

18:1 *At the same time*- At the end of chapter 17, the Lord has spoken of His death. According to the parallel records, the disciples had been arguing amongst themselves as to who was or would be the greatest amongst them in the Kingdom. This detail is omitted in Matthew because he seems to want to emphasize how in the light of the Lord's prediction of His death, the disciples still argued about petty things and were divided amongst themselves because of their own pride. In the shadow of the cross. Again we see how self-critical were the Gospel preachers and writers- for the Gospels are transcripts of how they usually preached the Gospel message.

Came... unto Jesus- Their arguments and divisions had been carefully conducted by them outside of His earshot, just as we can wrongly assume that our own church politics are somehow not in His presence. The Lord knew their discussions, for He asked them what they had been arguing about, and they refused to say (Mk. 9:33,34). Lk. 9:46,47 makes clear His perception: "There arose a reasoning (Gk. *dialogismos*) among them, which of them was greatest. And Jesus perceiving the thought (Gk. *dialogismos*) of their heart...". In any case, they gave the game away by asking who was greatest in the Kingdom. Luke is bringing home the point that the discussion amongst them also took place within their hearts; the thoughts of jealousy gave direct birth to the words spoken.

Who is the greatest in the Kingdom- The present tense suggests that they had accepted the Lord's frequent teaching in the parables of the Kingdom that the rulership, the dominion of God is in essence now amongst His followers. They wanted to know which of them He considered the greatest. We could possibly infer that there was a perception that one of them, presumably Peter, was perceived by the Lord as the greatest. And they disagreed with that judgment. The Lord had indeed spoken of "the least in the Kingdom" (11:1), which suggests He did indeed see some element of gradation amongst His followers. Without doubt, Peter, James and John formed an inner three whom the Lord appeared to have especial hopes for, and out of them, Peter was the one the Lord seemed to have especial hopes for, and it had just recently been demonstrated in 17:24 that Peter was perceived even by outsiders as the leader of the pack. The Lord's response was that whoever became as the little child "is greatest in the Kingdom" (:4)- again, using the present tense, as if He saw the essence of His Kingdom as already existing in the form of the disciples. And yet He seems to suggest that their focus should be upon *entering* the Kingdom (:3) rather than being the greatest in it. The suggestion was that He doubted whether they had yet entered that community as they should have done; they had yet to be "converted" (:3). But at other times, He is so positive about them, especially when justifying and defending them to the unbelieving world around them. This is typical of love. Love is not blind, the weaknesses of the beloved are noted and commented upon, and yet the object of love is still seen as wonderful and spoken positively of to others. The whole Biblical teaching of justification and imputed righteousness is really just the logical outflow of the love of God and His Son for us.

The Lord had repeatedly implied that He would be the greatest in the Kingdom, because He humbled Himself the most. When the disciples asked Him "Who is the greatest in the

Kingdom?" (Mt. 18:1), they therefore reflected a complete lack of appreciation of *His* greatness. The disciples' immaturity and squabbling amongst themselves had led them to forget the superlative greatness of the One who stood and sat and walked amongst them. And conversely, they had failed to allow His surpassing greatness to make all discussion about which of them was the greatest absolutely irrelevant. Thus their perception of His greatness, the extent of it, and the nature of it, only grew *after* His death.

Mk. 9:35 adds that before the Lord called the child to Him, He made the comment that "If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all". The Lord Himself on the cross was the ultimate "servant of all", and therefore was the first of all. This may explain the Lord's comment that the last shall be first and the first last (Mt. 19:30)- He may have intended us to read in an elipsis to the effect that he who *wants to be* first shall be last, and he who *wants to be* last shall be first. There was to be a glorying in being the last, the servant of all- exemplified in the Lord's washing of the disciples' feet.

18:2 *Called*- Just as the Lord is often described as calling the disciples. The idea is that those called, which included the disciples, should be as little children.

A little child- The disciples are framed as doing exactly the opposite soon afterwards, when they forbade the little children [s.w.] to come to Jesus (19:13)- whereas the Lord actually invited them to Him. Again we note how the Gospel writers present the disciples as so often out of step with their Lord.

Set him- The Greek means to stand, not to sit- this is how it is usually translated. Mk. 9:35,36 says that the Lord *sat* but He *stood* the child in their midst. But *histemi*, often translated "set" in Mt. 18:2, has the strong connotation of standing up or setting someone up in a position. "The midst" suggests the disciples were in a closed circle, and the Lord stood the child within the circle. If you call an onlooking child into the midst of a group of unknown adults, they will typically not want to come. We see the powerful attraction of the Lord to children in that this child came, although likely with much nervousness, wanting to come to Jesus, but not into that closed circle of men- just as so many today. Almost certainly the child came to the Lord and He held the child close to Himself; for He goes on to urge the disciples to "receive" such little ones, implying they were reluctant to have the child amongst them. That closeness to the Lord was what was being set up as an example. The scene is portrayed graphically if we put the Gospel records together- the Lord *sat* with the men in a circle around Him, He calls the child to Him, stands him up "by Him" (*para* Him means close by Him, Lk. 9:47) and then 'takes' him, cuddling the child to Himself "in His arms" (Mk. 9:36)- whilst He is sitting down. The natural response of the child who had been stood would be to want to sit down, holding on to Jesus, and not to stand above those men with their attention focused upon him. This natural desire to come down, to

humble self, is what is being memorialized by the Lord as the pattern for all who wish to enter His Kingdom. Perhaps we can imagine the scene even further- the child would've wanted to come to Jesus personally, but the circle of disciples with their apparent superiority and judgmentalism would've been offputting. But still the child came, and the Lord in Luke's record urges the disciples to allow the child to join the circle and "receive" him. This scenario is seen so often in the body of Christ in our days. In the early church, there soon developed a problem about 'receiving' others, not least children, women and Gentiles- and the Gospel records through this incident show how seriously wrong the disciples were not to do so. Luke's record goes on to record the incident with John's disciples where the Lord's disciples didn't want to "receive" them- implying they did not immediately grasp the teaching themselves.

Set... in the midst- This phrase is used several times about the Lord Jesus Himself standing in the midst of His followers (Lk. 24:36; Jn. 1:26; 8:9; 20:19,26). The supreme "child" was the Lord Jesus. This connection between Him and that child as it seems perceived by Peter later, when he uses the same word to describe the Lord Jesus as God's "holy child" (Acts 4:27,30). If as suggested the Lord held the child to Himself, the identification would have been visually powerful and the image would've remained with the disciples. The Lord Himself clinches the connection by saying that whoever becomes as that child will be the greatest in the Kingdom- and He clearly was and is the greatest in the Kingdom (:4). Lk. 9:48 makes the connection beyond doubt in recording that the Lord then said that "Whosoever shall receive this child... receives Me". His subsequent comment there that "For he that is least among you all, the same is great" is surely a reference to Himself, rather than urging them to be the least so that they might be the greatest. The Lord's answer as to who was greatest in the Kingdom was therefore to indirectly point out that He is the greatest, and we should simply seek to be like Him, using the little child as a template to that end. The antidote to division, therefore, is to be focused upon Christ and to seek to simply enter the Kingdom- the things of the Kingdom and of the Name (Acts 8:12).

