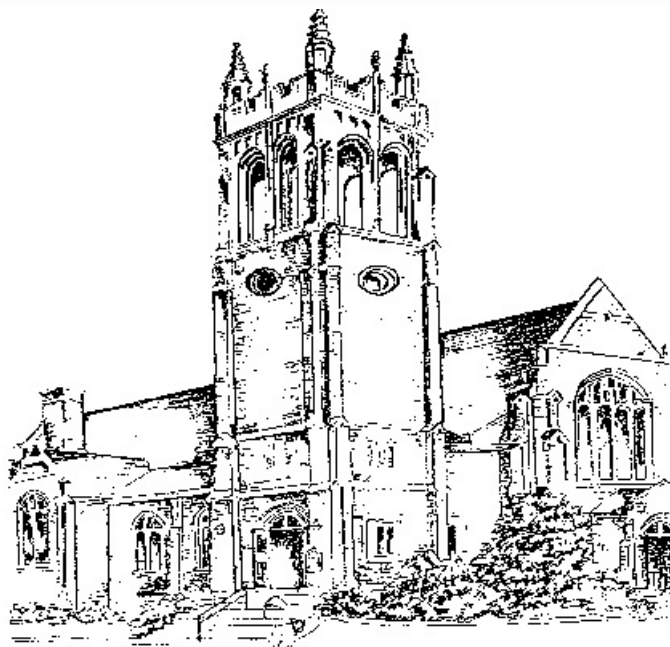


 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 18:1-14
“Where Greatness Begins”

June 19, 2016
(5th Sunday After Pentecost)

Pastor Phil Thraikill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

MATTHEW 18:1-14 "WHERE GREATNESS BEGINS"

Begins 4th Major Discourse//Chapter 10

1) vv.1-4 QUESTION AND ANSWER: KINGDOM GREATNESS.

//Mk. 9:33-37, 10:15

Status Seeking

Hierarchical Honor Culture, **STATUS KILLS COMMUNITY**

a) v.1 Question: Who Is Greatest?

Greatness Hinders Repentance, 5:19, 11:11

1 At that hour the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? **Misunderstanding**
Where Rank On Scale Of Things? How Climb?

b) vv.2-3 Enacted Parable: Not Greatness But Repentance Is The Key To Entry.

2 And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, ³and said, **Condition Of Entrance, Jesus Knows!**

"**Truly, I say to you**, unless you turn and become like children, **Repent, Admit Need, Surrender Status**
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. **5:3, No Status (20:25) All Equals (23:8-10), 1 Kgs. 3:7**

11:16-17, Jesus Has No Romantic/Innocent Idea Of Children

a') v.4 Answer: Humble Are Greatest (Lk. 14:11).

23:12, Children = Insignificant/Dependent

4 Whoever humbles himself like this child, **Actions/Not Self Hatred, Posture Of *Little*ness**
he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. **23:12, Greatness = Dependence On God, Not Independent Achievements**
Omits Strange Exorcist, Mk. 9:38-41//Lk. 9:49-50

2) vv.5-9 A RADICAL APPROACH TO SIN IN THE SELF AND WITH OTHERS.

Child As Bridge To Little Ones (Vulnerable)

a) vv.5-6 Single "It Is Better" Saying: Receive Vs. Causing A Child To Sin. Mk. 9:37, 42-48

5 "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; **Low Status, Blessing, 10:40, 25:31-46**

6 but whoever causes one of 'these little ones' who believe in me to sin, **Reversal Of Order In Patronage Culture**
it would be better for him **Tempt, Cause to stumble: scandalizo**

Scandal Sin For Others to have a great millstone (donkey mill)fastened round his neck **Risk Damnation If Deliberately Corrupt Others**
and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. **Curse, Horror For Jews: No Body To Bury**

God Hates Evil! None Of The Ones We Think Insignificant Are!

b) v.7 The Necessity And Consequences Of Temptation And Sin (Lk. 17:1-2 ?).

