

Title: What is God doing?  
Text: Matthew 17.10-14  
Theme: The inestimable value of “little ones.”  
Series: Matthew #90  
Prop Stmtnt: Christ acts upon his great love to insure the protection of his own

Read Text:

Our world is characterized by people who abuse their authority in order to impose their will and serve themselves and they will often use hostility and violence in order to get their way. The message is clear: I have the right to use any means possible to keep you in line so that you will do what I say and give me the respect that I demand. It is no secret that boys who watch their dads abuse their moms tend to abuse their siblings, girlfriends and wives, while girls who watched their moms be abused often find themselves in abusive relationships as well because they have become conditioned into believing that abuse and violence are normal.

“Studies now indicate that one in every five teens has been the victim of physical dating violence (slapping, punching, pushing, kicking or choking), and nearly one in three teens reports knowing a peer who has been a victim.”<sup>1</sup> The violence in our streets is simply the public expression of the violence that is in our homes and in our hearts. But, just because there is a lot of violence, just because it is common place for people to use their authority in order to impose their will in a hostile or violent manner, does not mean that it is okay. And just because people are getting away with it, does not mean that they are actually getting away with it.

In Genesis 4 we are introduced to the very first act of violence recorded in human history. It was a case of domestic violence. Cain attacked and killed his younger brother. Cain, who was older, perhaps bigger was so threatened by his brother that he hated him and violently killed him. When God confronted Cain he said, “*The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.*” Here in our western context we tend to separate the body and the soul so much that we fail to see people holistically. God is treating the blood of Abel, unjustly poured out on the ground as crying out to God. Abel’s blood is out of place. It belongs in Abel’s body, but here it has been spilled out on the ground and the ground is revolting against it. So God says to Cain, “*And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s strength.*”

The pattern was set in motion. Cain’s unaddressed corruption led to violence, which resulted in God’s response. By chapter 6 the earth was filled with this. The cries from the earth due to the unjust spilling of blood had become deafening. God’s ears were full of their pleas for justice and he responded. There we read that during the days of Noah the earth “*was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt...And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them.’*” The text establishes

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<sup>1</sup> Violence Among Us, 50 Branson, Silva

a clear relationship between corruption and violence. This corruption which leads to violence results in God's response. In just over 1,000 years the human race that was made to govern and steward the creation is now characterized by abusing that position of authority and is corrupt. Do you see the contrast? Instead of caring for the creation that was given to them, the human race is now using their strength and position to viciously rule and violently treat one another until as God said, "*the earth is filled with violence.*"

Our world is characterized by people who abuse their authority in order to impose their will and serve themselves and they will often use hostility and violence in order to get their way. Corruption – violence = God's response. Violence in our streets is public. Violence in our homes is private. Violence in public is reported. Violence in private is usually not. The statistics of abuse on children is staggering. Perhaps the worst one is that 70% of all cases never get proper attention or prosecution. There are a lot of people who appear to be getting away with a lot of evil. Or are they?

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus is presented as the King. Instead of using his authority and power to hurt and kill people that he might live, Jesus gives up his rights and dies so that his people might live. He is a King like no other. But, even as Jesus is preparing to go to the cross and is preparing his disciples for his death, Jesus is also preparing his disciples for life without him. This means that he is preparing them to be the church. He is preparing them (and us) to represent Him; that is to be his body, on this earth. While Jesus has ascended, his presence is made known through his church. We are to look like him, talk like him, lead like him and protect like him. The church is the city of God being built within the city of man. We are the people of God who live within the people of the earth. We are a holy nation made up of people from all other nations. We are people of life who have been saved from cultures of death. We are an aroma of life amongst the stench of decay. We are represented not only by a cross in the midst of symbols of power but we are also represented by an empty tomb in a graveyard of corpses. In other words, we are counter-cultural. We are in the world but not of the world. The world has a history of being violent to the weak, and abusive to the vulnerable. Beloved, we do not follow this world. We follow God. God is serious about how little ones are treated. So, not only must you humble yourself in order to become a follower of God and a member of his kingdom, but, in your humility you are called to treat little ones as being more important than yourself. That is what God does. In fact, this is what God is doing with his authority.

I. **He is concerning himself with how his little ones are being treated.** (10)

*"See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven."*

Who exactly are the "little ones?" Jesus calls children "little ones". He goes on to describe these little ones as those who believe in me. So, are they children, are they his disciples? Are they all believers who are despised by the world and rejected? Are they the people who are in the lower classes of the culture and are subject to abuse by the world and prone to neglect even by the church? I think it is all of them. The way that you treat those who are vulnerable to your power is an indication of your heart.