The Lord took a child and set him in the midst of those rough fishermen and tax collectors. He said that they must become like that child; and further, they must receive that child as a representative of Himself, and thereby, of God Himself. In probable allusion to this, Paul teaches that in malice we should be children, but in understanding: men (1 Cor. 14:20). The child in the midst of men, wide eyed, simple and sincere amidst men full of cynicism and human wisdom and self-righteousness and the gruffness of the flesh... This was a symbol of every true believer, of the Lord Himself, and of Almighty God, as they were and as they are in the midst of a world and even a brotherhood that, like the disciples, so often stares on uncomprehending. The aptness was not in the child's humility [if indeed a child can be humble], but in the purity of the innocence and sincerity and unassuming directness.

18:3- see on 13:15,16.

Truly... unless... converted... You shall not enter into the Kingdom- This is all sober language, repeated quite soon afterwards (Mk. 10:15; Lk. 18:17), indicating the degree to which the Lord saw the salvation of the disciples as being in doubt unless they were going to humble themselves, and quit their pride and the divisions which come from it.

Converted- There are levels of conversion, as exemplified in the life of Peter who was not totally 'converted' until he devoted himself to strengthening his brethren after his encounter with the Lord after the resurrection.

Become as- The same Greek words are used for the need to become as their Lord and Master (10:25). The focus was to be upon becoming as Christ, rather than seeking greatness amongst themselves. The idea of 'becoming' suggests a process- to become as Him was to be the thrust of Christian life.

18:4 *Humble himself-* This is the very language of the Lord Jesus on the cross; the hymn of Phil. 2 speaks of seven stages in the Lord's self-humiliation until He finally died "the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8), and then the hymn speaks of seven stages of exaltation. This is yet another indication that the little child, the one who would be greatest in the Kingdom, was to be seen as representative of the Lord personally. The disciples had initially followed John the Baptist, and his message had been that men must be "brought low" (s.w. 'humble self'; Lk. 3:5). And yet they had clearly not grasped this, even though in chapters 12 and 13 the Lord seems to rejoice that they had responded to John in spirit and truth, unlike Israel generally. Such was His grace and positive feelings about His beloved. To humble oneself suggests conscious effort, and yet it is almost impossible to make ourselves more humble by our own act of the will, or by some self-instigated internal intellectual process. Paul speaks of how *God* humbled him (2 Cor. 12:21), and Peter speaks of humbling ourselves "under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you" (1 Pet. 5:6). He is willing to humble those who wish to be humbled, and so the essence of self-humiliation is surely to appreciate that God is seeking to humble us, and to cooperate with this, allowing His mighty hand to humble us, rather than resisting the process. We need to daily carry this in mind- that today, God seeks to continue His process of humbling us, so that He might exalt us in His time.

As this little child- In *Against Celsus* 3.55, Origen defends Christianity against the allegation that it requires men to leave the world of men and go mix with women and children in "the washerwoman's shop"- presumably a house church Celsus knew. Lucian of Samosata even mocked Christianity as being largely comprised of children and "old hags called widows".

Marcus Cornelius Fronto likewise mocked the way “children” [and by that term he would’ve referred to teenagers too] participated in the breaking of bread [*Octavius* 8-9]. The teaching of the Lord Jesus was attractive to children / young people. They like women were treated as of little worth; the Greco-Roman world considered that children had to be taught, and couldn’t teach a man anything. But the Lord Jesus repeatedly set children up as examples of discipleship (Mk. 9:36,37; Lk. 9:47,48; as Heb. 12:5-9). So we can understand the appeal of early Christianity to young people, teenagers, especially girls. O.M. Bakke has written a fascinating study entitled *When Children Became People*. The thesis is that the teaching of Christianity gave disenfranchised people an identity and meaning as persons- women and slaves are obvious examples- but this also applied to children / young people. They too were disregarded as people in Mediterranean society; and yet in Christ they were given their value as people. In the house church setting, we can imagine how this happened. Celsus mocks how teenage boys go to Christian house churches to be taught by women- reflecting how attractive Christianity was for young people. Solomon’s words: "I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in", i.e. to rule God's Kingdom (1 Kings 3:9) are alluded to in Mt. 18:3,4; become a child so you can rule the Kingdom; Christ was the greatest child as he will be the greatest ruler. This sets Solomon up as our example in this respect.

The same is greatest- Elsewhere the Lord taught that he who humbled himself would be "exalted" (Mt. 23:12; Lk. 14:11; 18:14), a word which is used both about His 'lifting up' on the cross (Jn. 3:14; 8:28; 12:32 and His ascension to Heaven (Acts 2:33; 5:31; Eph. 4:8), with all the subsequent 'exaltation'. Again, we sense that He has Himself in mind here- He who made Himself the lowest, was to be lifted up both on the cross and to Heaven. Paul makes a telling allusion to this idea in saying that he has humbled himself, not so that *he* would be exalted, but so that the weak brethren in Corinth might be (2 Cor. 11:7). When Peter later preached that Jesus was 'the exalted one' (Acts 2:33; 5:31) he perceived finally what the Lord was driving at here- that *He* was the greatest, the most exalted one, because He had humbled himself the most. And therefore all argument about seniority or greatness amongst the body of Christ was therefore irrelevant and deeply inappropriate.

Exalts himself- On at least four separate occasions, the Lord taught that he who *exalts* himself will be *abased*, and he who *humbles* [s.w. abases] himself will be exalted (Mt. 18:4; 23:12; Lk. 14:11; 18:14). This was clearly a major theme in His exposition of the Gospel of the Kingdom; this is what will happen when that Kingdom is established at His return. He paralleled conversion with humbling oneself (Mt. 18:3,4). The humble will be exalted, and the exalted humbled. Because this will happen, we must *now* humble ourselves, so that then we might be exalted. The majority of references to humility in Scripture refer to humbling *oneself*; humility, hard as it is to define, is something consciously done, as an act of the will. Yet the Father

confirms us in our efforts. The Lord *humbled himself* to die on the cross (Phil. 2), and yet the cross *humbled him* (Acts 8:33). If we don't humble *ourselves* now, then God will do this to us through the process of condemnation at the judgment. In this lies the insistent logic of humility. It was the logic Israel failed to comprehend... "When Israel was a child..." It is prophesied of those who will be condemned: "Enter into the rock, and hide thee in the dust, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty [as Moses did in this life]. The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day. For the day of the Lord of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low" (Is. 2:10-12). "And the mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled: But the Lord of hosts shall be exalted in judgment" (Is. 5:15,16). There are many similar passages; the theme of 'bringing down' pride is a major one in the first half of Isaiah (2:17; 13:11; 25:5,12; 29:4; 32:19). They pave the way for the announcement that in man's response to the Gospel of Christ, "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain" (Is. 40:4). By the hills of human pride being brought down, and the giving of confidence to those so low in the valleys of hopelessness and lack of self respect, there is a levelling of all those who respond to Christ. But more than this; in this lifting up of the hopeless and bringing down of the proud, there is a foretaste of what will happen in the future day of judgment. In essence, "we make the answer now" by whether or not we bring down our pride, or whether we summon the faith in God's grace and imputed righteousness to believe that we, who are nothing, are lifted up in His sight. "Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: But the rich, in that he is made low" (James 1:9-10).

