

## THESE LITTLE ONES

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After Jesus a second time predicted His death and resurrection, His disciples argued with each other about which one of them is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. He told them that those who are greatest in the kingdom are not those who rule over others, but those who serve others. He showed them a child, and told them that no one can enter into the kingdom of heaven unless he humbles himself, and becomes like a child. Children are not without sin. Yet, children have a kind of innocence. They have a simple, yet profound, faith. They believe in God, as they should, without the need of argument. They do not put on airs. They may hide from their parents, but they do not hide who they are. They pretend, but they make no pretenses. They are quick to be sorry, and quick to forgive. They are eager to help others. So, Saint Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “In malice be ye children.” (1 Corinthians 14:20) Those that humble themselves like little children are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus took the child in His arms, to show that those who humble themselves like children belong to Him. Moreover, He said that anyone who receives such a person in His name, receives Him, and whoever receives Him receives God who sent Him. A man naturally loves himself, but he does not naturally love others. So, God commanded the children of Israel, “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” (Leviticus 19:18) For the Christian, there is an even higher love: the love of the brethren. On one occasion, Jesus called His disciples “little children,” and told them “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all *men* know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” (John 13:33-35) Saint John, in his first epistle, calls his readers “little children,” and tells them:

Again, a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in him and in you: because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth. He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes. (1 John 2:8-11)

A sure sign that one is a true follower of Jesus is that he loves Jesus's other followers. The love of one Christian for another is a hallmark of Christians. The Christian must be good to all, but the family of believers have priority. So Saint Paul told the Galatians, “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all *men*, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” (Galatians 6:10)

Sadly, however, Christians are sometimes factious. The church at Corinth developed factions not long after its founding. Some in that church said that they followed Paul, others Apollos. (1 Corinthians 3) Of course, a congregation must have its own pastor, but it is wrong for the Christian to refuse to recognize another pastor, or to receive Christians of another congregation. Immediately after Jesus told His disciples that whoever receives someone in His name receives Him, Saint John said to Him, “Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbad him, because he followeth not us.” A party spirit was taking root amongst the disciples. They had argued with each other over which one was the greatest. Then, after Jesus told them that the humble are the greatest, and that they ought to receive anyone who humbly follows Him, Saint John told Jesus that the disciples had seen a man casting out demons in His name, and forbade him because he was not in their company. It seems the disciples did not think the man a fraud; it seems, rather, that they believed he was not authorized to perform miracles in Jesus' name because he was not a member of their fellowship. Similarly, Joshua told Moses to forbid Eldad and Medad from prophesying in the camp. Moses answered him, “Enviest thou for my sake? would God that all the LORD'S people were prophets, *and* that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!” (Numbers 11:28, 29) So also John the Baptist's disciples complained to him that the people were going to Jesus, and not to him, for baptism. John answered that he was pleased to yield to Jesus. (John 3:25-36) Jesus denied neither the man's miracles, nor his authority to perform them, and He said

to the disciples, “Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part.” (Mark 9:39-40) No one doing miracles in Jesus’s name would quickly turn against Him. Moreover, if the man was for their cause, then he was not against it, and they ought not prohibit him. On an earlier occasion, when the Pharisees said that Jesus cast out demons by Beelzebub the prince of demons, Jesus said, “He that is not with me is against me.” (Matthew 12:30) There is no neutrality with respect to Jesus; one is either for Him, or he is against Him, and the Christian should not discourage them that are for Jesus, but encourage them. Jesus further said to His disciples, “For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward.” (Mark 10:41) Here Jesus alludes to the service the Shunammite woman gave to the prophet Elisha. Elisha, on one of his travels, encountered a woman of Shunem who recognized him as a prophet of God, and gave to him food and shelter. In turn, he told her she would have what she always wanted: a child. (2 Kings 4:8-17) Jesus, before He commissioned the twelve, told them that, as God had rewarded the Shunammite woman who received Elisha the prophet, so God would reward any who received them. He said to them:

He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me. He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold *water* only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward. (Matthew 10:40-42)

Jesus will reward them that perform service in His name, and He will reward them that receive them that do service in His name. So, after Jesus’s disciples forbade a man cast out demons in His name, Jesus told them that, as He would reward someone who performed for them a simple act of kindness in His name, like giving them water, so much more would He reward someone who cast out demons in His name.

