



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 18:1–14

Gospel of Matthew

“The Law of Precedence in the Kingdom”

TRANSCRIPT

The Scripture reading for this morning is found in the 18th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, and we are going to read the first fourteen verses for our Scripture lesson for this morning. Chapter 18 of the Gospel of Matthew verse 1 through verse 14. You remember that just previously, the Lord Jesus, with the disciples, has gone to Caesarea Philippi and there elicited from Peter the confession, “Thou art the Christ the Son of the living God.” That signifies something of a crisis in the ministry of our Lord and from that point on, great stress in his ministry lies upon the ministry to the apostles in preparation for the days in which he would not be with them, ministry in the light of his coming crucifixion, and so from that point on in Matthew the great stress then turns toward Jerusalem and events that shall take place there.

In the immediately preceding context we have had the account of the miracle of the tribute money, in which Peter was the agency of that miracle, which might seem to have suggested that he had some precedence among the apostles. They evidently, according to the other Gospel accounts, fell to squabbling over who was going to be greatest in the kingdom, and as a result of that, when the Lord Jesus came to Capernaum and into the house with them, he asked them what they had been squabbling about and that raised the question of greatness in the kingdom of God, and so we read these verses in the light of that general context.

“At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, And said, ‘Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whosoever shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. But whosoever shall offend one of these little ones who believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe unto the world because of offences! For it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh! Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire. Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.’”

The next verse in our Authorized Version incidentally is probably not a genuine verse of this Gospel. Our most ancient manuscripts do not have it. You recognize however that the verse represents a scriptural sentiment and is found essentially in other passages such as Luke chapter 19 and verse 10. So we’re going to read it. It is a scriptural sentiment, I say, and while it does not belong to this Gospel it does express scriptural truth. Verse 11:

“The Law of Precedence in the Kingdom” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2007 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

“For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost. How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more over that sheep, than over the ninety and nine which went not astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.”

May God bless this reading of his Word.

We're very pleased to have in the audience this morning several members of the committee who are responsible for the New International Version. Many of you have the New Testament which was issued a short while back, and I know that you are profiting from this contemporary translation. We're especially privileged this morning to have Dr. Edwin Palmer with us, who is the executive secretary of the New International Version, and for those of us who have from time to time worked on the committee, he is really the man responsible for the completion of the work. He has been riding herd on all of the professors and others who have helped in making that version, and we're looking forward to the completion of the whole Bible, I think, in the fall of next year—is that not right Ed?

Dr. Palmer is a well-known scholar himself from the Christian Reform Church. He has written some books, some of which we have in our library, such as the book on the Holy Spirit, and the book about a subject that I don't really know too much about called the *Five Points of Calvinism*. [Laughter] It's a very profitable little book which I have read with a great deal of personal satisfaction myself. Dr. Palmer, it's a delight to have you here and would you lead us in prayer please?

[Edwin Palmer] May I just say before we pray, I have really appreciated being with Dr. Johnson. He has been with us at several of the editorial meetings, and I appreciated his simple Christianity, humble Christianity, as well as his gifts in the knowledge of the Hebrew and the Greek

as well as his strong convictions concerning the sovereignty of God, which is a glorious teaching of the Bible. Let us pray.

[Prayer] Dear God, we give Thee thanks that we can come into Thy presence this morning and meet at fellow believers. We acknowledge that we are sinners even as Christians we sin. We know what is right and we do what is wrong. Lord we deserve nothing from Thee. Why Thou dost choose us from eternity we don't know, but we give Thee thanks our God that Thou hast loved us giving us Jesus Christ to die for our sins, that we're saved.

