

Matthew 18B

- As you read the New Testament gospels and epistles, you can't help but admire the men who wrote them
 - John, Peter, Matthew and Paul were exceptional men who endured great trials and became examples for believers throughout the age
 - They gave us wise counsel and provided steady leadership during the years when the church was forming and growing
 - But they weren't always so steady and wise
 - Like every believer, those men had to grow spiritually over time until they become godly examples of Christ
 - And the Lord was kind and gracious to allow us to see their progression from sinner to saint to servant
 - Beginning with their stumbling in the Gospels, moving to their growing years in Acts
 - And ultimately best exemplified by their instruction to the church in their letters...
 - We can chart their growth as men and leaders in the church and followers of Jesus Christ
 - Seeing that progression should be encouraging for all of us
 - Because it reminds us that spiritual growth takes time for everyone
 - In a sense we all start as Simon before we become Peter
 - We all transform from a Saul to a Paul, from Abram to Abraham, from Jacob to Israel
 - And that progress depends entirely on the Lord working inside us to produce the necessary change
- But in the beginning of that journey (and even for many years after), it's natural for us to struggle at times in our walk, to revert back to our old nature
 - Sometimes we succumb to selfishness and pride, sometimes we're confused by things Jesus says, sometimes we disappoint Jesus

- But in time, as we continue following Him, we do better
- And that's perhaps the most encouraging thing about reading stories of these men in their early days following Jesus
- Everyone who follows Jesus – even the greatest disciples of Jesus – started the same way we did...*poorly*
- And today we get another opportunity to be reminded of that lesson
 - Last week these guys were arguing over who would be the greatest in the kingdom, which earned a rebuke from Jesus
 - They were measuring their greatness in terms of worldly achievement or status, but Jesus said God rewards humility
 - The one who served his brothers the most would receive the most honor in the Kingdom, Jesus said
 - And Jesus compared the proper attitude of a believer to that of a child, because as we learned last week, children are models of humility
 - Young children don't rank as first in the home, they rank last
 - They serve others, wait for others, obey others
 - They have the least power, make the fewest decisions, have the least freedom
 - And their attitude in life reflects that reality, so Jesus says that's the attitude a believer should adopt in seeking to please the Lord...
 - Remain humble while serving others
 - And if you do that well, you will be well-rewarded in the Kingdom
- The disciples no doubt felt the sting of Jesus' rebuke, but rather than learn from it, they sought to change the subject
 - And that's where we pick up today, back in v.4

[Matt. 18:4](#) "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

[Matt. 18:5](#) "And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me;

- After Jesus told the disciples that humility will mark the greatest in the Kingdom, He moves to how we should treat those who serve in this way
 - When someone humbles themselves to serve us, like a child, Jesus says we are receiving Jesus in that moment
 - For example, if Jesus came to serve you (as when He washed the disciples' feet), how would you respond to Him?
 - You would be astonished at His humility, wouldn't you?
 - In fact, you would probably feel a bit embarrassed at the prospect of Jesus serving you knowing it should be the other way around
 - Jesus says that's how we should respond to those who serve us
 - We receive that child (a reference to a believer in Jesus' metaphor) as we would Jesus
 - We receive them in thanks, appreciative of their humility, seeing them as a representative of Christ to us
 - That's not how the world looks upon the humble who serve them
 - Servants are barely acknowledged and even abused
 - They are perceived as weak, insignificant, and useless even as they make possible the lives of the rich and powerful
 - People look down on servants thinking if they had more intelligence or strength, they could do better for themselves
 - That's how the world looked at Jesus when He became their servant on the cross

[Matt. 27:39](#) And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads

[Matt. 27:40](#) and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross."

[Matt. 27:41](#) In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him and saying,

[Matt. 27:42](#) "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him.