Humbles himself- So how, then, can we 'humble ourselves'? When Israel was a child... she was humble, as we should be after our spiritual rebirth at baptism. It is evidently not something natural; for it is a fruit of the spirit we must develop. It isn't a natural timidity or nervousness or shyness. By realising our own sinfulness, we will realise our condemnation, and thereby be 'brought down'. For we are condemned for our behaviour, but saved out of that condemnation. The exact, vast debt is reckoned up- before we are forgiven (Mt. 18). We have been invited through the Gospel to sit down in the Kingdom: "But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 14:10-11). Humbling ourselves is therefore sitting down in the *lowest* place- not just a low place. Strictly, the Greek means 'the farthest' away from the Lord Jesus, who sits at the head of the table. Like Paul we must somehow get that deep and genuine apprehension that we are "chief of sinners"- and sit in the *lowest, farthest* place. This would mean that we 'each esteemed our brother better than ourselves to be', not in any naïve, meaningless way; not seeing strengths where they simply

don't exist; but seeing him [or her] that way simply in comparison to our own lowness. Seeing others as higher than ourselves is a sure remedy for every case of ecclesial friction and division. So often pride develops from a worry about what others will think of us, a desire to be seen as acceptable and not unusual. It leads to a hyper-sensitivity regarding what others may be implying about us [I am verily guilty of this]. The humbled mind will not see things in these terms. *If only we would each, personally, learn this lesson, or at least grasp the truth and beauty and power of it.* The publican was so worried about his own position before God that he paid no attention, so we sense, to the hypocritical brother next to him: "The publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner... this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for ... he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:13-14). That sin-conscious man is an essay in self-humbling. This is why David sometimes parallels "the meek" and the repentant sinner (e.g. Ps. 25:8,9).

It seems to me that so often in His teaching, the Lord was speaking to and about Himself. We understand from Phil. 2:8 that on the cross, the Lord "humbled himself". He used just those words in speaking of how the greatest in the Kingdom, the one who would be the most highly exalted (and He surely had Himself in view) was the one who would be the most servile in this life. His references to *becoming* as a servant He therefore spoke partly as exhortation to Himself (Mt. 18:4; 23:12; Lk. 14:11; 18:14). The Mt. 18:4 reference speaks of humbling oneself in terms of being converted and becoming like a little child. This was lived out by the Lord in His life and ultimately in His acceptance of the death of the cross. Yet this is what "conversion" is essentially about. In the same way as the Lord Jesus Himself had to be "converted" even at the very end of His life, to accept the awfulness of the crucifixion with an almost child-like simplicity (in some ways- e.g. His silence when surrounded by evil accusers, just like "the child in the midst"), so we too will pass through stages of 'conversion'. Note in passing that the same idea of the humble being exalted is used by the Lord in Lk. 18:14 with reference to how the humble man recognizes His own sinfulness. Whilst the Lord was sinless, perhaps part of His humiliation and taking on a servant-form involved His acceptance of the full horror of sin, and His willingness to bear it for our sakes.

Whilst humility isn't a natural characteristic of children, we are asked to take as it were a snapshot of that child in that situation, looking at the ground, pining away inside himself. The Lord said that the child had "humbled himself" (Mt. 18:4)- showing that He didn't see children as naturally humble. But as he stood (or sat, Mt. 18:2 Gk.) in the middle of the circle, the impishness and immature self-assertion was driven out, and in a moment the child was humbled. That child in that situation, the Lord said, represented the true disciple; and it represented Himself, the Lord of glory. It seems to me that the Lord was standing next to the child, identifying Himself with it, in the middle of the circle of disciples. *In the very same context, a few verses later* the Lord spoke of how He was *in the midst* of the disciples (Mt. 18:20). There is no doubt He saw that humbled child as the symbol of Himself, possibly implying that He

Himself had been progressively humbled, from one level to another. Yet in Lk. 9:48, the Lord goes further: the child represents not only the believers and their Lord, but also *the Father* (Mt. 18:5; Lk. 9:48). The humble surroundings of the Lord's birth, the way the exalted Lord of life and glory appeared from the tomb dressed like a working man (whilst the Angels, far inferior, had shining white garments), the way during His life He spoke in such a way that reflected His lack of formal education (Jn. 7:15)- all this shows a humble, super-human Father. And His Son was and is the same. Indeed, Lk. 2:12 RV (cp. Is. 7:11,14) says that *the* sign would be that the Son of God would be laid in a cattle trough; this was to be the extraordinary indication that God Himself was involved in this wonderful birth.

18:5 *Receive*- To not offend others we must "receive" them (Mt. 18:5). It is written of Jesus that when crowds of materialistic, fascinated people followed Him, "He received them, and spake unto them of the Kingdom" (Lk. 9:11). He didn't just turn round and read them a lecture about the Kingdom. "He *received* them". Presumably Luke means to reflect how he perceived something in the Lord's body language that was receiving of that crowd of peasants- whom we would likely have written off as just dumb groupies with no more than surface level interest. And we too must receive one another, even as the Lord has received us (Rom. 15:7)- and this includes receiving him who is even weak in the faith (Rom. 14:1). We should be looking for every reason to receive and fellowship our brethren, rather than reasons not to.

The disciples would've had to open their closed circle to allow the child to enter. As the child settled down in the arms of the Lord Jesus, he was effectively added to the circle of disciples. Children were counted as non-persons in first century society, along with women, serious sinners, the mentally ill and lepers. The Lord is powerfully teaching that our attitude to such persons is our attitude to Him and therefore to God (Mk., Lk.). The challenge comes down to many of us too, who come from closed table communities. The Lord foresaw that to form a tight circle around Him was the natural response of those who followed Him, but He is saying that unless we open that circle, we are in danger of actually not having received Him at all. Our not receiving of such persons is going to make them stumble ("offend them"), and this warrants eternal condemnation. The Lord had bidden the disciples 'humble themselves', and now they are given an opportunity to do so- by 'receiving' amongst themselves, as one of them, into their circle, a little child. Opening our circle and accepting amongst us those who do not share (at least, at this time) our level of faith, understanding or even culture- this is indeed a humbling experience. All that is in us cries out to keep them excluded, and to keep our circle tightly closed against them. But the argument for a closed circle, or a closed table, is ultimately one which originates in pride and a refusal to humble self.