And we ask Thy forgiveness for the sins we've committed in this past week, the things we've done wrong. And we're not good perfect, don't love Thee with all of our heart and all of our mind and all of our soul, and we don't love others as much others as much as we love ourselves. But we give Thee thanks that Thou hast given us the forgiveness of our sins because of Jesus Christ our Savior, and we pray, Holy Spirit, that Thy wouldst come into our hearts. Live within us, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, and give unto us the ability which we don't have ourselves. Indwell us, work within us, make us to be continually increasingly conformed to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our Lord we give Thee thanks for this church. We give Thee thanks for its tremendously broad outreach, and we ask that it may continue. We pray that it may be known increasingly in wider circles, and Holy Spirit, we ask again that as people listen to tapes all over during various things, traveling or quietly at home, that Thou wouldst come and take this Word that Thou hast given to us, this infallible Word that is now preached it's now on the tapes, grant our Holy Spirit that Thou wouldst work in lives of people that people would be changed and altered and Thy kingdom would come more fully into our hearts because of this ministry.

We pray for the elders of this church that they may give good leadership, be broad in the vision be with the people, that they may work together and volunteer their services and not be forced to go along, not dragged, but may they themselves be out ahead of the elders giving them great encouragement, great help.

Our Lord we give Thee thanks for our nation. Thou hast blessed us many great ways. In spite of wars, we've had great peace. We have had great prosperity. We give Thee thanks our God, but again, here we do not deserve any of these blessings. We deserve only the opposite, but Thou dost not give that to us. Thou hast given to us good things, and we thank Thee for it. We need Thy help as a nation. Grant that we may turn increasingly to Thee. Grant that we ourselves may turn increasingly. Grant Thy Spirit may come to the hearts of many people throughout this nation, so that we would not forfeit Thy blessings, but that Thou hast continued to be gracious to us.

Lord, Thou dost know the needs of each one in this church right now, the loneliness that's in some hearts, the bereavements that have come and the sadness because those close ones have gone away and not with us any longer the frustrations disappointments. Lord, we give Thee thanks that when we confess our sins, we can go to Thee, and Thou wilt meet our every need. Thou wilt be more than gracious to help us physically, emotionally, spiritually, and we pray our God for each one here that Thou wouldst come through the preaching of the Word this morning or through the words of a hymn or the Word of a friend.

Grant our God that we may be blessed and helped and strengthened. So we thank Thee, our God that Thou hast loved us that we're here this morning. We thank Thee for the family blessings church blessings national blessings, and we praise Thee in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior in whose name we pray. Amen.

[Message by Dr. Johnson] Our subject for this morning is “The Law of Precedence in the Kingdom.” There are some truths that are expressed here which are old truths for you, and I am sure that you will recognize as we go through some of these verses that we are not saying anything especially new. But I think it is fair to say that our Lord does express some of these truths in new and fresh ways.

One of the truths that he stresses is the method or condition of entrance into the kingdom. He says to the disciples and apostles, “Except a man be converted and become as little children ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” And of course, he expresses the essentiality of the new

birth before one can enter into the kingdom of God. In fact, the very way in which he has expressed it, except ye be converted ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven, reminds us of the words that the Lord spoke to Nicodemus in which he said, “Except a man be born again he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”

This new birth, this conversion, is something that we cannot do without. There is an old story which I like of a backwoodsman, who at the invitation of a wealthy New York friend came to the metropolis for the first time to look over the city. He spent a great deal of the day shopping downtown, specifically on Fifth Avenue. And when he returned to his friend’s, his host inquired, “Well Bill, what did you think of our great city?”

And the backwoodsman hesitated for a moment and then drawled—I don’t have to illustrate that, I speak in a drawl anyway—he then drawled, “Well George I never saw so many things in all my life that I could so easily do without.” [Laughter] That was a wise remark. It expresses, of course, the fact that there are some things that are absolutely essential however, and one of them is the new birth.

This passage also speaks of the manner in which believers are to be treated by the world. In a rather remarkable statement, the Lord Jesus says in the 6th verse, “But whosoever shall offend one of these little ones who believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.” And so we are told here essentially that the saints are extremely precious in the sight of God, and he does not forget in any way the way in which they are treated by the world. And the Lord Jesus Christ’s warning is that it would be better to suffer physical death than to suffer the things that will be the consequences of mistreating offending one of these little ones that believe in him.