- Little did they understand that the Son of God had placed Himself on that cross voluntarily for their sake
- It was Jesus' strength that made it possible for Him to be such a humble servant
- That's what Jesus is saying here to His disciples...it takes strength to be a servant to others sacrificially
 - So when someone comes to us serving self-sacrificially, we need to receive their service with gratitude and honor them in return
 - Celebrate them, and remember you may be looking at the person who will be your superior in the Kingdom
 - Because as they serve you with child-like humility, they are auditioning for a better place in the Kingdom, Jesus says
- So Jesus tells His disciples to adopt a humble attitude and to honor others who do as well, so what do you think the disciples said in response to that?
 - Well, once again, it's hard to see what's happening here by looking only at Matthew's account
 - Matthew jumps into the next part of Jesus' teaching in v.6 without noting what the disciples said in between
 - I can't help but wonder if Matthew moved on so quickly to avoid exposing what happened next
 - But thankfully, Luke (who wasn't there at the time) was faithful to include the background on the moment

[Luke 9:47](#) But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side,

[Luke 9:48](#) and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great."

[Luke 9:49](#) John answered and said, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name; and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow along with us."

[Luke 9:50](#) But Jesus said to him, "Do not hinder him; for he who is not against you is for you."

- Earlier, the disciples were debating which one of them within Jesus' inner circle would be greatest in the Kingdom

- Now after Jesus' rebuke, John moves to comparing Jesus' disciples to those outside the inner group
- Apart from the twelve men Jesus selected to be His apostles, Jesus had many more disciples by this point in His ministry
- But these twelve men who became Jesus' inner circle were set apart from the rest
- They were appointed to a higher station, because the Lord intended to use them in a greater capacity as apostles
- Earlier in Luke 9 they got their first taste of the power that would accompany their new position, when they cast out demons
 - Performing miracles similar to Jesus truly set them apart from the rest of Jesus' followers
 - But now we see that this distinction has gone to their heads a little
- That's why the apostles were concerned when they saw a "regular" disciple presuming to do the same miracle Jesus had assigned to His twelve apostles
 - They felt this person was presuming too much authority or privilege by doing the ministry they believed was reserved to them alone
 - So when they saw a disciple casting out demons in Jesus' name, John says they tried to stop him in the act
 - But in Luke 9:50 Jesus tells John that wasn't the right response, because someone who is not against you is for you
 - Why did they oppose that person...they weren't concerned with what he was doing...they were concerned with who was doing it
 - They were bothered by the idea of an "ordinary" disciple trying to accomplish miracles they believed were reserved for apostles
 - They didn't like someone else gaining the attention they thought they alone deserved
 - But Jesus says that too was a wrong comparison
 - When it comes to serving the Lord in ministry, there are only two teams
 - There is Team Jesus and Team Satan, and the goals of each team are easy to tell apart because they are polar opposites

- So if a person is doing the same things you would do for Jesus, then that person is on your team – accept them as a partner
- Moreover, we all get an assigned role on this team according to how Jesus decides we should serve Him and according to the gift of His Spirit
 - Later in Luke 10 Jesus sends out 70 disciples with the power to cast out demons
 - I suspect Jesus did so in part to show the twelve that He can equip anyone He desires to serve Him
- And since Jesus is the One making those decisions for all of us, none of us can claim to be a privileged member of the team
 - We can't expect to reserve certain ministry for just some people
 - Another person's ministry success doesn't come at our expense, and another church's growth is not a bad thing
 - If we go about making those comparisons, as the apostles did here, we inevitably invite feelings of jealousy or pride
- And in the end, those emotions don't make ministry better...it gets in the way of ministry
 - There's an old saying that there is no limit to what we can do if we don't care who gets the credit
 - But when we care who gets the credit, we stop ministry and become a stumbling block to others
 - And that leads Jesus into a new section of teaching on stumbling blocks

[Matt. 18:6](#) but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

[Matt. 18:7](#) "Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!

[Matt. 18:8](#) "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire.

[Matt. 18:9](#) "If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell.

