

## Week 21: *Matthew 18:1–14*

### Hook



**Main Point: In this Upside-Down Kingdom, humility is greatness.**

D.L. Moody was the most famous evangelist in the world in the late 1800s. People came from around the world to attend his Bible conferences in Northfield, Mass. One year a large group of pastors from Europe were among the attendees. They were given rooms in the dormitory of the Bible school. As was the custom in Europe, the men put their shoes outside the door of their room, expecting them to be cleaned and polished by servants during the night.

Of course there were no servants in the American dorm, but as Moody was walking through the halls and praying for his guests, he saw the shoes and realized what had happened. He mentioned the problem to a few of his students, but none of them offered to help. Without another word, the great evangelist gathered up the shoes and took them back to his own room where he began to clean and polish each pair. Moody told no one what he had done, but a friend who interrupted him in the middle of shining the shoes and helped him finish the task later told the story of what had happened. Despite the praise and fame he received because of God's blessing on his life and ministry, Moody remained a humble man.<sup>1</sup>

**Q: What stands out to you about this story? What lesson can we learn from Moody's act of kindness?**

**Q: What are some examples of humility that you have witnessed personally? How did those encounters impact you?**

**Transition:** A spirit of humility is a great indicator of a believer's submission to the lordship of Jesus. For many in our culture today, self-promotion, narcissism and achievement at all costs have been communicated as the most valuable ways to achieve self-fulfillment. But today's lesson from Matthew will teach us that in the Upside-Down Kingdom of Jesus, greatness is found in those willing to be humble.

## **Week 21: Matthew 18:1–14**

### **Book**

**Main Point:** In this Upside-Down Kingdom, humility is greatness.

#### **Matthew 18:1–4 [Read]**

**Talking Point 1:** The greatest in God’s kingdom are those who take the lowliest positions.

**Q: What is it about children that makes them an example of greatness in the kingdom?**

**Q: Why do we need to *change* to become like little children?**

The disciples argued on more than one occasion about who was the greatest among them (Mark 9:33–36; Luke 22:24–27), and there are two different stories of James and John or their mother asking Jesus to let them sit on either side of His throne in the kingdom of God (Mark 10:37; Matthew 20:21). They still thought of the kingdom of God as a physical kingdom, the nation of Israel. Since the beginning of His ministry, Jesus had declared that He was bringing the kingdom, even declaring it was why He was sent (Luke 4:43). But the disciples (along with the Pharisees and other religious leaders) misunderstood “the kingdom of God.” They envisioned the Messiah overthrowing the Romans who had been occupying their land, taking back the throne in Jerusalem for the line of David, and ushering in a new golden age of Israel, as in David’s time, but even better. As His disciples, they imagined they would rule with Him as His chief advisors and government leaders, like King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table or the president’s cabinet. They had given up their livelihoods and families to follow Him, imagining it would all be worth it because one day they would rule with Him in the greatest kingdom Israel had ever seen.

But Jesus wasn’t bringing back the kingdom of Israel with a bigger and better version of David’s monarchy. He was doing a whole new thing. He had been telling them this for His entire ministry with His parables about the kingdom of God. The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast showed them that the kingdom would start out very small but grow to impact the whole world, not just Israel (Matthew 13:31–33). The parables of the wheat and the tares and the fishermen’s net talked about the Day of Judgment at the end of the age, not just a current physical kingdom (Matthew 13:36–50). Jesus said the kingdom is like a new wineskin; old systems and ideas won’t fit into it (Matthew 9:17). When John the Baptist asked if He were really the Messiah, Jesus didn’t describe physical military battles He was winning against Rome. He pointed to spiritual battles He was winning against evil, sickness and death – “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf here, and the dead are raised up....” (Matthew 11:1–6). On the night before His death, He would tell Pilate that His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). Jesus wasn’t building a physical kingdom; He was building a spiritual one.