7 "Woe to the world/ for temptations to sin! **26:24, Woe = Lament Of Sorrow Over The Dead!**

For it is necessary that temptations come, **Nature Of World, Jesus Is No Idealist**

but woe to the man/ by whom the temptation comes! **To Be Agent Of Sin Is Deadly, Still Responsible**

a') vv.8-9 Double "It Is Better" Sayings: Allowing Oneself To Habitually Sin Is Death.

8 And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, **Singular, 5:29-30, Mk. 9:43-48**

Scandal Sin For Self cut it off and throw it away; **On Punishments, Quintilian 8.3.75**
it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame **Community Must Be Guarded**

than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.

9 And if your eye causes you to sin, **Dt. 14:1 Prohibits Mutilation** **SIN KILLS COMMUNITY**

pluck it out and throw it away; **Well-known Punishments: Theft/Voyeurism/Runaway Slave**

it is better for you to enter life with one eye **Qumran Manual of Discipline 2:11b-17**

than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell (Gehenna) of fire. **5:22,29; 10:28, 23:15**

If Body Of Christ, Refers To Church Discipline

1') vv.10-14 QUESTION AND ANSWER: THE WORTH OF ONE LITTLE ONE.

Directed To Leaders In Training, Lesson In Care

a) v.10 The Little Ones Are Not To Be Looked Down On. **If Elite Angels Are Interested, So Should You?**

10 "See that you do not despise one of 'these little ones'; **1 Enoch 14:21, Tobit 12:15, Jub. 2:2, 18, 31;14, Lk. 1:19**

for I tell you that in heaven *their* angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven. **1QH v.20-22**

6:10, 18:18, Symmetry Between Heaven/Earth

b) v.12 Double Question Using Shepherd (Pastor) Analogy (Lk. 15:3-7, Q). **For Pastors**

12 What do you think? **17:25 To Peter**

Straying Members If a man has a hundred sheep, **Lk. lost, Mt. gone astray (Drifting Christian)**

and one of them has gone astray (wandered off), **24:4-5, 11, 24 Indicates Apostasy**

does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains **Where People Are Involved, Statistics Are Irrelevant**

and go in search of the one that went astray? **No! Unrealistic Plot, God Never Says, "Most are OK."**

See Polycarp, *Philippians* 6:1

b') v.13-14 Answer: Finding The Lost Is A Great Joy.

NEGLECT KILLS COMMUNITY

13 And if he finds it, **truly, I say to you**, **Not Always Recoverable! Not Accept Correction 18:15-17**

he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. **Stayed In The Fold!**

Transcend Self-Absorption, Tend Joyfully To Others

a') v.14 The Little Ones Are Not To Perish.

Ezek. 34 False Shepherds, So (v.35)

14 So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of 'these little ones' should perish. **Theological Assertion**

WHERE GREATNESS BEGINS

*And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin,
cut it off and throw it away....”*

M A T T H E W 1 8 : 8

Jesus uses exaggeration to make a serious call for self-discipline.

One of my convictions is that the world is highly connected and smaller than you think. By the time you get to *I know somebody who knows someone who knows this guy* the circle’s quite large. You find yourself with odd links to people you’ve never met. What are the chances Pastor Phil has a link to Sir Elton who sang at Princess Di’s funeral? Actually I have two.

A family friend I saw off and on over the years because our dads were friends, a woman several years my junior, was decorator for his large Atlanta apartment, every detail and color a matter of careful discussion I’m told. Cindy Joe was her name; her grandfather was once an executive here with Abney Mills. A second is that a young man I baptized in Atlanta in 1978, I found out years later, was a regular at parties in the home— probably not a good thing. Never met the man, but if I mentioned these names, he’d know who they were.

One of the most revealing questions I ask in pastoral interviews is, “Can you tell me about your father?” because it gives clues for how they see God. A March interview in *Rolling Stone* raised the issue, and Sir Elton’s answer is revealing because it begins in the distance of the third person plural:

"They wouldn't hold you. They wouldn't say they loved you. I was afraid of my father, walking on eggshells the whole time trying to get his approval. He's been dead a long time, and I'm still trying to prove things to him." Asked what he meant, he replied, "I still do things and say, 'Dad, you would've loved this.'"

