

Bible Passage: Matthew 18:10–14

Title: The Little One Who Went Astray/translated by Ji-Yun Kang

1. The Value of a Single Life

These days, I am reading a novel called *The Citadel*, which was published in 1937. It is an autobiographical story by A. J. Cronin, a Scottish writer.

Cronin lost his father when he was young and was raised by his maternal grandparents in a small rural village in Scotland. He entered medical school, and because his family was poor, he completed his studies with the help of a scholarship. After working for three years as a doctor affiliated with a medical cooperative in a Welsh mining village, he continued practicing medicine in London. However, when he became ill, he returned to his native Scotland to recuperate. It was there that he began pursuing his lifelong dream of becoming a novelist. *The Citadel* is based on his experiences as a physician. The protagonist of *The Citadel* is Andrew, a young man who has just graduated from medical school and is beginning his career as an assistant doctor in a mining village. At first, Andrew tries to walk the path of righteousness. He stands up against a flawed medical system in order to fulfill his fundamental calling as a doctor who saves lives. He also resists senior physicians who pursue money and fame. In the latter part of the novel, however, Andrew's ideals begin to collapse. He conforms to the corrupt system he once opposed and starts pursuing money. The *citadel* he had tried so hard to defend was crumbling. Although the latter part of the story shows Andrew coming to his senses and striving to return to his original ideals, the transformation is painful to witness. One of the most memorable scenes comes early in the novel, when Andrew has just arrived at the mining village as an inexperienced young doctor and begins treating patients with great passion. One particular story, in which he helps a miner's wife give birth, is deeply moving. During the delivery, the mother gives birth to her baby, but then begins to lose her life. After administering an injection of Pituitrin, Andrew throws down the syringe and devotes his entire body to reviving the mother, who lies motionless, seemingly dead. After several minutes of desperate effort, the mother's heart gradually begins to regain strength.

When he comes to his senses and looks at the baby, he finds that the child is already in a state of apparent death, with its limbs and neck hanging limp. This time, he tries to save the baby. He repeatedly places the infant in cold and lukewarm water, lifting it out each time. But the baby does not respond. At the very moment when everyone else has given up on the child, Andrew decides to try one final method. He rubs the baby vigorously with a rough towel and repeatedly presses and releases its tiny chest with his palm, desperately trying to breathe life into the limp little body.

He is covered in sweat, but he does not give up. He pours out everything he has in order to save a single life. At last, a miracle happens, and the baby begins to breathe.

Andrew stays up all night treating the mother and child. It is not until five o'clock in the morning that he finally heads home. Yet, as he walks home, his mind is filled with just one thought:

"God, I did it. At last, I have done something meaningful."

The scene is described so vividly that I found myself reading it with bated breath. I felt the same emotion that Andrew experienced. Through the trembling of my entire body, I could sense just how precious a single human life truly is.

2. Do Not Despise Them

The precious value of a single life is not an ideal held only by medical professionals. The ideal and vision of our Lord's kingdom are also embodied in the precious value of each individual life. God is the one who cherishes every single life. Verse 10 expresses God's heart in these words: "Be careful that you do not despise one of these little ones." It is because the world lacks this very attitude that it is turning into hell. Driving people away because they are weak, excluding them because they are incompetent, and turning away from them because they are powerless are all insults to our Lord. As I mentioned last week, to live with God as our Creator means accepting that every life in this world has value. Nothing has been created meaninglessly or without purpose. Every living being exists on this earth according to God's purpose and intention. How deeply, then, must God cherish them? A faith that values and protects life includes not only human beings but every living creature. This is the faith of respecting life that we should renew in our hearts during the Season of Creation. The expression "these little ones" in verse 10 may broadly refer to the socially vulnerable. However, if we limit its meaning to the community of Matthew, it refers to those among the congregation who are of low social standing or little importance in the eyes of others. The Greek word translated as "despise" is formed by combining the words "below" and "to think." In Korean, the word for "despise" also means to regard someone as insignificant or worthless. It seems to come from the expression meaning "to consider someone as if they do not exist." To be treated as though one does not exist is the kind of treatment given to the dead. What kind of emotions arise when someone treats you as though you are invisible or unworthy? Would it not feel as though you had been deprived of life itself? This is a solemn warning: we must be careful not to cause such deep humiliation to enter the hearts of these little ones. The passage explains the reason: "For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven." This likely means that the angels who continually behold the face of God have a deeper concern than anyone else for the circumstances of the poor and vulnerable. The Book of Proverbs expresses the same truth in these words: "Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God" (Proverbs 14:31). If, within a community, people who have no material possessions, no one to support or advocate for them, or little education are treated as though they are nobody, then that community could be said to be storing up God's wrath. These are truly frightening words.

3. A Strange Way of Counting

At the end of his teaching not to despise the least important among us, Jesus tells a parable: the parable of the lost sheep. There was a man who had one hundred sheep. Having one hundred sheep also meant that he was quite wealthy. Even if he lost one sheep, it would not seem like a great loss to him. But one day, one of his sheep went missing. In order to find that one lost sheep, the shepherd left the ninety-nine sheep that had not gone astray in the mountains and went out to search for the one. This is one of the biblical parables that can be difficult for us to understand. We naturally think, "Why would he just leave the ninety-nine sheep behind? What if he lost those sheep too? Wouldn't it be even worse if they were attacked by wild animals?" But these concerns arise from a misunderstanding: we are treating the parable as though it were a literal account rather than a parable. The focus of the parable is this: How should a community respond when one of its members goes astray? This parable asks us how we should relate to others within the life of our community and in the concrete circumstances of our daily lives. We are not naturally inclined to look favorably upon people who are like that one lost sheep. In the eyes of the world, they are failures and those who have fallen behind.