This is the moment when Jesus explicitly told the disciples just how upside down His kingdom is. When they argued about who was the greatest, Jesus said being great in His kingdom meant being a servant, putting yourself last (Mark 9:35). To enter the kingdom at all, they had to humble themselves like little children (Matthew 18:1–4). When we talk today about having faith like a child or becoming like children in our faith, people have a lot of different interpretations of what that might mean – being innocent and pure like children,<sup>ii</sup> being trusting like children,<sup>iii</sup> having a child’s sense of wonder,<sup>iv</sup> or even referring to the “new birth” as becoming spiritual children.<sup>v</sup> But Jesus was quite explicit here when He said becoming like little children means humbling ourselves (v. 4). The NIV translates it, “Whoever takes the lowly position of this child,” which highlights the social-status aspect of Jesus’ meaning even more clearly.<sup>vi</sup>

Other rabbis also emphasized humility as a virtue, but Jesus’ example of a child was more dramatically counter-cultural than anything any other rabbi taught and would have been absolutely shocking for them to hear.<sup>vii</sup> Theirs was an honor-based society, and children had no value or status at all. Like foreigners, slaves and women, children were considered non-persons. They were the property of their fathers, like a cow or a horse, and could be treated as such. Some ancient authors said children were more like houseplants than human beings. In ancient Rome, the *paterfamilias* (father of the family) had absolute power over his household and children. If they angered him, he had the legal right to disown them, sell them into slavery, or even kill them if he chose.<sup>viii</sup> Jesus chose children as His example of “greatness” because children were considered anything but great in the eyes of the world.

In this culture, Jesus telling them to “turn” and “become like children” was an exhortation to willingly let go of their honor/status and take on the lowly position of a child. The word for “turn” (ESV) or “change” (NIV) literally means to turn around and go the other way. It is not the word that is typically translated “repent,” but it has a very similar meaning.<sup>ix</sup> Using this word indicates that “becoming like children” would be a major life-change for the disciples. It would be an about-face. Instead of pursuing higher honor and status, the typical goal of people in their culture, they were to do an about-face and become like those who had no worldly status or honor at all.

This was completely upside down from their culture, where honor meant everything. Honor, even more than money, was the most valued commodity a person had. The higher level of honor you had, the greater your ability to do business or associate with anyone you wanted, so people were constantly trying to gain honor. People started life with a set level of honor (ascribed honor), depending on the social status of their family. Then, everything they did and anything that happened to them either gained or lost them honor (brought shame). Being invited to dinner by someone of higher honor or winning an argument increased honor. Committing a grave sin such as adultery or contracting a disease such as leprosy brought shame. You could even lose honor if a member of your family did something shameful or had something shameful happen to him.<sup>x</sup>

But when Jesus came, with everything He said and did, He was “calling off the honor game,” as scholar Jerome Neyrey phrased it.<sup>xi</sup> By eating with sinners and tax collectors and those “beneath Him,” Jesus was intentionally giving up His honor. By touching a leper, He invited shame upon Himself; it was looked at as a dishonorable thing to do. Talking to a Samaritan woman, healing a Canaanite woman, calling fishermen and tax collectors to be His disciples – all told the world that He didn’t care about their honor game, that *all* people are equally valuable in God’s eyes. Jesus was telling the world that the levels we create for society are not valid in God’s kingdom. There is no slave or free, male or female, Jew or Gentile (all distinctions of honor versus dishonor) in the kingdom of God (Galatians 3:28). With everything He did, Jesus redefined what honor looked like, and it wasn’t based on social standing. It was based on love, generosity, humility and sacrifice. What it means to be great in God’s kingdom is the complete opposite of what it means to be great in the world.

Had it been an earthly kingdom, the disciples’ role as leaders would have meant great wealth, power, honor and status for them. But as leaders in Jesus’ kingdom, they would have great *spiritual* power, but no political, economic or social power. They would have no wealth or status; they would live simply and be hated by many (Matthew 5:11–12; 10:9–10). They would be beaten, thrown in prison, and eventually killed for their faith ... *and they would rejoice about it*. They would consider persecution to be their greatest honor (Acts 5:41). In God’s kingdom, instead of power and status, greatness is humility and service (Mark 10:42–44). Instead of getting rich, it’s storing up treasure in heaven (Mark 10:23–26). Instead of receiving, it’s giving (Acts 20:35). Instead of trying to earn your way into the kingdom, it’s repenting of your sin and trusting in Jesus (Matthew 21:28–32). In the kingdom of God, the last will be first and the first will be last (Matthew 20:16).

