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Four Essential Attitudes for a Healthy Christian Community

An Attitude of Holiness

Matthew 18: 7-14

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Every year about this time, my family breaks out the sculpee. If you don't know what sculpee is, it's a polymer clay that you can sculpt into different objects. You can then bake and paint them. Patti and the girls make Christmas ornaments and all kinds of stuff. When the days get shorter and it's cold outside, it's a good thing to do together inside. Last year I grew weary of being a spectator at this event in our home, so I decided to roll up my sleeves and join the "sculpee group." Today you have the grand privilege of experiencing the unveiling of my "sculpees." Here is a part of my "Wilderness Series" – actually it's the only series I have done, but I thought you should probably see these. The first one is a sculpture of my dog, Jacob. That is supposed to be a golden retriever. The second one is a wood duck – it's not a mallard with a football helmet on. Wood ducks actually have a big square head, so that is pretty close to what they look like. I have to admit, though, that the cattails in the background were beyond my ability, so Patti made the cattails for me. The third one is a fish – it's a largemouth bass getting ready to grab a black spinner bait, which is my trademark lure.

There actually is a point to this. When I sat down to try to create something, I realized that I had no ability just to sit down and create without a pattern. I suppose that is what separates the artists from hacks like me. The reality is that until I had something that I could look at and visualize the dimensions, the details, and the colors, I really couldn't do anything. I first went to the library and found a book with pictures of what I wanted to do, so that is where I got my three ideas for my sculptures – from the pictures in the library book.

When I think about that and the importance of a pattern or something to look at in order to create, it seems to be consistent with the way God has made us. If you were to seek to find the greatest impersonators in our world today, you would not find them on the David Letterman show. You would not find them in comedy clubs. You would find them in your home, because the greatest impersonators on planet earth are children. Children are remarkable in their ability to impersonate their parents. They begin to walk like them. and talk like them and they start sounding like them. Soon they start to have the same attitudes, and they tend to "buy into" the same values. They become very much like their parents.

I believe as you read through the New Testament, that is part of God's design. He has designed us in such a way that we need a pattern to follow. We understand that it becomes very important what kind of a pattern we put in front of our children. With our teenagers, we say to them, "It is very important that you find good peer groups and you think about who you are following. Sometimes you take a stand against this and you follow these people." They are at an age where they can understand that. Certainly as adults, we understand there are certain people we ought to follow and certain people we shouldn't. But children are another story. We have to teach our children not to take candy from strangers and not to get into a stranger's car. Sometimes our children really do not have what it takes to assess who they should follow and who they should allow to

influence their life. Part of the responsibility of the parent is to guard that child and make sure that the influences in the child's life are good and proper.

Sometimes children have a way of exposing things that we don't necessarily want exposed. I had a friend whose little boy had a small car that he would drive in the living room. He would pedal it with his feet and drive around the living room. He would go a little ways and then he would stop and he'd say, "You jerk!" He would go a little bit farther and he would stop again and say, "You jerk!" His father quickly realized that he was learning that somewhere, and the father had to make some adjustments in his own driving habits.

I think as true as that is in the physical realm, certainly the same thing is true in the spiritual realm. Have you ever thought about the fact that when somebody trusts Jesus as Savior we bombard them with information? If they attend church they hear all this information about: "You need to walk this way. You need to live this way and Christ needs to be alive in you." All this information seems overwhelming to them. The question that they always ask is, "How do I do that? What does it look like? I don't understand what that looks like at work. I don't understand what that looks like at home as a husband or wife or as a student." One of the things that new believers desperately cry out for is some sort of a pattern – some sort of a model. In the New Testament it often talks about the need for a pattern or a model. Just like I was with those sculptures, new believers need something in front of them where they can say, "Okay, I see what it looks like to follow Christ. I see what that looks like fleshed out in real life. Now that is starting to make sense to me."

That is how God has designed the church. It reminds us how essential it is that those models are truly following Christ so that these little "spiritual infants" grow up to be mature, healthy believers. We are talking about four essential attitudes for a healthy Christian community. Last week we talked about the attitude of humility and how important it is that we humble ourselves to receive these spiritual infants, remembering they entered the Kingdom the same way we did. They entered with lots of needs, lots of baggage, and sometimes they do try our patience. Jesus wants to lay that spiritual infant at our doorstep, and He wants us to embrace that infant – to love him or her, saying, "You can be part of our family. We are in this together."

The next attitude we see in Matthew 18 is an attitude of holiness. Holiness means to be set apart. It means to be "other than." It really means to walk in obedience and to provide an accurate model or pattern of what an infant believer needs to follow in order to be like Christ. In verse 6 Jesus introduced us to this concept of a stumbling block. He talked about how important it is to embrace or welcome in these new believers – the ones He is calling "these little ones." The stumbling block in v.6 would be our unwillingness to receive them. Our unwillingness to take the responsibility to help raise these spiritual children would be a stumbling block. It would cause them to get off the path and onto a destructive path. Jesus said that is a terrible thing: "It is better that you put a big grinding stone around your neck and jump in the sea than to do that to one of my children."