### A. God's concern is a great comfort to his "little ones".

Note the emphasis on "one of these little ones." When we teach children that Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, and that they are precious in his sight, we are teaching them more than a song that is comforting. We are teaching them truth. But the truth that Christ cares about little children is a double-edged sword. For those who do not care about little children and look down on them, or hold them in contempt are being warned. When you receive a little one in the name of Jesus, you are receiving Jesus (v.5). But when you despise one of these little ones, you are despising God.

Now, if you want, you can follow the President's schedule (at least a portion of it) on [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov). On Tuesday of this week, the President met with the Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny, met with Secretary of Defense Carter and hosted a St. Patrick's Day reception. On Thursday, after receiving the Daily Briefing and attending an event at the Department of Energy, the President met with Their Royal Highnesses The Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall. Day after day you can review the President's schedule and see that he consistently meets with what we would consider to be really important and powerful people. The President needs to be on friendly terms with other countries. The President needs the cooperation of powerful people if he is going to have any success in advancing his agenda. The President needs the resources, the good will and approval ratings in order to govern effectively, for while he is the President, he does not have ultimate power, but only temporary vested authority. He only has authority for the time that he is in office.

But that is not the case with God. God does not need the cooperation of world leaders in order to leverage their cooperation so that his agenda will be enacted. God does not need the resources of wealthy people in order to fund a marketing campaign to prop up his approval ratings. Powerful people are powerless in his presence. Wealthy people are poor compared to him. Things that impress this world do not matter to him. He is ultimate power. So, what would you imagine is on the agenda of the throne-room of the universe? Who gets face-time with God? Who is able to get access to God?

*"their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven."*

This is really quite an amazing statement. In fact, this is the statement that has given rise to the belief that everyone has a guardian angel. While, it does not say that explicitly, it is certainly possible. What Jesus does say is that there are angels who take a personal interest in the children of God. Jesus describes them as "their angels". They are the angels of the "little ones." Now, I do not know if it is man-to-man or zone coverage, but the important thing to note is that God has designed, created, employed and deployed angelic beings to watch over the lives of his children and these powerful beings always see the face of God. Always. That means that the lives of those who are easily overlooked and discarded are overseen by angelic beings who are constantly giving updates to God. They see his face. To see the face of God is the ultimate statement of blessing, favor and attention. God is actively engaged in the daily lives of his children.

God reveals to us all that we need to know. But, there is so much more that is going on than we know. And there is so much more that is going on than we have the capacity to understand. The Bible does not say a ton about angels, but it does say enough to let us know that God's dealings with the angels is a major focal point of his plan. Let me give you a few examples.

Job 38.7 – "...*the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy*" when God laid the foundation of the earth. In other words, in order to have a ground-breaking ceremony for the building project of the earth, God had to create two things: 1) An audience and 2) ground. In the opening act of creation, God created the angels. These powerful beings who number in the millions watched with amazement, worship and song as God opened up day of creation and laid the foundation of the earth. By the way, how did the angels know how to sing? Who did they learn it from? Obviously, they learned it from God. It is one of the reasons why I believe that when God created the world, that Christ literally sang it into existence.

Psalm 8.5 "*Yet you have made him (man) a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.*" God made man a little lower in ability and power. Mankind does not have the strength or capabilities of angels and yet God chose to crown man with glory and honor over the angels.

1 Corinthians 6.3 "*Do you not know that we are to judge angels?*" We are to judge the angels? They are more powerful than us? Why are we going to be in a position of authority to judge them? We wonder what it would be like to be an angel. We wonder what it would be like to be able travel at high rates of speed and go from place to place and see the universe and heaven and the world of spirits. We would love to see what they see. But, guess what? The angels are saying the same sort of thing about us. No kidding.

In the opening chapter of Peter's first letter he is writing about salvation. He points out that our salvation (through Christ) was promised long ago by the prophets and that even though the prophets were predicting this that they did not fully understand all that was going to happen. They knew that God's plan of salvation was more amazing than they could grasp. Peter says that God revealed to them that they were serving us, not themselves. And he says that the Holy Spirit has empowered people to announce (preach) the gospel to you. And then, at the end of 1 Peter 1.12, he adds this one little phrase that is just fascinating. He says, "things into which angels long to look." Peter is saying that the angels are examining the doctrine of salvation. So, while we are looking at them and saying, "Wow! God must be really powerful to create such impressive beings who stand in his presence and worship, and sing, and who are awesome in appearance and glorious in beauty and overwhelming in strength" they are saying, "I wonder what it is like to be saved. I wonder what it is like to be redeemed. Wow, God must be really merciful and loving and gracious to care for such weak, wounded, broken and fragile people." In fact, for millions of them, their job is to keep God informed on how his little ones are doing. It is not that God needs the information, it is that he is giving them this job in order that they may learn how amazing his love and compassion really are. This truth is a great

comfort to us isn't it? But, like all truths that are a great comfort, this truth is also a severe warning.