Now he will say a great deal more about another point later on, but he also stresses in this verse the peril of being a self-proclaimed apostle who assumes the place of teaching the saints, and nevertheless does not teach them truly from the Word of God.

Some years ago Carl Henry made a statement concerning the irrelevancy of much of modern theology. He said, “How irrelevant to the Great Commission can theologians get? Where do modern men—and there are multitudes of them—flock around Bultmann or Tillich or the linguistic theologians or the death-of-God theologians, crying out you have restored authentic Christianity to us? The captive theological students in ecumenically-minded seminaries are their main converts. Tillich made Tillichians at Harvard. Hamilton makes Hamiltonians at Cole-Rochester. Van Buren makes Van Burenites at Duke. Altizer makes Altizerites at Emory”—he’s since left that institution.

“And others have made followers at others. But modern man,” he went on to say, “Is hungry for spiritual reality and will be flocking to the places where it may be obtained.” Dr. Henry goes on to say that it’s a striking thing that in the world today men are not flocking to hear the great theologians, but they are flocking to hear the evangelists who are speaking the simple truths of the Word of God.

It is sad fact, and of course you know that as well as I, that the leadership of a Christian character in this country is not really a leadership that puts first things first so far as spiritual things are concerned. Most of modern theology is largely impotent so far as the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is concerned. And the Lord has some very strong words to say about individuals who assume to be teachers of the Word of God but who offend the little ones that believe in him.

It’s very striking to me how individuals can stray so far from the Word of God and then the saints, the sheep, follow these shepherds—sometimes who are false shepherds in their false doctrine. We often hear today for example that Jesus Christ was a revolutionary and therefore we ought to be revolutionaries. The simplest study of the Word of God, it would seem to me, would convince one that Jesus Christ was not a revolutionary in the general sense of that term at all.

In fact, the truth of the Bible seems to be exactly the opposite. The truth of the Bible seems to be that God created a society in the Garden of Eden which we might call “the establishment,” and that the true revolutionaries are you and I who have rebelled against the establishment in the Garden

of Eden, and the whole story of the Bible is the story of how God is seeking to recover the revolutionaries through the ministry of the Great Shepherd who came to give his life for sheep.

You see, it’s so often that we fail to look at Scripture in order to discover the truths of the Word of God, and I do think it’s an exceedingly serious matter to stand up and say that one is a teacher of the Word of God for others.

There are two other interesting questions that are found in this passage. I’m sure you thought of them as we read through the verses. One has to do with the salvation of infants. Is it really true that infants are saved? I would like to suggest to you that this passage does not really treat of that subject.

Now when the Lord Jesus took the little child, Mark says he took him also in his arms which would indicate that he was a relative infant, he was using the infant or the little child as an illustration. It is evident that he is really speaking of believers, because he states in the 6th verse, “But whosoever shall offend one of these little ones who believe in me” that he is really speaking about believers and not about little children. Little children illustrate a certain characteristic of believers which we’ll talk about in a moment.

This passage then is only an illustrative mention of children or babes or infants, and has nothing it seems to me to say to the point of the salvation of infants. Another question, however, arises and this passage does seem to have a word to say regarding it, and it [is] the question of the existence of guardian angels. We do read in the 10th verse, “For I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.”

Is it possible that we have a guardian angel? Well I want to say a lot of my friends certainly need one. [Laughter] And a lot of my friends have made the same comment regarding me, that I have certainly needed one from time to time, and most of all when we disobey the laws of our land and proceed at a rate of 56 miles per hour instead of 55. Some have even said that I have known some Christians to fly so fast on the highways that they leave the guardian angels behind. How they know those facts of angelology I don’t know, but we’ll talk about that in just a moment.

But let's look at our passage now remembering the context. The Lord Jesus has, I say, just from the Apostle Peter the confession, thou art the Christ the Son of the living God, and then he has begun to stress in his ministry to them that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die.

