

Saved By Grace Lutheran Church  
Sermon by Pastor Tim Bartels

Michaelmas, 2014  
Matthew 18:1-11<sup>1</sup>

Part I

There is a famous German postcard from the year 1900. On it there is a picture of a two year old boy, dressed in lederhosen, German shorts, accompanied by a four year old girl, his sister maybe, in a dress. The boy and the girl are walking across a bridge. The bridge straddles a stream in a deep valley. It's about three feet wide, rickety, weathered, and has a slat missing. There is no hand railing on one side of the bridge. On the other side, the hand railing is falling down. The sky in the background is dark. The darkness colors the precarious situation.

Yet, centered in that picture is an angel. The angel is dressed in a white robe. He is hovering behind the children with outstretched arms; watching them and protecting them from danger. The bright angel provides comfort in the midst of a precarious situation.

Today's text speaks about such angels. Angels, God's word says in another place, are God's servants. God sends them to serve his children; to protect them from danger; to watch over them.

Part II

Our text begins by *contrasting* these children with an expected answer to a question asked by the disciples. They wanted to know who was greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Their concern for greatness is a concern of the old Adam; something the world treasures.

When it comes to greatness, the world *emulates* those who are successful. They are the Bill Gates, the Oprah Winfreys, the Terry Bradshaws of the world. Bill Gates failed at his first business attempt; now he is a billionaire. Oprah Winfrey came from a tragic family background; she

went from that to a having a hugely successful television program. Terry Bradshaw was poked fun at for being a dim wit; now he is a leading sports commentator.

People like these have made it in the world. They are the “great ones.” You see their faces on television and magazines. They get paid huge sums for speeches. They have written books; and books are written about them.

They have gotten their greatness by hard work, long hours, keeping a focus. When they achieve by their hard work, they have had success. When they get promoted, they have earned it. It is something that gives a *sense of pride*.

Jesus turns all that on its head. He does by taking a little child to his side. Then he says, “Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” When it comes to greatness in the kingdom of heaven, it isn't the *great* ones we are to emulate. It is *children* we are to emulate.

That seems backwards, doesn't it? Children cry out when they are hungry. They need to be calmed when they are tired. They need to have their diapers changed when they are dirty. That is, children are *completely dependent upon* Mom and Dad. That is, little children aren't about earning and achieving. They are about receiving. Mom and Dad give. The little child receives.

That's the point. *Greatness* in the kingdom of heaven *is* being completely dependent upon God. It is depending upon God for mercy. God gives mercy in Christ Jesus. He forgives sins, gives eternal life, opens heaven. He does all the providing. His children merely receive. That is the faith of a child; a childlike faith. It is the faith *both* of little children and *also* of grown-ups. God gives; we, his little ones, receive.

Then, Jesus adds this about his little ones. “Whoever receives one of these little ones in my name, receives me.” How can that be? We *don't see* Jesus. Little ones *aren't* Jesus. Yet, God's word tells us that when anyone is baptized *into* Jesus, he he joined *to* Jesus' body. Jesus body is the church.

Jesus is the head of that body. The baptized make up the parts of his body. So, when you befriend, care for, or help one of Jesus' little ones, you are doing it to Jesus.

### Part III

Its no wonder, then, that Jesus warns you and me against offending his little ones. To offend them is to put a stumbling in their way. A stumbling block is something that causes them to loose the faith. That happens when we are *permissive*. To be permissive is to fail to warn a little one of a danger to their faith. That leads them to think they are safe to sin. It happens when we are *legalistic*. To be legalistic is to give the impression that man-made religious laws are equal to God's word. That leads them to think they are sinning if they don't do them. That happens when our *behavior* is *offensive*. To be offensive is to treat one another rudely. That leads others to pull away from the church.

These stumbling blocks, Jesus says can't be avoided. "Offenses must come." That's how it is in a fallen world. The world is fallen into sin. Satan was the instigator. He lead Adam into sin; and when he fell the world fell with him. Now Satan uses the world to get at God's little ones; to make them stumble.