Jesus was calling them to give up the pursuit of worldly honor, power and status and become like little children – the lowliest position in their culture, with no honor at all. It may have seemed shocking to them, something no self-respecting man would ever willingly do, but it is exactly what Jesus Himself did when He left His throne in heaven to come down to earth, become a man, and even die on a cross (Philippians 2:1–11). He willingly let go of all the honor and status of heaven, humbled Himself, and became a man, and not even a man of high status. He was no king, priest or even Pharisee, but just a carpenter’s son. Then He humbled Himself further by touching lepers, eating with sinners, and washing the disciples’ feet. Finally, He humbled Himself completely by willingly submitting Himself to the most shameful death in the world at that time – even though He was innocent. Jesus was the perfect picture of what it means to “become like children.” He never demanded honor, status or power, though He deserved it more than anyone. He always served others in humility. He “came not to be served but to serve” (Matthew 20:28; Philippians 2:1–11).

**Q: In what ways do people pursue status, honor and power today? Why? Why might people have a hard time with Jesus’ command to become like little children?**

**Q: How would your life be different if you gave up pursuing worldly power, honor and status for the sake of the Gospel? What things would you have to *change*?**

## **Matthew 18:5–9 [Read]**

**Talking Point 2:** Woe to anyone who causes those who believe in Jesus to stumble.

**Q: What does it mean to cause someone to stumble in their faith?**

**Q: Why would it be better to cut your hand off than to be thrown into the eternal fire?**

Here Jesus used children or “little ones” as a metaphor for those who believe in Him and follow Him. When He spoke of causing little ones to stumble (v. 6) or despising little ones, He wasn’t talking about how we treat children, but how we treat people who follow Him, those who have “become little children” by giving up worldly power and status to serve others in His kingdom. John often used this term – “my little children” – in his letters to refer to believers (1 John 2:1), not in a derogatory way but in a loving, fatherly way.

First, Jesus talked about those who cause one of His “little children” – His followers – to sin (ESV) or stumble (NASB). Literally, the Greek word here means “to put a stumbling block” in someone’s way so that they trip or fall into a trap. Figuratively, it is used to talk about enticing someone to sin, as though setting a trap for another to fall into. In Matthew 16:23, the word is also used when Jesus rebuked Peter for saying He should never suffer and die. “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me!” (ESV uses the word “hindrance.”) Jesus was telling Peter that he was putting a stumbling block in His way, tempting Him not to follow through on His mission.

In their culture, putting a literal stumbling block in the way of an unsuspecting and vulnerable person was illegal (Leviticus 19:14). Causing someone to sin, leading them into sin, or entrapping them to sin was the spiritual equivalent of placing a stumbling block in his/her way, and other rabbis also spoke against it. It is even found in the apocryphal wisdom book of Sirach.<sup>xii</sup> Just as causing someone to trip and fall hurts him physically, causing him to sin also leads to pain and destruction. Jesus made this emphatic statement to let His audience know just how serious leading someone else into sin is. Though crucifixion was considered the cruelest legal punishment in Jesus’ day, drowning was even more horrifying for Jews because of their fear of the sea as a place of chaos (from the story of creation, Genesis 1:2) and judgment (from the story of the flood, Genesis 6–7). The Psalms describe the sea as a dangerous place (Psalm 130:1; 69:1–3).<sup>xiii</sup>

Also, this particular type of drowning would have been horrendous. Millstones were incredibly large, heavy stones used for grinding grain in the community mill.<sup>xiv</sup> They were so heavy, they had to be turned by a donkey. This is clearly a hyperbolic statement. Tied around someone’s neck, it



would be too heavy to even be lifted, much less thrown into the sea. But if it could, the person would have drowned immediately. Yet this would be better than what happens to those who cause believers to sin and stumble. This is a strong warning against anyone who would lead people astray from Jesus. There is a reason the Bible says not many should become teachers – they will be judged with greater strictness (James 3:1). We will be held responsible for leading other people astray and into sin.<sup>xv</sup>

Next, Jesus shifted from causing others to fall into temptation to sin to personal responsibility when it comes to temptation (vv. 7–9). He used another hyperbolic metaphor, one that was particularly abhorrent to Jews, to drive home His next point. The image of cutting off your own hand or cutting out your own eye is bad enough for *anyone*, but for Jews, self-mutilation was against the law (Leviticus 19:28).<sup>xvi</sup> This hyperbole provides a stark image of the price we should be willing to pay to avoid spiritual death, “the eternal fire.” Very plainly, it’s better to lose a limb than burn in hell forever. Some theologians try to argue that the Bible doesn’t really talk about a literal hell, but this passage is pretty clear. The Greek here literally means “the eternal fire.”

