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Matthew 18:11 - 18:14



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses Matthew 18:11-14, highlighting the idea that God's will is not always done, and that men are condemned when they reject the light of God. Gregg explains that the parables in this passage emphasize the importance of humility and repentance in being found by God. He also notes that while the parables do not definitively answer whether it is God or the sinner who takes the initiative in returning to God, they do emphasize that God actively seeks out those who are lost, and that it is possible for even God's people to stray.

Transcript

Let's turn now to Matthew 18, and we'll pick up our study in this at verse 11. Now, once again, in terms of God's attitude toward little children, Jesus said it is not the will of your father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. Now, of course, to say it is not God's will for them to perish would be not necessarily stating what happens, because God's will is not always done.

It's quite obvious the Bible states many things to be God's will that don't happen. The Bible says God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. Well, some do perish, and some don't come to repentance, so His will isn't always done in that respect.

The Bible says this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that you should abstain from fornication. Well, God's will, therefore, is that Christians would abstain from fornication, but sometimes Christians don't. God's will is, therefore, not always done.

When He says it is not the will of your father that any of these little ones would perish, that in itself does not mean that they don't. But, as I said in an earlier session, from this chapter there are many things that Jesus said about children that indicate that not only is it not God's will that these little ones perish, but they don't. That is, if they die in their infancy, they die not lost, but they die saved.

Now, not all Christians agree with this. In fact, there are many who strenuously disagree. But I believe that Jesus meant something when He said, Do not forbid these little ones to

come to me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven consists of such little children. And when He said, If you receive a little child, you receive Me. It's the same as when He said to His disciples, He who receives you receives Me.

Why? Because He is identified with them. And when He says that they have angels, He says the little children have angels. Their angels behold the face of the Father every day.

Well, guardian angels are for those who are the heirs of salvation, according to Scripture, not for the lost. So, everything Jesus said on little children leads me to believe that little children, in their original young state, are saved. Even though they are sinners, they are saved because they are not held responsible for sins that they have absolutely no light about.

Men are condemned when the light comes into the world, and men love darkness rather than light. And that is why the world is condemned. Little children who have not had any such light have not loved the darkness rather than light.

They have not exhibited a hatred for the light, and therefore they are not in that state of condemnation. I believe that Jesus described as the condemnation of the world. Now, a lot of differences of opinion on that, but I must tell you what I think the Bible says.

Now, Jesus says about sheep. He said, what do you think? He says, I've come to save that which was lost. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine who did not go astray? Now, this parable of the lost sheep is recorded in another context in Luke chapter 15.

Now, Jesus may have given it twice, maybe in this context here in Matthew 18 and maybe in a different context also. But that other context in Matthew 15 was when there were a great number of sinners, tax collectors and sinners, that were resorting to Christ. They were coming in large numbers to hear Him, and He was obviously very receptive of their company.

And this caused the religious elite, the scribes and the Pharisees, to criticize. And they said, well, you know, you're hanging out with this bad element. You know, birds of a feather flock together, and you must therefore be a bad person if you allow these bad people to be your friends.

And Jesus told three parables. One of them was this one about the lost sheep. Another one was about a lost coin, a woman who lost one of ten coins.

And she swept her whole house diligently until she found the lost coin. And then she

called all her neighbors to come rejoice with her that she found it. And then He told a third parable with the same message, and that was essentially what we usually call the parable of the prodigal son.

In each of these cases, each parable has something in common with the others. In every case, something is lost, and that something is recovered. A sheep that was lost is found.

A coin that is lost is recovered. A son who was lost to the family returns. And in all three stories, we read of the great rejoicing that occurred on the part of the person who found it, and his eagerness that others would rejoice with him over this recovery of the lost item.

Now, what Jesus was saying, of course, is that those tax collectors and sinners that were flocking to Him were like lost sheep, or like lost coins, or like lost sons, whom God had lost, but they were now being recovered. They were being found again. And therefore, rather than criticizing them for coming back to God, one should rejoice with God that they have come back.

