



Group Discussion Guide

For group meetings from January 3 afternoon through January 10 morning

Matthew 18:1-9

“Who is the greatest ...” Jesus and his disciples were still in Capernaum, and the disciples approached Jesus with this question. They wanted to know who would hold the highest position in the kingdom of heaven, and Jesus responded by calling a child over to the group. He used this child to show them they needed a change of heart; they needed to “turn” from their current way of thinking and humble themselves like a child. In fact, in his initial response he tossed aside their original question of who would be the greatest and told them they could not even enter the kingdom if they did not humble themselves like a child. In this culture and time period, children were considered to be on the lowest rung of the social ladder. They were seen as having very little value. Jesus was telling his disciples they needed to stop thinking about what position they would hold and instead embrace an attitude of humility that would lead them to love God and love others. He continued to teach the need to serve others as he told them that receiving a child meant receiving him, and that causing a child to sin would bring dire consequences.

Jesus then shared the seriousness of sin. He pronounced “woes” to the world system that produces temptations to sin, and more specifically those individuals who present temptations to others. He used an extreme example: to remove a part of the body that is involved in a sinful practice. This teaching is almost identical to what is recorded from the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:29-30. The point is not advocacy for self-mutilation, but rather the removal of things in life that can lead to sinful behavior or practices.

Matthew 18:10-20

This parable of the lost sheep is similar to the one Jesus told in Luke 15:4-7. However, there are significant differences. In the Luke parable, the point is how God seeks those who are lost and rescues them. In addition, that parable was spoken to Pharisees and scribes who were angry that Jesus was reaching out to those who were known sinners. Here in Matthew, the audience and application of the parable were considerably different. Jesus spoke not to religious leaders, but to his own disciples. The point of the parable is connected directly to what Jesus had taught regarding “these little ones,” (vs. 5-6, 10). With this understanding, the story shares how God cares for all of his children. After all, He makes sure that those who are now in His presence are always able to see His face (v. 10). When one wanders, the Father leaves those who have not wandered to bring the one back into the fold. This demonstrates the love the Father has for each of His children, and also served as a reminder to the disciples not to create any offense that would cause another child of God to stumble.

Jesus showed the disciples how they could be used by God to bring back those who have wandered. He gave a clear plan for restoring a “brother who sins against you” (v. 15). First, the one who was sinned against went to the one who committed the sin and brought that sin out into the light. The hope was that the one who committed the sin would listen and ask for forgiveness. However, if this did not happen, other steps were to be taken. These involved bringing other believers into the situation and if no change occurred, eventually the church. If the person still refused to repent, they were to be treated as an unbeliever. This was not meant to merely be a punishment, but a more forceful means of restoration and a method of protecting the believers from sinful influences. Jesus repeated his words from Matthew 16:19, which again pointed to the power of his teachings; those who followed them would be following a course of action that is ratified in heaven. He then reinforced the importance of unity among believers; how agreement among believers will be blessed by God, and how those who gather in his name will experience his presence.

Matthew 18:21-35

Peter approached Jesus and asked him how many times he would be required to forgive a person who sinned against him. The traditional rabbinic teaching was three times, therefore Peter already was being generous by starting with seven. However, Jesus alluded to the revenge factor in Genesis 4:24 and used it to demonstrate that forgiveness should be offered in an unlimited quantity. Some have taken this number to be 70 and others 490, but regardless of the exact number, the point remains the same. Jesus then told a parable to illustrate this truth (vs. 23-34). Jesus was clear in the application of this parable: one who is forgiven by God must offer forgiveness to others, or the Father will hold him accountable.

Discussion Questions

1. The disciples asked the question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” What does this reveal about their state of mind at that point?
2. Jesus tells his disciples they must turn away from their “who is the greatest” mindset and become like children. What does he mean by that? How do we arrive at that point of turning away from wrong thinking and surrendering to God?
3. What does Jesus’ teaching in verses 7-9 teach you about the seriousness of sin? What are some practical steps we can take to cut sin out of our lives?
4. There are times that it seems Jesus simply shares truth and expects the hearer to be responsible for applying that truth without him chasing after them. Then there are times he does make an effort to seek after a person, and in verses 10-14 he tells a parable about how the Father seeks after just one person who has wandered away. How do we make sense of this?
5. According to Jesus’ teaching in verses 15-17, what is our role in seeking after a believer who has wandered? How is this also helpful in resolving conflict among believers? Why do you think this teaching is often ignored by followers of Jesus?
6. How are you personally blessed or challenged by the parable Jesus tells in verses 23-34, and the clear application he gives in verse 35?