Receives Me- The little child was to be identified with the Lord Jesus personally. See on 18:2

Set. To not receive the little ones is to not receive Jesus personally. The issue is of eternal importance, as the next verse emphasizes. We cannot simply go along with such rejections and refusal to receive others just because it is the policy of a church or fellowship to which we have belonged or grown up in. Social death and rejection by our brethren is nothing compared to the painful rejection at the last day which the Lord speaks of.

Mark inserts at this point the question about a man casting out demons although 'not following us' (Mk. 9:38-42). The Lord rebukes them for this and goes on to warn them about not offending little ones. In Matthew, that warning follows straight on from the teaching about the need to receive little ones- as if refusing to receive them is what makes them stumble. The case raised by the disciples, as it were in protest at His teaching about receiving little ones, was presumably one of John's disciples. Although they had a different spiritual culture, history and even doctrinal understanding, the Lord had earlier likened both His and John's disciples to children in the marketplace working in parallel, presenting the same message in different ways. They were admittedly immature in some ways and in parts of their doctrinal understanding, but the Lord is teaching that this is what made John's disciples "little ones", and they must still be accepted. The Lord warns twice in that section in Mk. 9:38-42: "Forbid him not". This is the same as saying 'Receive him, do not forbid him from entering your circle'. It is the same word which the Lord will go on to use in Mt. 19:14 about not forbidding another group of "little children". The Jewish world was to be condemned exactly because they hindered or forbid [s.w.] men to enter the Kingdom (Lk. 11:52- see on 18:7 *Woe to the world*). Peter surely alludes to the Lord's teaching when reasoning: "Who can forbid water" that Gentiles be baptized (Acts 10:47). Refusing baptism to those not considered good, ready or mature enough is surely a way of forbidding and not receiving little ones.

18:6 *Offend*- Why the warning against offence, causing to stumble, in this context? The context so far in this chapter has been about the need for humility and not dividing against each other in jostling for seniority in the community of believers. Lk. 9:48 says that the Lord went further and urged the disciples to receive such children. Surely the connection is in the fact that refusing to receive little ones and divisions amongst believers are what cause little ones to stumble, hence Paul brackets together "divisions and offences" (Rom. 16:17). This is the sin of division- it causes little ones to stumble, and that is so true to observed experience in the body of Christ. Refusing to receive little ones and divisions over this matter have caused so many of the little ones to go away from Christ. Lk. 17:1,2 repeats the teaching about not offending little ones, and the Lord goes on to teach about the need for unlimited forgiveness of others. Not forgiving is a form of not receiving others, and this too can lead the person to stumble from the way.

One- The implication may be 'Even just one'. If 'just' one person is rejected by us, then we have not received Christ and condemnation awaits us. Each encounter we have with people is

therefore of eternal moment and significance. We cannot hide behind any sense that 'generally' we are innocent on this matter; if just one is rejected by us, then the Lord's terrible picture of condemnation must loom large before our eyes. Of course we can in this life repent and seek to put things right with one we previously rejected. But for the rest of our days we need to live in quiet humility realizing that we should have been rejected, that we caused a little one to stumble from the way, and our salvation truly is by grace.

Little ones who believe in Me- The Lord was clarifying that He was not so much talking about the spiritual acceptance of children as the acceptance of believers in Him whom His disciples might consider spiritually immature or inappropriate for acceptance into their closed circle. This may well have reference to John's disciples, whom the disciples were slow to accept, both in the Lord's ministry and probably also in the early years of the church. In the parallel records, He saw those who "follow not us" as being "on our part", not losing their reward, as being the little ones who believed in Him; and He saw wisdom as being justified by *all* her children, be they His personal disciples or those of John (Mk. 9:38-41; Lk. 7:35). John's men had a wrong attitude to fellowship- they should have 'followed with' the disciples of Jesus; and it would seem their doctrinal understanding of the Holy Spirit was lacking, although not wrong (Acts 19:1-5). Indeed, they are called there "disciples", a term synonymous with all believers in Luke's writing. And the Lord too spoke in such an inclusive way towards them. No wonder His disciples had and have such difficulty grasping His inclusiveness and breadth of desire to fellowship and save.

Millstone...- The very language of Babylon's judgments at the last day. The believer who makes another to stumble by not receiving them is therefore no better than Babylon, the archenemy of God and His true people. And Rev. 18:21 speaks of how *Babylon* shall be cast into the sea as a millstone- such 'believers' will at the last day face Babylon's judgments, they will be "condemned with the world" (1 Cor. 11:32), sent back into it from the judgment seat of Christ to share the world's fate. Even though externally they had been so separate from the world, so separate that they refused to receive the "little ones". But this attitude is in fact a worldly attitude; by having it, we are showing that we are of the world.

A nice picture of the Lord's perception of the disciples is found in the way He said that the little boy who came to Him, responding to His call (Mt. 18:2) represented the "little ones" who believed in Him (Mt. 18:6). 'Little ones' is a title of the disciples in Zech. 13:7; Mt. 18:3; Jn. 21:5; and it is disciples not literal children who have Angels in Heaven (Mt. 18:10). The context in Mt. 18:11,12 speaks of the spiritually weak, implying the 'little ones' were spiritually little as well. Christ's talking to them while he knew they were asleep in Gethsemane and the gentle "sleep on now" , spoken to them whilst they were asleep (Mk. 14:41,42), sounds as if He was

consciously treating them as children- especially fitting, given their spiritually low state then. His father-like care for them is seen also in His promise in Jn. 14:18 RVmg. that He would not leave them “orphans”, but He would come to them. The disciples were not orphans- because they had a true and real Father-figure, in the Lord Jesus. But the disciples were the Lord's children. John records in his Gospel only once how Jesus described His disciples at the Passover meal as “My little children” (Jn. 13:33). The Lord Jesus was acting as the father of the family, instructing his children as to meaning of the Passover. But the same phrase occurs seven times in 1 John. He had dwelt upon that phrase of the Lord's, and it clearly came to mean so much to him. Our child-father relationship with the Lord Jesus likewise needs sustained meditation. In this sense, the Lord Jesus was manifesting the Father, and thus leading the disciples to the Father through Him.