Loving one’s brother is central to the Christian faith, and loving one’s brother means doing what is in his best interest. It is looking after the material needs of others. It is giving food to them that are hungry, water to them that are thirsty, hospitality to them that are strangers, clothing to them that are naked, and it is visiting them that are sick, and them that are in prison for Christ’s sake. In fact, Jesus teaches that He will judge the nations on this account. Those who minister to their Christian brothers, minister to Jesus. He said, in His Olivet Discourse, “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done *it* unto me.” (Matthew 25:40) Conversely, those who neglect their brothers, neglect Jesus. He said, “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did *it* not to one of the least of these, ye did *it* not to me.” (Matthew 25:45) Saint James writes that faith without works does not save, and he asks, “If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be *ye* warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what *doth it profit*?” (James 2:14-16) Saint John writes that if someone does not love his brother, then he does not love God. “But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of *compassion* from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.” (1 John 3:17, 18) The faith that saves is the faith that works, and one that loves God also loves the children of God, who are the brothers and the sisters of the Son of God.

The Christian is to look after the material needs of other Christians. However, he is also to look after their spiritual needs. He is especially not to lead a Christian astray. Jesus said to His disciples: “And whosoever shall offend one of *these* little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea.” (Mark 9:42) Jesus gave the gravest warning to them that would lead one of His disciples into sin. Those who believe in Jesus belong to Him. They belong to Him, and they are members of His body. It would be better for a man, Jesus said, to kill himself than to lead into sin one them that belong to Jesus. Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians of not being the cause of another Christian’s falling into sin. He wrote, “And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.” (1 Corinthians 8:11, 12; cf. Romans 14:13-23) Even in a matter of indifference, if one Christian believes a particular act to be a sin, but

another knows it is not, and the one is led by the other to commit the act, then they both have sinned: the one by sinning against his conscience, and the other by leading his brother to sin; the one by betraying his faith in Jesus, the other by doing harm to one that belongs to Jesus. So, Saint Paul wrote that if one believes eating meat sacrificed to idols is a sin, although it is no sin, he would never eat meat again, so as not to cause his brother to sin. (1 Corinthians 8:13) Such is the seriousness of sin.

Saint Paul wrote to the Philippians, “*Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.*” (Philippians 2:3, 4) Jesus taught that the world will know who His disciples are because they love one another. He said, “*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.*” (John 13:35) The ancient church had its share of problems, yet the Christians did love each other, and the heathen knew it. Tertullian, the Church father, wrote in his *Apology*:

But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See, they say, how they love one another, for themselves are animated by mutual hatred; how they are ready even to die for one another, for they themselves will sooner put to death. And they are wroth with us, too, because we call each other brethren; for no other reason, as I think, than because among themselves names of consanguinity are assumed in mere pretence of affection.” (Tertullian, *Apology*, XXXIX)

Just as the Christian must never place a stumbling block in front of his brother, so he must never allow a stumbling block in front of himself. Jesus said to His disciples:

And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. (Mark 9:43-48)

In this life, the Christian is not perfected. He is always subject to temptation. He ought to be able to resist temptation, but there are some temptations he cannot resist. It is better, then, for him to avoid temptation than to sin. So, Jesus has taught His people to pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” (Matthew 6:13) Jesus uses extreme language to make his hearers understand the grave nature of sin, and the extreme measures they may need to take to keep themselves from it. So, the Proverbs advise the young man with respect to the adulteress: “Remove thy way far from her, and come not nigh the door of her house.” (Proverbs 5:8) The Christian may need to end a friendship, or quit a job, if not doing so places him in the way of temptation. However, although external constraints may keep a man from committing certain sinful acts, they cannot keep him from sinning in his heart. So, if a man cuts off his hands, he may be hindered from stealing, but he is not thereby kept from coveting. If a man cuts off his feet, he may be hindered from running to shed blood, but he is not thereby kept from hating. If a man plucks out his eyes, he may be hindered from looking at another woman to lust after her, but he is not thereby kept from lust. Jesus taught that sin is conceived in the heart, and no mutilation of the body will alter that fact. So the Christian finds that he will always need to cast himself upon the mercy of God in Christ Jesus.

Let us have humble hearts. Let us not seek greatness as the world counts greatness, but let us serve one another. Let us not hinder anyone who serves Christ, but “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.” (Romans 14:19) Let no one of us put a stumbling block in the way of another, and let no one of us allow a stumbling block in his own way.

Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto His God and Father; to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. *Amen.*