

Sabbath School Lesson #9 – Idols of the Soul – 21-27 May 2016

Christ taught His disciples, in one of the lessons, by an illustration of a little child. We find this lesson, on the spiritual danger of the idol of supremacy, in Matthew 18:1-11. In studying the lesson in Matthew, particular attention should be given to the parallel passages in Mark 9:33-50 and Luke 9:46-50, for only by so doing can all the circumstances be learned. In Matthew 18:1 we read: "At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?" From Mark's account we learn that something had preceded this question. Jesus had first asked them what they had been disputing about by the way, and, ashamed to acknowledge that they had been disputing as to who should have the supremacy, they held their peace. Doubtless some of the other disciples who had not been so prominent in the discussion, but who were equally anxious with the rest that the question should be settled, asked the question which Matthew records.

"And Jesus called a little child unto Him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:2-4). Mark says that before this He said, "If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all." How different the kingdom of Heaven is from this world. Here the man who wishes to be first, and accounted great, must push his claims. No man could hope for any political preferment if he did not 'work' for the position. One who wishes to be great in Christ's kingdom must entirely forget himself, and prefer that others be honoured rather than himself. Otherwise he cannot be the follower of the Son of man, who "came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). It is evident that Christ must be the greatest one in His own kingdom. His whole life was one of self-denial and humble service to others, and on the night in which He was betrayed, He washed His disciples' feet. Now the man who should esteem himself too exalted to perform such menial service, would esteem himself greater than Christ, and consequently could not enter His kingdom. Such an one would want to divide honours with Christ, as did Satan, in Heaven. "The servant is not greater than his Lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him" (John 13:16).

Christ did not mean, when He said that they must be as a little child, that children are sinless. The seeds of sin are in the heart of even a young child, for "foolishness is bound in the heart of a child" (Proverbs 22:15). But there are characteristics of childhood that must also be exhibited in the man who expects to enter the kingdom of Heaven. The child is trustful, accepting what it is told as literally true. It has not learned 'the wisdom of the world,' which is doubt. So the one who would share Christ's kingdom must believe, without any mixture of doubt, whatever God says. When the Lord made a promise to Abraham, which was so great as to be incomprehensible, and contrary to all natural law, the simple record is, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness" (Romans 4:3).

In childhood there is naturally a lack of self-consciousness, absence of pride. The idol of pride tend to lead us continually to wonder what others are thinking of us, to imagine that we are the centre of observation, when nobody is thinking of us. The child has not this morbid care for what others think, because it does not think of itself. Again, a child does not harbour resentment. It is utterly foreign to a little child's nature to hold grudge. To cherish animosity is something that a child learns after repeated ill usage unaccompanied by Christian training. So we, if we would be followers of Christ, must love even those who use us spitefully. In a word, artless simplicity, loving confidence, and an entire absence of self-seeking, must characterize the candidate for heavenly honours. He must "put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness" (Colossians 3:14), and we know, "charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil" (1 Corinthians 13:4-5).

We connect this answer of Christ as to who should be greatest in His kingdom, with His words on the same subject in the sermon on the mount: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:17-19).

In one case He said that he who would be greatest must humble himself as a little child; in the other He said that the one who should do and teach the commandments of God, should be great in the kingdom of Heaven. Therefore we must conclude that these two things go together, and that true humility and the keeping of the commandments of God are identical. For further proof, let us read the following text: "Now the end [object, or design] of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned" (1 Timothy 1:5). We have already read the description of charity, in 1 Corinthians 13:4-5. So we find in Scripture that the design of the commandment is to make a man long-suffering, kind, free from envy, or malice, and humble. It is to make a man love God with all the powers of his being, and his neighbour as himself. Such a man cannot be a self-seeker.

It is quite fashionable to talk slightly of the Ten Commandments, as adapted for a low state of civilization, serving only to give people some crude ideas of holiness, but as unfitted for the mature Christian. But the man whose life is no better than the Ten Commandments require a man's life to be, he cannot be much of a Christian. Such ones have no conception of the depth and the breadth of God's love. It stops not with outward acts but covers "every work, with every secret thing" (Ecclesiastes 12:14). There is not a grace which the angels of God possess, that will not be exhibited in the life of the one who keeps the commandments perfectly. The beautiful character of Christ, "who went about doing good" (Acts 10:38), and His life of sweet humility, and tender, self-denying love, was due to the fact that the law of God was in His heart. Every act of His life was simply the natural working of the law of God. If anybody wants to know just how much is required by the Ten Commandments, let him study the life of Christ. It requires no less of love and mercy and justice than is in Christ.

As Isaac Watts beautifully expressed in the Hymnal: "My blest Redeemer and my Lord, I read my duty in thy word; But in thy life the law appears, Drawn out in living characters." "It must needs be that offenses come" (Matthew 18:7). Not because God wills that they should come, but because of the perverseness of human nature. "But woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!" If offenses were necessary, that is, if it were fixed by fate that certain men should commit certain evils, then it would be unjust to pronounce a woe upon them. The "offenses" here spoken of are stumbling-blocks, idols. The idea is that in this world it is impossible but that there will be things tending to make Christians stumble in the way; but the one who shall be a cause of such stumbling is in a sad case. This should teach extreme carefulness in acts of life "lest that which is lame be turned out of the way" (Hebrews 12:13).

Right here we may express this thought with this part of the lesson, concerning the law of God as the rule of humility which will make one a sharer in the kingdom of Heaven: Offenses are stumbling-blocks; offenses will come, and some will fall, yet not all. Says David: "Great peace have they which love thy law; and nothing shall offend them" (Psalms 119:165). That is, those who love and adhere to the law, shall not stumble. This is what the same writer says of the righteous in Psalms 37:31: "The law of God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide." But we have learned that the keeping of the law produces humility, and lowliness of heart. Now what is more evident than that a humble man will not fall? "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18). "When pride cometh, then cometh shame; but with the lowly is wisdom" (Proverbs 11:2). So here again we see that Christian humility is simply conformity by the aid of Christ, to the Ten Commandments. The fact that those who humble themselves and keep humble cannot fall, is thus aptly expressed by John Bunyan: "He that is down need fear no fall; He that is low, no pride; He that is humble ever shall Have God to be his guide." Humble yourselves before God (1 Peter 5:6).

"Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 18:10). Much misapprehension has existed in regard to this text. It does not refer exclusively to literal little children, but to all who have been converted and have become as little children. It is thus that the beloved disciple uses it in his epistle (1 John 3:7; 5:21). The expression "their angels" indicates that each follower of Christ has an angel to whose special care he is entrusted. Compare Hebrews 1:14. "Their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in Heaven." This does not teach that they always remain in Heaven, looking at the face of God; for then they would not be "ministering spirits, *sent forth* to minister for those who shall be heirs of salvation" (Hebrews 1:14). But it means that they always have access to the throne of God. There is no business so pressing but that it can wait while God gives audience to one of His messengers who comes with a plea for one of His stricken children. What a wonderful thought! and how full of encouragement, and at the same time of warning!