

In Matthew chapter 18, Jesus is talking about what it means to live together as Christians. He says that we should not seek to be first. He says that we should not cause each other to stumble, to fall into sin. He says that we should forgive one another. This is all part of what it means to live as Christians in the Kingdom of God. But he makes one point in passing to really drive home what he's saying here, and that comes towards the end of our reading for today in verse 10, where Jesus says this: "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." Now, that verse is really easy for us to just pass by, because it's not Jesus' main point, and so maybe we think that it's not really that important. But what Jesus says there is really remarkable, that the angels watch over even the humblest Christians. Their angels always see the face of the Father who is in heaven. And to really understand just how wonderful that is, we need to understand, first of all, what does the Bible say about the angels, and then we will be able to see why Jesus says that we should not despise one of these little ones who trust in God.

So what does the Bible have to say about angels? It says quite a bit, to be honest, but it doesn't tell us everything. There is not a passage within the Bible that you can just go to learn everything that there is to know about the angels. If we want to know something about them, we have to compare lots of different passages together to see what it has to say. And when you boil it all down, the Bible says three things about the angels: first of all, who they are; second of all, what they do; and third, their position in the order of creation.

So let's look, first of all, at what the Bible has to say about what angels look like. I think that's especially important because of the picture that most people have of angels. When I say the word "angel," I'm sure most people immediately think of wings and a halo. If you go to a Halloween store, for example, to pick out a costume, and you were to buy an angel costume, I guarantee you it will be a white robe with wings and a halo. That's all there is to it. In fact, if you even go on the Internet and just look for the word "angel," you're going to get lots of pictures of mostly beautiful women with wings and a halo, and probably some fat babies with wings as well. That's the common picture. The reason for that is because artists have drawn angels that way for hundreds of years, so it's not surprising that that idea continues.

But what the Bible has to say about what angels look like is a lot more complicated than that. Because first of all there's different kinds of angels. There are the cherubim, there are the seraphim, and then there's other kinds of angels that we're not even told what their names are. But these angels look different from one another. Sometimes angels do look like people. Take, for example, in Daniel, which we heard from our Old Testament reading for today. In that passage, Daniel describes an angel that he sees in a vision. And he says in Daniel chapter 10: "I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist." Daniel actually goes on to describe this angel as having things like a face like lightning, eyes like burning torches, legs like shining metal, and so forth. He clearly is an angel, but he looks like a man, even though he doesn't have any wings. And Daniel, when he sees him, falls on his face, terrified. Now there are other angels in the Bible too that probably look like people. Gabriel, for example, when he speaks to Mary, is not described. We're not told what he looks like, but that's probably because he just looked like a person. He just looked like a human being.

So angels can look like people, but there are plenty of angels that look a lot more strange and otherworldly. Isaiah, for example, talks about a vision he saw of God sitting on his throne in the temple. And around the throne were flying angels, and he describes them in this way, Isaiah chapter 6: "Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew." That word "seraph" in seraphim in Hebrew can mean fire, so these six-winged angels are literally the burning ones. Is it any wonder that Isaiah falls down in fear, thinking that he's going to die?

Ezekiel also saw a vision of God sitting on his throne, high up in the sky, and he describes the cherubim around the throne of God, which he calls the living creatures. He says this in Ezekiel chapter 1: "And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings." Those four faces, he goes on to say, were of a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. In fact, that's why we have those symbols on the altar of all of those things. They are pictures of the cherubim. But these are the throne guardians of God. They are the ones who are closest to him, who are with him at all times, who go wherever he goes. And Ezekiel falls down terrified, completely overwhelmed at the vision that he has received.

The Bible also talks about other angels, too, appearing in different ways. Some angels appear like wheels. Others appear like chariots. Some angels even appear like horses. They appear in all kinds of different ways. But they are all powerful and fearful creatures, the kind of creatures which cause fear in anyone who sees them.

