

4th discourse – Sermon on Community

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This is the 4th sermon in Matthew. Sometimes called the Community discourse. It could also be called the Sermon on church. The Lord focuses on how His followers are to act and react to one another.

The Lord focuses on the attitude that those in His kingdom will have. Those in the kingdom will humble themselves. The call for humility will be consistent throughout the sermon.

Our Attitude

The need for this sermon comes out of the disciples' question about those who are the greatest in the kingdom. Perhaps due to Peter, James, and John being taken aside by the Lord, the disciples had gotten into a dispute about their relative greatness. This completely missed the point of what Christ was making them and the kingdom Christ would set up.

Thus, this 4th discourse is required; the disciples needed to understand the attitude that should mark them to serve together for Christ's kingdom.

For one to enter the kingdom of heaven, they need to be transformed. The current state of the disciples or anyone would never survive in God's kingdom. It is a place where Christ is supreme; those who enter the kingdom are to be Christ-exalting and Christ-like. Thus, humility is the exalted virtue in this kingdom.

Being child-like

The Lord calls a child to illustrate what His followers are to be. The Lord presents the child specifically as an example of humility. One who is not concerned with social status or gaining power, but is simply willing to trust Him.

Christ does not commend childishness; there is to be maturity of thought but humility of mind.

This is what makes someone the greatest: a refusal to seek greatness. Those who humbly trust God and serve others will be exalted. This is the beatitudes working themselves out in our relationships with one another, and it starts with being lowly and poor in spirit.

With this in mind, the Lord will now refer to His followers as 'children' and 'little ones' throughout the discourse. This is what all true followers of Christ are.

Our actions

Causing little ones to stumble

Those who have humbled themselves to follow Christ represent Him and are to live as He lived. Thus the way people treat Christ's little ones is illustrative of how they view and accept Christ.

The result of people humbling themselves to follow the Lord is that they are vulnerable. They do not assert their own rights and are reliant on the kindness of others.

The Lord's focus initially is on the general treatment of His followers.

To receive a child in Christ's name is to receive Christ. To reject a child and cause them to stumble in their discipleship is to reject Christ Himself. This is a serious offence, it will be punished forever and thus merits the strong language used by the Lord.

This is not mere mistreatment of another human; serious as that is, it is considered mistreatment of Christ, and the Lord will judge accordingly.

What is stumbling?

The idea of the word stumbling or stumbling-block used by the Lord here, is something that gets in the way, a barrier of some kind. Additionally, it is linked to causing someone to fall or become entrapped. Specifically here, the end in view is causing someone to sin. In verse 6, the sin is potentially caused by poor treatment or by explicitly enticing one to sin. As the Lord continues to speak about stumbling blocks, we can think of it as things which cause people to sin.

Woe to the world

The Lord has warned of the seriousness of stumbling blocks; however, in a fallen world, they are inevitable. That means inevitable judgment on the world.

"Woe" is used here to indicate a proclamation of judgment as opposed to an expression of sympathy. The Lord judges those who cause His children to stumble, and He does not hold back in His language.

The inevitability of stumbling does not mitigate the responsibility individuals have not to be the cause of it.

Causing ourselves to stumble

Cutting off your hand?!?

Causing someone else to sin is extremely serious, and likewise, allowing things in our lives that stumble us can be eternally serious. What the Lord is displaying in this section is the seriousness of sin. It is as serious as hell itself.

Because of where sin leads, all possible actions should be taken to prevent us from sinning. This is why Jesus uses this intense language. He is not calling for people actually to mutilate their bodies. However, sin is so serious and so deep in each one of us that to remove it from our lives will require serious sacrifices that will likely be painful.

The solution

The Lord has warned against causing others to stumble, warned about the inevitability of the stumbling blocks coming from the world; however, if one is the cause of stumbling, they are aligning themselves with the world, and their allegiance to Christ is in question.

The solution to this danger is to have the attitude the Lord began with.

Those who are true followers of Christ are marked by humility and a recognition of their own weakness.

Those who are proud and self-reliant will only cause stumbling for themselves and others.

Despising little ones

Flowing directly on from this need for humility and severity in dealing with sin as a warning of care for the little children. One is not to look down on them for their meekness and humility, supremely because they are loved by the Father.

Their angels...?

The reason the Lord gives for not despising little ones is that there angels see the face of the Father. There are several different views as to what this could be.

1. The guardian angel view

One understanding is that each individual Christian has an individual angel assigned to them.

Some Biblical support from this would be pulled from Acts 12:15, after Peter was rescued by an angel and arrived at the house, those inside did not believe it was him and thought it was "his angel".

Additionally, some argue that as there are angels for Governments (Dan. 10:13) and Churches (Rev. 1:20), it is not unreasonable to think there are angels for individuals as well.

2. The whole host view

Some understand “their angels” to refer to something collective, and this is simply stating that God’s angels serve God’s people in a more collective sense. Hebrews 1:14 may be appealed to for this view; angels are sent to serve all who are saved.

3. The spirits view

Another view is that “their angels” refers to the spirits of the little ones after they die. This view understands the Lord to be referring to something future, that little ones shouldn’t be despised because one day they will see the face of the Father. This stems in part from an understanding that angels do not have the privilege of seeing the Father’s face (Isa. 6:2). An argument for why the Lord uses this language of angels could be taken from Matthew 22:30, in the resurrection, saints are “like the angels”.

