

Temptations Are Inevitable, but It Is God's Will That All Should Be Saved

A Sermon on Matthew 18:7-14

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Matthew 18:14

Matthew 18:3

Let me begin by saying that God has put mankind on notice. This is evident from how fast the world is changing. The prophecies we read in the Holy Book about the second coming of Jesus Christ are unfolding one after another. Time seems to be running out on us. In the light of all that, today's message from Matthew 18:7-14 is very apt, telling us what course corrections are urgently needed in our lives. We will deliberate on the given theme: "Temptations are inevitable, but it is God's will that all should be saved."

Had that not been the case — I mean, had God not wanted to save us — the human species would have come to an end when Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation to be like God and disobeyed Him. Man, however, did not realise or accept this fact of God's great generosity, and failed, millennium after millennium, discovering newer things that are more and more tempting, and indulging in these to the delight of Satan. The Salvation narrative had to be brought into play in the economy of God through His incarnation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. A new spiritual world order, doing away with the old, became necessary, demanding an end time for the existing world, which is corrupted in every respect.

Considering the cunning and the malice of Satan, and the weakness and depravity of human hearts, it is not possible that offences would not come. Being told beforehand that there will be seducers, tempters, persecutors, and bad examples, let us stand on our guard. Let us back up a few verses to Matthew 18:3. Jesus tells us that, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." It is easy to lose our eternal perspective and compete for wealth, position, and status. It is difficult, but healthy, to identify with children — simple and innocent.

Therefore, we must, as far as lawfully we may, part with what we cannot keep without being entangled by it in sin. The outward occasions of sin must be avoided. If we live after the flesh, we must die. If we, through the Spirit, mortify the deeds of the body, we shall live. Christ came into the world to save souls, and He will reckon ruthlessly with those who hinder the progress of others who are setting their faces heavenward.

Matthew 18:7-9 tells us that unspeakable misery will be in the world through those who tempt, neglect, and demean God's people, the little ones. Such is the nature of things, and such are the weakness, folly, and wickedness of mankind, that one temptation after another will inevitably come. Offences are all things whereby anyone is turned out of, or hindered in, the way of God. It is the responsibility of fellow

Christians to help and protect young people, new believers, and also older believers, from anything or anyone that could cause them to stumble in their faith and lead them hellwards.

We hear Jesus cautioning us to remove all stumbling blocks that cause us to fall into sin. What Jesus said in verses 8 and 9 does not mean cutting off an offending part of the body; it means that any person, activity, or teaching in the church that threatens the spiritual growth of the body of Christ, the church, must be removed. For the individual believer, any relationship, practice, activity, addiction or compulsive behaviour that leads to sin should be stopped. The statement of Jesus that it is better to go to heaven with a part of the body removed would mean that unconquered temptations and hidden sins corrupt our inner being. One cannot hope to enter His Kingdom with a tainted soul.

After these warnings, Jesus comes out with the assurance: "Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish." — Matthew 18:14. He tells us this through the Parable of the Lost Sheep. He was addressing the backsliders. You find them everywhere: at home, in church, in school, and at your workplace. As fellow believers, Jesus wants us to be like the Good Shepherd, and to go after them and bring them back into His fold. Jesus is telling this parable to His disciples. This is similar to the Parable of the Lost Sheep told in Luke 15, except for His audience and the words used in each parable. I feel a more fitting title for this parable might be the Parable of the 'Straying Sheep.'

In this parable, the Shepherd leaves the ninety and nine on the side of a mountain and seeks after the one that has gone astray. There is some risk involved in leaving the ninety and nine, yet he will go and search for the one in need. The present tense used points to the continuous effort of seeking. He abandons his normal routine and concentrates all his energy on the lost one.

A Good Shepherd rejoices when the straying one is found: because he loves and cares for all his sheep, the recovery of just one out of a hundred is a cause for joy. I believe there are two lessons here.

One: God the Son, Jesus, is the Great Shepherd of His sheep. Jesus gives us a glimpse of His love and forgiveness. We learn that the point of this parable is primarily about God. The implicit argument is that if ordinary people pursue a mere sheep when it is lost, how much more will God respond when one of His children goes off course. We learn this same truth in John 10 (verses 14, 27-30) and again in Matthew 12 (verses 11-12). Why does He pursue the one who strays away? Because it is not His will to lose, cut off, or condemn those who are of His fold. It is not the will of God 'that one of these little ones should perish.' The Great Shepherd looks after and saves His sheep.

Secondly, the church is a picture of the shepherd. It is our role as disciples of Jesus — the church — to share in God's concern for each 'little one,' and not to despise any, no matter how bad it looks. It is all too easy to turn from the lost members and want nothing to do with them. They bring dishonour to Christ through their blatant sin. They bring disgrace to the church. They abandon families, friends and fellow believers, and deprive them of fellowship, support, and encouragement, just to name a few things. If we are not careful, anger, disgust, and indifference can become our response to those who wander away. Although this might be an understandable human response, this is not the response God wants us to have. Our attitude should be to hate the sin, but love the sinner back into the fold.

We learn from this passage that God pursues the lost. Whether you are a non-believer who needs to repent, or a backslider, you must ask: what does God think of me? Would He ever pay attention to me? Would He hear if I called? Indeed, He would. Before you ever began to even glance in Christ's direction, He was already in pursuit of you. He began to open your mind and heart to biblical truth. He began to send people into your life, and to work through circumstances, to point you to Him. God has been on your trail for some time. Jesus came into the world to save sinners, says Paul. He pursues, seeks after, and searches for the worst. Fornicators, homosexuals, drunkards, idolaters, thieves, adulterers, the covetous, and swindlers, are among those that Jesus has been saving and redeeming for over two thousand years. He seeks them and wins them, and if they go astray, He pursues them again. Even more, Jesus rejoices when the lost are found. If this is our God, and He has pursued us, how much more should His followers pursue the lost, and those gone astray. In our personal lives, and in our life together as the church, we must aggressively seek to reconcile straying members and bring back the lost. Amen.

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