Now the apostles were students of the Bible in their own way. They had read the Old Testament, and they knew the fact of the Old Testament concerning the coming kingdom, and they conceived of that kingdom as being in their ignorance at this point, largely a political kingdom. They knew that the Old Testament Scriptures said that there would be a time of Jacob's trouble that would precede the advent of the Lord Jesus. They knew that the kingdom would come with some birth pangs that would mean a great deal of suffering for the inhabitants of the world and for the nation Israel. And so when the Lord Jesus announced to them that he was going to Jerusalem to suffer and to be buried to be slain by the chief priests and others, it evidently created in their minds the impression that this might be the time of Jacob's trouble that preceded the introduction of the kingdom of God.

And furthermore, in the immediately preceding context, Peter, who has been marked out as *primus inter pares*, or the first among equals by the way in which the Lord has been speaking of him, and by this miracle of which he was the agent in its performance—the miracle of the tribute money—evidently it occurred to them that they were near to the time of the introduction of the kingdom, and therefore the question of who would be greatest in the kingdom had become a very live and relevant question to them. And so they fell, according to Mark, to squabbling on the way over who should be greatest in the kingdom.

Therefore when we read in chapter 18 verse 1, at the same time, we are to look at this as the connection between this context and the immediately preceding context. It was in the context of the confession of Peter, of the announcement of the sufferings of our Lord in Jerusalem, and in the context of Peter being singled out for the performance as an agent of the miracle of the fish in the Sea of Galilee for the payment of the tax of both Peter and the Lord.

So then at this hour, the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Who is then the original text inserts the word then who is then or who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” That’s the question. As Alexander McLaren said, “So it was time to be getting ready for the kingdom and settling the question of precedence.”

Well the reply of our Lord is a striking reply which gives us some very, very important truth, and I think the answers that he gives in the verses that follow to the question that he has asked cut at the root of the disposition that elicited the question to start with, and at the same time gently and yet firmly point out to them that if a man is going to enter the kingdom, he must have a certain disposition, and if he is going to be imminent in that kingdom, he must have a certain disposition, too. So let’s notice his answer.

And the first thing that he says is that, “Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” Now it would seem to me from this statement that to be turned, or to be converted, is to become as a little child; or to become as a little child is to be turned or to be converted. But what is meant by this, if or except ye be converted and become as little children? What is characteristic of little children? What is the characteristic that our Lord is speaking about as being so necessary for entrance into the kingdom of heaven?

Some have said, well, it means that one must be possessed of the virtue of simplicity, for that is characteristic of children. They are characterized by simplicity. Well I think it is true. Children are characterized by simplicity. They do not have the necessary maturity to be characterized by duplicity as adults so frequently are.

Others have said, no, it’s frankness. Little children are frank. And others have said still no, it is sincerity. They are all sincere. I’ve noticed children are remarkably sincere, except when they have committed some wrong against their parents, then they are not sincere at all. But of course their lack of sincerity shows on their face.

Still others have said what is characteristic of little children is simply receptivity. They are receptive. And one must be receptive in order to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Now it is

probably true that it is right to say that we must be receptive to enter into the kingdom of heaven, and there must be a relative simplicity. There must be some frankness in the recognition of our sin, and there must be some sincerity, as we approach the face of God in prayer, recognizing our own need.

But what is characteristic of little children? Let’s put it this way: what’s characteristic of babes? For evidently since the Lord Jesus took this child, and said it in the midst of these men, and then took the child, according to Mark, into his arms, it must have been a little child that was a toddler, a kind of infant. And still others feel that the passage Luke is a parallel with this—there is some question about that—and there Luke uses the word which means, “an infant.” So it is just possible then that this is a relatively young child, so young that we would call it an infant, able perhaps to toddle, but that is all. So the Lord Jesus took that child into his arms.

