

Sermons on Matthew As Little Children

Matthew 18:1-6

With Study Questions

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As Little Children
Matthew 18:1-6

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"⁻²⁻ Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them,⁻³⁻ and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."⁻⁴⁻ Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.⁻⁵⁻ Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.⁻⁶⁻ "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea (Matthew 18:1-6).

Conflict Resolution

If asked to give a term or phrase describing parenting, I'm not sure what would be on the top of the list. But without a doubt, the term 'conflict resolution' would be in the top five. No matter how wonderful individuals might be, when the individual finds himself part of a community, conflicts are inevitable.

This is true of families, teams, jobs and clubs. Even the retirement home at which I volunteer is not immune to the chafings of community. These otherwise sweet little old ladies can become indecorously aggressive when jockeying for position during meals.

Anyone who has made an investment of time in the church community has come to realize that the church is no exception to this rule. It becomes disheartening when exposed to the reality that Christians don't merely claim to be sinners in need of a Savior, they are just that.

In chapters 18 through 20 (21 being the Triumphal Entry) Matthew will record Jesus' instruction regarding interpersonal relationships among the people of God. He will speak of seeking out the brother who goes astray (18:12-14); the proper method of confrontation between Christians and church discipline (18:15-20); forgiveness (18:21-35); marriage and divorce (19:1-15); confidence in one's own righteousness and conviction (19:16-20:16); and blind ambition (20:20-33).

The record of how we are to care for one another begins with the account before us this morning. Matthew begins with this event, perhaps, because there is no sentiment within a community of people more destructive than an excessively high estimation of self.

In Mark's account of this incident (Mark 9:33-37) we learn that they had been arguing about who would be greatest and when Jesus asked them about the nature of their argument they "kept silent" ...at least for a while.

At _that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “_Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?_” (Matthew 18:1)

From Kingdoms to Corporations

It was conceivably an honest mistake on the part of the disciples; it is after the kingdom of God. And when kingdoms win battles, their generals would be rewarded with positions of pomp and power; the bacteria of this mentality, sadly, still plague the church. My good friend, who is also a pastor, studies church growth. He relays stories to me of pastors who, in seeking to advance their church from hundreds to thousands, leave a trail of bodies along the way.

Their models are no longer kingdoms but corporations. And the temptation for greatness still surfaces in the form of prestige and recognition for having done something significant, pious, wise or magnanimous.

Similar to pride and self-confidence, ambition can be healthy, or it can decimate. Having been so long with Jesus one would think the disciples would be past the trifling of this nature. But pride and ambition are notorious, like a lingering disease. Their sorrow over Jesus' announcement of His death abruptly vanishes when the argument over who is greatest arrives. None of us are immune. The universality and destructive nature of this sinful disposition finds it listed high on the transgressions which receive a note a significant reprehensibility from God.

These six *things* the Lord hates, Yes, seven *are* an abomination to __Him: ¹⁷ _A _proud look (Proverbs 6:16, 17b).

The antibiotic Jesus would prescribe for this particular sin would come in the form of a child.

Then Jesus called a little _child to Him, set him in the midst of them, ⁻³⁻ and said, “_Assuredly, I say to you, __unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:2, 3).

Not Greatest...Not At All

Not only will you not be greatest, Jesus teaches, but you won't even enter the kingdom of heaven unless...! And there they stand, staring at a small child that Jesus had stood in the midst of them.

“Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will...” literally **“not not¹ enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

They walked with Jesus for years. The blessings of Christ and His kingdom had been pronounced and given to them (Matthew 13:11; 16:17), yet here they are told by Christ that they need to convert (*straphete*—to turn around, change, repent, make right). This might be listed among the warning passages² in Scripture. We must always be ready and willing to change directions in our thoughts and actions when confronted with the word of God.

What Childlike Quality?

We are to become (*genesthe*) as little children. So just what is it about a small child that we are called to become like? Are we to remain childlike in our understanding of things? Some pride themselves in avoiding the loftier doctrines because they wish to remain childlike in their faith. But Paul says just the opposite.

¹ In koine Greek this is not a double negative but a point of emphasis; like saying “no, no”.

² Warning passages are passages which warn Christians to continue in the faith lest they fall short of entering the kingdom of God. It is assumed by some that this necessarily pre-supposes the possibility of losing salvation. It is a false presupposition. Warning passages are passages which true believers will respond to in the same way the elect will respond to the gospel. All the apostles except Judas did respond.

Brethren, _do not be children in understanding; however, in malice _be babes, but in understanding be mature (1 Corinthians 14:20).

There is nothing godly about remaining ignorant in our understanding of the things of God. The Proverbs teach,

Foolishness *is* bound up in the heart of a child. (Proverbs 22:15a)

It is a mistake, as is so popular today, to think there is some innate wisdom woven into the fabric of youth. We are born foolish and need to seek to be wise.

Perhaps it is their sinless-ness. I had a friend argue against sin nature based upon this passage. As the disciples stared at the child, did they conclude that it was the child's sinless estate that provided the example?

They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies (Psalm 58:3).

_Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me (Psalm 51:5).

What *is* man, that he could be pure? And *he who is* born of a woman, that he could be righteous? (Job 15:14)

Certainly Jesus did not set the child before these men as an emblem of moral purity. So what was it about the child that we are to become? Jesus spells it out in the next verse.

__Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:4).

Humility of a Child

There will be a hue and cry from my atheist friends with these words, but a study of history and world religions clearly demonstrate that to deem children as precious is uniquely Christian. Even the covenant people of God during the time of Christ had lost a sense of

themselves when it came to the value of being a covenant child. Mark records:

Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought *them*.⁻¹⁴⁻ But when Jesus saw *it*, He was greatly displeased and said to them, “_Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for __of such is the kingdom of God (Mark 10:13, 14; see also Matthew 19:14). -

So when Jesus brought forth the child it wasn't as if the disciples uttered a harmonic 'aaah'. They were very likely confused. Children were thought of as relatively insignificant. Perhaps one of the very children rebuked by the disciples was the one Jesus stood in their midst. Children were not thought of as a valuable commodity. They were, one might say, in a very humble station in life.

Gandhi (as well as Kant) said:

The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.

And I ask your indulgence if I seem dismissive of the ethical short-sightedness of such a comment (not that I'm in favor of cruelty to animals). Much more profound would be a similar comment regarding the way a nation treats its children. The protection of children was and is something that has to be fought for.

If I'm laboring the point it is so we understand the lowly nature of the person used by Jesus. What was it about the child that we are to become? It was the humility of the child. Christians are to humble themselves. To humble (*tapeinosei*) means to “make low”. Paul explained it this way:

_Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but __in lowliness of mind (*tapeinophrosyne*—literally humblemindedness) let each esteem others better (*hyperechontas*—literally above or surpassing in value [4:7]) than himself (Philippians 2:3, parenthesis mine).

The very idea of arguing over who would be greatest is antithetical to godliness. And although the context of Jesus' admonition has to do with Christian ministry, the grotesquely prideful pursuit of being recognized as superior to others taints households and governments as well. Just once I would like to see a political candidate demonstrate some level of humility in his campaign. And fathers who view their station as head of the household as license to rule as a feudal lord over their personal fiefdom are equally ungodly.

There is a biblical principle repeated throughout the Scriptures where we are advised that he who seeks the seat of honor will receive the seat of dishonor and he who sits in the lowest place will be exalted (Luke 14:7-11).

Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, ⁻⁷⁻ casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you (1 Peter 5:6, 7).

Calvin offers a worthwhile definition of humility.

That man is truly humble who neither claims any personal merit in the sight of God, nor proudly despises brethren, or aims at being thought superior to them, but reckons it enough that he is one of the members of Christ, and desires nothing more than that the Head alone should be exalted.³

Then, that we might embrace the gravity of the lesson, Jesus teaches:

Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. ⁻⁶⁻ __”_Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea (Matthew 18:5, 6).

Receiving Little Ones

³Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System;Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

The force of these words appear to warn us against living in such a way as to tempt others to value human praise and greatness over true godly piety. We are to receive (*dexetai*—to accept warmly, even to take in one arms [Luke 2:28]) others regardless of station in life. This was as much a problem then as now.

**My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.⁻²⁻ For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes,⁻³⁻ and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, “You sit here in a good place,” and say to the poor man, “You stand there,” or, “Sit here at my footstool,”⁻⁴⁻ have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?
(James 2:1-4)**

In receiving others we are, according to Jesus, receiving Him. And in Mark’s record when we receive Him we receive the one who sent Him (Mark 9:37).

A Millstone Sin

And if we are not moved to repentance by those words, Jesus issues the warning. It might be said this way: if we cultivate an environment in the church which causes little ones (or for that matter anyone, since John will later refer to adults as little ones [1 John 2:1]) to stumble (the context here stumbling in the area of the sinful pursuit of worldly greatness within the kingdom of God), it would be better for that person to have a millstone hung around their neck and drowned in the depths of the sea—pretty strong words!

Nothing will more inculcate humility in the Christian than to seek humility. It’s been said that humility is the one thing that once you think you’ve attained it, you’ve lost it. Humility, in its most perfected form was attained by our Savior, who,

...being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death,

even the death of the cross. ⁻⁹⁻ __Therefore God also __has highly exalted Him and __given Him the name which is above every name, ⁻¹⁰⁻ __that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, ⁻¹¹⁻ and *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:8b-11).

A humility we can never attain was attained by Christ. And through His humility we receive the exaltation of God. In all our efforts to please God, let us never trust in those efforts but in Christ alone.

Questions for Study

1. Is conflict resolution necessary in the church (page 2)?
2. What would cause the disciples to argue about who is greatest (pages 3, 4)?
3. What are some things about children we should not imitate (pages 4, 5)?
4. What quality in children should we imitate (pages 5-7)?
5. Discuss true humility (pages 5-7).
6. What does it mean to receive little ones in the name of Christ (page 8)?

7. Discuss the warning of leading little ones astray (pages 8, 9).