

Are you leading people **TO** Jesus or **AWAY** from Jesus?

Matthew 18:5-14

Pastor Jim Rademaker

One person writes, "I was born and raised in the church, baptized, confirmed, married in it, had our kids baptized and confirmed in it, and I practically lived, breathed, ate, and slept "church." Then something happened that revealed an ugly underbelly of the church. Wagons were circled. The truth was silenced. It's near impossible for me to trust anymore."

Another, "The Bible and God were twisted into something ugly and frightening. Most of the time, people just wanted to step on us, to grind their Christian truth into us with their heel. I was so disgusted by the hate radiating from Christians, from churches. It made me sick. And if that's what being a Christian was, what God was, I wanted nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with it."

What about you? In your actions, in your lifestyle, in your attitude, in the way you treat people, are you leading them TO Jesus or AWAY from Jesus? And does it really matter? Is it really such a big deal? Is it something we should be concerned about?

Jesus knows what's going on in the hearts of His disciples. He even sees it in the words and in their actions. And He doesn't like it at all! There's cause for great concern!

How do we treat one another, especially our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ? How do we encourage others in their relationship with Jesus? How do we help lead them to look to Jesus? How about if we focus on how great we are? How superior we are to others? How about if we live for ourselves and look to others to serve us? You think that might help encourage them in their faith, encourage them in their faith journey in following Jesus? You don't think that would help? Neither does Jesus.

How we live, influences others. How we live, has an effect on the lives of others, on their trust in Jesus. On their journey of faith in Him. We, our actions and attitudes of the heart, either point people away from Jesus or to Jesus. And it matters a LOT to God. A whole lot! And it should matter to us as well!

Why does it matter so much to God? He's not wanting to lose ANY of His children to unbelief. He doesn't want ANY of those trusting in Him to fall away from Him. The stakes couldn't be higher!

"Who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" It must have struck the disciples as very strange to have Jesus stick a little kid in their midst and say, "There's greatness for you. This little one. And unless you turn (that is, repent) and become like this little guy, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Unless you turn and change your way of looking at things, unless you become little, you cannot know the greatness of the kingdom of heaven. It's the greatness of humility, of being humbled, of becoming as nothing. As John the Baptizer, whom Jesus called "the greatest [to ever be born]," said, pointing to Jesus, "He must increase, and I must decrease."

It's not about achievement. It's not about your religious accomplishments. Little children don't have great achievements. They have little to give. They are "givable to," on the receiving end of things. Which makes them perfect pictures of faith. The greatness of faith (trust in Jesus and what He's done for you and what He gives to you), that's greatness in the kingdom of heaven. (Cwirla) Turning from self to Christ. For in Christ, those who have nothing are given everything! *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.* (James 4:10)

And Jesus is zealous for faith. He guards the little ones of faith closely, with dire warning to those who would cause them to stumble. "Cause to sin" is probably better translated "cause to stumble" like sticking your foot out in front of someone to trip them, or putting a rock in their path that they trip over. The Greek word is "scandalizo" from which we get "scandalize."

A *scandalon* is a stumbling point, something that causes someone to stumble or trip. Jesus says that whoever causes one of the little ones who believe in Him to stumble in their faith would be better off having a large millstone tied around his neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea. (Cwirla)

How do we encourage others in their relationship with Jesus? How do we help lead them to look to Jesus? Not in a self-serving, prideful, self-centered way. What will that do for their faith? It's an example that encourages them to sin, a stumbling block that helps lead them away from Jesus.

"And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me." Welcomes. Receives. Loves. Serves. Leads to Jesus. Remember Jesus' words? " ... whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did it for me." And when Saul, the persecutor of Christians, was struck down, Jesus said what? "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" There's an inseparable unity between Jesus and His little ones of faith, whatever their age, who humbly trust in Him. So highly does Jesus esteem one of His believers. We should think of them and treat them as equally priceless. Treat them like we'd treat Jesus Himself, as the most precious thing there is.

