

The Proper Care and Feeding of God's Children

In the name of him who is with us whenever and as often as we gather in his name, dear friends in Christ: As today's Gospel begins, we find the disciples of Jesus engaged in what seems to be their favorite pastime, namely, trying to determine who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. From this and other accounts, we know that they argued about it incessantly; each one, no doubt, putting himself forward as the best candidate for the title holder of the honor. And what standards did they use for measuring their respective levels of greatness? I imagine it was the same sorts of things we would use. Who is the most productive? Who has done the most? Or given up the most? Or studied Scripture the most? Or come farthest in pursuing holiness of living? They would have measured greatness by looking at themselves and their accomplishments. The trouble would be determining which of these merits carried more weight in the eyes of the Lord. *That* they couldn't know – which is why they were always arguing about it.

So, having arrived at an impasse in their discussion, they bring the matter to Jesus for the authoritative answer. And here you have to imagine the disciples each expecting that Jesus will respond in a way that verifies his own point of view on the subject. "Jesus is going to give an answer that proves *me* right and confirms that *I* am the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Well, if that's what they were hoping for (and it's safe to say they were), then you can imagine how shocked and surprised they were when Jesus placed a child in their midst – just a toddler, really, one not even capable of wiping his own nose – and said, "Fellas, you want the truth? Here it is: unless you turn and become like children, you're never even going to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, *that's* who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

They are dumbfounded by this response. Racing through their minds are a thousand questions. "How can this be? This child has no learning or list of accomplishments. He can't do anything for himself. Why, he's completely dependent upon his parents for everything." And that is precisely the point. Jesus is telling them, You suppose that greatness in the kingdom of heaven is measured by evaluating yourself: your works, your wisdom, your goodness, your ability to stand on your own two feet and make a positive difference. But that's completely wrong. To be sure, to be great in God's kingdom you must first despair of yourself and what you have to offer, recognizing that what you call your best is sinful filth in the eyes of the Lord, sinful filth compounded and made even worse because it reeks of your prideful arrogance in imagining that it's worthy to present to the Lord. Start there and know that greatness in the kingdom comes not of looking at yourself and what you have to offer, but of looking in faith to Christ and what he has done to save you from your sin. Be like a child, and understand that you are completely dependent upon Jesus for everything. He washes you clean of your sin with his blood. He clothes you in his righteousness. He feeds you the bread of life. He gives you his Holy Spirit to give you faith and sanctify you. Who trusts and believes in Jesus and what he has to offer, *that's* who is great in the kingdom of heaven.

Friends, we are children of God because we believe that. We are dependent children, no matter how old we are. The danger is forgetting that. If the day comes when you feel you've grown up and are on your own and can take of yourself in a spiritual sense, that's the day you're no longer in God's kingdom. We begin and remain dependent children. And the thing about

dependent children is that they need to be cared for. Thus, part of our calling as God's children is to care for each other – which is where Jesus takes this discussion. Having established that to be in the kingdom, you must be like a dependent child trusting solely in Jesus, he immediately begins to warn his disciples about how their actions (or lack of them) can undermine and destroy the faith of some other child of God and cause them to be lost.

This is serious business. A while back a woman came to me with a theological question. She was having trouble reconciling God's all encompassing love with his wrath and judgment that's frequently displayed in the Scriptures. She said, "God seems so angry at times. He's always destroying the wicked with plagues or fire from heaven. How can a God of love do that?" I told her that sometimes wrath and violence are manifestations of love. She looked at me as if I were out of my mind. So I said, "You love your children, don't you?" She said, "Yes, of course." I asked, "How would you feel about someone who tried to hurt them?" She said, "I'd be furious." I asked, "Would you defend them? Even get violent and kill if necessary in order to protect them?" She said, "Oh".

Like that mother, the Lord takes a very dim view of those who hurt his children, which is why Jesus says it would be better to have huge millstone fastened around your neck and be cast into the sea rather than be guilty of – and here we have a bit of a translation problem – causing one of his children to sin. The word Jesus uses in that sentence is better transliterated "scandalize". It means to trip someone up so that they fall. And surely causing someone to fall into sin is included; but it's more than that. Since being a child of God is all about belief in Christ, you can also scandalize someone by causing them to fall into unbelief.

How can you do that? First and most obviously, by teaching false doctrine. If you tell someone something that's not true about Christ and his work of salvation, if you say something's a sin when it isn't or it's not a sin when God says it is, if you misrepresent any truth of Scripture, you are potentially damaging the faith of others. We need to be careful. And based on what's already been said, a big danger is teaching that Christianity is about something more than trust in Christ. This is what the disciples were doing when they were thinking that greatness in the kingdom is measured by merit. That's the same philosophy the Pharisees peddled. It's terrible. But we do the same when we teach that there's something more to being a Christian than trusting in Jesus – that after you come to faith, to be a *real* Christian you have to do this and this and this—*that's* what makes you a true believer.

Mind you, there are plenty of churches out there that teach exactly that. We don't with our words; but we can with our actions, like when we treat some of God's children as if they were better or more valuable than others. These people are the pillars of the church: they give more. They volunteer more. We need people like that – and so we'll be careful to befriend and thank them so they stick around. But these others who are not so active, who don't have as much to give – or have it and won't – why, we won't exactly throw them out or give them the cold shoulder; but we sure won't go out of our way to make them feel welcome either. And if they leave because they are offended, okay. It's no great loss. How very different is the attitude of Jesus who tells us, "Who receives one such child in my name receives me." He doesn't distinguish between people. To him every child of God is precious. And to the extent that we don't receive them as one of God's dearly loved children, we are not receiving Jesus who is with and in them.