Matthew 18:1-14 4

Elton John's father died in 1997 without ever seeing him play live. His father touched him most when beating him. "My mum always says, 'That's just the way we did it in those days, and it didn't affect you.'"

"And I'd say, 'What are you talking about? It affects me every day.'"¹

If you ladies take time to ask your man about his father, and then to be patient and kind as stories start to flow— if they do— he will give you a window into his male soul; a textured map of his interior will begin to emerge. What model of manhood he was given, whether it was constructive in the main or destructive. What he learned about work and women, about strength and self-control. What was left out he now had to figure out on his own. Promises kept and upkept between them. You'll begin to understand some of the forces shaping your man's life and why some areas are still too tender and loaded with emotion to touch. You see, I agree with Elton John, though for a different reason, "And I'd say, 'What are you talking about? It affects me every day.'" This is one of the reasons God commands us to honor father and mother, even if what they gave you was life and little more, or— in my case— much more. You must find a way to honor the link between the generations because they are with you always. To honor them implies a sifting process of keeping some things and letting others go, and we are doing that all our days. I know I am, and every Father's Day is a yearly reminder the long work is not finished.

There's a painting I see each morning; it hangs above my bedside table. It's a photo which— by the magic of a digital alteration— my sister turned into a painting. It's a seventy year old man in a lab coat, stethoscope round his neck. Behind him on a table are the tools of his trade: alcohol, blood pressure cuff, a medical chart. At the bottom right a verse from Matthew's last judgment is overlaid, "And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'"² So when I awake and glance up to my right, I have my marching orders for the day from my heavenly Father through the example of my earthly father, who left me with deep imprints, a few gaps, and loads of wise insights, ten of which are:

¹ Stephen Rodrick, "The Bitch at Peace," *Rolling Stone* (3-10-16).

² 25:40.

“Everyday’s a classroom; keep observing and studying; my patients and your parishioners will benefit from the effort.”

“Son, everyone’s interesting if you just take time to listen.”

“Courtesy and compassion are always in style.”

Then a deep one, “The purpose of a professional education is not enrichment but service; privilege and duty are twins.”

Here’s one Lori loves, “Treat women of all ages with special care and a quiet dose of chivalry. They will love you for it,” and she did.

“Sing *Up From The Grave He Arose* every Easter, without fail!”

“The greatest gift people give you is trust; treat it as a treasure.”

“Build up whatever you’re a part of: a marriage, a profession, a town, a church, a state, a country, because many will not, and social capital is easily exhausted and hard to restore.”

“If there’s a need, get there early and stay late.”

“If people can’t come to you, take your skills to where they are.”

Now on Father’s Day 2016 I could do several things. I could give advice to dads from books I’ve read, but that would be second hand, so why not just leave you to read the books since the authors are the experts, not me. I could review the sociological research on the current state of men and dads in America, which— I tell you— is a discouraging tale from some of this week’s internet reading.³ When 41 % of white kids and 71% of black children are born without dads married to their moms, we’re crumbling as a nation of families and

³ For a start down this trail, see Suzanne Venker, “The war on men,” www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/11/24/war-on-men; Loredana Vuoto, “American Society Needs Return of Real Men,” humanevents.com/2006/11/22/american-society-needs-return-of-real-men; Ben Gaul, “Masculinity Under Fire: Real Men Are Disappearing,” guardianlv.com/2014/02/masculinity-under-fire-real-men-are-disappearing; Mark Sherman, “Boys and Young men: A New Cause for Liberals,” www.psychologytoday.com/blog/real-men-don't-write-blogs/201003/boys-and-young-men-new-cause-liberals; Finlay Young, “Why Men Are Killing Themselves,” www.newsweek.com/2015/02/20/suicide-men-305913; also “The Good Men Project,” goodmenproject.com; and for a Christian response, see Stephen Mansfield, *Mansfield Book Of Manly Men* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013); for a good website on the feminization of the church and its effects on men, see David Murrow, churchformen.com. The literature is vast and growing that we need a new model of manhood, in and outside the church.

piling up a colossal debt of social costs no one is talking about it because it's now politically incorrect to suggest kids do better with a married mom and dad, as the research indicates.⁴ And when you note the high and growing number of discouraged young men under thirty-five who can't get traction and who've essentially given up on the ideas of marriage and fatherhood, it's even worse. Fatherhood and Father's Day are not what they used to be, are they?

