

The Wonder of Childlike Qualities

Lesson for March 12, 2023

Unit I: Called from the Margins of Society

Scriptural Background: Matthew 18:1-9; Mark 10:15

Printed Text: Matthew 18:1-9

Key verse: *“Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”* (Matthew 18:4, NIV)

Many years ago, Christian professor Stuart Blackie of the University of Edinburgh was listening to his students as they presented oral readings. When one young man rose to begin his recitation, he held his book in the wrong hand. The professor thundered, "Take your book in your right hand, and be seated!" At this harsh rebuke, the student held up his right arm. He didn't have a right hand! The other students shifted uneasily in their chairs. For a moment the professor hesitated. Then he made his way to the student, put his arm around him, and with tears streaming from his eyes, said, "I never knew about it. Please, will you forgive me?" His humble apology made a lasting impact on that young man. This story was told some time later in a large gathering of believers. At the close of the meeting a man came forward, turned to the crowd, and raised his right arm. It ended at the wrist. He said, "I was that student. Professor Blackie led me to Christ. But he never could have done it if he had not made the wrong right."

Source Unknown

"They that know God will be humble and they that know themselves cannot be proud."

John Flavel

Key Terms

1. **Become** (verse 3) – to come into being; to happen; to be born; come about.
2. **Believe** (verse 6) – to have faith in, trust in; be entrusted with.
3. **Children** (verse 3) – young ones; little ones; infants.
4. **Greatest** (verse 1) – in the widest sense; all the more; greater things.
5. **Humble** (verse 4) – to show humility; true lowliness (happens by being fully dependent on the Lord; not relying on self; “lowly” (NIV).
6. **Offenses** (verse 7) – stumbling blocks; causes for error; “things that cause people to stumble” (NIV)
7. **Receives** (verse 5) – takes; accepts; “receiveth” (KJV); “welcomes” (NIV)

Lesson Background

The book of Matthew is one of the four Gospels. Matthew, the Hebrew tax collector, writes for the Hebrew mind. Matthew, meaning “gift of the Lord”, was the other name of Levi (9:9), the tax collector who left everything to follow Christ (Luke 5:27-28). Matthew was one of the 12 apostles (10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). In his own list of the 12, he explicitly calls himself a “tax collector” (10:3). Nowhere else in Scripture is the name Matthew associated with “tax collector”; the other evangelists always employ his former name, Levi, when speaking of his sinful past. This is evidence of humility on Matthew’s part.

Since Matthew is concerned with setting forth Jesus as Messiah, the King of the Jews, an interest in the Old Testament kingdom promises runs throughout this gospel. Matthew’s signature phrase “the kingdom of heaven” occurs 32 times in this book (and nowhere else in all of Scripture). Matthew portrays Jesus as a victorious King who will one day return “on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory” (24:30).

The book has three basic divisions:

1. Prologue: Jesus’ birth and significance (Matthew 1-2)
2. Jesus’ teaching and ministry (Matthew 3–25)
3. Climax: Jesus’ sacrifice, victory, and commission to his disciples (Matthew 26–27)

Matthew Chapter 18 focuses on more of Jesus’ teachings to his disciples. It includes two major parables: that of the unforgiving servant and the Kingdom of Heaven. It is built on the anticipation of a future community of Christ followers and role of the apostles in leading it.

Chapter 18 is the fourth of five discourses around which Matthew frames his narrative. This section’s theme is the childlikeness of the believer.

Lesson in Depth

I. Humility: The Need (Matthew 18:1-5)

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

The disciples were often concerned about the question of greatness. They seem to ask this question thinking that Jesus has already chosen one of them as greatest, or as if they wanted Jesus to decide among them. Now what they wanted to be satisfied in was, who should be advanced to the post highest in that kingdom next to the Messiah; and they doubted not but it would fall on one of them. To have the most honorable post, and the place of the greatest trust, they were desirous of knowing who it should be.

It did not say which disciple was asking this question, or whether it was all of the disciples. It seems as though the question was asked because one of them was not humble enough. No one wants to play second fiddle. Every one of them was trying to be first.

Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven: The disciples wanted to know who would hold the highest position in the administration Jesus would soon establish.

And Jesus called a little child unto him: One very likely, that was in the house and might belong to the master of it, and which was big enough to come to him at his call. Christ designed by doing this, to give them his sense of the question, and convey some proper instruction to the minds of his disciples. Jesus might have answered the question, “who is the greatest?” by pointing to Himself. Instead, Jesus drew their attention to His *nature* by having them look at a child as an example.