Whatever view one takes, the point the Lord is making is the same. Little ones are not to be despised and should be treated with respect because of the immense privilege they have of being closely connected to the Father Himself.

The parable

In Luke’s gospel, the Lord also tells this parable (Luke 15:4-7), however, in a different context. The likelihood is that Jesus used the same story to make 2 different points. In Luke, His point is that God cares for every sinner and will suffer much to see them saved. In Matthew, His point is that God cares for every saint, and any little ones that go astray will be sought after by God and brought back. This is still in the context of stumbling blocks, those who despise the children and could cause them to stumble, but God is not done with them. He cares for His children and will bring them back to Him; this is an encouragement for all true disciples.

Our Reactions

The humble child-like attitude of the kingdom not only informs how we think and act towards people, it should direct how we react to people who sin against us.

The warning in the first half had warned against His disciples as the aggressors, now His teaching involves them as the victims of sin.

Unrepentant sin

The first situation Jesus deals with is what to do if one sins and refuses to acknowledge it.

This process outlined is the way of godly wisdom. It upholds truth while seeking to maintain peace. This process is one that many businesses today advocate for to resolve conflict; it is the most effective way to deal with personal wrongdoings.

Step 1

The first step is to deal with issues privately; if something can be dealt with quickly and privately it should be done. The purpose and nature of this confrontation is restorative, not vindictive. To do this, one needs to have the humble attitude of the child, not asserting their own rights and personal hurts, but humbly pointing out sin and looking for the relationship to be restored.

Step 2

If that is unsuccessful, the next step is to bring others to hear the issue and to make their own judgment. This is an objective judgment, not just a group out to get one person. The other people there not only assess the facts themselves but also provide a witness to the confrontation if it needs to progress to the next step.

To do this properly, it requires humility and honesty; to openly allow others to judge a situation objectively can be a humbling experience; both sides need to be open to being wrong.

Step 3

The final step is to tell the situation to the church. It is evident that the Lord is laying out these principles for when He is gone, His followers have to make judgments themselves. This is the first time in the New Testament that the local church is mentioned.

The local church is given authority by God; this is what is meant by the following verses. The local church has authority to bind and loose, and it is to be done in a way that is consistent with God's rule. Local churches are where heaven's rule is seen on earth. This is why the attitude of the child is necessary both for church life and kingdom life. The local church is where kingdom principles for ruling are to be seen.

The seriousness of this authority is that if someone refuses to submit to it, they are judged as refusing to submit to God's authority and their salvation is in question, thus they are put out of the church and treated as a non-believer.

It should be noted that to treat someone like a non-believer does not mean to treat them poorly. We have already seen how Jesus treated tax collectors (Mat. 9:9-13) and gentiles (Mat. 15:21-28). He loved them and viewed them as those in need of the gospel and salvation.

The authority of the church comes from the fact that it is where the Lord has put His name. His name used to indicate His identity, His power and His authority. Those things are integral to the existence of the church and the church has the responsibility of exercising its authority in a way consistent with the identity of Christ.

Repentant sin

Perhaps provoked by what the Lord has just taught, Peter has a question for when the first step goes well. If a brother or sister is confronted and they recognise their own sin and repent, of course we are to forgive them, but how much? When do we draw the line and say that someone has repeated their sin too many times?

Jesus' answer breaks all of our natural and selfish intuitions. He alludes to Genesis 4, where Lamech says his revenge will be 70 times 7. Unlike this early sinful man, Christians are to be the total inverse, forgiving to an uncountable extent.

By 70 times 7, Jesus does not just mean that we are to forgive someone 490 times; 7 in scripture is a number used to indicate completeness or perfection. Peter likely suggested 7 because it would have been thought of as a perfect or complete forgiveness; when that was reached, there would have been no more forgiveness available.

Jesus' answer does not set a limit on forgiveness; it is perfection multiplied by greater perfection. We are to forgive as God forgives; this is the foundational truth that will be drawn out by the parable.

The unforgiving servant

This parable of Christ should give us perspective when we are thinking about whether to forgive someone. The 10,000 talents of debt that the man had would be equivalent to over \$10 billion! It was about 200,000 years of work! The man would never have been able to pay it back, but the king chose to suffer the cost.

With this in mind, the small (and very repayable) amount his fellow servant owed him should have been of no consequence to him. His actions indicate an ungratefulness for the king's kindness.

At the end of the parable, Jesus brings in a solemn reality: those who do not forgive will be judged by God.

For anyone who is actually forgiven and belongs to God, unforgiveness will result in being shut off from the enjoyment of God's goodness and familial forgiveness.

For others, and what is likely the main point, unforgiveness puts into question whether someone truly knows the king or has truly been forgiven.

Jesus' teaching on forgiveness sets no limits on the amount of our forgiveness. If we are humble children who appreciate that we have been forgiven greater than we could even imagine, then we will be forgiving people. However, Christ's teaching does lay out circumstances for forgiveness; those who refuse to repent cannot be truly forgiven; however, that gives us no grounds to despise them. We are to love them and seek to see them restored and forgiven.