

# Session 10

## JESUS PURSUES

*Matthew 18:1-14*

### Memory Verse

*“And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over that sheep more than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray.”*

– MATTHEW 18:13, CSB



## Jesus Pursues

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** Jesus sees, loves, and seeks after us all, even the people society deems “unimportant.” As His disciples, we should do likewise.

**CALL TO ACTION:** Are you equipped to help those who are wandering astray and to pursue those who are yet to believe? Join a group or sign up for a class or mission trip to take your next step to expanding the kingdom.

Being the “greatest” is as popular as ever in 2025. We even have an acronym for it (GOAT: Greatest of all time), and many examples of people who have earned this moniker today.


Simone Biles is a skilled pioneer of her sport, and the most decorated U.S. Olympic gymnast in history.<sup>1</sup> Michael Phelps was a prolific U.S. swimmer with a whopping twenty-eight Olympic medals.<sup>2</sup> Tom Brady is a former NFL quarterback with seven Super Bowl wins.

You can surely come up with more. The desire to be great is so deeply ingrained in us that, eventually, all of these GOATs will be unseated by someone new who worked hard enough to surpass those who came before them.

This human desire to be great goes throughout history, and in our reading today, we’ll study Jesus’s answer when His disciples asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (v. 1).

 Why do you think being great is important to many of us?

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 What do you know about how God defines greatness?


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## Session Summary

When Jesus' disciples asked, "Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (v. 1), they likely had an expected answer in mind. We might define greatness by personal ability, wealth, or power, but Jesus defined it differently: "Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child—this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (v. 4)

Jesus's teaching that followed this surprising pronouncement focused on how to treat others, not judging by outward appearances or society's standards, not acting as a stumbling block for others (treating sin in their own lives seriously), and caring for the one who has gone astray. When we live in these ways, we model the way Jesus lived.

### 1. Like a Child (Matthew 18:1-5)

 What might have been the motivation behind the disciples' question about the kingdom of heaven? What do you think they really wanted to know?

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 What does it mean for Christians to "become like little children" (v. 3)?

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Chapter 18 opens with important context:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “So who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matthew 18:1)

Everything that follows in our reading today was Jesus’s response to this question from His disciples. Jesus brought over a child to model His first teaching—a living, breathing demonstration of what He was about to teach. Jewish rabbis would often teach in this manner, using what they had on hand to teach a spiritual truth.

Why would the disciples ask this question? Perhaps it hints at their pride or desire to be the greatest among the group. This isn’t the only time this concept made an appearance in the Gospels. In Mark 9, the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest among them. In Mark 10, James and John asked Jesus for positions of greatness in glory. Still today, the idea of being the “greatest” has lost no appeal. The sin of pride is as prevalent as ever in our power-hungry world.

But Jesus has a different idea of greatness: humility.

In our upside-down world, humility can be seen as a weakness, a good way to get passed over or become a doormat. But Jesus taught humility as a great strength, and a hallmark of a true disciple. Believers have already achieved the greatest status we could hope for: We are children of God.<sup>3</sup> Where so many in our culture are driven by their need for worldly greatness, the disciple of Christ is driven by the desire to humbly honor and serve the one who is actually the greatest, God.

Jesus’s choice of a child as the example would have been surprising in a day when children were seen as inferior to adults.<sup>4</sup> Children often look to adults for an example on how to behave, but here Jesus taught that His disciples should look to the child, the most humble among them, as an example. When we model this type of humility, we risk being viewed as “inferior” in the eyes of humans too.

Have you ever seen a group of children who don’t know each other strike up a game in a public place? Children, generally less concerned with status, often consider themselves on more equal footing with their peers than we might as adults. There is less hierarchy. Age, race, background, prestige, wealth, and ability often fade away when you put a group of children together. Many haven’t yet learned to erect the walls and summon the preconceived notions of adulthood.

Consider how this translates to the kingdom. A childlike Christian sees everyone on the same playing field. They don't discriminate. They don't consider themselves as better than their peers (Philippians 2:3-4). They treat others equally. They throw out preconceived notions and show kindness. They invite everyone to "get into the game" of living for Jesus, and don't put up roadblocks. They have a humble understanding of their own situation as sinners in need of grace and mercy from a loving God.


 Application: Why is it right and necessary for Christians to live as humble people with God and others?

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## 2. The Seriousness of Sin (Matthew 18:6-9)

 What is the warning of verse seven?

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 What was Jesus's point about sin in verses 8 and 9? How does this connect to Jesus's broader teaching in this passage?

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Some scholars interpret "little ones" in verse 6 to mean spiritual children, Christians who are new to the faith and not yet mature in their walk with Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Like actual children, they still have so much to learn, and it doesn't happen all at once! Like a runner preparing for a marathon, spiritual maturity isn't something we just try, it's something we train toward over time. It takes time and effort. We all learn slowly, over a lifetime. We should take our responsibility to disciple and care for new believers seriously.

Some scholars interpret this to mean people society deems insignificant.<sup>6</sup> These people, made in the image of God just like you and me, are important to God and deserve to be treated equally. As Christ's ambassadors we should show them love and kindness. Remember the need for child-like faith. We should want everyone to get

into the game of living for Jesus and not put up roadblocks based on our preconceived notions.