But the Bible also tells us what the angels do, and the angels are primarily the messengers of God. Think again in our Old Testament reading. The man dressed in linen, whom we heard speaking, says this: "O Daniel, man greatly loved, understand the words that I speak to you, and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you." He had been sent to bring that message to Daniel, to tell him about what was to come. Gabriel also brought the message of Jesus being born to Mary, and so forth. That is their primary task. In fact, the word "angel" in both Greek and in Hebrew means "messenger." That is what they do most of the time.

But they're not just God's mail carriers. They do other things too. They carry out his will in different ways. Some of the angels, for example, are described as carrying out judgments. The man dressed in linen in Daniel is described as fighting against evil powers in Persia. Michael wages war against Satan and his minions. And we hear of angels causing plagues. We hear of angels bringing destruction. We hear of angels destroying entire armies. A real good example of this is in 2 Chronicles 32, where it says: "The Lord sent an angel, who cut off all the mighty warriors and commanders and officers in the camp of the king of Assyria." If one angel could do that much, Christians, if one angel could single-handedly destroy an army, they are truly fearful and powerful creatures. In fact, the only thing more powerful than they is God himself.

But the Bible also tells us that the angels are greater than us, that God has set them above us in the order of his creation. David, in Psalm 8, for example, is praising God for all the wonderful things that he has done, especially for the care that he shows towards men. And he says in Psalm 8: "Yet you have made him"--that is, man--"a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor." Or as it says in Hebrews, you have made him a little lower than the angels. So the angels are greater than we are, for a couple of reasons. First of all, because they're

closer to God. They see him at all times. They worship him without end. And also because they are perfect. They are flawless. They do not sin. They carry out God's will without compromise. They do exactly what he says. So the angels are God's mighty messengers, the powerful servants of his will. And they are beyond count, with God at all times, worshipping him without end. That is the picture, in brief, of what the Bible has to say about angels.

So with that in mind, Christians, listen again to what Jesus says, Matthew chapter 18: "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." Notice he says "their angels." Their angels! God sends the angels to serve his people. Think about what that means. These heavenly beings, whose appearance can be like lightning and fire, these mighty creatures, who can destroy armies all by themselves, these messengers, who have been set above us in the creation, these same angels bend to serve us. They stoop themselves to protect us, and they watch over even the humblest believer who trusts in God. Psalm 91 says: "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone." Even something as mundane as stubbing your toe on a rock, Christians, the angels are there to protect us, to watch over us. There is no task which is beneath them. There is no Christian which they consider unworthy. In fact, they rejoice over every Christian. Jesus says, Luke chapter 15: "I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." One sinner, one person who comes back to God causes the angels to rejoice. No matter who they are, no matter how humble they are, the angels delight in them, because they have come to God. They wage war for us, Christians. They fight for us. They humble themselves for our sake.

And if the angels guard even the weakest believer, why should we despise each other? If the angels bend themselves to serve us in obedience to the will of God, why should we be unwilling to bend ourselves in service of one another? If those who are greater than us, who have been set over us, rejoice over every Christian, why should we be concerned with who among us is the greatest? The angels do these things, and we can follow their example.

But more than this, Christians, we have a greater example still in Jesus Christ our Lord. Because Jesus is greater than the angels. He is their Master. He is their Lord. All things belong to him. He was from the beginning and always will be. But he lowered himself, humbled himself even below the angels who serve him, and became one of us. He even lowered himself to the very lowest place of all by dying on the cross. He did all of this, Christians, so that we would be saved. He stooped himself to us so that we would be raised up to new life and that he could bring many sons to glory. If Jesus has loved us in this way, let us also love one another. Let us forgive each other. Let us not cause each other to sin. Let us be reconciled to one another. Let us humble ourselves and serve one another for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. And then, together with the angels, we can worship him and give glory and thanksgiving to him forever!

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who commands the armies of heaven but who lowered yourself to save us in love, soften our hearts toward one another so that we would love each other as you have first loved us; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.