And set him in the midst of them: That everyone might see him; and upon the very sight of him, had he said no more to them, they might easily have perceived what his opinion was. That he that was but a child, the humblest, and least in his own eyes, would be the greatest.

Except you become as little children: This is how Jesus characterized conversion. Like the Beatitudes, it pictures faith as the simple, helpless trusting dependence of those who have no resources of their own. Like children, they have no achievements and no accomplishments to offer or commend themselves with.

Little children have a special humbleness and are easily taught. Most adults are not this way. When a person is converted, it means he turned from his old ways and starts out brand new. A little child is enthusiastic and eager to learn and has a love that is forgiving. He has simple trust.

Children, when very young, do not desire authority, do not regard outward distinctions, are free from malice, are teachable, and are willingly dependent on their parents. It is true that they soon begin to show other dispositions, and other ideas are taught them at an early age; but these are marks of childhood and render them proper emblems of the lowly minds of true Christians. Most adults are different, constantly comparing their lives with others. Few have confidence or faith in anyone or anything. Surely, we need to be daily renewed in the spirit of our minds that we may become simple and humble, as little children, and willing to be the least of all.

This was probably a great disappointment to the disciples. They knew that in that day, children were regarded more as property than individuals. It was understood that they were to be seen and not heard. Jesus said we have to take this kind of humble place to **enter the kingdom**, much less be the **greatest** in the kingdom.

Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven: Jesus then addressed the issue of *greatness*. When we most fulfill the humble place a child had in that culture, we are then on our way to greatness in His **kingdom**.

“*Humbles himself* does not refer to arbitrary strictness or a phoney false modesty...but the acceptance of an inferior position (as Jesus did, Philippians 2:8, where the same phrase is used).”
(France)

We know that one Man was actually the **greatest in the kingdom** – Jesus Christ. This means that Jesus Himself was humble like a little child. He wasn't concerned about his own status. He didn't have to be the center of attention. He could not deceive, and He didn't have an intimidating presence.

And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receives me: This speaks not of literal children, but children in the sense described (in verses 3-4; those who have humbled themselves like children), i.e., true believers (verse 6).

When you receive a little child, you can't expect to get a reward in return, because he has nothing to give but himself. Helping a child of God, expecting nothing in return, brings a satisfying feeling. It also stores up treasures in heaven for you.

“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” (Matthew 25:40)

God is the rewarder of those who love and care for His children.

II. Humility: The Cost (Matthew 18:6-9)

But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me: Jesus takes it seriously when one of His **little ones** is led into sin. **“Little ones”** in the figurative sense does not only mean children, but those who humble themselves as children in the manner Jesus described. Those without power or status in the community of faith. With shocking imagery, he states the utter seriousness of causing the downfall of any of these “little ones who believe in me.” Indeed, he warns that “it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6).

It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck: A severe punishment is described here. It would be **better** for the offending one to receive this punishment of the millstone.

Millstone: A large stone used for grinding grain. Literally “the millstone of an ass”, a stone so large it took a donkey to turn it. The meaning is it would be better for him to have died before he had committed the sin. To injure, or to cause to sin, the feeblest Christian, that will be regarded by Christ as a most serious offense, and will be punished accordingly.

To be punished by society is bad, but nothing to compare with the punishment from God. The authorities can destroy your body, but God can destroy your body and commit your soul to a burning hell forever.

Woe unto the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes: The first **woe** is a cry of pity for a world in danger of offenses. The second **woe** is a warning to the one who brings or introduces evil to others. It is expected that those in the world will cause Christians to be offended, stumble and sin, and they will be judged for it. But it should not be that fellow believers lead others into sin, directly or indirectly. One would be better off dead (Romans. 13:14, 19, 21; 15:2; 1 Corinthians 8:13).

Woe to that man by whom the offense comes: We live in a fallen world, and it is inevitable that sin and hurt and **offenses** come. Yet the person who brings the **offense** is guilty before God and has no excuse. There are going to be problems in the world, until Jesus comes back and sets up His kingdom here, and reigns for 1,000 years. The sad thing today is that offensive things to God are not only being promoted by the worldly people, but so-called Christians are promoting unholy living.

Judgment begins at the house of God. The punishment will be greater for those who know to do right, and still choose to do wrong.