In the case of this parable and the other two that are told in Luke 15, Jesus at the end of each one says, So likewise, there is great joy in heaven whenever one sinner repents. He says there is joy in the presence of the holy angels when one sinner repents. What he is saying is that rather than God holding a grudge against these sinners, even though they want to return to Him, He is rejoicing when they return to Him.

And this indicates that even while they were away from Him, His heart was for them. As in the story of the prodigal son. The son was away from his father, and when his father saw him returning a long way off, he ran out to meet his son and grabbed him and hugged him around the neck and rejoiced and killed the fatted calf.

The idea here is not that the father suddenly had a change of heart about his son when he saw him coming. He says, Oh, I might as well forgive him. It's rather this, that the father had always longed to see his son return.

His heart was with his son even when his son was away, but the son was lost. The son was not saved while he was away from his father, but his father wished he would be. His father always wished for his return.

And so also, this is the attitude that Jesus says is God's attitude towards sinners. There are people listening to this broadcast today who are away from God. You're rebelling against God.

You have left Him, and you know you have. And you probably suspect that God is upset with you and rejects you and so forth, and that you're just one of those that's doomed to be lost because how could you ever expect God to ever accept you back? And that's a very good question. How could you expect God to accept you back? Well, you couldn't

except on the merits of Jesus, of course, but those merits of Jesus are a factor.

Jesus came and took the responsibility. He took the guilt for your sins upon Himself, and He paid the utmost price of shedding His blood, really, to pay that so that God would have grounds to accept you back if you come to Him on the proper terms. And those proper terms are really not very inaccessible.

All He requires is that you humble yourself and repent before Him and resolve that you want to believe in Him, in what Jesus has done, and to be a follower of His, not a follower of your own ways. That you repent of your sins means you turn around again. Now, some people say that the decision to repent is not really in the power of the sinner to make, that it is God who unilaterally decides who will be saved, and then God grants repentance to that person.

And truly, the Bible does say that God grants repentance. We read that in 2 Timothy 2, that God can grant repentance to the sinner. We read it in Acts 11, that God granted repentance to the Gentiles.

So, I mean, we do not deny that God grants repentance, but there is a step further that some people take this. They say that since God grants repentance, God decides to grant it to some and not to others. In other words, they make it sound as if God is the only will in the matter.

God grants repentance to the ones that He wants to see repent, but He does not grant it to others because He does not want to see them repent. Well, that of course flies in the face of Scripture, which says God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. God will grant repentance to anybody who humbles himself before God.

The Bible says that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. And once a person humbles himself in the sight of the Lord, God lifts him up. God grants him true repentance and faith.

And this is what saves a person, is repentance and faith. It is certainly the grace of God that grants the humbled one true repentance and faith. But that person must make a decision.

Now, some people think that this story of the lost sheep would show that God is the only one who makes the decision. The sheep gets lost. The sheep cannot find its way home again.

It is doomed. The wild beasts of the earth will catch it if the shepherd does not find it before sundown. But the shepherd takes all the initiative.

The shepherd goes out looking for the sheep. He goes into the mountains. He is

searching around.

He finds the sheep. He picks it up. He carries it home.

All of it is done by the shepherd. The sheep does not do one thing to contribute to its own recovery. And for that reason, some would say, well, you see, the sinner does not do anything.

The sinner cannot repent. The sinner cannot believe. The sinner cannot do anything to change his circumstances.

And they also would point the same thing out about the lost coin story. The woman loses a coin. The coin does not contribute to its own recovery.

The woman does all the work. She sweeps the house. She searches diligently.

She brings candles in to illuminate every corner. And she finds the coin. Again, the recovery of the coin was done not by the coin, but by the woman.

And so these parables are often brought forward to show that the salvation of the sinner is done without anything, any change of mind or anything on the sinner's part, that God must do it all. However, remember, Jesus did not just tell those two parables to make his point. He told a third parable, and that is the parable of the prodigal son.