Again in v.7, He talks about a stumbling block. The stumbling block now has to do with not refusing to receive them, but rather having received them, we begin to influence them through our behavior. We can lead them off of the path of becoming like Christ. In

other words, by our behavior, lifestyle and attitudes, we may lead them astray. We may become a negative influence. Look at what v.7 says: “Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come...”

That word “stumbling block” is an interesting one in the Greek language. It actually started out to be a word that describes the part on a trap that you would use to put the bait. In fishing, it would be the fishing hook. In a mousetrap, it would be the little tab that sticks up where you put the cheese or peanut butter on. This Greek word that is translated stumbling block is the idea that the enemy is setting a trap in order to get the spiritual infants. In a sense, you would say that the enemy wants to molest these spiritual children. The best way to do that is to bait the trap in such a way that they are lured off the path. What Jesus is saying is that there are many who provide that – many in the world who lead those children off of the path. When He is talking about the world, of course He is talking about the world system that is opposed to God. This world system is composed of people who are enemies of God, and they are in rebellion to God. He says it is inevitable that they are going to lure these children off the path. He goes on to say: “...but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!”

We see the word *woe* used here twice. That word *woe* takes us back to the Old Testament where the prophets used to say that often. It was really a word of impending judgment – a word of warning: “Woe to those who do this and woe to those who do that.” Jesus is saying that it is inevitable that those stumbling blocks are going to be out there. There are going to be those people who are enemies of God. They are going to seek to lure these little children away from God in order that they can “spiritually molest” them. Jesus says that does not get them off the hook. “They will still bear responsibility for what they have done to my little children.” Jesus says, “Woe to that person who does that.”

In v.8, He changes the subject in the sense that v.7 has been talking about those in the world. It is inevitable that those in the world are going to do that to his children. But starting in v.8 and v.9 he shifts from talking about those in the world who do that, and he moves the discussion to us as members of the family. In vs. 8-9 he says that, as terrible as it is for those people in the world to do that, it is a “double woe” for those who are part of the family to do that to these children. The discussion goes from those out there to those within the family, who have received one of these spiritual infants. He says this is a very serious thing if we lead one of our own family members astray by leading them down a path of destruction or by causing them to stumble. Verses 8 & 9 tell us that we had better do absolutely everything necessary to prevent that from happening:

And if your hand {*He is not talking about them; He is talking about us*} or your Foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out, and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into the fiery hell.

You say, “Wow, those are bizarre verses!” Yeah, they are. When Jesus says, “enter life” He is using a phrase that means “enter life eternal.” It means enter into the life that goes on forever. He is contrasting that with being cast into an eternal hell. He is saying that these are matters of eternal life and death – these are matters that are more important than anything else. Therefore, it is extremely important that we take what

happens to these little children very, very seriously because we are dealing with matters of eternal life and eternal death.

When He is talking about cutting off your hands, cutting off your feet, or poking out your eye, He does not mean to literally do that. It is hyperbole {exaggerated speech}—a way of saying, “Do whatever is necessary to correct that behavior in order not to lead one of those little ones astray. In the New International Version v.7 says “to lead people into sin.” It is important to distinguish that what He is really talking about, though, are not people in general. I don’t think that is a very good translation. He is talking about the little ones specifically.

It is obvious as you read on through the verses that He is talking about the new believers – the babies in Christ who don’t yet know what this Christian life looks like. They don’t know a lot of the truth yet and they don’t know how they are supposed to flesh it out. They are very vulnerable and easily influenced. I have seen new believers come into the church and they are influenced by people who were not a good influence on them. Rather than growing in Christ, they just fade away and you lose sight of them and it causes all kinds of heartache in their life. What Jesus is saying is that they can be very easily influenced, so it is very important that we behave properly before them and provide for them a pattern which they can follow.

In Matthew 5 Jesus used this same language. He basically talked about the sin of adultery. He talked about the sin of the eyes and that if you commit adultery with your eyes, it is better to pluck out your eyes than to continue doing that sin. It was the same point where Jesus was saying, “Do whatever is necessary to stop that because of the seriousness of that sin.”