Now what is characteristic of such a little child? I suggest to you that Professor Warfield was correct when he said, in connection with the context of this particular chapter here and the next chapter that follows, that the characteristic thing about a little child or an infant is helpless need. It’s rather striking, it seems to me, that of all of living beings, there is probably no more helpless being than an infant. An infant could not possibly survive of itself. The thing that characterizes an infant is helpless need, naked before men, the infant arrives. That itself suggests the helpless need that exists in infancy.

And I think we can also add, using the passages of Romans chapter 3, that another thing that is characteristic of infants, and should be characteristic of us, is that they are speechless before a holy God. Now I know what you’re thinking. My goodness, if there’s one thing that characterizes an infant it is that he’s speaking all the time. Yes, speaking but making no sense. Not articulate. Really speechless in the sense of articulate speech.

What is our Lord trying to say? He’s trying to say this, and I think he’s saying it very beautifully, that if we are going to enter into the kingdom of heaven, we must come before God as one who is in absolute need, helpless before him. To use the words of Apostle Paul, “without hope

and without God in the world.” We are helpless and we are hopeless and we cannot have any hope of entering the kingdom of God if that entrance and the power to enter is not itself a gift of sovereign grace. That’s what he is saying. Except ye be converted and become as a little child. Helpless, hopeless, in the dire need of some outside strength and enablement, you cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

That means that even the idol free will cannot help us. As a matter of fact, it seems to me that this statement of our Lord destroys the idol of free will, as the Puritans used to like to speak of it, destroyed it by the unconditional sovereign grace of our God just as David’s sling slew Goliath.

Now in Jeremiah chapter 31, there is a word about conversion, or turning, which I think is very appropriate for the remarks that I’m making right now. In Jeremiah chapter 31 and verse 18, the prophet says, “I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus; Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, like a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke:” and now giving the words of the nation in expression of prayer to God the prophet writes, “Turn me back,” so Ephraim says, “And I shall be restored; for thou art the Lord my God.” Turn Thou me and I shall be turned. That’s the order. You turn me, and I shall be turned. But if you do not turn me, I shall never be turned.

He stresses the fact that we cannot possibly turn to God, we cannot possibly be converted, we cannot possibly enter into the kingdom of heaven if it is not preceded by a sovereign work of God in salvation produced through the ministry of the Lord Jesus and the effectual grace of the Holy Spirit. What a beautiful word that is. To enter the kingdom we must come as those who are in helpless need. If you are here this morning and you do not know the Lord Jesus as your Savior, you shall never enter the kingdom of God if you do not first by the grace of God come to the conviction of your sin and your need.

Now he says another word or two concerning eminence in the kingdom, once we have entered that kingdom. He states in the 4th verse, “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of the heaven.” The requirement for eminence in the kingdom is the same as the requirement for entrance into the kingdom. And that’s not unexpected,

because the way we enter the kingdom is by faith, and the way we live within the kingdom is also by faith. Luther said, “O, do not think to be great, but to be little.” Becoming great will come of itself if you have become little.

There’s a story of a young preacher, or preacher to be, who came to the minister of his church, and he was very much interested in addressing the congregation. He thought that God had given him a gift of teaching, but he didn’t realize that he was a very immature person. So he badgered the pastor for the privilege of addressing the congregation, and finally after words of counsel from the minister did no good, he thought, well, perhaps it would be the wisest thing to let him preach.

And so the time came for him to enter the pulpit, and he entered very confidently, having prepared his message extremely well, and when he stood behind the pulpit like this, he looked out at the large congregation and forgot everything that he had prepared. He was humiliated. He turned finally and had to walk off of the platform with his head down and went over and took his seat.

Afterwards the minister came to him and very kindly said, “You know, if you had gone up like you went down you might have been able to go down like you went up.” [Laughter]

You see, in the Christian faith, in the family of God, in the kingdom of God, it is the same attitude by which we come into the kingdom—the attitude of helpless need that is to characterize every saint within the family. The Lord Jesus came not to be ministered unto but to minister—that’s to be a slave—and to give his life a ransom for many. And it is that attitude that should persist.