Drowned in the depth of the sea- This was a common figure for the condemnation of the wicked. And yet Mic. 7:19 had spoken of how the sins of the faithful in Judah would be cast into the depths of the sea and drowned like the Egyptians at the Red Sea. And yet individual condemnation is spoken of with the same metaphor. The meaning is surely that our sins will be condemned, and thus forgiven; but if we are not identified with our sins, then we shall not be. In this lies a strong basis for understanding Paul's introspection of Romans 7- clearly he recognizes his sins, but doesn't identify himself personally with them.

We rather than the Lord are the ones who in essence have demanded our condemnation; His judgment is merely reflecting our own choice. The idea of self-condemnation is perhaps behind the Lord's teaching in Mt. 18:6. If we offend one of His little ones, "it is profitable for [us] that a great millstone should be hanged around [our] neck, and that [we] should be sunk in the depth of the sea" (RV). This is the language of Babylon's future condemnation at the last day (Rev. 18:21). But how can such a condemnation be "profitable" for us? Remember that James teaches that in some things, we all offend someone (James 3:2). Maybe the Lord is saying: 'When you offend others, as you all do at times, then you're deserving of condemnation at the last day. But condemn yourselves for it, now, in this life; that will be profitable for you, and then you need not be condemned at the last day'. It's a sober thought, that deserves introspection. We all offend others- let's give James' words their full weight. And instead of going down the road of 'Yeah but it was after all *their* fault they allowed themselves to be offended...', let's just allow these Bible passages their obvious meaning. Our poor attitude to others at times shouts for our condemnation. And we need to recognize that, resolving to live life ever more sensitive to our colossal impact upon others.

18:7 *It must be-* The Lord continues His theme of giving offence to others when He says: “It must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh! [The Lord must have said this after such careful introspection, knowing that He was the rock of offence to

many, and that Jewry were to be ‘offended’ by Him]. *Wherefore* if thy hand or thy foot *makes you a cause of stumbling* [i.e. to others], cut them off...” or else you will be condemned (Mt. 18:7 Gk.). This is how important it is to search our lives and see what may cause others offence. And, in His relentless way, the Lord continues: “See that ye despise not one of these little ones” (Mt. 18:10), the little ones He has Himself just been so careful not to offend, by paying up His taxes. We offend people by ‘despising’ them. And, on and on and on, Jesus incisively takes His teaching further- in the parable of the shepherd who seeks the lost sheep. To *not* seek others’ salvation is to despise them. We may not think we are spiteful people. But effectively, in His eyes, we are...if we neglect to actively seek for their salvation until we find it. To not offend others is thus made parallel to seeking their salvation. And the shepherd seeking the lost sheep matches the man who plucks out his eye and cuts off his hand lest they offend others. So you see the parallels throughout Matthew 18:

Lest we offend them	Pay the temple tax, go fishing, make the effort
Lest we offend others and are cast into condemnation	Pluck out our eye, cut off our hands and feet
Lest we offend the little ones and are cast into the sea	Receive the little ones as if they are Christ, see the Christ in them
Don’t despise others	Go out looking for the lost sheep with unlimited effort
Lest we are cast “to the tormentors”	Give unlimited forgiveness to your brother, try to “gain your brother”

The self-willed effort we must make to not offend our brother is quite something. Just imagine looking at yourself in the mirror, wedging your finger nails under your eye socket, and pulling out your eye. This is the conscious effort we must make not to offend, and thereby to save. It’s really quite something. Note that the parallels tabled above show that to not offend is to save. If we seek above all the salvation of others, then we will not offend them. We will, quite simply, *care for them* as the Lord cares for us.

Woe to the world... the man- CEV: "The world is in for trouble because of the way it causes people to sin". The *kosmos* in mind was surely the Jewish world [the word usually has this

primary meaning in John's Gospel]. In this case "Woe to that man" would then be specifically addressed to the disciples; they were to take the warning to themselves each one, which is why the next verse speaks of the need for 'you' singular to do absolutely everything to avoid causing another to stumble. The Jewish religious system caused men to stumble, as the Lord often pointed out. But there would be an especial woe to the individuals who caused the stumbling, because for doing this they will be liable to personal condemnation. The Jewish world, the system, was to face the "Woe" of Divine judgment specifically because it made men stumble spiritually. That's what these words of Jesus seem to be saying, and His criticisms of that system recorded elsewhere would accord with that view- the 'Woes' He pronounces on the Jewish system in Mt. 23 particularly focus on the damage that system did to people, and the barrier it became between God and man.

18:8 *Offend you*- Cause you to stumble. The context has spoken of not offending the little ones, and of the terrible condemnation awaiting those who cause others to stumble. There are two legitimate meanings of the words here. The idea could be 'If these things cause you to stumble others'; or, 'If these things cause you yourself to stumble'. But the ambiguity is surely intentional. If we make others to stumble then we have made ourselves stumble, for if we make others stumble out of the way to the Kingdom, then we shall not be there ourselves. The point is clear- we are to go to absolutely any length, paying any personal cost, in order not to cause stumbling to a little one.

Cut them off- I suggest the Lord is parodying the orthodox Jewish idea of cutting off members of the community in order to preserve the rest of the body of believers- an idea equally common today amongst some in the new Israel. The Lord is saying that in order to avoid personal condemnation, we are to cut off our own limbs if necessary- in order to avoid causing a little one to stumble. The cost of not causing the little ones to stumble is therefore very personal; because communities, both secular and religious, tend to cause little ones to stumble by their policies, it follows that individuals will pay a high price for stepping out of line by insisting that we will not cause them to stumble. The preceding verse has explained how "the world", the Jewish religious system of the Lord's time, the *ekklesia* of the day, lead others to stumble, and that individuals must take personal responsibility for this. In the same way as the whole system was destroyed in AD70, so personal condemnation at the last day awaits the individuals who make others stumble.

Cut them off and cast them...- The Greek for "cut off" here is that translated 'hew down' in speaking of condemnation at the last day in Mt. 3:10; 7:19; Lk. 13:9; Rom. 11:22. The idea of 'casting' is used about the casting of the rejected into condemnation at the last day (Mt. 3:10; 5:13,25,29; 7:19 and often). This is the language of latter day condemnation- and yet the Lord says that this is what we must do to those parts of our bodies which cause us to make little ones stumble. I believe that we have here the idea which James 3:2 is articulating more directly: "In many things we offend all". We are warned that if we offend / make others stumble, then we

shall be condemned. James says that we all make others stumble in some way (and honest self-examination will reveal that to us). So, we all should be condemned. But we must recognize and confess wherein we have done this, and condemn those parts of our lives which have done that- and cast them from us.