Or, I could take another tact. I could speak of Jesus' challenge to his disciples, how tough and uncompromising he was, a Drill Sergeant in the disciplines of the kingdom. Any why so hard? Because the stakes are so high. Following Jesus as a serious understudy is the path to becoming a good man in the deep sense, one who knows and loves God and in whom the rugged and messy energies of manhood are rightly channeled into deep rivers of joyful obedience. And that is what a Christian husband and father is, a disciple who lives out his faith and service, his struggles and successes, within the sacred covenants of marriage and fathering. Single men also hear and heed Christ's call, and they have to find ways to be involved in the lives of their children or those of others in ways that make a difference. But then, today is Father's Day, not Uncle's Day or Coach's Day, so my focus is bit more narrow.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

1) vv.1-4 What Is Greatness?

I find it insightful that the disciples came to Jesus privately with a question that lurks in the heart of every man, and it's frankly a highly competitive one, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of God?" Not great, not greater, but *greatest!*

In the heart of every man is a dream that will express itself one way or another. It's about respect, about strength, about making a mark, about being admired, even if in negative and destructive ways, say notches on a belt or how many fear you or how much alcohol you can hold or the expensive toys you

⁴ Bridget Maher, "The Benefits of Marriage," downloads.frc.org/EF/EF11B13.pdf. Also Ryan T. Anderson, *Truth Overruled: The Future Of Marriage And Religious Freedom* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2015).

enjoy, all the things that make men trivial and dangerous and fill out the fantasy covers of GQ, Esquire, and Maxim. A man who thinks following Christ will someone how make his less a man will never come to faith, and that's one of the great challenges in our day, to articulate to modern men of all sorts– from red necks to white and blue and no collar men– how complete surrender to Jesus is God's way to fulfill who they are at the most basic level. God does not save generalized humans because there are none; God saves males and females, men and women in all their distinctives and complementarities.

After trying on several models of manhood as a bewildered teenager, all of which left me empty and broken, it was a relief to discover that I was never more who I was made to be as a male then when I was in pursuit of Jesus Christ with everything in me, and it's been quite a ride since, and not over yet!

And, if you don't know it or never thought about it, men love to keep score. It's why we love sports, because when the contest ends, someone won, someone lost, whether it's the left turns of a NASCAR oval or the bell that closes the day at the New York Stock Exchange. Men live in an honor and shame, a winner and a loser culture, and we can all– if honest– tell you just where we stand in any pecking order. And just because these twelve young men– and that is what they were, young male Jewish risk-takers– were following Jesus, it didn't mean they'd given up their dreams of manly greatness. Verse 1 sets the scene, "At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'"⁵ each no doubt hoping for the honor. "Is it me?" "No Peter, it's me John. I'm the greatest!" If it had been women instead of men, the question would have been, "How can we cooperate in the kingdom?" We're different. We care about different things. God made it so. Stop the gender blender. It's not working.

"I am the greatest!" Sounds like Ali, doesn't it? and it's one of the reasons he was so hated in his early years and so loved later on. He stood– for a few short years– as king of the mountain, heavy weight champion of the

⁵ John Ortberg, "Leader's Insight: Curing Grandiosity (Part Two)," LeadershipJournal.net, (1-29-07).

world, amazing athletic and ruthlessly skilled in the blood sport of boxing, the sole purpose of which is to knock your opponent out cold and stand over him in triumph like some ancient gladiator. Ali was a magnet for the aspirations of many men, which is the reason Mixed Martial Arts and the redneck opera of professional wrestling have made such a comeback in our post-feminist world because they point something authentically masculine, that a man is meant to use his strength and wits to win at something, to achieve something, and so sports and our nearly insatiable appetite for it tell us something absolutely basic about men. That millions of men sitting in front of flickering screens for hours on end cheering for the exploits of others is telling us something, “I was made to play and win, but I don’t know what the game is. Can anyone show me what the game is and what the rules are? What does it mean to be man?”