Well after a word concerning identification with him in the reception of the little children, he goes on to admonish his listeners concerning stumbling blocks. I think he halts, he casts a sorrowing gaze upon the world which is full of stumbling blocks, and he warns them of it. He says, one with a child’s spirit will not offend a child, but woe to those who do. The best example of the application of this truth of not offending one of these little ones is the Lord Jesus himself. And we have seen in the preceding incident, last Sunday, in the miracle of the tribute money, that the Lord Jesus claimed that he did not have to pay the temple tax, as a matter of fact the whole temple belonged to him. But he stated in the 27th verse of chapter 17, notwithstanding, lest we should offend them, and he went

ahead and did that which was which it was unnecessary for him to do. So he beautifully illustrates the fact that one should not offend one of these little ones.

But you know there is a very important warning here. I wish it were possible for everyone in the world to read it. Whosoever shall offend one of these little ones *who believe in me*. Those words as I suggested earlier define the persons he has in mind. He is speaking about believers. He speaks of them as little children, because they have this attitude of helpless need, ideally. Whosoever shall offend one of these little ones who believe in me, why it were better for him that he should suffer physical death than the kind of death that awaits that person.

Now what a terrible warning that is for leading astray the saints of God. I have a very good friend in Birmingham, Alabama. He is a businessman. He was in World War II. He was the son of a believing mother, but a mother who did not really have a firm grasp upon the gospel, so that she was able to communicate it too clearly.

He was in some very serious situations in the Pacific during the war with the Japanese. [He] he came out with a great deal of awards for his bravery. He said that while he was in one difficult situation, he finally cried out to God and said, “O God if you will be so gracious to me as to bring me home safely when I get home, I want to devote my life to your service.” Well he arrived back in Birmingham, Alabama, and he told me, he said, you know Lewis, the first thing I did, because I didn’t know a whole lot—and I didn’t trust to much my mother’s Christianity because she seemed such a fanatic to me—he said, I systematically got on the telephone and called the leading ministers in Birmingham, Alabama of the leading churches. He was a Presbyterian himself.

He said, “I called a score of ministers in the city. From not a single one of them did I get a statement of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” He said, “Then I remembered that my mother had a good friend who was also a religious fanatic, even more of a religious fanatic than she was, an elderly woman.” And he said, “Lewis, it was your mother-in-law. [Laughter] And I went to see her, and she was the first person who gave me the gospel, and as a result of it I was converted and came to faith in the Lord Jesus.”

Now think of this text in the light of that. Whosoever shall offend one of these little ones who believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Now a number of you young men in this audience intend to preach the Word of God some day, and let me say to you it is a very serious thing to take up the Holy Scriptures and set yourself forth as a teacher of the Word of God to the saints. Therefore, it requires on your part the most solemn recognition of the fact that this is the Word of God, and you are not to add anything to it, but that which is found in the Word of God itself. You are to faithfully proclaim its message. Offense given to his little ones is a serious matter. And I certainly would not like to be in the steps of a person who has taught supposedly the Word of God and has misled people down through the centuries.

Now he gives some instruction about overcoming. He states in the 8th and 9th verses that if our hand or our feet offend us, if our eyes shall offend us, we should pluck them out. Now I believe that this is figurative, and I say that with a great deal of care in the light of the remarks I have just made. But the reason that I say this is because it is impossible to enter into life lame or maimed. When we enter into life we shall have a resurrection body that is like our Lord's own glorious body. So he evidently is speaking in figurative fashion.

And he is speaking about those many things which so often lead us astray. They can be many times very good things. You'll notice, incidentally, that there is a kind of climax: hand, foot, and eye, because an eye is more necessary than a hand or a foot. Lawful things may become the occasion of sin. Sad but true. It's possible for even your own culture to be the means of your downfall. It's possible for you who are businessmen for your business to be the means of your downfall. Every businessman should, it seems to me if he is a Christian businessman, should do his job well. But it is possible to make of your business the first thing in your life, and the results are that the Lord takes second place. A good thing has become a means of stumbling. It's possible for a person for a friend, it's possible for our hobby—so many things to lead us from giving God first place in our lives. What

shall we do in a case like that? Well if our hand offends us, if our foot offends us, if our eye offends us, let's take out the ax and spare not to cut them off in order that our Lord may have first place. He is a fool, someone has said, who insists on keeping a mortified limb which kills him.