When he gets little ones to stumble, then he accuses them. He points the finger at them. "You miserable sinner! You're hopeless! You can't be forgiven!" Or, he gets God's little ones think that they have to feel a lot of guilt. "If you want to be forgiven, you have to punish yourself enough. When you have, *then* you can be forgiven." The thing is...no one will *ever know* if he has felt enough guilt. Yet, that's what Satan wants. He wants Jesus' little ones to despair.

### Part IV

Its no wonder that Jesus says "woe to the world because of offenses; woe to the man by whom the offense comes!" "Woe" expresses shock, horror, warning *all* at the same time. Its as if to say, "If you have put a stumbling block in anyone's way, the end result is shockingly horrifying. Think twice before you become guilty of such offensive sin."

“The offense is so great it would be better have a millstone hung around your neck and be cast in the sea, *then* to put a stumbling block down; to have body parts cut off – hand, foot, or an eye, *than* to be cast into hell fire; to have a part of your body cut off, *than* to be cut off from Jesus' body. Remember the little ones *are* Jesus' body. To cause them to stumble is to be cut off from Jesus. To be cut off from Jesus is to be discarded rotten offensive flesh, fit for hell fire.”

### Part V

You can be eternally grateful that God has not held *your* feet to the fire, but that that he held *Jesus'* feet to the fire *for you*; that he was cut off *for you*. He was cut off from the Father at the cross. His hands and feet were pierced, driven through by nails, for your sin.<sup>2</sup> His eyes wasted away because of grief as he was given hell for you.<sup>3</sup> His body was lacerated by the scourge as he was condemned for you. Jesus' body was beaten, bloodied, bruised so that yours is not.

Because Jesus' body was mutilated in *your* place, *you* are not condemned to hell fire. “There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> You aren't cut off from God because of your sin. Your sin is taken away. You don't get cast off like dead rotten flesh. Jesus gives you life. He gave you life when at the baptismal font, he joined to you him. Baptized into Jesus, you are a part of his body. As a part of his body, you can say, “Satan, I am baptized! Drop your ugly accusation. Jesus paid for my sin, my guilt, my offenses. Your accusation no longer holds water. I am a child of God and heaven is my home.”

### Part VI

That is what God does for his little ones, you and me. Jesus' final words about his little ones sum it up this way, “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you, that in heaven their angels always see the face of their Father who is in heaven. For the Son of Man has come to save that which is lost.”

To be sure, Jesus forbids that his little ones be despised. He does, because they are great in the kingdom of heaven. Their greatness is *not* something in themselves; *not* some achievement they have made; *not* some success they have enjoyed. No. Their greatness is not something *they* have done. Their greatness is what *God* gives them, Jesus. Jesus was cut off for them. Jesus joined them to his body.

...and God wants to *protect* his Son's body. So, he uses his angels to do so. God did throughout Jesus' life. When Joseph thought to divorce Mary and leave the unborn Jesus without a step-father, an angel explained that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. When Herod wanted to murder the baby Jesus, God sent an angel to Joseph to tell him to flee with the baby Jesus.<sup>5</sup> After Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by Satan, God sent angels to attend to him.<sup>6</sup>

God *continues* to use his angels to protect Jesus body, *the church*. That is, they care for you, his little ones; as they do, they report back to the Father. They protect you from offenders; as they do, they speak up in your defense. They will be by your deathbed; when you breathe your last, they will bear you home to heaven. Since God sends the angels to do all this for you, you can pray with Luther's morning and evening prayers, "Let your holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe man have no power over me."

So it is that the angels are with you. They are because they love the Father and Jesus. Jesus paid the ultimate price for his little ones. The Father greatly cares for each of you, his little ones.

## Part VII

Now, today, God's angels rejoice with you, as you kneel at Jesus' altar. Our communion hymn puts it this way, "Look earthward, angels, now with me/ and honor this great mystery,/ that Jesus, set at God's right hand,/ is here in bond of testament." Here Jesus comes to you; here he gives you his body and blood. His life throbs through you; his blood courses through your veins. Coursing through your veins, you have life.

Alive, you are a part of Jesus' body. Part of Jesus' body, the angels *delight* is to serve you; to protect you, you who are Jesus' little ones. Amen!

1References to the text (NKJ) will not be cited in the sermon

2Psalm 22

3Psalm 6

4Romans 8.1

5Matthew 2

6Matthew 4