Another way we might cause someone to fall would be to teach by our words or actions that we ourselves are no longer children who are dependent upon the Lord Jesus for his gifts of life and salvation. In the church where I grew up there were several sets of parents who would

faithfully drop their kids off for Sunday school, and then go out to a restaurant for coffee, and then pick the kids up when they were done. This was the normal Sunday routine. I imagine they felt they were doing their Christian duty by making sure their kids learned lessons about Jesus. They learned a lesson all right. They learned what their parents taught them: that Jesus is for kids and when you grow up you don't need him anymore. Now, the problem there is clear. What might not be so clear is seeing that all other Christians – not just your own kids – are children of God whom we can influence with our behavior; influence for better or for worse. Each one of us needs to ask, "What am I communicating to others about my ongoing need for Jesus and the gifts of his grace? Am I telling them this is important – that I'm totally dependent upon him? Or am I telling them not so much?" We teach by our example.

And it's in this regard that we're most likely to cause others to stumble into sin – which in turn may lead them to fall into unbelief and be lost forever. There are temptations all around us, Jesus says. They are going to be there; but make sure you're not one through whom they come. It's at this point Jesus speaks so emphatically about the danger of sinning, telling us that it's better to lose a hand, a foot, or an eye that causes you to sin than to keep all your members and end up in hellfire. And again, the danger is not just for you, but also for those whom you may lead astray by your example. Elsewhere the Scriptures speak of degrees of punishment for those who are lost in the end. For anyone who ends up in hell, it's going to be awful; but based on what Jesus says in today's text, you'd better believe it's going to be a lot worse for someone who played a role in causing others to fall into sin and unbelief. And that's why we need to examine ourselves, our words and actions, so carefully, and consider how our behavior is influencing other children of God. Are you, by your example, helping or hurting them?

Now, all that has been said up to this point speaks about our responsibility to those who are in the household of faith. Next Jesus goes on to speak about our duty to those who have fallen, who through ongoing and unrepentant sin in their lives are in rebellion and can no longer be properly called children of God. First, he lets us know how important these people are to the Lord. With the short parable of the 100 sheep one of which goes astray, Jesus makes it clear: it's the Lord's will that none of children be lost. He wants to find them, rescue them, and bring them back with rejoicing. But he does that through means – through his word of Law and Gospel. We know that. And because he works through his word, he needs someone to speak it. This is why he says, "If your brother sins, go tell him his fault, between you and him alone." That is to say, if you know that someone, a purported brother or sister in Christ, is involved in ongoing and unrepentant sin, no one else need know about it. The responsibility is yours. You go and call them to repent. You bring the Law to bear on their sin. And if they do repent, you proclaim Christ's forgiveness. You give them the Gospel. So doing, you've restored a fellow child of God to the kingdom and the matter is done. To protect that person's reputation, you never mention it again.

But suppose the person argues with you, tries to justify himself, and refuses to acknowledge his sin and repent. If that happens, the responsibility is still yours. You go back, this time with one or two others who are familiar with the situation. It's probably best to take people whom the one who's fallen respects and who are well versed in Scripture. You try again to bring the person to repentance, the others acting as witnesses to the conversation who will confirm God's truth and support you in your effort to restore the one who's lost. Again, if the person repents, you proclaim God's forgiveness in Christ and the matter is done.

But if not, if the person digs in his or her heels and tells you to leave them in their sin and mind your own business, you tell them "You are my business. I can't just sit by and watch you destroy your own soul." You take the matter to the church. You bring in the pastor and the

elders. They too go to the one who's fallen to attempt to restore them. And if that doesn't work, if the person still stubbornly clings to their sin and refuses to repent, then the church has a duty to speak the truth in love – to tell that person that they've fallen from Christ and are no longer a member of God's family, and that if they persist in their rebellion they will not be saved.

We call it excommunication; but what it is, is a manifestation of tough love. And we do it for three reasons. The first is so that the Holy Spirit can work on the heart of the one who has fallen. Repentance and faith come by hearing the Word of God – in this case, God's Word of sternest judgment. If that doesn't make a sinner tremble and fear then nothing will. Secondly, if we don't call the situation what it is, if we don't warn the sinner to repent, then if that person dies in their sin, we are guilty of that person's eternal death. We might have saved them; but we didn't bother to try. Now, we can't make anyone repent; but if we don't speak the truth, we bring God's judgment on ourselves. Finally a third reason we employ excommunication is for the sake of those who haven't fallen from grace. They need to see what happens to those who do so that they will take warning and be less likely to fall themselves. They also need to see that the church as a whole loves and cares enough for each and every former child of God who goes astray to go to extreme measures to attempt to reclaim them for Christ. That's the goal: that none be lost.

For, you see, God our heavenly Father loves and cares for all of his children in Christ Jesus. And we've seen in today's lesson that as God's children, Christ assigns us all roles to play in helping to feed and care for our brothers and sisters in Christ. We need to be aware that we can by our words and actions cause others to fall, just as we need to be aware that we can by our lack of action fail to assist someone who has fallen. Therefore, sincerely repenting of our past failures in these areas, and receiving again Christ's sure word of forgiveness, let us entrust ourselves fully to his care and keeping, that we may be great in the kingdom of God and fulfill for him our part in the proper care and feeding of God's children. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!