

## THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL RESPONSIBILITY

(Matthew 18:6-14; Mark 9:38-50)

1.23.22

**Description:** *Jesus uses the foundation of a servant being the greatest of all in the kingdom of heaven to build on how that should shape our relationships with one another.*

### INTRODUCTION

When I was maybe five years old, my dad took my brother and I to the observation deck on the 31<sup>st</sup> floor of the Foshay Tower in Minneapolis. For some 48 years, that 447-foot, 32-story building was the tallest in the Midwest.

A few years later my brother and I visited New York City with my mom; we were there for the New York World's Fair. As part of that trip, we took in the sites of Manhattan, including taking an elevator up to the observation deck on the 86<sup>th</sup> floor of the Empire State Building, some 1,050 feet up. For 39 years, from 1931 to 1970, the Empire State Building was the tallest building in the entire world.

Back here, shortly after it was built, I ventured with some friends to the observation deck of the IDS building in downtown Minneapolis. That was found on the 51<sup>st</sup> floor of that 57-story, 792-foot skyscraper, and gave us quite a view.

And my parents, on their last visit to New York City, had the opportunity to visit the observation deck on the 110<sup>th</sup> floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center. And now, the new Freedom Tower, built on the original site of the World Trade Center, has observation decks on the 100<sup>th</sup>, 101<sup>st</sup> and 102<sup>nd</sup> floors, the building itself topping out at an appropriate 1,776 feet, making it the tallest building in the Western Hemisphere and the seventh tallest building in the world.

Now why all this talk about tall buildings? Because for all the amazing height that we see, and sometimes visit, it's what is not seen that makes such tall buildings even possible. In other words, it's all about the foundation. For the twin towers of the World Trade Center, for example, they were quite literally "built upon the rock"; the foundation rested directly on the bedrock found at a depth of more than 70 feet below the ground surface — equivalent to seven stories. When the towers eventually collapsed in the tragedy of 9/11, the foundations had been constructed so well that they essentially survived the impacts of all that weight coming down on them. The truth is, for all the greatness and impressive achievement we see in amazingly tall buildings, what allows them to be so tall is found in the strength of their foundations. Without a strong foundation, those heights are never reached.

Now when He spoke during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had talked about foundations as well; in His story about a man building his house "upon the rock," He recounted how, despite the strength of the winds and the rain pounding his house during a storm, his house held firm. The guy who built his house upon the sand, not so much. But the point Christ was making was about the need to build our lives upon the rock that was, and is, Him. There is no stronger foundation to be found.

But today, we will be building upon the foundation that Christ established for His disciples: a foundation based on how we see ourselves in Him, and that strength radiating out in all the relationships we have. So, as we begin to build some stories above that foundation, **let's start with a word of prayer.**

### **TEXT**

Last week, if you remember, Jesus got involved in an argument His disciples were having about which one of them would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus used a small child to illustrate the profound difference that was the foundation for citizens in His kingdom: the humility of a child. That humility was wonderfully expressed by Paul in his letter from prison to the Philippian church: ***Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others — Paul, Philippians 2:3-4.***

Now keep in mind that Jesus is looking ahead to His “church,” founded by Him but existing in a time when He is no longer physically around. He is therefore trying to build off of the foundation He established last week in an attempt to get “a building” of relationship and viewpoint to be successfully built in His disciples — and the basis, the foundation for that building, is the humility of a child. So, with that in mind, He continues from last week’s conversation to talk to them: ***“If anyone causes one of these little ones — those who believe in Me — to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:6-7.***

At this point, Jesus has left the “child” image of humility to move on to talking about believers. You get the impression of how much His believers mean to Him that He refers to them — including us — as His “little ones.” It is from that picture of endearment that He presents a far more ominous picture — the consequence of causing one of His dear little ones to stumble. The idea of causing somebody to “stumble” means to trip them up in their faith, negatively impacting their spiritual life, literally causing them to fail. The ultimate tragedy of such an impact would be apostasy — the complete abandoning of faith.

Jesus is telling us that He will hold accountable anybody who would negatively impact somebody’s belief in Him, to whatever degree. He literally sees that as the equivalent of a capital offense, a crime worthy of death! And He creates a very vivid image that the disciples would have understood right away. A millstone was a heavy, wheel-shaped stone tied to a pole that was turned by a donkey as it walked around a birdbath-shaped structure into which grain was poured, causing the stone to crush the grain. Archaeological discoveries tell us that these largest of the two millstones involved in a milling operation could weigh as much as over 3,000 pounds. To be thrown into the open sea with such an incredibly weighted object around one’s neck would surely, and obviously, lead to drowning.

