

## **Sermon Text (Matthew 18:1–10 ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” <sup>2</sup> And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them <sup>3</sup> and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>5</sup> “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, <sup>6</sup>but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

<sup>7</sup> “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! <sup>8</sup> And 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 crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. <sup>9</sup> And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

<sup>10</sup> “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.”

## **Jesus and His Angels Fight for You**

You are at war. I’m not talking about a physical war which you could be drafted to fight in and have no choice but to engage other people in combat on a physical battlefield. No, this is a war that cannot be seen, and yet, it is happening all around you, even inside your heart. This war is a spiritual war, and it is being fought over your soul. Your enemies: the devil and his angels, the demons, who rebelled against God and were punished for it by being cast out of heaven and into hell. They want to take everything away from you that they can in an effort to cause you to stumble in your faith and, ultimately, fall away. They would have you be like Job, who lost everything that he had (his possessions, his children, and even his own health), all in an attempt by the devil and his angels to get him to lose his faith in God. Their purpose for doing this: so that they do not have to suffer in the fires of hell alone.

But you have allies in this war, and those allies are the multitudes of angels who did not join the devil in his rebellion against God. They continue to stand in God’s presence, always ready

to carry out his will for you, no matter how old or young you are. As Jesus says at the end of our reading for today, “[I]n heaven [the angels of these little ones] always see the face of my Father who is in heaven” (verse 10). These angels carry out God’s will by protecting you from the attacks of the devil and his angels, keeping you safe in your faith until the day that God decides to take you home to heaven. How comforting it is to know that there is such a force that is ready and willing to fight for us!

However, the devil has an unexpected tactic to get believers to fall away from their faith. That tactic is to use you to do it. Jesus says in our reading for today, “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!” (verse 7). He also says, “[W]hoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (verse 6). With these words, Jesus is issuing a warning to those who would cause someone who believes in him to sin by stumbling in his faith or falling away from his faith completely. Jesus cares so deeply for everyone who believes in him, that he says it would be better for a person to die by having a large stone that was pulled by animals in mills hung around his neck and being tossed into the sea than for him to cause someone who believes to lose his faith. This is not a warning that Jesus gave to just anyone; this is a warning that Jesus gave to his disciples, to those who believed in him, and it is a warning that he gives to us too.

But how could Christians like you and me cause someone to lose their faith? After all, are we not the ones who are out there carrying out the Great Commission, “[making] disciples of all nations [by] baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit [and by] teaching them to observe all that [Jesus has] commanded [us]?” (Matthew 28:19–20). Well, it might be easier for us to lead someone astray than we think.

Jesus says to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). However, while letting your light shine can be used in our mission to make disciples of all nations, not letting your light shine could have the opposite results. Have you ever used your hands to start a fight with someone you didn’t get along with? Have you ever used your feet to walk away from someone who needed your help? Have you ever used your eyes to watch something that you shouldn’t have been watching? These sins, and others like them, already cause enough harm to us. So much so that Jesus says, “[I]f your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire” (verses 8–9). But these sins can also cause harm to those around us who may witness the ways that we sin. Maybe they could see what we are doing and think to themselves, “If that person is a Christian, and they’re doing it, then I guess it must be okay.” Or they could think, “If that is how a Christian acts, then I want nothing to do with being a Christian.” And so, through our sinful actions, we may have caused someone to be led astray and lose their faith.

But what of the angels? Will they still fight for us, even if we cause someone to lose their faith? Well, the verse that was quoted earlier about the angels is actually part of Jesus’ warning to us believers. He says, “See that you do not despise one of these little ones [that is cause one of these little ones to sin]. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven” (verse 10). Since the angels carry out God’s will by fighting for those who believe in him and protecting them in their faith until God calls them home to heaven, what will they do if we, who are supposed to be fellow believers, cause them to lose their faith? On the Last

Day, when Jesus returns, is it possible that we will hear the angels bringing charges against us before him, telling him of how we were the ones that caused him to lose one of his precious ones? If so, then the comfort that we once felt toward the angels will turn to dread, for they will no longer be fighting for us.

What a terrifying thought that is! After all, how can we be sure that our sinful actions did not result in someone falling away from the faith? In fact, we may even be able to recall a moment from our past in which we did do something that resulted in a believer being driven away. Are we doomed to be thrown in hell as a result? Have the devil and his angels won their war against us?

Jesus' warning is so severe because of how much he cares about those who believe in him. He doesn't want to lose a single one of them and drives that point home with his strong words. However, if we have caused him to lose one of those who believe in him, would we actually be doomed to face eternal punishment in the fires of hell? If we were all on our own, then we would be. However, we are not on our own. Our sin is not so severe that Jesus would never forgive us. As the apostle John says, "[T]he blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7).

Jesus faced a war of his own to ensure that the battles that we lost, no matter what they were, no matter how severe they were, would not condemn us. Jesus fought that war against the devil by coming down from his throne in heaven and entering the battlefield of this sinful world by becoming a man. The devil attacked Jesus by throwing every temptation at him that he could, but whereas we failed to resist the devil's temptations, Jesus succeeded in resisting every single one of them. The devil then thought that he finally got the upper hand over Jesus when he tempted Judas, one of Jesus' own disciples, to betray him and the religious authorities to arrest him and falsely accuse him of crimes that he never committed, resulting in Jesus being tortured and sentenced to death on the cross. When Jesus breathed his last on the cross, the devil temporarily

thought that he won, but then, Jesus descended into hell to declare his victory. Jesus' innocent suffering and death, which appeared to be a defeat, was actually exactly what was needed to pay the price for all our sins, even the worst sins that we committed. And, after declaring his victory to the devil, Jesus declared his victory to the world by rising again from the dead.

Your sins may have been severe. You may have even caused people to fall away from the faith with your hands, feet, and eyes. But Jesus faced the punishment that you rightfully deserved for those sins when his hands and feet were nailed to the cross. His eyes beheld your sin, which caused God the Father to turn his eyes away from him instead of you. By Jesus' wounds, you are healed. All of your guilt has been washed away in the waters of your baptism, and you have been made white as snow. The devil may try to remind you of the failures of your past. He may try to make you think that the ways that you acted toward others and what those interactions resulted in make you unforgivable. However, God the Father does not remember your failures at all, because his only begotten Son has already paid the price for them in full and made it as though they no longer exist. There are no longer any charges that can be brought against you, which means that God and his angels will always be on your side.

The war for your soul continues to wage on and will continue to wage on until the day that God calls you home to heaven. However, no matter what the devil throws at you, you do not need to fear his attacks, nor do you need to fear possibility of the angels bringing charges against you for the things that you have done in the past. The angels still fight for you and will continue to fight for you, because Jesus fought for you first and won.