Jesus next warned about causing offenses. The NLT uses the word “temptations” here, and the NIV describes this as causing others to stumble. We should live in such a way that we don’t cause others to sin. Sin will come. Temptations will remain. But we should endeavor not to be the cause of them. This takes intention. As we grow in putting others first (Philippians 2:3-4), and loving others like Jesus loved us (John 13:34-35), our awareness and intentionality grows. We should be like stepping stones, leading people on a path to knowing God better, not stumbling blocks, making the way harder for fellow image bearers to walk with Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus taught that we should take sin very seriously. Sin is not something that goes away when we become Christians. We sin any time we miss the mark and fail to fully love God and others. Jesus wasn’t advocating for self-mutilation here, but He was teaching that sin is serious, and we should be willing to take drastic measures to remove it from our lives. This is vastly different from the “do what makes you happy” mentality in our culture today. Jesus calls us to a higher standard.


 **Application:** What does the drastic way Jesus addressed dealing with sin teach us about the seriousness of sin? Do you typically view sin this way? Why or why not?

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### 3. Going After the One (Matthew 18:10-14)

 What does this parable teach about God’s heart for His people?

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 What does this parable teach about how believers should pursue those who don’t yet know Christ?

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Throughout this passage, Jesus reframed the idea of greatness and showed we should be less concerned about being “the greatest” and more concerned about others, even and especially those our society sees as “less than.” We shouldn’t use worldly standards to judge others. Thankfully, Jesus doesn’t do that for us.

In these verses, Jesus presented the idea that even the “little ones” (people that humans might find unimportant), are valuable enough to God that He has angels looking out for them (and not just any angels, angels who have direct face time with God). Scholars are unsure what this means exactly, as there is not specific Scriptural support for the idea that everyone has a specific guardian angel.<sup>8</sup> One point we do know Jesus was making here, though, is the importance of every person to God, even the people society finds unimportant.

Jesus’s parables were typically set in a context His audience would understand. Today in America, we may not often see a shepherd caring for his or her flock of sheep, this was (and still is, in some parts) commonplace in the Middle East. God repeatedly uses the shepherd/sheep metaphor throughout the Bible to paint a picture of His relationship with His people. Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd (John 10) and in the parable of the lost sheep, He wove a beautiful and memorable picture of His care for His sheep.

This parable shines light on a couple of different relationships for us: our relationship with God, and our relationship with the people God has placed in our lives.<sup>9</sup>

This picture of the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-18) demonstrates the depth of God’s care of us. He loves us enough to come after us when we’ve gone astray, and not just come after us, but to search for us on the hillside. He considers it worth His time and effort to come after us.

Earthly shepherds do this.<sup>10</sup> They keep an eye on the flock and notice when one goes missing. When a sheep is missing, often it is because they are “cast,” a dangerous condition where the sheep is stuck on its back with no way to right itself. Sometimes it is because they have done something like wedge themselves in a thorn bush in a search for green grass. In either case, the sheep has gotten themselves into a situation they cannot get out of alone. They need the shepherd’s help. When the shepherd finds a sheep like this, the sheep requires care before they return to the flock. Their

coat is cleaned. Their limbs are lovingly massaged to return the feeling they lost when they were cast. The shepherd takes time with them and then brings them back into the fold. What a beautiful picture of what God does for us. He takes time to come after us, when we've gotten ourselves into a situation we alone can't get out of or manage, and cares for us to set us back to rights.

If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and we are meant to live like Him, this is how we are to care for others too. We are meant to watch out for the person society calls "unimportant." The outlier who might believe no one thinks they are worth the time to help or pursue. We know the truth. God sees them as worth leaving the 99 for, and at times, we are the instrument He uses to pursue them.

 Application: Who is God calling you to pursue as His instrument of reconciliation now?

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## Conclusion

Jesus called the most humble the greatest, and directed His disciples to be child-like, not discriminating or considering themselves better than anyone else, but welcoming everyone. The ultimate example of this type of radical humility is Jesus Himself.

As those Jesus's has pursued completely, we are to look out for those who have gone astray and go after them, not discounting them or judging them, but showing them the love of Jesus. What a blessing it is when we get to be the instrument God uses to seek after His lost sheep.

 How can we humble ourselves in our faith, "like little children" (v. 3), today?

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 How can our group live together in a way that shows we understand and desire Jesus's version of greatness over that of the world?

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What are some ways we could better seek out the “lost sheep” among us?

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## Memorize

*“And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over that sheep more than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray.”*

—Matthew 18:13, CSB

## References

<sup>1</sup><https://www.nbcolympics.com/news/simone-biles-becomes-most-decorated-us-olympic-gymnast-leads-team-usa-womens-team-gold>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.swimmingworldmagazine.com/news/the-goat-turns-40-an-appreciation-of-the-career-of-michael-phelps/>

<sup>3</sup>Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 191.

<sup>4</sup><https://soniclight.com/tcon/notes/html/matthew/matthew.htm>

<sup>5</sup>Charles L. Quarles, “Matthew,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1532.

<sup>6</sup>Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 191.

<sup>7</sup>Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 192.

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<sup>9</sup>Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 193.

<sup>10</sup>Keller, W. Phillip. *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1970).