From talking about how seriously He takes stumbling, Jesus now moves to a more personal perspective, looking at the things in our own lives, even parts of our own bodies,

that could cause similar spiritual crisis — not in somebody else, but in ourselves: ***“If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:8-9.***

Now this is a wonderful example of “hyperbole,” meaning the use of exaggeration to make a point, but not to be taken literally. And it also played on the ancient Jewish belief that a person would enter into eternity in the same physical condition in which one died; therefore, for example, any absence of limbs in this life would carry over to the next. But the point that Jesus is so drastically making is that His disciples do whatever is necessary to separate themselves from whatever might cause them to stumble, which obviously could lead to causing others to stumble.

But what is absolutely not hyperbole is what Mark reports that Christ added — a terrifyingly clear picture of hell, ***“where ‘the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched’” — Jesus Christ, Mark 9:48 (quoting Isaiah 66:24).*** The word Jesus uses here for “hell” is *Gehenna*. This refers to the Valley of Hinnom, located on the south side of the Temple Mount below the city of Jerusalem that, in the time of Christ, was essentially the city garbage heap. But it had a horrific history, being not only a place of garbage but also a place where the bodies of executed criminals were dumped, and also being the place where devotees of the god Molech, including the Judean king Ahaz, would burn their sacrifices — including their own children. The sights and smells of the place were terrifying, and Jesus used that imagery to paint a very deliberate picture of the reality of hell — eternal fire amidst eternal punishment and unrelenting eternal horror.

And then, a summary statement if you will of Christ’s passion for His followers: ***“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of My Father in heaven” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:10.***

Christ is watching over His “little ones,” and directing His angels as necessary as an extension of His care and concern — a care and concern that extends all the way to the Father Himself.

And then Jesus continues with a parable: ***What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will He not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if He finds it, truly I tell you, He is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:12-14.***

To further make His point, Jesus shares a parable — a wonderful story to which we can probably all relate. We have all had the experience of losing or misplacing something of value, and then stopping all other activities to try and find that particular item. In that moment, remember how important that search became. And then, remember the joy you experienced when the object, whatever it was, was finally found. The search was over; the

quest was successful — and that was all that mattered. Remember the joy of that success, that something lost was now found! That is how God views His “little ones,” those who belong to Him through His Son Jesus Christ. He is passionate that all possible may be found and never perish — precisely the point that Peter would make later in his second letter: “[*The Lord*] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance — II Peter 3:9b.

Then Mark reports another piece of this overall conversation: “*Teacher,*” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in Your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in My name can in the next moment say anything bad about Me, for whoever is not against us is for us. Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in My name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward” - Jesus Christ, Mark 9:38-41. The disciples needed to understand that they weren’t the only show in town, despite the fact that they had so personally been called by Christ. His ministry had been going on for the better part of three years by this point in time, and certainly many others had become His followers. In that context, there was ministry that God had designed for those other followers. The bottom-line questions were: Did it advance the kingdom? Did it bring glory to God in the name of the Son? If so, those ministries needed to be supported, not resisted.

And then, His final word: “*Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other*” — Mark 9:49-50.

Mark has Jesus concluding this section with this allusion to the Old Testament. In the sacrificial system that God had established with the Israelites, as he told Moses: “*Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings*” — God speaking, Leviticus 2:13. In this context, salt was a symbol of their permanent loyalty and faithfulness to the covenant which had been established with them by God. Salt was also a purifier and preservative. Jesus uses that picture to share that the disciples may also be offered as a sacrifice in their service for Him, that sacrificial living further purifying and preserving them, yet they should nevertheless maintain their distinctiveness (saltiness) despite worldly opposition and persecution. With that context, they are also to maintain that spirit with each other, being united in Christ and, based on that mutual “seasoning,” be at peace with each other.

## **APPLICATION**

So, 2,000 years later, what’s it all mean? There is one meaning that really stands out, and that’s this: We are ALL God’s “little ones.” We all have different levels of maturity. We all have those areas of weakness in which we struggle. We all have those areas that, while being no problem for you, maybe present a big problem for me. This side of heaven, that’s a frustratingly real part of who we are. That’s not an excuse; that’s just a fact of our lives here. Which means that we need to see each other with the same passion, and the same

gentleness, with which Christ sees us — as His “little ones.” We love on each other, we pray for each other, we come alongside each other because that’s what Jesus did.