Enter into life limping or maimed- The lame, blind and maimed were those not acceptable for service in God's tabernacle (Lev. 21:18; Dt. 15:21; 2 Sam. 5:8). The Lord surely has this in mind. He seems to be saying that to avoid offending little ones, it is better to be unacceptable for priestly service now, and yet therefore enter God's Kingdom. The implication, therefore, is that by *not* being seen as fit for priestly service, we avoid offending little ones. The only interpretation which makes sense of this to me is that the Lord foresaw that by fellowshiping the little ones, we may well be excluded from public priestly service in the house of God in this life, because those running the show generally exclude those who think in terms of an open table. But that is a cheap price to pay for entering the Kingdom. And we will be miserably excluded from His Kingdom if we make others stumble by acting in such a way as merely keeps us in with the religious powers that be, that keeps us fit *in their sight* for service. And this again is absolutely true to observation in the body of Christ. Those who are inclusive of little ones tend to be sidelined from public service by those who are decision makers within the ecclesia. But that is a cheap price for entrance to the Kingdom.

It's better to limp into the Kingdom than be rejected for self-righteousness. Surely there is an invitation here to see the limping Jacob, walking away from the encounter with the Angel, as our role model. The personality we will be in the Kingdom will reflect the struggles we have personally endured in this life. Relationships in the Kingdom of God will reflect these. Thus those who had consciously chosen to be eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom are comforted that in the Kingdom they will be given a name and place in God's temple better than of children in this life (Is. 56:5). All the faithful will be given a name and place in the temple; so what especial consolation was this to those eunuchs? Surely the point is that the name (personality) they will then have will gloriously reflect the self-sacrifice and personal Biblical understanding which they went through in this life. This alone proves that the reward will be individual. The Lord's picture of men entering the Kingdom without limbs is surely making the same point (Mk. 9:47); the result of our self-sacrifice in this life will be reflected by the personality we have in the Kingdom. And there is evidence that the Man we follow will still bear in His body, throughout eternity, the marks of the crucifixion (Zech. 13:6; Rev. 5:6).

18:9 *Your eye-* The idea has been pushed that this refers to sexual lust. But that is not the context here. The context is of our offending others, and how we should be willing to pay any price, no matter how awful for us, so that we do not do that. I suggested above that the allusion is to how the blind, maimed and lame could not enter the priesthood for public service. The Lord is saying that it is better to be out of public service in the community of believers, if it means upholding policies which make little ones stumble. In the *kosmos* or the *ekklesia* of His day, it was necessary to separate oneself personally from the damage to others which the system was doing.

It's better to enter into the Kingdom not having had the honour of public priestly service in the community in this life, rather than to have that public honour and yet cause others to stumble, meaning we shall not enter the Kingdom. The idea of entering the Kingdom without an eye or limping doesn't necessarily mean that we shall eternally be like that. I suggest it means that we enter the Kingdom having not had those things in this life, and not having therefore had a public ministry. The Lord was speaking to the 12 disciples at this point, some of whom, Matthew (Levi) especially, could have had a priestly career. Or He could be making the point that they were not going to be able to ever be priests in the old system because of their inclusiveness- but they would be shepherds of the *new* Israel He was forming, as He goes on to explain in :12-14.

Mk. 9:43-47 spells out the details of the condemnation in laboured detail- if our eye offends, or causes us to offend others, then cut it off, for it is better to be without an eye in this life than to be condemned in Gehenna, where the worm and fire are 'eternal'. And this is repeated concerning the hand and foot. We read of eye, hand and foot together in only one other context- of "eye for eye... hand for hand, foot for foot" being the punishment for damaging a 'little one' within the womb of a woman (Ex. 21:24; Dt. 19:21). Nowhere else in Scripture do these three words occur together. By not receiving a little one, despising them and thus causing them to stumble, we are doing the equivalent of the Old Covenant sin of beating up a pregnant woman and causing handicap to the 'little one' within her. It could be that the Lord is saying that we can be responsible for damaging those who have not yet come to spiritual birth, to the point that if they are born, then they will be born with serious defects which are our fault. And such defects will have been the result of not receiving them, even in their immature state. Thus the table practice of the Lord was to accept people at His table at whatever stage of their spiritual growth or journey, even those not as yet born again, not yet converted, not yet repentant... in order to try to bring them to that point.

Enter into life- The Lord bid us cut off the hand or foot that offends, and thus enter into life halt...blind, rather than be condemned in Gehenna (Mt. 18:8,9). It sounds as if 'entering into life' means entering into the Kingdom; and so it can do, for this clause is set as the antithesis for being condemned at the last day. Yet it is hard to imagine us entering the Kingdom somehow maimed, and in any case then we will not need to be without what causes temptation. The figure rings more true to our lives today; if we cut off our flesh *now*, we will live the rest of our mortal days somehow lacking what we could have had. In this case, we enter into life right now, insofar as we cut off the opportunities of the flesh. Jesus told another man that if he would enter into life, he must keep the commandments (Mt. 19:17). Insofar as he kept those commands, he would right now enter into life. We are entering into life, eternal life, right now!

Enter into life with one eye- The Lord Jesus spoke several times of taking up the cross and following Him. This is the life you have committed yourself to by baptism; you have at least tried to take up the cross. The full horror and shock of what He was saying doubtless registered more powerfully with the first century believers than with us. They would have seen men in the agony of approaching death carrying their crosses and then being nailed to them. And the Lord

Jesus asked men to do this to themselves. Our takings up of the cross will result in damage- the plucked out eye, the cut off foot. And notice that the Lord says that we will enter lame into the eternal life, or enter the Kingdom with just one eye (Mk. 9:45-47). Surely this means that the effects of our self-sacrifice in this life will in fact be eternally evident in the life which is to come. The idea of *taking up* the cross suggests a conscious, decided willingness to take on board the life of self-crucifixion. Taking up the cross is therefore not just a passive acceptance of the trials of life. There's a radical in each of us, even if the years have mellowed it. The way to express it is surely through radical devotion to the Father's cause. On one hand, Jesus spoke to men as they were able to hear it, not as He was able to expound it. Yet on the other, He gave His radicalism free reign. The Sabbath miracles seem to have purposefully provoked the Jews. When He encouraged His men to rub the corn heads and eat them like peanuts as they walked through a field one Sabbath, He knew full well this was going to provoke confrontation. And he said what was anathema to the Jews: "The Law was made for man and not man for the Law". Where there is human need, the law can bend. This was a startling concept for a Jew. Jesus described the essence of His Kingdom as mustard seed, which was basically a weed. It was like a woman putting leaven [both symbols of impurity] into flour. Surely the Lord was trying to show that His message was not so Heavenly that it was unrelated to earthly life. It was real and relevant to the ordinary dirty business of life. The woman who have everything she had was noted by the Lord as His ideal devotee. He taught that it was preferable to rid oneself of an eye or a limb and to sacrifice sex if that is for us the price of entry into the Kingdom (Mk. 9:45-47). The parable of the man who built bigger barns taught that in some senses we should in His service like there's no tomorrow. He expected His followers to respond immediately, to pay the price today rather than tomorrow, with no delay or procrastination. There is an emphasis in His teaching on immediacy of response, single-mindedness and unrestrained giving. This is radical stuff for 21st century people in the grip of manic materialism.