Well now, finally, in the last few words of this section, the Lord Jesus exhorts against contempt for the little ones and gives three good reasons why we should not offend them. He states first in verse 10, “Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.” Now those who stand nearest the face of God, the angels, are said to behold the face of the Father who is in heaven. This would seem to indicate that the angels, at least as a company, serve for the benefit of the saints. And the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews has written, you'll remember, concerning the angels, “Are they not ministering spirits sent forth for salvation or sent forth for ministry for those who are to inherit salvation?”

So we assume then that the angels are tremendously concerned about those of us who are here upon the earth. They are dedicated to ministry of the saints, because it is the Father's will that that be so. And furthermore, they stand in the presence of God, so they are that close to the divine being. And it is they who care for the saints. How precious then must the elect saints be to the Lord, if their angels stand in the very presence of the God of this universe?

Now whether we each have one individual angel or not, the Scripture is not so plain. We do read in Acts chapter 12 that when the Apostle Peter was released from prison by that remarkable miracle and came to knock on the door of those who were having a prayer meeting—and remember when Rhoda went to the door and asked who it was, he said it was Peter, and that startled her, because we're all always startled when we get a quick answer to our prayers—so she went back without even opening the door.

And there was a little theological discussion that went on, remember, and someone said, no, that's not Peter, it couldn't be Peter. He's in prison. Someone else said, it's his ghost. And someone said, it's his angel. So evidently they had the idea that individuals did have guardian angels. Whether

or not that’s true I don’t know. But I do know this the angels are concerned about the elect and that indicates, of course, that the Father is concerned about the elect.

But then he goes on to say that we should not despise one of these little ones because it is the Savior who has come to seek and to save them. He uses an illustration of a man who had a hundred sheep and he lost one of them. One of them strays away, and he goes out after the one, leaving the ninety and nine, and cannot rest until finally he has found that lost sheep, has taken that lost sheep to his bosom, and has brought him home. And then called for a gala festival in order to celebrate the return of the sheep. What a beautiful illustration of the particulate definite love of the Savior for straying sheep, just one of them. “One of the hirelings,” Mr. Spurgeon said, “Would undoubtedly respond, we still got ninety-nine, that’s almost a hundred. Who cares about the one? But he came and to seek and to save that one.

What a beautiful picture it is, and this of course, is the story of our Lord’s work. I think it’s most wonderfully illustrated in the salvation of the Ethiopian eunuch. The evangelist and deacon, Phillip, had been conducting meetings in Samaria, and God had blessed. And then in the midst of that remarkable evangelistic campaign, he was called by an angel of the Lord to leave Samaria and go down to the south to the desert country, wondering I’m sure what it was all about.

When he arrived there he saw an Ethiopian who was a eunuch who was riding in a chariot reading a passage from Isaiah chapter 53. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and now he was returning evidently at the time of the feast. This man, a convert to Judaism, had thought that having finally an opportunity to go to Jerusalem, his worship needs would be satisfied. I just suggest to you that when he arrived there and didn’t find anything—for one never finds the satisfaction to the heart desire from religion, even a religion divinely originated such as Judaism when it’s strayed from the path of the divine revelation—I suggest to you that while he was there he heard the debates between Stephen and Paul, and he was rather chagrined when Paul, the great champion of Judaism, was defeated in those debates by Stephen who used the Old Testament Scriptures in a new way.