That also means that we do all we can to make sure we are not the cause of anybody else’s stumbling. That means an honest evaluation of ourselves. Is there some way that I am that makes somebody else’s life more difficult? Is there something that is a stumbling block in my life that could also impact somebody else? Am I willing to lose something in my life that causes difficulty for somebody else? That is what love does.

That is what Jesus encouraged His ambitious, insecure disciples to do — to value somebody else as so much more important than me that I would be willing to lose anything in my life that could cause somebody else to trip up. For instance, say I like a certain kind of music but a Christian friend of mine doesn’t think that music is appropriate. For the love of my Christian brother or sister, the right thing to do is to avoid that kind of music when they are around — even if I have no problem with it. I don’t tease them about it or get angry about it. I give it up. It’s about showing Christ’s love to the family; that’s the bottom line. Galatians 5:22-23 tells us how we do that — showing the fruits of the spirit to one another. And this shirt, referencing the words of John the Baptist — **“He must increase, but I must decrease” — John the Baptist, John 3:30 (NASB1995)**, tells us why we do that: To please our wondrous, glorious Heavenly Father, who has given us everything.

And that is always the bottom line — to be willing to get rid of something that might cause somebody else difficulty. We may have different spiritual sensitivities, but we all claim the cross of Christ. Let that be what unites us! And let that cross be the common bond that makes us see the welfare of others ahead of ourselves.

Another thing that stands out: We have all come to this church family from different backgrounds and different circumstances. Some of us have been Christians for the vast majority of our lives, while others may be relatively new to the faith — very genuinely “little ones” in terms of having spent any time with Christ. That is also a huge area of responsibility, to treat those new in the faith with the love and tenderness with which Jesus sees them — while remembering what Paul told us through the Corinthian church (and I love how the New Living Translation phrases it): **Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance — Paul, I Corinthians 13:4-7 (NLT)**. Is that how we love? Is that how this church loves? We might as well be honest; God already knows. What kind of church are we called to be? And what are we willing to give up answering that call, to be that church?

You see, behind it all needs to be the realization that how God sees each one of us — as His “little ones” — far overrules how we may see each other. Nobody knows our weaknesses and our failures better than God, and yet He sees us as His “little ones” upon

whom He places all His affection. How can we see each other in any other way than He does?

## CONCLUSION

I had an interesting drive home last Wednesday. I was just clearing the area around the airport when my car all of a sudden started sputtering and coughing and lurching and all kinds of stuff. Made me think I needed to test it for COVID. But what actually turned out happening was that the fuel injector died. I was able to limp home, get it into a mechanic the next day, picked it up Friday and had it to drive out here yesterday morning. It's running fine now.

But what was interesting was when I walked out of the house on Thursday morning to drive it to the mechanic. Just to look at that car, you'd have never thought anything was wrong. The car looked great. But the moment I started the engine, it was obvious that that beautiful car was not beautiful at all; in fact, without help, it was in trouble.

My point? Just to look at each other on Sunday mornings (or whenever else we see each other), there are probably no signs of trouble, no signs of a difficult week, no signs of struggle, of maybe being overwhelmed by something. But here's the deal: For many of us, letting people in to know that we're struggling, to know that we're having a hard time with something, is really, really difficult. But, in the family of God, it is also really, really necessary. There may be a lot of things in our background that make admitting to difficulty or struggle, and letting somebody from the outside inside, just about the worst thing we can imagine doing.

But God gave us family, gave us this family, to have people to come alongside us to walk us through the moments of difficulty or struggle. Remember what Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about this: ***God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it — Paul, I Corinthians 12:24b-27.*** Letting somebody in is not a sign of weakness; it's a sign of maturity, acknowledging that "I can't do this" along with "I can't do this alone." This church family is God's design, so let's take advantage of the gifts and hearts which God has made available to us.

So, we keep on developing our "alarm" system: If somebody seems short with us, we pray. If somebody seems to be avoiding us, we pray. Whenever we sense trouble in somebody, we pray — without ceasing, for whoever it is in whatever situation they find themselves (whether we know the details or not). And, in the meantime, we love. If somebody's not talking, we love. If somebody's in difficulty, we still love. And we never forget: At no time are any one of us anything less than God's incredibly dear "little ones." Let's pray!