What's your greatest fear? For many, it's the fear of water. Fear of drowning. You ever been in over your head, literally? How does that feel? Pretty scary! What a way to go! Some, can't think of anything worse. The opposite of receiving a childlike believer in the name of Jesus is to "entrap" one of them. To lead them down the wrong path. What will happen to the person who helps destroy a childlike trust, following, faith in Christ? Thrown overboard with a large anchor tied around your ankle? Pulled under, gasping for air. Never to come up again? Death by drowning? That's nothing. You could only hope to have it so good to leave this earth in that way! Why, that's nothing compared to what's going to happen to you if you help lead someone away from Jesus!

"Woe to the world because of the things that cause [tempts] people to sin (stumble/go astray)! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!"

What do you do about it? Whatever it takes. Don't take it lightly when, by what you say or by what you do or by the example you set in the way you lead your life, you lead others away from simple trusting faith in Christ. Don't be foolish enough to think, "It's no big deal. It couldn't be a bigger deal!"

If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

As one person put it, Jesus is, "an agitating and disquieting figure ... When one desires to follow Him, it becomes necessary to break with men and things, to surrender old customs and habits of mind – for which Jesus Himself chose the figure of plucking out the eye and cutting off the foot and the hand." (J. Kilde)

It's better entering the kingdom of God one-eyed, one-footed, and one-handed than to go whole into hell. Obviously, gouging out eyes and lopping off hands and feet isn't going to help our spiritual situation one bit. Why? Amputation doesn't change the heart. But it illustrates how utterly radical faith in Christ is. It is the greatest and sole treasure.

And if you think Jesus is simply overstating things, remember where He's going as He's saying these things. To the cross, where His hands and feet will be pierced, as He prepares a place for you. Losing a hand or eye or foot is nothing compared to losing Christ and His salvation.

What should you do to avoid the danger of going astray or leading someone else astray? Do whatever it takes! Take whatever measures are necessary. Get rid of your T.V. Put restrictions on your cell phone use. Find a new job. Get out of a spiritually destructive relationship. Find a new crowd to hang around with. Do whatever it takes to avoid the traps to your childlike faith in Christ or the faith of another. Nothing is worth the price, the risk, of falling away from Jesus and facing eternity in hell! God's children mean everything to Him! There's nothing more important to Him! And there should be nothing more important to us either.

"See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost."

We don't very often think of how our words and actions might be leading someone away from Jesus. They and their relationship to Jesus isn't always first on our mind. But it's always on God's mind. We should value them as Jesus values them and do everything in our power to help these little ones who are in danger of going astray.

Greatness in the earthly kingdom in which we live is found all around us - on the football field, on magazine covers, on the nightly news, behind the doors of the large corner office, and at the top of the corporate ladder. But true greatness, greatness is the kingdom of heaven, is often much harder to find. True greatness in God's eyes consists in a willingness to serve, to be counted last rather than first, to give rather than take, to think of others more than self, to serve - as we've been served by Christ.

As the one little one of faith said earlier, "I was so disgusted by the hate radiating from Christians. And if that's what being a Christian was, what God was, I wanted nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with it." How we live, influences others. How we live, has an effect on the lives of others, on their trust in Jesus, on their journey of faith in Him.

We, our actions and attitudes, either point people away from Jesus or to Jesus. And it matters a LOT to God. A whole lot! And it should matter to us as well! Why does it matter so much to God? He's not wanting to lose ANY of His children to unbelief. He gave His life for them! He doesn't want ANY of those trusting in Him to fall away from Him. The stakes couldn't be higher!

Someone's always watching us. Whether it's our loved ones, co-workers, neighbors or whomever, someone's always watching. Like it or not, you're a role model to others. Are you leading people TO Jesus or AWAY from Him? Are you lording it over them or serving them? Are you thinking of them and their needs, especially their life of faith, instead of your own wants and desires, your own greatness?

On our own, we will fail to point others to Jesus. There's too much of "us" in us. Too much of our old nature that gets in the way and points away from Jesus. We're too big in our own estimation. Repentance brings us into the right state of mind and heart. Once again, realizing we're nothing and have no great spiritual accomplishments of our own. Helpless, like a child. And as a child, turning to Jesus and receiving from Him forgiveness and life and all that we need. We help lead others to Jesus as we ourselves are first led back to Him.

As the hymn says, *King of my life, I crown Thee now, Thine shall the glory be. Lest I forget Thy thorn-crowned brow, lead me to Calvary. Lest I forget Gethsemane, lest I forget Thine agony, lest I forget Thy love for me, lead me to Calvary.*