

### Stumbling a Little One in the Faith is a Serious Sin

#### Matthew 18:1-14

Matthew 18:1-14 - *“At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”  
2 Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, 3 and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. 6 “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. 7 Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!  
8 “If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire.  
10 “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven. 11 For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost. 12 “What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? 13 And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. 14 Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”*

#### Background Notes

The parallel passage in Mark 9:33-34 states that the disciples had been arguing about which one of them would be the greatest in the kingdom. *“Then He came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, “What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?” But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest.”*

Three of the disciples had just seen a preview of the coming kingdom on the Mount of Transfiguration. So now, after arguing along the way to Capernaum about who should be the greatest in the kingdom, they turned to the Lord and asked, *“Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”* The Lord’s answer to the disciples was essentially, “You’re asking the wrong question!” They should have been asking how they could humbly **serve** the Lord, not about what positions they’d hold in the kingdom. **Humility is the key to greatness in God’s kingdom.**

The disciples were thinking the way the world thinks. The world thinks that status, position, money and power are what makes a person great. Work your way up the ladder. Be the boss. Get to the top. But the Lord said that humility and serving one another are what truly makes one great. The Lord told the disciples, *“If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35)*. This is true now, and it will be true in the kingdom when the Lord returns. So we should all stop and ask ourselves the question, “How does the Lord see me?” Does the Lord see me as great in His kingdom because I am a humble servant?

In order to illustrate His point, the Lord Jesus called a willing child to Him and used the child as an object lesson. Then He said, *“Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (v3)*. (Notice - not childish, but childlike!) The Lord was not implying that the disciples were not saved, but rather that everyone who is saved must come into God’s kingdom in the same way – humbly, with childlike faith and trust. Don’t expect to get to heaven if you’re a skeptic, doubter and unbeliever. And don’t expect to get to heaven if you’re proudly relying on your own stellar good works to get you in!

Throughout this passage, the term “little ones” includes literal children, as well as new believers and humble believers, especially those who are young in the faith. *“Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me” (v5)*. This verse is not saying that people can earn salvation by working in “children’s ministries,” such as teaching in Sunday School or VBS. The Lord’s point is that if you receive a simple, lowly, humble believer in the name of Christ, you will be rewarded as if you had received Christ Himself.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. Stumbling little ones is a serious sin.

Stumbling young believers means to trip them up in their spiritual walk and growth. This is such a serious sin that the Lord said, *“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses!”* Notice that the Lord was speaking here to His disciples. So even if you’re a mature believer, it would be better for you to die, and go prematurely to heaven, rather than cause spiritual harm by stumbling young believers!

We need to be extremely careful not to stumble young believers - either young in age or young in the faith. Many young believers have been tripped up in their Christian growth by observing unsuitable lifestyle practices of older, supposedly more mature believers - such as what they do in their spare time, what movies they watch, how materialistic they are regarding houses and cars and “toys,” what they do (or don’t do) for Christian service - and more! Convicting, isn’t it?

The sin of stumbling is so serious that if you find that you’re stumbling others (or even stumbling yourself), you must make radical changes in your lifestyle! That’s what our Lord meant when He said, *“If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it*

*off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire” (v8-9).*

The Lord didn't mean that we must literally cut off a hand or foot, or pluck out an eye, because the rest of Scripture clearly indicates that maiming yourself doesn't provide you with eternal life. What the Lord meant is that we must **take drastic action** and **make radical changes** to eliminate whatever is causing us - or others - to stumble. Better to get rid of our TV and computer, or sell our expensive car, or move to a less ostentatious house, if these are stumbling blocks for you or some younger believer. *“For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!” (v7).* Stumbling little ones is a serious sin.

## **2. Despising little ones is a serious sin.**

*“Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven. For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost” (v10-11).*

Verse 11 is not included in some translations of the Bible, or is placed in brackets in some Bibles. This means that this verse is not included in a number of early manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel. However, this truth of this verse is certainly found in other Scriptures.

What did our Lord mean when He said, *“... in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven” (v10).* There are a couple of possible interpretations of this verse. One interpretation is that He was referring to “guardian angels.” Hebrews 1:14 says that *“Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?”* Angels are God's servants and they are sent out to give service to those who are saved, so this verse supports guardian angels.

Another interpretation is that the spirits of young believers (and of all believers) go into the very presence of God the Father when they die. Therefore, do not despise or look down on young believers as if they're insignificant nobodies. Their spirits go into the very presence of God the Father - so don't despise these little ones.

We can't be dogmatic as to which interpretation of verse 10 is correct, but the main point that our Lord was making is hard to miss. Don't despise young believers, because every single one of them is extremely important to God. When even one of them goes astray, the Lord graciously goes after that wandering lamb, just as a shepherd goes after one lost sheep that has wandered away from the flock. And He rejoices at their return! *“For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost. “What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (v11-14).”*

This is a wonderful Scripture! It shows that God knows and cares about every individual, including every single little child. His desire is that all would become believers. *“The Lord is ... longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9)*. People are not lost because God doesn't give them an opportunity to come to Jesus and be saved. They are lost because they arrogantly, deliberately and defiantly refuse to come to the Good Shepherd.

God is very concerned about children and all young believers. They're important to Him, and they should be important to us as well. We should not look down on any one of them. Despising little ones is a serious sin.

## Practical Application

### Try working with children!

Have you ever taught Sunday school or served in some kind of children's ministry? Try it - you might like it! It is very rewarding. It's a great blessing when you see those children grow up and faithfully serve the Lord - some of them in wonderful ways. We often tend to think that the adult ministries, classes and worship services are more "important" - but the **Lord** shows us in this passage that evangelizing and teaching children and young believers is extremely important. Children are more open to the gospel, have a great capacity to learn - and they don't have the hang ups that adults do!

Most of you probably became believers when you were children. Aren't you glad that you didn't wait until you became adults? I certainly am! I know I would have been a critic and skeptic if the Lord hadn't saved me when I was young. I was open to the gospel as a child! My sister-in-law just returned from doing mission service in the Philippines. She said that the children there are wide open to the gospel, and many put their trust in the Lord. What a blessing!

Have you ever worked with children? Try it! You may be more gifted and more successful - and more **blessed** - then you ever dreamed possible! Try working with children!