* in keeping watch over our hearts and souls. We must *wage war* against our sinful desires, temptations, and tendencies.

We cannot be OK with sin in our lives. We cannot tolerate it. We cannot justify it. We cannot be OK with any amount of lust, or greed, or gossip, division, rebellion, anger, gluttony, or any other kind of sin. We cannot justify it. We cannot excuse it or ignore it. We cannot be OK with it as long as we don't get caught. We can't say, "Yes, I know it's bad, but after all, I'm only human." *If that is our response, then we have bought into the lies of Satan, not the Word of God!* We cannot excuse our anger and jealousy just because its not as severe as someone else's. We cannot ignore our gluttony, greed, or gossip, and pretend that it's OK. We cannot cover over our pride, ignore it in our hearts, and cloak it in a veil of false humility. We cannot make excuses for our lack of obedience, saying, "I know I should read my Bible and pray, but I'm just too busy; I know I should go to church, but I'm just too busy and tired; and after all, it is game day."

We're called to *vigorously fight against* our sin; we're called to resist temptation, root out sinful desires, and take whatever measures are necessary to keep ourselves from falling back into the same old sins and temptations. We're called to wage war against our sin with *whatever measures are necessary*. And that includes taking even *drastic measures* in order to make sure we don't keep falling into the same patterns of sin.

In fact, a major distinguishing mark of *true repentance and faith* - of true "godly sorrow," as opposed to "worldly sorrow" over our sins - is whether or not we're willing to take such drastic measures. Even unbelievers might feel sorry and guilty for their sins when they get caught; they might even be glad at the thought of being forgiven! But true faith feels the conviction of our guilt and sin, and then *mourns the sin*, saying, "OK, now what do I need to do or change in my life to make sure I don't go back down that path and give into that temptation next time? What "hand" do I need to "cut off," so to speak?"

If there is a particular sin that you continually struggle with, then we need to ask ourselves (and each other), "What needs to change in my life to make sure I don't keep falling into that temptation?" If you're tempted towards drunkenness or alcoholism, and know you're vulnerable to temptation in that area, then you might need to cut out alcohol in your life

completely. If certain people in your life keep influencing you towards sins - like gossip, for example - and every time you're with them, you fall into that same old trap, there might come a time when you need to cut it off, for your own soul's sake, and for theirs as well. Or if you struggle with lust, and have a history with falling into sexual temptations, you need to do whatever it takes to keep yourself from going back down that path - even putting restrictions on your devices; maybe even to the point of cutting off yourself completely from your computer, your smart phone, your tablet, or any device or object that causes you to sin! And you may object, and say, "Oh come on, isn't that a little extreme?" But if that's what we're tempted to say, look again at Jesus's words here: is it more extreme than "cutting off" your own hand, or plucking out your own eye?

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#### **IV. We Must Take Great Care to Pursue Fellow Believers Who Stray (18:10-14)**

In v.10, Jesus gives another command: "See to it that you do not despise one of these little ones" - that is, don't despise a fellow believer, one of God's beloved children. We're commanded not to despise each other; we're called to love, accept, and genuinely care for each other, as fellow believers, because each of us are *God's beloved children, whom he deeply loves and cares for!* That is, we should deeply love each other because of GOD's profound love for each of us, as His children! Since this is true for each believer, we are commanded to love each other - and this should *especially* be true for us as fellow church members, shouldn't it?

In fact, let me say this on an even more intimate, personal level - as a believer in Jesus Christ, you are *God's beloved son or daughter*; and since you're God's beloved child, He loves you so much, He cares for you so deeply, that He is *commanding* all the rest of us to *not despise you*, but instead to love you, to accept and receive you, and to *sincerely care for you!*

And now, look up, to look your neighbor sitting next to you, look to your fellow believer across the room - *these* are also God's beloved children; and GOD commands you to not despise

them; He commands you *to deeply love them*, because *He deeply loves and cares for them, just as He deeply loves and cares for you!*

The rest of verse 10 drives this point home, but it does so in a way that is admittedly difficult to interpret. Jesus says, “For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.” I don’t think this verse implies that we each have a guardian angel; there are no other scripture passages that support that idea, and I think such a reading goes beyond what this verse actually says. However, I *do* think this is meant to imply that there are angels who minister to us believers under the Lord’s bidding. As we see in Hebrews 1:14, there are angels that are sent from the Lord as “ministering spirits” to “serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation” - that is, for believers. Again, I think the point is meant to drive home for us how deep the Father’s love for us is, as His children. He cares for us; He hears our prayers; He even sends his angels to minister to us, and is personally involved every step of the way - for they “always see the face of my Father.”

And then, in verses 12-14, Jesus tells a small parable to show how much the Father loves each of His children: he says, “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.”

In other words, Jesus is saying that our Heavenly Father loves each of us so much that He will not let us go, but will hold us fast in His sovereign love; He loves us so much, that even if we start to wander off and go astray, He will go after us, pursue us in love, and bring us back to Himself. Again, the “little ones” going astray here are *sheep*; they are God’s children, those who believe in Him. God pursues us; He saves us, purely by His grace, and He promises to *hold us fast - He will not let us go!* We have assurance of our salvation because it does not rest with us or what we have done or will do - it rests upon what Christ has done, what God promises to do! Our salvation is the work of the Lord, from beginning to end. This means that He will not let any of His children go; this means that if someone claims to be a believer, but ultimately walks away, they were never truly a Christian; but this also means that if someone does truly believe in the gospel, and falls away for a time, then God Himself *relentlessly pursues His child and brings them home, restoring them to Himself by grace!* A true believer will always return and ultimately



persevere in the faith because *God promises to hold us fast and go after us, as our good shepherd! As our loving Father!* That's how much God loves you, as His child! He won't let you go!

ANd so, once again, He calls us to have this same kind of love for each other! If we see a fellow believer start to backslide in the faith, start to walk in unrepentant sin, or start to fall away, *we are called to pursue them in love, to call them to repentance, and to help them come back to the Lord and be restored by the Lord's grace!*

We can't be content with just worrying about ourselves; it is not loving for us to have a "hands-off" approach to each other's Christian lives. We're a *family*. We have responsibilities to each other. And if we see each other backsliding and falling away, CHrist *commands us to love each other enough* to go after each other, to pursue each other in love, and see each other restored in the gospel of grace, by turning back and clinging to the Lord in repentant faith! Next week, we'll see Christ give us instructions on what this looks like - but for now, let's simply note that we're called to do this *because this is what the Lord's love demands! This is what love looks like for us, as a family of God's children!*

God's loves us so much that He relentlessly pursues us by His grace; He love so much that He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to live, die, and be raised in our place, bearing the wrath that our sin deserves, so that we can be adopted by His blood as children of GOd, forgiven our sins, declared righteous, and so beloved of GOd that He gives us the free inheritance of salvation and eternal life! He loves us so much that He promises to never let us go; to pursue us, save us, and hold us fast! And He loves us so much that He gives us each other as a tangible, visible *family* here on earth, to demonstrate His love for us towards each other in Christ.

If you're trusting in Christ by grace this morning, then this is how much God loves you, as His child! And if you're not a believer this morning, this same gracious love can be yours simply - simply turn to the Lord with childlike faith; trust in this gospel, and truly believe that the Lord will love and receive you as His child, not because of anything you can do or have to offer, but simply because of His free, gracious love.

If you have any questions about this gospel, about how to become a Christian, or about baptism or church membership, I would love to speak with you. You can find me after the service, or you can even come down now and wait on the front row. Let us pray.