So when you hear ten year old boys on playgrounds saying things like “I’m better at this than you are,” or “My dad can beat up your dead,” don’t think they’re little heathens— though some of them may grow up to be big ones— it’s just that testosterone has a different social profile than estrogen. It’s how the Creator made us, to compete and to strive and to win and to rejoice and to learn along the way that Jesus Christ is the best friend and guide a man ever had.

Let’s not kid ourselves. Peter and James and John and the rest may have been following Jesus, but what they were after was status, within their circle, which if Jesus was the Messiah, was the biggest circle of all, and the good news was that they were already insiders to the only game that mattered— the God game. A man who can feed thousands from a sack lunch, sends demons packing and raises the dead has real promise as a patron. So they wanted to know the pecking order, where they stood, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” It was religious competition; it still exists among clergy in raw form.

You and I live in a much more child-centered culture than they did. To associate with children was to spend time with those who offered no benefit in return; it’s what women did. So what Jesus did by summoning a child was counter-cultural. And in the most solemn terms, as indicated by the formula, “Truly, I say to you...” Jesus warned his closest associates that unless they had a change of mind and heart, unless they turned and repented, unless their understanding of greatness was abandoned- “unless you turn and become like

children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” In other words, they’re not the greatest; they’re not even in yet.

They saw themselves as insiders; Jesus saw them as outsiders. They wanted to climb to the top; they were after prestige; he was after the humility of radical dependence on God. To be delightfully dependent on the Father in heaven is the greatest position God affords; I belong to the one who made it all, owns it all, controls it all. Like the child who was summoned, I come and wait and listen. That’s humility. Not to think badly of myself, but to gladly obey Christ in things great and small, as he said, “Whoever humbles himself *like this child* is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” The child Jesus applauded had done nothing but obey and stand there.

There is nothing more valuable in the life of a child than to have a mom or dad who is steadily allowing Jesus to remake them from the inside out. For them to watch you change will put in them a hunger for the same quality of relationship. If we want our children to follow us, then we had better be following Him.

2) vv.5-9 The Dangerous World Of Opportunities.

It happens often. I’m busy at some project when Emmie notifies me someone is here to see me. It’s immediately clear that they’re needy and came for help. We sit in the library. I get their names, pray, then listen to their story. It’s my duty as a pastor to pay attention. And not every time, but often enough, somewhere in the conversation I become aware of *His* presence. Duty becomes a doorway into something deeper. I know because I now see the person before me not just as a problem to be fixed or counseled towards more effective and less dependent living but as someone God loves intensely. I catch a glimpse of how he sees them; it’s a sign the Spirit is hovering. And why should I be surprised; it’s the validation of what Jesus promised in verse 5, “Whoever receives one such child in my name *receives me.*”

I go from thinking, “Oh No, not another one,” to “This is my duty; do it well,” to “Yes, Lord, I missed your disguise again; what a fool I am.” The lesson is straightforward: people with needs, when they come to us because we

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are Christian, bear with them *His* presence even if they don't know it, along with whatever sin and foolishness they also bring in their backpack. Welcoming the Lord in his various disguises and sorting through the pain and the clutter are both parts of what is meant by Christian hospitality. A Father who does this will stamp his children forever with the eyes of compassion which look beyond appearances. Jesus is everywhere, but only if you have eyes trained to see him.