For the sake of making this practical, let’s just use Jesus’ example of adultery, or the whole arena of sexual sin, and bring that into what He is talking about here in Matthew 18. He is saying that if you have a problem with what you look at, or if you have a problem with anything in the area of this behavior, do whatever is necessary to address that. Let’s say that somebody has a problem with pornography. The temptation is to try to manage that sin and to say, “You know, I really just need to be careful not to go to those sites when I get on my computer.” What happens is that once a week or so, they just get careless and then off they go. Then they think, “I really have to stop doing that.” What Jesus is saying is that there comes a point in time when we realize, for the sake of the spiritual babies around us, we need to take drastic measures and bring that to an end. Jesus is saying is that if you can’t handle it, then get rid of the Internet. If you can’t handle it, get rid of the computer ... or get rid of your television ... or quit going to movies. He is basically saying, “Eliminate every possible source of the problem and get the sin stopped.”

We do have a tendency to rationalize the behavior by shrugging our shoulders and thinking, “Whatever this area is in my life, it is not that big a deal. I will get it taken care of.” By and large, we just excuse certain areas of sin in our life. Let me ask you a question. Suppose we were to ask all of the people who have become a Christian in the last six months to identify themselves. And suppose we were to ask everyone who has been a Christian for five years or more to come up here on the stage and line up. We could tell every one of those new believers, “If you want to know what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus – if you want a model or a pattern – I want you to become just like one

of these people.” Would you be comfortable with that if they imitated everything that you do in public and everything you do in private? We are not talking about perfection of course – that is ridiculous. We are talking about whether you demonstrate in public, in private, in all sincerity and in every way you know, what it is to be like Christ. Jesus is saying that is what we need. We need to put those people in front of these new believers and say to these new believers, “Be just like them.”

You say, “Nobody would say that.” Paul said that in 1 Corinthians 11:1: “You imitate me as I imitate Christ.” That is a pretty strong statement. Paul understood that these people need a model – they need a pattern. Paul said, “I am going to go all out for Christ. You follow me as I follow Christ.”

If you are able to identify anything in your life that you say shouldn’t be there, that would prevent you from being a model or pattern for what a new believer ought to be like, Jesus is saying to you, “Stop messing around with that area. Do whatever is necessary to deal with it. Make a commitment that this area will stop.” We are to make every attempt to be what God wants us to be in public and in private – to be a pattern for these little ones. That is what Jesus is saying here. He is using the exaggerated speech to say, “Do whatever is necessary. Get it addressed, because this is very serious.”

Jesus goes on to motivate us to carry through with this by saying, “I want you to know how serious this is. I am going to give you a heavenly illustration and I am going to give you an earthly illustration. Both of them are simply a way to show that this is very, very important.” Look at what he says in v.10:

See that you do not despise one of these little ones, *{Again, we are still talking about these new believers.}* for I say to you, that their angels in heaven continually behold the face of My Father who is in heaven.”

You say, “What in the world does that mean?” There is quite a bit of argument about what that means. To despise the little ones basically means to look down on them, in a sense to resent the fact that you have to clean up your own behavior in order to somewhat please them, or in order somehow for them to mature and follow. Maybe you have had a situation where you are watching something on television and one of your children walks in. They are staring at the television and you quickly change the channel. You are kind of irritated. You want them to leave so you can go back to the program. But what they are exposing is that maybe you shouldn’t be watching that at all. It just feels awkward. Or maybe you have watched a video and then you sit down and watch the same video years later with your children. You are shocked by all of the language and what is going on. And you say, “I never heard that before.” Part of that is this cleansing process where we start to realize how we are influencing our children. It causes us to address certain things.

The same thing is true in the spiritual realm but sometimes we can resent that. We wish those little ones weren’t around us because we really don’t want to clean up our act. Jesus is saying: “Do you realize these little ones have angels in heaven who are continually in the face of God?” That is an extremely rare statement. It carries the idea that the angels were right in the very presence of God, which is an unusual occurrence. It’s a way of saying they are so important because of their relationship to these little ones on earth that they are continually in the presence of God. It is as if God has this team of angels and they are constantly aware of these little ones – what they are doing and how they are doing – because they so want to protect them, guard them and encourage their growth. It is just

God's way of saying, "Do you understand how important they are in the heavens? They are so important in the heavens and they ought to be that important on earth. You ought to take them on earth as part of your family as seriously as they are being taken with the angels and God in heaven." Because they are so incredibly important to God in heaven, we are not to despise them, but rather to treat them with the same gentle care that God would.

Matthew 18:11 says: "For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost." In your Bible it is probably in brackets, which is the way of saying it's not certain whether this was originally in the book of Matthew or not. The statement shows up in several places in the Gospels and it is a true statement. There is just some question as to whether it actually appeared in the original manuscript here. It is a common statement that reminds us that this is the whole purpose for which Jesus came – that people would trust Him as Savior and they would mature in their relationship with Christ. They would become followers of His. There is nothing more important than that, and that is why Jesus is speaking in such strong language. Look at what He says in vs. 12, 13 and 14. He tells the story that we are familiar with – the story of the lost sheep:

What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? And if it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine, which have not gone astray. Thus it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.