### **B. God's concern is a great warning.**

Do you remember back when we studied the book of Exodus? Do you remember how that book began? Pharaoh was drowning Hebrew baby boys in the river. What difference does it make? They are just slaves. They are just babies. I am the Pharaoh. I am the ruler of the most powerful empire in the Ancient Near East. I am a god. I make the rules. I can do what I want. The Hebrew people are my property. I own them. I can do with them whatever I want. If I want to drown them in the river, I can do it. Well, what happens a few chapters later? What does God do? He takes out the entire army. If you drown my boys in the river, I will drown your army in the sea. You don't mess with God's kids. If you mess with one of his little ones, he will mess with you. Don't miss the message. Those who are generally the most despised by the world are most important to God.

The sad truth is, we tend to isolate and ignore those whom we consider to be not quite to our level. Someone asks you to hang out with them and you were hoping for a better offer. What do you do? Some of you say, "hey, well, maybe." What do you mean by maybe? (explain)

Do the people that matter that much to God, matter that much to you? Jesus is not done with this, is he? It's like he won't let this issue go, and for good reason. He goes on to tell the story of the lost sheep. Not only is God concerning himself with his little ones who are despised, but he is concerning himself with his little ones who go astray and get lost.

## **II. He is concerning himself with his sheep who have gone astray. (12-14)**

Notice the phrase, "What do you think?" We saw that before (17.25) and we will see it several more times because Jesus will not settle for you just acting right. He wants you to get it. He wants you to understand and embrace who he is and what he says. So, when he says, "What do you think?" he is asking us to enter into and engage with the real heart of this story. This shepherd is not simply doing what he has to do or ought to do, this shepherd is doing what he desires to do.

### **A. God always cares about the "one". (12)**

A herd of 100 sheep is pretty big. In fact, if you had a herd that large you were probably fairly wealthy. So, you discover that one is missing. What do you do? Do you risk the 99 because of 1? If we were using a business model to help us be more efficient as a church, the answer would be obvious, right? Why risk what you have, over the one who was wandered away? That makes no sense. Of course it does not make any sense because we do not think like God thinks and we do not love like God loves. The fact that God cares about the one, means that God cares about you.

He will leave the 99 on the mountains in order to go and look for the one. Which means that if any of the 99 wander off, while he is gone, he will go and look for them too. Come to think of it, it sounds like he would therefore spend most of his time looking for sheep who are wandering off. If that was not amazing enough, consider this.

### **B. God rejoices over the “one”. (13)**

What do you say to the one who wandered off and cost you a warm meal and a night’s sleep and a lot of discomfort because you had to go out and look for it? What do you say? Do you say, “Did I not tell you that this would happen?” “Do you know what this cost me?” “Do you realize what may happen to the 99 because of you?” And all the way back to where the 99 are, we would be tempted to wear this one out with our frustration and our effort to make sure they know how much this cost us and how disappointed we are, all in an effort to shame them and humiliate them into never doing this again. The truth is, shame and humiliation are powerful. But, that is not a tool that the shepherd uses, is it?

Notice the phrase, “Truly I say to you.” Jesus is pausing for a moment in this story to draw our attention to what he is about to say, because what he is about to say is like the linchpin in this entire account. What does the shepherd do when he finds the lost sheep? He rejoices over the lamb! In fact, he is more excited about this one than he is about the 99 who did not go astray. And why does he rejoice? He rejoices because the lamb has not been devoured. He rejoices that the lamb is now safe again. He rejoices because he really loves his sheep and he wants them safe and is willing to do everything that he has to in order to make them safe.

Jesus told a slightly different version of this parable in Luke 15 in order to make another point. But in that text he talked about the joy that is in heaven over one sinner who repents and how that this joy is before the angels of God. Some have assumed that it is the angels themselves who are rejoicing, even singing. And while I think that this is true, the text says that “there is joy before the angels of God.” Notice this now: In the first place, who is before the angels of God? It is God. And secondly, angels respond to God. The joy of the angels is in response to the joy of God.

Think of this. What can you do to contribute to the joy of God? God knows we have all done enough to grieve the Holy Spirit, right? So what can we do to contribute to the joy of God? We can help lost sheep find their way home and when we find them; we do not shame them, but truly rejoice over them! This is the heart behind verses 15-20.

### **C. God is committed to the security of every one of his sheep. (14)**

How many of you have wandered away? Do you know why you have come back? It is not because you are smarter than others; it is because the Shepherd will not let you go. It is not his will that one of these little ones should perish. If keeping our salvation was left up to us, we would all lose it. Aren’t you glad that he finishes what he starts? And he will not let anyone that he died for, perish. But will bring every single one home.

Questions to consider:

How intentional are you to care for those whom others tend to neglect?

Does it really matter to you if someone falls away?

What do you rejoice over?

Action to take:

Identify one person or couple you know who has “wandered away”.

- Pray for them everyday this week.
- Plan to pursue them.
- Do it.