It is then, in verses 6 through 9, that Jesus gives some of his most brutal teaching about the world in which we live and its dangers. People are vulnerable, some are more vulnerable than others, especially children and the category of adults Jesus labels *these little ones who believe in me*. We cannot get a precise description of this later group; our best guess is that they were new believers, inexperienced, perhaps poor and at the edge of life, in other words just the kind of people it would be easy to take advantage of or look down on. Every church has them- the mentally and morally weak, the simple and unsophisticated, and they are- in a real sense- the measure of our faith. Are they listened to? Helped and encouraged? Do they feel welcomed and honored? Are their gifts utilized? Are they loved? And if our body language or attitude makes it harder rather than easier for them, then Jesus says we're the ones in danger. To place a stumbling block in their way is to mark myself as one who simply does not understand how valuable they are to the same Lord who's also trying to save me, "... but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for them to have a great millstone fastened round their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."

You do not want to be the agent of someone else's corruption or abandonment of faith. You want to treat *the little ones*, whatever their age, with care. Anyone who takes advantage of the poor and the ignorant and the weak and the foolish and the vulnerable is an enemy of God, whether it's through the false promises of the lottery or exorbitant interest on revolving loans. Hello?

Jesus was clear. You simply do not want to be the source of temptation in someone else's life. Temptations are unavoidable since we live in a fallen creation infected with evil so that much of the culture we have created encourages independence from and rebellion against God. "Woe (or sorrow) to the world for temptation to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but

woe to the man (or woman) *by whom* the temptation comes.” For you to be a vehicle to corrupt and mislead another person, particularly one of the little ones, is to declare yourself an enemy of God. That Jesus announces a funeral dirge over such people as if they were already dead is sobering. And if the Spirit is at this moment calling to mind an incident where you introduced another person into wickedness of any sort, I beg you to beg God for forgiveness.

And lest we think that only other people have this problem, in verses 8 and 9 Jesus turns his searchlight on his disciples, “And if your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.” Same with your eye. Of course he’s exaggerating for effect, but the truth remains: the only way that we can insulate ourselves from being a corrupting influence in someone else’s life is to first deal with the corruption that is *within us*. Jesus advocates an utterly brutal approach to whatever in my life causes me to sin. Don’t cater to it; kill it!

If you are a man with a porn problem, get rid of the computer, cancel the cable. If you’re an over-spender, cut up the credit cards. If you have an anger or alcohol problem, get help. If addicted to nicotine or food or whatever, go to your doctor and come up with a plan of attack. If you harbor racial prejudice, admit your error and ask God for help. If a gossip, walk around for a day in public with masking tape across your mouth; ask a friend to confront you every time they hear you gossip. If greedy and never satisfied, start tithing and making offerings beyond the minimum. Look at your life and take an honest inventory. Do whatever you have to do to pull up the wicked weeds by the roots. Sin is anything that takes away from and dulls your hunger for more of Jesus Christ, and no one is in more danger than someone who has grown spiritually bored and is looking around for some new excitement, including pastors who’ve forgotten to take the same medicine we offer others. Be brutal with yourself, first by asking God to reveal anything— however innocent appearing— that is dulling your spiritual appetite, and when you are clear from self-examination and Scripture that it is an issue, go at it as if you were stomping cock roaches. You’ll be amazed at the help that comes and the new freedom and desires God pours into your soul. In his commentary on this text, Dr. Michael Green makes this comment:

“Does your hand offend you, the hand raised in anger or grasping

at money? Does your foot offend you, the places it takes you to and the Christian service it declines to undertake? Does your eye offend you- the unsatisfied eye of consumer society? Be single-minded! Deal ruthlessly with whatever causes you to stumble in your walk with Christ in the body of his Church.”⁶

There was a garbage pit just south of the walled city of Jerusalem in the Valley of Hinnom known as *Gehenna*. In the darkest days of ancient Israel it was where children were ritually sacrificed to the pagan God Molech.⁷ I leave it to you to name the modern day equivalent. Under the reforms of King Josiah, the valley became a dump for the burning of animal entrails, garbage, and human waste. It burned, smoldered, and stunk; it was covered with flies and crawling with maggots, utterly disgusting. So revolting was *Gehenna* that over time it became the stock Jewish image for hell, which is where God ultimately assigns human refuse that will not respond to his grace and love.⁸ And the purpose of Jesus’ highly-graphic imagery, whether the picture is of drowning in ocean depths or of being consigned to in the cosmic garbage pit, is to make clear it’s not a place you want to go, and don’t have to!⁹ And the way to avoid it is to turn humbly to Christ for help and then to get busy with his aid about the process of the deep moral reformation that makes me into a positive and holy influence in the lives of others rather than a corrupting influence, because you will be either the one or the other. Moral neutrality is a myth.