Cast into Gehenna- Gehenna was the ravine south of Jerusalem where 'little ones' had been sacrificed to Moloch (Jer. 7:31; 10:5,6; 39:35). So there is an appropriacy in this particular picture of condemnation. Those who stop others entering God's Kingdom and lead them to condemnation will share the same condemnation; what they did to others will be done to them.

18:10 *Despise not*- Paul uses the same word in one of his many allusions to the Gospels in 1 Cor. 11:22, where he warns that exclusive attitudes at the breaking of bread, even having 'another table' to ones despised brethren, was in fact despising the entire church of Christ. Our attitude to the little ones is our attitude to Him and thereby to the entire church or body of Christ. Elsewhere, the Lord uses this word for "despise" as counterpoint to loving; the opposite of loving is to despise (Mt. 6:24; Lk. 16:13). He is forcing us to perceive that we either love little ones by accepting them, or we despise them. We of course would prefer to argue for some third way, whereby we are conveniently indifferent to some and accept others whom we consider on our moral and spiritual level. But those whom we do not love and accept, we effectively despise.

That is the Lord's understanding. The Lord had warned His followers to “despise not” the ‘little ones’ (Mt. 18:10). Paul picks up this phrase in 1 Tim. 6:2 in warning servants not to despise their masters who were brethren; the implication that they were to treat those wealthy but perhaps not very spiritually mature masters as ‘little ones’, with all the patience this would require.

Always behold- The Greek could equally mean that they fully behold the face of the Father. The idea seems to be that the “little ones” are in fellowship with God, they are indeed represented in Heaven, they are ‘before God’, in His presence. And we should therefore not reject anyone who has relationship with God and in a spiritual sense is in His presence. This is the essence of John’s teaching- that we cannot claim to have fellowship with the Father unless we fellowship His children, and if we do not fellowship His children, then we thereby break our relationship with the Father. It is seriously wrong, therefore, to admit on one hand that individuals are in fellowship with the Father, and yet refuse them fellowship.

The guardian Angels of Christ's "little ones", "do always behold the face of My Father in Heaven". There seem two options here:

- The Angels may be physically present with us on earth but also maintain a presence in the 'court of Heaven', perhaps by means of another Angel there.
- A more likely explanation lies in the meaning of the word "behold" - 'to look to, be aware of, perceive, take heed'. Although physically present with us, the Angels are intensely aware of the face of God which they behold when assembled in the court of Heaven awaiting God's words of command. The "little ones" in the context are the spiritually weak- does this have something to do with their Angels being physically absent from them in Heaven?

18:11 *The Son of Man-* In the context, the point is that if *His* mission was to fellowship with and thereby save "the lost", then it should be ours. His method of saving the lost was to have table fellowship with them in order to try to lead them to repentance and salvation. All that is true of Him is to be true of us- we have the same mission and should use the same methods. And refusing to open our closed circle to the little ones is going right against that method.

That which- The Lord Himself was evidently very conscious of the inclusiveness of both male and female in His redemptive work. He came to save that [both male and female] which was lost (Mt. 18:11). He asked His people to follow Him in His cross carrying, and then told them to follow a *man* bearing a pitcher of water (doing woman’s work)- probably a slave bearing water

for the purification rites of Passover. In asking this He was requesting us to see in that man a symbol of Himself in His time of self-sacrifice. Yet the Lord saw Himself as a slave, a man doing woman's work, as the seed of the woman...surely the Lord had worked out in advance this wonderful blend of the genders in the figure He chose to represent Him. He spoke of leaving one's sister for His sake as being a sacrifice, whereas the contemporary culture would rarely have felt that way about a female relative. Jesus not only spoke to women publically, but is even recorded as allowing a Gentile woman to change His mind (Mt. 15:22). This was unthinkable and shocking to contemporary society.

That which is lost- The sentence begins with "For...", connecting the "lost" with the "little ones". Following through the theme of this section, the lost, the little ones, the despised ones, will be won back and not stumbled by receiving them in table fellowship. This is the going out to seek the lost. The Lord's parables describe those He will save as the son who refused to go to work, but later went, sheepishly aware of his failure; the sheep that went away, i.e. those Christ came to save (Mt. 18:11) (a symbol of us all, Mt. 18:12 cp. Is. 53:6); the lost coin; the son who went away and sowed his wild oats, and then returned with his tail between his legs. Christ expects that we will fail, as grievously as those parables indicate. Yet we have somehow come to think that they refer either to our follies before baptism, or to those within our community who publicly disgrace themselves. Yet they describe *all* the faithful. But is there that sense of contrition in us, really? Aren't we more like the elder brother, or the son who said "I go, Sir, but went not" (Mt. 21:30)?

18:12 *Sheep-* Of course we must use our freewill and repent, but the Lord in the parables of the lost coin and sheep likens us to things which *cannot* repent and are not repentant, and yet all the same are brought back by the Lord's endless searching and pastoral care. By all means compare this with Peter's comment that the Lord's exaltation was in order to give *repentance*, not just forgiveness, to God's people (Acts 5:31; 11:18 cp. 2 Tim. 2:25). This is the extent of His atonement for men; not only to enable forgiveness, but to show His matchless grace yet further in even granting *repentance* to men. In the light of this it remains open to question how much credit we can personally take for our repentance. Not all lost sinners will come back, but the Lord speaks as if He will search always, in every case, *until* they do. These hyperboles are all to teach the vast extent of His desire to win back the lost. In the light of this, who are we to start questioning whether or not a brother has actually repented, if he says he has and shows this to some extent?

Does he not...?- The answer is, No, he doesn't. This is the element of unreality in this parable. It seems there are such elements in all the parables, and they are there to signpost us to the essential

point of the parable. The Lord's parables all feature an element of unreality, which flags attention to His essential point. The shepherd who left the 99 and went after the lost one was an unusual shepherd. Common sense tells us that one should think of the good of the majority, not max out on the minority. We invest effort and resources in ways which will benefit the maximum number of people. But the Lord turned all that on its head. The heart that bleeds cannot disregard the minority, however small or stupid or irritating it or they may be. For people matter, and the heart that bleeds will bleed for every single one.

Leave the ninety nine- This may appear irresponsible. But it is in line with the Lord's grotesque language of cutting off body parts in order to avoid offending little ones. It's hyperbole to make a point- that the one little one or lost one is to have our maximum attention. I suggested above that the loss of body parts was an allusion to rendering themselves unfit for priestly service under the Old Covenant system. The Lord may be continuing the idea. Focusing on the little ones, the lost, may well lead to our being judged unfit for wider shepherding roles by those who are the power brokers within the human side of God's people on earth. But so be it. Lose that kudos, those roles. Focus on saving the lost. For that is what the Lord did, and thanks to that, we have been found and saved.