When I was in the military, there were always people who fell behind during marches or training exercises. The military did not look favorably upon such stragglers. They were treated as though they were unnecessary to the organization. The military culture of treating people this way is vividly portrayed in the film *A Few Good Men*, starring Tom Cruise and Demi Moore. The story investigates the death of a soldier at the U.S. Marine base in Guantanamo Bay, near Cuba, who was subjected to harsh treatment on the orders of a superior officer after being labeled a straggler. Jack Nicholson plays the base's commanding officer. In court, he openly reveals the frightening belief that the soldier could die that way simply because he was a straggler. The film seems to be criticizing a military culture that has little regard for the sanctity of life.

But this is also a reflection of who we are, having been shaped by the emphasis on efficiency in modern capitalist society. We already find it difficult to understand the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep behind and goes out searching for one. It seems inefficient.

But the shepherd's way of counting is different. No matter how insignificant a sheep may appear, no matter how far it has strayed from the community, the shepherd considers it precious. He does not throw it away because he regards it as useless. When I was traveling in western China, I visited many regions where people raised sheep. I often saw sheep climbing steep cliffs and ridgelines. The shepherds watched them carefully, and whenever danger threatened, they would rush out to rescue them. Why? Because they were their sheep. It is like the reason parents do not abandon their children simply because they are flawed or unsuccessful. We do not calculate the value of our children according to efficiency. Because they are precious and lovable just as they are, we do not measure them by the world's standards.

4. Resonating with the Heart of God

While neuroscientists were conducting research with monkeys, they discovered what are known as mirror neurons. They found that similar neurons became active even when a monkey did not perform an action itself but merely watched another being pick up an object. Later, researchers began investigating a similar mirror-neuron system in human beings.

Imagine that someone accidentally hits their finger with a hammer. The person cries out, "Ouch!" and clutches their injured finger. When we see this, we do not merely process the visual information that the person has grabbed their finger. An empathic simulation takes place, and we respond as though we ourselves have been hurt. This is called neural resonance.

But human beings do not stop there. We can go on to offer compassionate care. When we see someone suffering, we feel the desire to do something to help. And when we help that person, we experience the satisfaction of having done something meaningful. This is not merely moral satisfaction. It is a reward and a positive emotion that comes from feeling connected to another person. Perhaps this is because God created us to experience happiness when we do something worthwhile. Here we discover a principle: if we want true happiness, we must help the people around us become happy. Those who believe in God must learn to resonate with the heart of God. We can truly be called people of faith only when we grieve over the things that grieve God. When God's heart is burning with sorrow over people who are like lost sheep, but we feel nothing when we see them, we are not truly people of faith. An embrace is both the act of my holding another person and the act of another person holding me. When I embrace someone who is suffering and try to comfort their wounded heart, it may appear that I am the one embracing them. But in reality, the other person is embracing me. Or rather, God, who is present within that person, is embracing us. Perhaps God has called us into this community so that we may learn to embrace suffering and develop this kind of heart.

5. The Little Ones

“In the same way, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (Matthew 18:14). Matthew uses the word “little” many times throughout his Gospel. In Greek, the word is *micros*, which is also the root of the English word “micro.” We often use “micro” to describe something so small that it cannot be seen. Consider Matthew 10:42: “Truly I tell you, whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because they are my disciples will certainly not lose their reward.” Matthew 11:11 says: “Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” And Matthew 13:32 says: “Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree.” Matthew 18:6 says: “If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” In all these passages, the word “little” is *micros*, used in the context of those who are insignificant, unimportant, or easily looked down upon. Yet the heart of God is directed precisely toward those who seem so insignificant and are so often despised. Matthew expresses this throughout his Gospel because he wants his community to cherish these little ones rather than look down on them. We, too, must take the final words of today’s parable to heart: “It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” Where this heart is present, there is heaven. When this heart disappears, that place becomes hell.

Now we must put aside our harsh gaze toward those who have gone astray. We must stop criticizing and resenting them. We must stop throwing stones of condemnation. Instead, we must embrace them and hold them close. Not long ago, we reflected on Romans 12:1, where Paul exhorts those who have received God’s mercy. As he explains the proper worship we are to offer with our bodies, he says in Romans 12:15: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” Which is easier: mourning with those who mourn, or rejoicing with those who rejoice? It may be easy to weep with someone who is grieving, but rejoicing with someone who is happy is by no means easy. This is because the system of comparison operates automatically within us. When we compare ourselves with someone who is mourning, our own circumstances may seem somewhat better, allowing us to mourn alongside them. But another person’s happiness can also stir up envy within us. A person who can genuinely rejoice with someone who is rejoicing is truly mature. Paul continues in the following verse: “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position” (Romans 12:16). It seems that God has hidden the true meaning and happiness of life within those who are humble and of low standing. When we draw near to them, hold their hands, and weep and laugh alongside them, only then do we discover the true meaning and happiness of life that God has hidden away for us.

Andrew in the novel I mentioned at the beginning found meaning and happiness in life through the mother and baby he saved. His efforts were rewarded with that discovery. God does not want anyone among us to go astray or perish. Who among us is the least? God has hidden the meaning and happiness of life within that person. By embracing them and caring for them, I believe our own lives will become more blessed and meaningful. I hope that we will now change the way we evaluate the members of our community and adopt the way of counting that Paul presents. First Corinthians 12:22 says: “On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.” Clearly, it was according to this very way of counting that God went out to search for the one lost sheep. Our Lord earnestly desires that this way of counting and this way of seeing may be at work within each of us and within our community.