The message is simple. Whatever is tempting you to sin, get rid of it. Whatever situations or people are temptations for you, get away from them. As Joseph literally ran away from Potiphar’s wife, we need to just get away from it. Of course, it’s not literally talking about self-mutilation. If we literally gouged out our eyes when they caused us to sin, everyone would be walking around blind. But it is clear that if something in your life is bringing you down, causing you to fall into temptation, whatever it is, get rid of it. Even if it feels as precious to you as a part of your own body. If your home is causing you to be materialistic, downsize. If your job is pulling you away from Christ, get a different job. No matter what it is, it’s not worth it. The kingdom is the treasure worth trading everything you have for (Matthew 13:45–46). As Jesus said about “becoming like little children,” we need to give up all worldly power, status and honor to enter the kingdom. Whatever stands in the way of living our life as a living sacrifice, dedicated completely to God (Romans 12:1–2), we need to get rid of it.

Getting rid of whatever causes you to sin is like cutting a bullet or cancer out of your body. It may hurt, but if you leave it there, it will cause a lot more damage in the long run. No one wants to lose their foot, but it’s better than gangrene spreading to your whole body. That is what it’s like when you cut temptations out of your life. It may feel like cutting off your foot, but in the long run, you will be so much healthier.

**Q: What specific things in your life do you need to “cut out” to keep from being tempted to sin?**

**Q: In what ways might you have caused someone to stumble in their faith in the past? How can you prevent yourself from doing that again?**

**Q: How can we help keep each other from stumbling or falling into sin?**

### **Matthew 18:10–14 [Read]**

**Talking Point 3:** God does not want any of His people to perish; He pursues His lost sheep.

#### **Q: What does it say about God that He leaves the 99 to go after the one lost sheep?**

Luke used the same parable in his Gospel, but in a completely different context, paired with the parable of the lost coin and the lost (prodigal) son (Luke 15). This is because Jesus told these same parables on many different occasions. Rabbis often repeated their teachings many times on many different occasions so their students could more easily remember them.<sup>xvii</sup> In this case, the parable describing God's heart as pursuing the lost sheep is in the context of talking about those who cause His people to stumble and fall into sin. These two groups of people are connected. As Bible commentator Craig Keener writes, "By his ingenious arrangement of the material, Matthew demonstrates that overbearing leaders unwilling to forgive the repentant fall into the same category as those who cause the stumbling to begin with."<sup>xviii</sup>

Jesus commanded them to "not despise" these little ones, meaning not to look down on them or think little of them. As leaders of the Church, the disciples were not to reject or shun those who had fallen into sin, but chase after them as a shepherd chases after a lost sheep. This created a stark contrast to Jesus' description of the religious leaders of His day, the scribes and Pharisees, who "shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces" (Matthew 23:13). They were more concerned with their reputations and their positions of honor and status than they were about the needs of the people. People who fell into temptation or even just failed to fit their mold of what a "good Jew" was, were ostracized. This all related back to the system of gaining and losing honor based on what they did and even what happened to them.

Just as the kings and leaders of Israel were "bad shepherds" of the people in the Old Testament (Ezekiel 34), so these leaders used the flock for their own gain instead of caring for them as God would. But Jesus' disciples would be a different kind of leader. They would be good shepherds who would not put stumbling blocks before the people and would chase after them when they went astray.<sup>xix</sup> This parable shows us the heart of the loving Father, of the Good Shepherd. It is not God's will that even one of His people should perish. Not even one. Even when we turn away from Him and fall into sin, He pursues us. He is a God who seeks and saves the lost (Luke 19:10). To be leaders in His kingdom, the disciples would have to do the same.

It is easy to read over the bit about the angels (v. 10), as it may seem somewhat out of place or hard to understand as modern readers, but it fleshes out this picture of God as a loving shepherd who cares for His flock and desires to keep them from perishing. Jesus described "their angels," referring to the ancient Jewish idea of guardian angels. Just as Israel had a collective guardian angel, Michael (Daniel 10:13–21), this text shows us that each individual believer also has a guardian angel who dwells in the very presence of God (v. 10).<sup>xx</sup> We don't know exactly how these guardian angels work logistically – when, how or how much they intervene in our lives, but we know that "ministering spirits [are] sent out to serve, for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14). We know that God protects His children

with His heavenly army of angels. “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways” (Psalm 91:11). God works *both* through His Spirit and through His army of angels in our lives to work all things together for good (Romans 8:28). God is not distant. He is near to us whenever we call on Him (Deuteronomy 4:7; Psalm 145:18) and He keeps guard over His flock to keep them from perishing, leading them in the way to eternal life (Psalm 23).