Now, that certainly muddies the waters. Because in the parable of the prodigal son, the son has left his father on his own volition. His father makes no contact with him in the far country.

But simply, at a certain point, the son has been reduced to such unacceptable circumstances that he comes to his senses. And he says, what am I doing here, eating with the pigs? He says, the servants in my father's house, they live better than this. I'll return to my father.

I'll say to him, Father, I've sinned against heaven in your sight. I'm no longer worthy to be your son. Notice he's humbling himself.

And he says, just make me one of your servants. And so, without any prior contact from his father, only a memory of him from back when he used to live with him, he makes a choice to come home. And once he has started home, his father runs out to meet him, to welcome him, and to accompany him the rest of the way.

Now, if we're going to try to get from these parables a picture of whether there's anything required of the sinner to be saved or not, we can't just look at the first two parables, the sheep and the coin. There's also the son. And it's clear that these parables, none of them are really there to tell us very much about whether it's all of God or whether it's all of the sinner or part of God and part of the sinner.

The purpose of the parables is not to address that issue, and that's why you don't get an exactness in the parallel. But what the purpose of the parable is, is to say that God is awfully glad to see sinners come home. He's awfully happy.

He doesn't begrudge them an acceptance. He gladly extends acceptance to them and rejoices to see sinners come home. Now, of course, depending on how much you want to press the details, you could either argue from two of those parables that God does it all and that the coin has no power, the sheep has no power to do anything.

It's just all unilaterally done by God. But the parable of the prodigal son would communicate the opposite message. The father stays home until the son is returning.

The son has made a decision on his own in a far country and comes home. And only after his father sees that his son is making his motions does he ever act toward the restoration of his son. Now, I'm not arguing for one or the other of these two options.

I'm simply saying that you can't have it just one way. If you're going to use these parables to argue that it's all of God, you're going to have to take all three parables. And certainly they don't all communicate that message.

Neither does the Bible itself. The Bible does teach that while we were helpless and while we're powerless to save ourselves, God took the initiative, sent his son, and did all that was necessary to acquire for us salvation. But that doesn't automatically save anybody.

Jesus, having died and risen again, acquired an available salvation for all. But no one was automatically saved as a result of that. It's only those who repent and believe who are saved.

The rest of those who do not are lost, notwithstanding what Jesus has done. Now, I realize that what I'm saying is not good Calvinism. In fact, it's not any kind of Calvinism.

As a matter of fact, I'm not any kind of a Calvinist. But the point is, this is what the Bible, in my understanding, teaches. Now, Jesus is pointing out that he doesn't want any to be lost.

He said, the Son of Man has come to seek that which is lost. He didn't say some of those who are lost. He didn't say he came to seek only the elect who were lost.

He came to seek the lost, period. How many people are lost? The whole world is lost. Therefore, Jesus came to seek and to save everybody that he could.

Now, is it possible for one of God's people to go astray, like a sheep? Apparently it is. Isaiah said, in Isaiah 53-6, Now, God laid on Christ the iniquity of all who had gone astray, said Isaiah. And I certainly agree with that.

Christ died for all sinners, all who had gone astray. Jesus came to save them. He came

with the purpose of offering and seeking to save all that were lost.

The example he gives is, there's 99 sheep in this man's flock. One of them has gone astray. That means there's 100 sheep.

There's 99 that do not go astray. Now, these 99 do not have to be sought. They are, in a sense, under control.

They are where they should be. But there is one that is not where he should be. And the shepherd doesn't sit around contently and say, Ah, well, 99% is pretty good.

I've got 99 of those 100. Let the other one go, if he will. No, he leaves the 99 in a safe place, and he goes after that one.

What Jesus is saying is that God is not satisfied with 99% recovery. He wants all 100%. He wants 100% of people to be saved.

If one is lost, it is not acceptable to him. He goes after them. He's not willing that any should perish.

Now, some do anyway. In this parable, the shepherd goes out, and he's successful. He finds the sheep and brings it home.