- Before we look at this section, it's important to understand how Jesus is developing the metaphor He began at the outset of this chapter
 - As I mentioned last week, when Jesus began this lesson He pulled a child close to Himself to serve as an object lesson for his disciples
 - Jesus then made several comparisons between His followers and that child
 - First, in v.3 Jesus said that the way we enter into faith is like becoming a child, entering the world humbly
 - Next, in v.4 Jesus moves a step further comparing the way we must serve Jesus in faith to the way a child serves humbly
 - Then in v.5 Jesus said we must receive those who serve us humbly like children as if Jesus Himself were serving us
 - And now Jesus moves to discussing His view of the person who should cause one of Jesus' followers (His children) to stumble in their walk of faith
 - Jesus' use of the child metaphor to represent every believer has remained consistent throughout this passage
 - So we need to interpret everything Jesus says in light of the metaphor
 - In other words, Jesus isn't speaking about the fate of children
 - He's using the child to stand for all of us, so Jesus is talking about all believers
 - People who teach this passage often miss the fact that Jesus has been using a metaphor and so they incorrectly limit the teaching to children
 - And when we do that we miss Jesus' larger point, which is that Jesus gets really upset when we cause any believer to stumble
- Causing a believer to stumble means leading a Christian away from obedience and service to Jesus, and toward sin and worldliness

- All of us have been guilty of causing others to stumble from time to time
 - In v.7 Jesus acknowledges that stumbling blocks will be inevitable
 - Many times, we don't even know we're causing others to disobey the Lord
- Being the cause of someone else's stumbling is never what we want, of course, but Jesus isn't concerned as much with being a bad influence
 - He's concerned with something more sinister, more deliberate
 - He's concerned about behavior like that demonstrated by His apostles
- He's concerned about organized efforts – whether done out of spite or resentment or jealousy – to inhibit the walk of another believer
 - Jesus says woe to that person, meaning they will be judged for doing so
 - And in fact, Jesus says it would be better for that person to be drowned in the sea than to continue stumbling believers
- That statement is classic biblical hyperbole...Jesus is speaking in exaggerated terms to emphasize how seriously He views this offense
 - Jesus isn't literally advocating for suicide nor is He suggesting the believer could be condemned for stumbling others
 - A believer will never be condemned for sin, but we will be judged for our service
 - And if our service includes working against others to stumble them, Jesus is saying we will not like the reward we receive
 - It would be better that we cut our life short than to continue piling up more demerits, so to speak
- Continuing with the hyperbole, Jesus says if we have become a stumbling block, we should take serious corrective action to address it
 - Even if it should require we cut off a foot or a hand or pluck out an eye, that is preferable to stumbling a believer and offending Jesus
 - Clearly, Jesus is not literally advocating self-mutilation

- Remember, in this whole discourse, Jesus has relied extensively on metaphors and figures of speech to make His points
- And now He uses another one to emphasize His serious displeasure for anyone who stumbles believers
- Jesus says there is no earthly sacrifice too great if it will prevent an eternal loss
 - In Jesus' exaggerated example, He says if you could arrange an escape from Hell by cutting off your foot, it would be worth it
 - And in real terms, He's saying take whatever steps are necessary to avoid stumbling others and thereby preserving your reward
- At hearing Jesus' words, can you imagine the look on the faces of the apostles when they realize they had been stumbling a believer?
 - They were trying to stop a man from healing someone infested with a demon
 - And not only were they wrong in how they treated that believer, they were risking their own eternal reward
- In short, they were doing the opposite of ministry
 - The word ministry is *diakoneo* in Greek, which literally means to serve
 - The English word deacon comes from this Greek word, and in a sense, all of us are deacons or servants of Jesus and of each other
- So when we serve someone, we minister to that person, and in our ministering to one another, we make more service possible
 - As I minister to you, I encourage you to walk more closely with Jesus, to think more carefully about your duty as a disciple
 - I teach you, train you, pray for you, direct you and in time as you grow you do the same for others
 - That's the culture Jesus wants in His church...serving one another, praying for one another, forgiving one another, etc.
 - But when I stop operating in humility and stop serving others, ministry stops too

- And in its place comes selfish pursuits of one kind or another, including selfish pursuits inside the church body
- I may do things that look very spiritual, but because I do them for myself and not others, they are not true ministry
- Maybe I do things to get noticed or to make money or to compete with someone else
- In time, I no longer see humility as my goal nor others in the body as those I serve
 - Instead, I expect to be served and recognized for what I accomplish
 - And I become prideful and boastful of my position in the church
 - And at worst I may work to undermine others in their ministry (as the apostles were doing) so that I look better by comparison
- In short, we become a stumbling block to others both by setting a bad example and by inhibiting others from serving well
 - And in v.10 Jesus says being a stumbling block to other believers is despising Jesus' little ones
 - To despise a person means to think very little of someone, and that's the opposite of being humble and a servant of all

Matt. 18:10 "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven.