This teaches us that we can *let go* of the anger and the bitterness for what people have done against us. God promised to deal with those **by whom the offense comes**. If God promises to deal with those who offend His own, it shows that He defends and protects His own. This teaches us that in Jesus Christ, *no other person can wreck our life*. If they bring offense in our life, God will deal with them, but not forsake us in time or eternity.

If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you: Some people only keep from sin if it is easy or convenient to do it. Jesus warns us that we must be willing to *sacrifice* in fighting against sin, that nothing is worse than facing the wrath of a righteous God. It really is **better** to sacrifice in the battle against sin *now* than to face the punishment of eternity later.

If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you: There are significant problems in taking these words as literal instruction instead of conveying an attitude. The problem is not only from the obvious physical harm that one might bring upon themselves, but more so in the problem that bodily mutilation does not *go far enough* in controlling sin. We need to be transformed from the inside out.

If I cut off my right hand, I can still sin with my left. If my left eye is gouged out, my right eye can still sin – and if all such members are gone, I can still sin in my heart and mind. God calls us to a far more radical transformation than any sort of bodily mutilation can address.

The sense in all these instances is the same. Worldly attachments, friendships, and employments of any kind that cannot be pursued without leading us into sin, be they ever so dear to us, must be abandoned, or the soul will be lost.

It is better for thee to enter into life maimed: Not that there will be any such thing, as upon the resurrection, going into heaven without a limb; the words are to be understood, not literally, but figuratively. And the sense is, it is better to part with everything here, that is detrimental to a man's doing, or enjoying, what is spiritually good, and enter into eternal life.

Lesson Summary

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’”

This question comes after Jesus has already told his disciples twice about the suffering and death that awaits him in Jerusalem (Matthew 16:21-23; 17:22-23), and after he has told them that following him entails denying themselves and taking up the cross (16:24-25).

It seems that Jesus’ message has not truly penetrated the minds and hearts of the disciples. Perhaps they have heard the part about the kingdom of heaven drawing near, but they have not understood what kind of kingdom this is, for they are preoccupied with questions of their status in this kingdom.

In response, Jesus offers a profound critique of their very question. He calls a child, places the child among them, and tells them that unless they change and become as little children, they will never even enter the kingdom. As long as they are concerned about their own status, they have missed the point completely.

A child in the ancient world was without status or rights, completely dependent on the good will of others to care for him or her. Notice that Jesus does not tell the disciples that they should have faith like a little child — as if they could conjure up this kind of faith on their own — but that they need to become like little children. Jesus further specifies what this means in the following verse: “Whoever humbles themselves like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4). It is giving up claims to power and status and knowing one’s total dependence on God that counts as greatness in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus takes it one step further in saying, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:5). Jesus humbles himself in identifying with a little child, one without power or status. This is neither the first time nor the last in Matthew’s Gospel that Jesus identifies with those who are powerless, needy, and marginal, and says that our response to such persons is, in effect, our response to him (10:40-42; 25:34-46).

Then it gets even more shocking, as Jesus starts talking about cutting off limbs and plucking out eyes. “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire” (Matthew 18:8-9; compare with Matthew 5:29-30).

The word translated as “hell” here is “Gehenna,” which refers to a valley outside Jerusalem that was used as a garbage dump. There the worms and the fire were continually fed by the refuse thrown out from the city — a vivid image for describing the destruction of evil.

Jesus uses exaggeration to make a dramatic point. Not only is it necessary to become a “little one” to enter the kingdom of heaven, but there is a dire warning for any who would lead “little ones” astray. Throughout Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus places a special burden on those who would be leaders in the community. Woe to those who, instead of embracing little ones, cause them to stumble or lose their faith!

Unfortunately, one can find numerous examples of the damage done by church leaders to “little ones” in the community by their abuse of power. Damage is multiplied by attempts to cover up abuses and protect the image of the church. Many people have been driven away from the church by such actions. Adding insult to injury, churches are often judgmental toward those who “fall away” or withdraw from church life.

Jesus states plainly that those in power who have caused the downfall of others will be held accountable. For those who would be leaders in the church, the warning is clear: extreme vigilance is necessary to guard against the possibility of leading little ones astray. Whatever might cause one’s own fall or the stumbling of others in the community — even if it is as important as a hand or foot or eye — must be thrown away.

This conversation between Jesus and His disciples emphasizes the importance of humility and self-sacrifice as the high virtues within the anticipated community. It teaches that in the Kingdom of God, it is childlike humility that matters, not social prominence and clout.