Leave- The idea is 'to send away', and four times in this chapter alone is translated 'forgive' (Mt. 18:21,27,32,35). The same word is then found in Mt. 19:14, where the disciples again forbid little ones and refuse to 'receive' them, and the Lord tells the disciples to 'suffer' those little ones to come to Him. The use of the word suggests that the disciples needed to 'forgive' their immaturity. The whole section is very thematic and it therefore seems unlikely that the repeated usage of this word is insignificant. Maybe the Lord is hinting that we should not waste energy on unforgiveness, but rather forgive even 99 sheep, and seek by all means to rescue / save / receive / not cause to stumble the one. It's as if unforgiveness towards others may lead the "one" to stumble. And that is indeed true to observed experience, because those who stumble are often full of stories from church life of where they encountered unforgiving attitudes towards others. The parable seems to be saying that if someone has been offended by the exclusion they experienced from the majority, then we are to forgive the majority and all the same do all we can to regain the lost. The closed circle of disciples who turned away the children from Jesus thus become the 99 sheep; the focus must be upon winning back those who have become lost. The parable teaches this in itself, because a sheep will only leave the flock if there has been some incident or situation between the flock and that sheep which mean that the flock has rejected or excommunicated it. For sheep do not just wander off alone from the flock and get lost. They tend to stay together by nature.

Into the mountains- The Old Testament is clear that the sheep of God's people were lost on the mountains because of poor shepherding (2 Chron. 18:16; Jer. 50:6; Ez. 34:6). The language of 'going astray' fits this picture, because the Greek word essentially means 'to be deceived' and is used in the context of the Jewish religious leaders deceiving ordinary Jewish people in the first century (Mt. 24:4; Gal. 6:7; 2 Pet. 2:15; 1 Jn. 2:26). The mission of the disciples was to take over the role of the shepherds; they were resigning from the chance of being shepherds under the Old Covenant, disqualifying themselves from priestly service by cutting off their limbs, leaving the shepherding of the 99- but thereby becoming the shepherds of the New Covenant.

We all have the desire to keep our faith to ourselves, to hold onto it personally on our own little island... and it was this attitude which the Lord so repeatedly and trenchantly criticized. And in his demanding way, he implied that a failure in this would cost us the Kingdom. He more than any other must have known the desire for a desert island spiritual life; but instead he left the 99 righteous and went up into the mountains (i.e. he prayed intensely, after the pattern of Moses for Israel?), in order to find the lost sheep (Mt. 18:12).

Gone astray- We are all such sheep who have gone astray (1 Pet. 2:25 s.w.). We are to replicate what the Lord did for us, in seeking the lost. But it is only if we perceive the degree to which we really were "astray" that we will be motivated to use His methods to likewise save others. This is especially difficult to achieve for those raised in believing homes, who were schooled into Christ from an early age. The lost sheep who leaves the fold and goes off is based on Ps. 119:176: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant; for I do not forget thy commandments". The lost sheep that is found therefore has the attitude of recognizing it is lost, that it is still the servant of the shepherd although isolated from him, and still has not forgotten the things of God's word. The picture in Ps. 119:176 is strange indeed: a lost sheep asking the shepherd to come and find him. It's as if the sheep talks to himself, feeling the shepherd can't and won't hear, feeling that he's just too far away. And this is *exactly, exactly* the position of all those who leave the faith and return: they don't forget the doctrines of the Truth, in their hearts they feel too far away, but they wish somehow something could happen to get them back. This explains the type of sheep one is dealing with in the parable, and why the parable isn't true of all who go astray.

18:13 *If-* Although in other parables the Lord is presented as searching *until* He finds the lost sheep, there is the possibility that He will not find it. Such is the huge power the Father has given human freewill.

Rejoices- The same word used for the man of Lk. 15:5 rejoicing in finding his lost sheep, and the Father's rejoicing at the return of the prodigal (Lk. 15:32). The time of rejoicing is at the day of judgment, when sower and reaper shall "rejoice together" when the fruit is gathered unto life eternal (Jn. 4:36 s.w.). The rejoicing is when the sheep is 'found', and whilst that can happen in a sense in this life, the ultimate 'finding' of the sheep is surely at the final change of nature when Christ returns. Our joy at the day of judgment will not simply be because of our own personal salvation, but because of how others are receiving that great salvation, in part thanks to the efforts we made for them in this life. Paul's "crown of rejoicing" would be to see his converts accepted in that day (1 Thess. 2:19).

Which went not astray- We could read this as meaning 'who did not *think* they went astray', seeing that all the Lord's sheep go astray. In this case, the reference might be to the majority of Israel; the Lord was saying that His disciples were to go searching for the little ones, the children, the women, lepers, whores and gamblers, and forgive or not worry about the masses of Israel who didn't consider they needed repentance. Or this could simply be the element of unreality in the story- the 99 simply function as part of the furniture of the parable, to focus our attention upon the proactive effort we should be making to win back the lost. And this huge effort stands in contrast to the negative attitude of the disciples in not 'receiving' the little ones.

18:14 *The will*- It is not the Father's *will* that little ones should "perish" (see too Jn. 6:39 s.w.), but :13 has made it clear that the finding of the lost is conditional: "*If so be* that he find it". Such is the huge power delegated to us, the extent of human freewill- that it can even stop the will of God being fulfilled. Because we have a choice as to whether we do His will or not.

Before your Father- RVmg.: "It is not a thing willed before your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish" seems to refer to the guardian Angels who represent the "little ones" before the court of Heaven. Every situation in which we reject the little ones is played out in the court of Heaven. This section began with the disciples thinking that their internal politics could somehow be hidden from the Lord (see on :1 and :2). They cannot be. The situations, discussions, rejections, formulations of policies, inward thoughts... are all played out before the throne of God in Heaven.

Little ones- This serves to show that the lost sheep are the same as the little ones.

Perish- The Son of God came to "save that which is *lost*" (:11- s.w. "perish"). His mission was indeed the doing of God's will- that little ones should not "perish" or be "lost". But it's possible

that they will be- because we can make them stumble, make them perish, even though it is the will of the Father and Son that they do not perish. The Lord gave His life so that they would not be lost / perish (Jn. 3:15,16 s.w.). But we can fight against the intention of the cross by making them stumble and thereby perish. The same word is used for how we can make a believer stumble and they thereby “perish”: “Don’t destroy [s.w. “perish”] with your [attitude to] food him for whom Christ died” (Rom. 14:15). By doing so we are making the cross of Christ of no power for that person. Exactly the same is said in 1 Cor. 8:11, and I think 2 Jn. 8 has the same idea: “Look to yourselves, that we don’t make to perish [s.w.] those things we worked for”- and those things were surely the converts which John’s community had converted and built up.