Matt. 18:11 ["For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.]

Matt. 18:12 "What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying?

Matt. 18:13 "If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray.

Matt. 18:14 "So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.

- If we ever become inclined to think too little of a fellow believer, you should remember this...Jesus said in v.10 that person's angels are before the Father

- To understand that statement, we first must recognize that angels are assigned to individual believers
 - In Hebrews 1:14 we're told that angels were created by God to be ministering spirits
 - Remember, the word minister is the Greek word meaning service, so angels are serving spirits
 - And Hebrews goes on to say that these angels render their service for the sake of those who will receive salvation in Jesus
- So the angelic realm was created by God expressly for the purpose of serving the elect, those who believe in Jesus Christ
 - And as such, Jesus says angels are assigned to specific believers
 - You and I have angels in Heaven assigned to serve us, and that's something remarkable to contemplate
 - We don't know exactly what kind of service they offer us spiritually, but I suspect it's far more important than we imagine
- And if our Creator thought enough of every single believer to create and assign angels to serve us, then how ought we look upon each other?
 - Is there is any reason or cause for us to despise one another? To look down on one another? To lead each other to stumble?
 - How do you think God feels when He has died to save a person and given them angels to guard over them, only to see you come along and lead that person into sin?
 - Or maybe we despise the person and judge them as unworthy to serve Jesus, or at least not as worthy as we are?
- Notice in v.11 Matthew says that the Son of Man has come to save and seek that which is lost
 - In your English Bible, this verse may be bracketed, which is an indication that the earliest manuscripts of Matthew lack this verse
 - Generally, earlier copies of a book are considered more trustworthy
 - So it's likely that this verse was added later by copyists who felt it offered a good summary of Jesus' point here

- The statement is actually from Luke's Gospel, and even if the line wasn't originally written by Matthew, I agree it's a good summary
 - The point is that Jesus came to save all who believe, and so who are we to think less of any of Jesus' children
 - In fact, we can understand the Lord's heart for His children by comparing it to the way a shepherd seeks after a lost sheep
- In v.12 Jesus says as a shepherd guards a flock of 100 sheep, he can't let his responsibility for the flock overshadow His concern for the individual
 - Even if just one sheep should go astray, he will leave the 99 for a time to search for the one
 - There is a risk in leaving the 99 because while he's gone looking, something could happen to the flock
- But still he goes, and before we make the application we should ask why does the shepherd take this risk?
 - Because individual sheep are always going astray
 - I doubt there are many days in which shepherds don't have to search for lost sheep at some point
 - So if a shepherd wasn't willing to go after a lost sheep, soon he would have no flock at all
- And that's the point...a key responsibility of the shepherd is keeping the flock together and unharmed
 - Jesus says the Father's heart is to rejoice over the return of the one, more than the remaining of the 99
 - That should be the heart of the shepherd too...that we make our ministry about restoration, recovery and return of sheep
 - Not the unhealthy control, containment and condemnation of sheep who get in the way or compete with our work
- Next week we pick up here again and move ahead in a conversation of how to restore stray sheep
 - But as I leave you today, let me suggest a few takeaways I'd like you to consider from today's text

- First, you're not competing with other Christians, so don't make comparisons
- Not everyone has the same gift or calling, not everyone will use the same methods, not everyone will gain the same results
- Leave judgment to the Master
- Secondly, serve one another in humility and receive service from others in joy as if from Christ
 - Let's value sacrificial service, not look down at those who serve us
 - And if you are not seeking ways to serve your brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, you should make that a priority
 - Because serving others humbly is the path to eternal honor
- Finally, become aware of how your words and actions may lead to stumbling, either in your own walk or in their influence over others
 - And when you discover it, Jesus says do anything necessary to curtail that negative influence
 - Because there are eternal consequences