Jesus tells the story of the lost sheep in Luke 15 and he also tells it here in Matthew 18. In Luke 15, the lost sheep is an unbeliever. In Matthew 18, the lost sheep is a believer who has gone astray. They are two different stories, probably told at two different times. You have to be careful that you don't create all kinds of theology out of a parable. He is not saying that He loves the ones who go astray more than those who don't. He is simply saying that He loves these sheep so much that if one goes astray, He will do whatever is necessary as the good shepherd to find that sheep and to carry it back to the fold. He brings it back into the family so that the sheep is once again safe in the fold. It is creating this wonderful picture of how much God loves His sheep and how much He cares when one goes astray. It is a reminder of how personal and how intimate God is.

There is a danger in a church our size of having a "flock mentality." What I mean by that is, as long as there is a large flock, there is a tendency to think everything is okay. But what if there is just one little one who has gone astray in the last week? There is a tendency to say, "Well, the building is full. Everything is okay." But what God is saying is that it is not okay. He cares about that little one. We have to be very careful that the little one does not fall through the cracks. People say, "Well, that is too bad." But Jesus is telling us to do whatever is necessary to go after that little one and bring it back.

Imagine what would happen if your child's class at school goes on a field trip to Wilderness Park. There are 100 kids and the end of the day, the bus pulls back up to school and all the kids climb off the bus. The teacher says, "It has been a wonderful day. We left with 100 children and we found 99 of them. We think that is pretty good. What if that one child who is missing is yours? You would be highly motivated to do whatever is

necessary to find that child, because it would not be acceptable to you that only one was lost.

We need to feel the same way as a spiritual family. When we know of “little ones” who have wandered astray, we all have the responsibility to care enough to go after them, and to do whatever is necessary to bring them back to the fold. Jesus is illustrating how much He cares about these little ones who are that revered in the heavens. Therefore, it is that important that we do not lead them astray – down the wrong path – through our attitudes, our lifestyles, our behaviors, or our sins.

The attitude of holiness is an all-out commitment to obedience – not just for your sake, but for the sake of the spiritual babies among you. You should be able to walk out this door today and say with confidence, “A little baby Christian could follow me; could imitate me in my life – publicly, privately, in every way – and become like Christ.” If you cannot say that, Jesus is saying that you need to deal with that, whatever it takes, because the lives of spiritual children are at stake.

Years ago Harry Chapin, who was quite a storyteller in song, wrote a song that I am sure you are familiar with. It’s called *Cat’s in the Cradle*, and as I read you the words, listen to how he understood how much a child becomes like a parent and think about how this also applies to our spiritual family.

My child arrived just the other day,
He came to the world in the usual way
But there were planes to catch and bills to pay,
He learned to walk while I was away.
And he was talkin' fore I knew it, and as he grew,
He'd say, "I'm gonna be like you, Dad, you know I'm gonna be like you."

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon,
Little boy blue and the man in the moon.
"When you comin' home, Dad?" "I don't know when,
But we'll get together then. You know we'll have a good time then."

My son turned ten just the other day.
He said, "Thanks for the ball, Dad, come on, let's play.
Can you teach me to throw?"
I said, "Not today, I got a lot to do." He said, "That's okay."
He walked away but his smile never dimmed,
He said, "I'm gonna be like him, yeah,
You know I'm gonna be like him."

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon,
Little boy blue and the man in the moon.
"When you comin' home, Dad?" "I don't know when,
But we'll get together then, Son. You know we'll have a good time then."

Well he came home from college just the other day
So much like a man, I just had to say,
"Son, I'm proud of you. Can you sit for a while?"
He shook his head and he said with a smile,
"What I'd really like, Dad, is to borrow the car keys,

See you later; can I have them please?"

"When you comin' home, Son?"

"I don't know when,

But we'll get together then. You know we'll have a good time then."

I've long since retired; my son's moved away.

I called him up just the other day.

I said, "I'd like to see you if you don't mind."

He said, "I'd love to Dad but I can't find the time.

You see my new job's a hassle and the kids have the flu,

But it's been sure nice talkin' to you, Dad.

It's been sure nice talkin' to you."

And as I hung up the phone, it occurred to me,

He'd grown up just like me.

My boy was just like me.

If that spiritual baby {who might be sitting next to you} turned out to be just like you, would that be okay? Would that be okay with God? Would God be pleased with what that child has become? That is really what Jesus is asking.

An attitude of humility says that we receive these children and we embrace the responsibility of raising these spiritual children to spiritual health. An attitude of holiness says, "I will model for them what it means to follow Jesus and I will do whatever is necessary to rid my life of anything that does not belong there." I would encourage you to make an all-out commitment to deal with whatever needs to be dealt with, that you might be a proper example to that little one who is so revered in the heavens and so loved by the Father.