**Q: How does it make you feel to know that God has commanded His angels to guard you in all your ways? To know that He pursues you when you stray from the flock?**

**Q: Why is it important that Church leaders have this same attitude, not shunning those who stumble but reaching out to them and drawing them back into the flock?**

**Q: Think specifically of friends or family who have stumbled or strayed. How can you reach out to them with the love of Christ this week?**



## **Week 21: *Matthew 18:1–14***

### **Took**

**Main Point: In this Upside-Down Kingdom, humility is greatness.**

A recent Pew Research survey<sup>xxi</sup> showed that a majority of young Americans in particular have grown less trusting of people in various ways and for various reasons. This study is sobering and reveals, to a degree, the reality that many people today, especially those who are younger, are frustrated with the duplicity they see in those around them. It also serves as an important reminder of the need for Christians to live out their faith with a servant's heart of humility.

**Q: In what ways can you display humility with other believers this week? How could your commitment to humility encourage them in their walk with Christ?**

**Q: In what ways can you display humility with those who are far from God? How could your commitment to humility encourage them to explore the implications of the Gospel in their lives?**

### **CHALLENGES**

**THINK:** Challenge yourself to think openly and honestly through what Jesus said here. Be honest with yourself about the ways in which you may be holding on to a desire for worldly status or power. Be honest with yourself about the things in your life that you may need to cut out in order to follow Jesus more fully. Be honest with yourself about ways you may have caused other people to stumble in their faith. These are probing questions, not to be taken lightly or glossed over. We need to be vulnerable, open and honest with ourselves and authentically ask God to search our hearts and show us any offensive way in us (Psalm 139:23–24).

**PRAY:** For Jesus to change your heart – to give you a desire to become like a child, to let go of any need for worldly power or status and to pursue Him fully, with your whole heart and your whole life. Pray for discernment to see the stumbling blocks in your life that need to be cut out and the ways you are being a stumbling block for someone else. Pray for the desire and the will to make the changes necessary to commit your life to Him fully.

**ACT:** Cut it out. Choose something that is keeping you from following Jesus fully, with your whole heart, and cut it out. Get rid of it. Change your ways. Get rid of the stumbling block. Ask the Lord for help to have the self-discipline to simply cut it out of your life, cold turkey.

## Hook, Took & Editing by Jonathan Teague

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- <sup>i</sup> <https://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/a-lowly-saviour>
- <sup>ii</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971).
- <sup>iii</sup> Brad H. Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).
- <sup>iv</sup> Brad H. Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).
- <sup>v</sup> Klyne R. Snodgrass, "That Which is born from *Penuma* is *Pneuma*: Rebirth and Spirit in John 3:5-6" *Perspectives on John: Method and Interpretation in the Fourth Gospel, National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion Special Studies Series 11* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993).
- <sup>vi</sup> R. T. France, Matthew, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).
- <sup>vii</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).
- <sup>viii</sup> O. M. Bakke, *When Children Became People* (Augsburg Fortress, 2005).
- <sup>ix</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).
- <sup>x</sup> Jerome Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998).
- <sup>xi</sup> Jerome Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998).
- <sup>xii</sup> Sirach 9:5; 25:21; 34:7
- <sup>xiii</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).
- <sup>xiv</sup> (image) <https://illustratedprayer.com/2018/08/18/lets-talk-about-millstones/donkeymillstone/>
- <sup>xv</sup> G. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1978).
- <sup>xvi</sup> Gustaf Dalman, *Jesus-Jeshua: Studies in the Gospels* (New York, NY: Macmillan & Co, 1929).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels* (Zondervan Academic, 2011).
- <sup>xviii</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).
- <sup>xix</sup> A. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God: The Names and Attributes of God* (New York, NY: KTAV, 1968).
- <sup>xx</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, International Critical Commentary, Vol 2* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991).
- <sup>xxi</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/06/young-americans-are-less-trusting-of-other-people-and-key-institutions-than-their-elders/>