This is classic Christianity; this is God’s program to save us, and that other easy, self-indulgent, feel-good, psycho-babble stuff that has all but destroyed the church in America is a deadly fraud, and the reason I keep preaching against it is that I do not want to be infected by it. Our world does not want to admit its helplessness and guilt before God. Our world does not

⁶ *Matthew For Today* (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 172.

⁷ Jeremiah 7:31, 19:5ff., 32:35.

⁸ Ben Witherington, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 347.

⁹ For a treatment from evangelicals in England, see *The Nature of Hell* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2000).

want to talk about judgment, now or later. But Jesus has warned us all, and on this Father's Day I apply it pointedly to myself and other men. If we are heroes at anything, let's be heroes at following Jesus and being as demanding and exacting with ourselves as he counseled because the stakes are high and because our families and world need a good example. And if you laugh at this or dismiss what I'm saying, it only shows how far gone you are from the heart of your heavenly Father. What will God have to do or allow to get our attention?

1') vv.10-14 The Worth Of The Little Ones.

My little slice of the world tells me that there are so many who are lost and lonely, neglected and forgotten, overlooked and dismissed. In a culture that prizes independence and self-sufficiency, success and sophistication, they just don't measure up, and few ever will. Nobody much listens to them. They are the people easy to overlook on the way to somewhere important, and when they intrude, it initially feels like a distraction. They shop at Salvation Army, get health care at the ER, go through change purses at the Wal-Mart checkout to pay for groceries, and count on mercy ministries like Greater Greenwood United Ministries and our food pantry to make ends meet and survive another month.

We wonder to ourselves, Why can't they get it right? Why are they always asking for more? And if you take the time to listen, they will tell you, and you will discover that these, the ones Jesus calls *the little ones*, are not so different from those of us who are closer to the secure top of the social heap. And it is just these folk, Jesus said, who are the special responsibility of the church and with whom we are to be vitally involved. Why? Because their angels, the ones Jews called *angels of the Presence*, unlike other angels who cover their faces in God's presence, look into the very face of God, and if they matter that much to God, then they should matter that much to us.

I have lots of such folk in my life. It's part of my job, and I'm a better man because I cannot just ignore them. When they ask, Is the pastor here? I'm hooked! But for many of you, such involvement with left out people is not as easy. They may not cross your path and be so largely invisible. This is why teachers and nurses and social workers are so valuable; they keep reminding us of what they see every day and asking embarrassing things like, What can the

church do about this situation? And if we avoid them or look down on them, if we do not seek them out and welcome them into our fellowship with the zeal of a shepherd looking for that last once percent, then guess what? We've missed out on Jesus and on the hilarious joy that is part of his continuing rescue mission in the world. Fathers and mothers who open their supper table to single parents and their children, who help build a Habitat House and visit at nursing homes, who spot the child in the class who is ill-clothed: these are the places where the faith is caught and taught and where the Bible finds traction.

CONCLUSION

Life looks different from inside the kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus was right, "Unless we turn and becomes as helpless and trusting as children, we will forever remain outsiders to the benefits of God's gracious rule of our lives." But once inside, we see two things with extreme clarity: 1) how utterly dreadful and deadly is this thing called sin, and 2) how utterly valuable people are, particularly those at the edges. It is then, and perhaps only then, that a life given to the pursuit of holiness and love and service becomes attractive.

To the men and fathers here today, and to the wives and mothers and daughters who love them, I have only one thing to say. It is time to follow Jesus Christ. Time to man up! It is time, in whatever way you are able, to seek and to pursue him until he turns, looks you in the eye and announces, "There is work to do. Will you join me?" It is in his presence, as nowhere else, that good men are built. Guys, it's what we were made for. To be his men and fathers.