But there are many of the lost sheep of the house of Israel who never came home. There are many of those in Isaiah's day who, like sheep, had gone astray. But they didn't ever come home.

They died in their sins, and they were lost. There are sheep that get away. That's right.

There are sheep that are lost. Think of Judas. Jesus said of Judas, when he prayed in John 17, he was praying to his father.

He said, Of those that you have given me. That's a term that Jesus used in John for his sheep. His sheep are those that the father had given him.

He said, Of those that you have given me, none are lost except the son of perdition, that the scripture may be fulfilled. He makes it very clear that the son of perdition was one of the sheep that God had given him, and that was one that was lost. Fortunately, most were not.

Jesus was not happy that Judas was lost. He was very sorrowful. He still referred to Judas as a friend in the garden.

He said, Friend, you betrayed the Son of Man with a kiss. Now there's an extending friendship, still even at that point, to Judas. There was opportunity for Judas to respond as a friend.

Jesus was extending that to him. Now, what I'm saying is this. God doesn't want any human being to be lost and to remain lost.

And thus he sent his son to seek and to save those that are lost. It's not enough that 99% are saved. He wants 100 out of 100 saved.

And that indicates that God is not tolerant of the loss of any of his people. However, the reason that not all are saved, I believe, is that not all choose to be saved, not all wish to be saved. And God is not such a suitor as would force his affections on one who spurns him.

What kind of a man would be? What kind of a man, knowing that a woman that he desires hates him and would never be happy with him, would nonetheless kidnap her, force her, brainwash her, keep her in captivity to force her to be his wife? What kind of man would do that to someone who didn't want it? Well, some kind of a demented psycho would do that, but not God. Not even a good man would do that. And yet many people feel that God, if he wanted to, could just force everybody to have a relationship with him.

Well, a relationship of a certain sort, sort of like that of a captive bride, but the Bible does not depict God in those terms. The Bible does not depict God as one who always gets his way. He is a God who sometimes complains that those that he loved don't love him back.

He complains that those that he's done everything for have not produced what he hoped they would produce. He has complained that he's raised up and reared children and they have rebelled against him. God throughout Scripture is depicted as a God who is not pleased with the way things have always turned out.

He is not a God who gets his way all the time. And the reason is because he has given to his creation, the human creation, the opportunity to choose to respond to him in love or not. And his sheep, his sons, his coins do sometimes get lost, and he is not content to have them lost.

But there comes a time when the son has gone to a far country. The father says, well, this is the son's choice. I will not pursue him.

But when that son begins to come back, God is so pleased to see it. He's so eager to see all saved. He's not willing that any should perish.

It's not his will that any of them should perish, he says. And that's how he is toward you. If you're far from God today, you may feel that God is quite content with this alienation, that you've offended him so much he just assumed you stayed away.

That is not God's heart toward you. God cares so much for the salvation of all sinners

that he was not content to leave it unremitted. And the remedy was very costly to him because it required him sacrificing his son in order to effect the reconciliation.

But this he did. And he did it in order to communicate and to demonstrate his love toward us. It says in Romans 5, verse 7, that God demonstrated his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

And this is the shepherd going after the sheep. He's got 99 that are apparently well enough behaved. He doesn't have to go searching for them, but he's got one that's out there.

Maybe you. Maybe you listening tonight to this program. Maybe you're that lost sheep, and he is going after you.

In fact, maybe he's reached you. Maybe this program is his way of reaching out to you right now. And the question is, what are you going to do? Are you going to keep straying, or are you going to submit? You're going to be the prodigal who says, You know, it is better being a servant in my father's house than being on my own with the pigs.

Well, I certainly hope that if you are such a prodigal or a lost sheep, that you may be found and that you may be successfully brought back into the fold because that is where life is. That is where acceptance with God is. And I wish that for everyone who hears my voice on this radio broadcast today.

We will continue our study in Matthew 18 in our next session. And we have some very interesting material ahead of us. I hope you'll join us.