Challenged by that he went down to Miriam’s Book Store which is on Number Nine Bersheeba Street. [Laughter] It took me great research to find that out. [More laughter] And there he bought a scroll, and he bought a scroll of the prophecy of Isaiah in order to read it. Now since Luke quotes from the Old Testament in Greek most of the time, let’s just assume that he bought a scroll in Greek, and he was reading that, and he just happened to be reading Isaiah 53 when the Holy Spirit moved the evangelist to come up alongside of his Lincoln Continental—that’s really what a chariot meant in those days—and there, God in his preparation of the man in his heart, and also the evangelist who has the knowledge of the Word of God meet. And as you know he came to remarkable faith in the Lord Jesus through the preaching of the evangelist. And when they approached a little body of water, he said, what hinders me from being baptized?

And there he made the kind of public confession of faith that everyone ought to make. He didn’t sign a decision card. He didn’t raise his hand. He didn’t come down to the front to pray at the altar, but he did what the New Testament says is the proper response when we have come to faith in Christ: he was baptized in water. What a beautiful illustration of God seeking the one soul: the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd who gives his life for the sheep. I was lost but Jesus found me, found the sheep that went astray, threw his loving arms around me, drew me back into his way.

And I think it’s also interesting to notice here that it says if a man have an hundred sheep, these sheep are his. They belong to him. He went out to seek his own, those that were his. By what right were they his? Why they were his by virtue of divine election. They were his also by virtue of the divine gift from the Father to the Son. And they were his by virtue of the fact that he will lay down the atoning sacrifice which shall meet their needs. And they are his by virtue of the fact that he will not rest until the virtue of that sacrifice is the possession of those who do belong to him, who have been given to him by the Father.

And so the Son of God will not rest—having accomplished the atonement by which they are saved—he will not rest until every one of his sheep is brought into the fold. What a wonderful expression of the concentrated, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotence of the sovereignty of our

great God in the accomplishment of his purposes. And when he dies, he does not die in order to make men savable. He dies to save. He does not die in order that men may be able to save themselves, but he dies to save, and he accomplishes his purpose by virtue of the blood, and the Spirit, who in effectual grace to which I have referred brings them to Christ.

Now, what more of a missionary warrant could we possibly have as Christians than the example of our Lord Jesus who sought the one? Incidentally, he didn't mind seeking one. He didn't mind seeking one little one. He didn't mind seeking one little one that was going astray. So often, in Christian circles, we have failed to seek the little one who is going astray. We see them astray, and we pull up our skirts and say we must not have any fellowship with them. He sought them, and he sought the one, he sought the little one, he sought the little one in their straying condition.

Now finally, and our time is up. In verse 14, he says the third reason why we should not despise one of these little ones is that it is not the will of your Father who is heaven that one of these little ones should perish. To despise one of these little ones, then, is to be out of harmony with the Son, out of harmony with the angels, and out of harmony with our sovereign God and Father in heaven. What a terrible thing it is then to despise one of the little ones.

If you're here this morning, and you have never believed in our Lord Jesus Christ, you're not one of these little ones yet. It may be that God in his sovereign purpose has given you to the Son, and you shall come, but perhaps you have not come yet. We remind you that the Lord Jesus has offered a sacrifice for sinners and that sacrifice is sufficient for all who come and he invites you to come. He invites you to put your faith and trust by the grace of God in the Son of God who has offered this sacrifice for you. So why don't you come? Wouldn't it be a terrible thing to hear a message about the love of Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd, who gave his life for the sheep, who sought the sheep, and to turn a deaf ear to the appeals of the Holy Spirit? So we urge you we call upon you as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus to be reconciled to him. May God the Holy Spirit work in your heart and may you come. Shall we stand for the benediction?

“The Law of Precedence in the Kingdom” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2007 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

[Prayer] Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father who gave the Son, the fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit, be in, abide with all his sheep.

And O Father, for those who are still lost and straying, we pray that if it should be Thy will that Thou wilt work in their hearts even at this moment in this room bringing them to the sense of helpless need, like a little infant, into faith and trust in the Son who died, O God, for Thy glory, accomplish the great work that enlarges the body of Christ.

May grace mercy and peace go with us.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.