

Children in the Kingdom

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Introduction.

- A. At one time or another, all of us struggle with priorities. Many of us live lives that are constantly busy, and in the midst of all of that business, we forget what's important. We invest our time and our resources in the things that are constantly crying out for attention, while we forget our families and our God.
- B. It's not surprising, then, when we have struggles with priorities in the spiritual realm, too. Just like the children of Israel escaped from the captivity of Egypt, but constantly struggled with Egyptian attitudes and practices, so we too, who have come out of the world, struggle with keeping a worldly mindset out of our spiritual lives. This shows up both in the way that we think of ourselves and in the way we think about others. In the world, people assert their greatness by climbing to the top of the heap, by proving that they are the ones who are in charge and better than everyone else. Everybody else is just a tool along the way.
- C. The teaching of Jesus, of course, is precisely the opposite. In the kingdom of heaven, it is the other, not the self, that is important. It is the glory of the other, not the glory of the self, that we should pursue. Perhaps no other section of Scripture speaks more clearly to this than Matthew 18:1-18. Let's examine this context this evening, to figure out what Jesus is saying to us in His teaching about children in the kingdom.

I. The Childlike Heart.

- A. Jesus' teaching on the subject starts with a question from His disciples that appears in Matthew 18:1. From a worldly perspective, this is a completely reasonable question to ask. People love to rank things and establish who is best. We brag on our sports teams in seasons when they excel. We brag on our kids when they do well in school or something else. We even brag on ourselves, even if it's only to ourselves. When we get that promotion at work, or get complimented by someone whose opinion we value, or even just meet one of our personal goals, there's a part of us that thinks we're pretty hot stuff, that we're a cut above the ordinary. And so, with that universal human mindset, the disciples want to know what they can do to rise to the top in the kingdom of heaven too. They're journeying to Canaan, but they're thinking like they're back in Egypt.
- B. Jesus gets right to the heart of the matter with his reply in Matthew 18:2-4. As v. 2 reveals, this is a speech that Jesus starts off with a visual aid. This was long before the days of PowerPoint presentations, but Jesus was a master at using the things around Him to illustrate His teaching. He used farmers sowing seed, birds, and flowers to drive home important spiritual truths. Here, He uses a child, some random kid from the crowd.
- C. He then tells the disciples that unless they become like this child, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Now, in what sense do we have to become like children? Does it mean that we all have to become short? Or is Jesus talking about something else? He gives us a hint when He mentions humility in the next verse down. What Jesus is actually getting at here is that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, we have to have the humble, trusting heart of a child. One of the funny things about kids is how gullible they are. Ever seen somebody do that trick to a kid where they tell the kid, "I'm going to pull your nose off," and then reach out, tweak the kid's nose, and stick their thumb through their fist so it looks like the tip of a nose? Every time, that little kid is going to reach up and check to see that his nose is still there! Little kids will believe anything.
- D. That's something we laugh at in children, but that's an attitude we need to rediscover if we want to come to the Lord. God's plan of salvation is very straightforwardly set out in Scripture. If we believe, repent, confess, and are baptized, we will be saved. There are a lot of people, though, who are too cynical and grown-up for that kind of faith. They want to figure out what's REALLY going on, what they REALLY have to do to be saved, and so they toss out God's plan and substitute one of their own. That's not the childlike heart.
- E. This process of humility and trust, though, doesn't stop with baptism. Instead, as Jesus points out in the next verse, the more we humble ourselves, the more we trust in God without worrying about what our human wisdom says, the more we approach greatness in the kingdom of heaven. Little kids are lost without their parents. We too are lost without God, but we're too impressed with ourselves to realize it. Only as we come to recognize that we need to rely totally on our heavenly Father can we become what He wants us to be.

II. Stumbling Blocks.

- A. Now that Jesus has defined the nature of the children of the kingdom, He describes two ways in which we can treat one another. This discussion appears in Matthew 18:5-7. Notice first of all that in this passage, and indeed through the rest of this context, Jesus is not talking about literal kids. Instead, when He says "one such child" and "these little ones who believe," He's referring to his previous description of the way that those who enter the kingdom must be childlike. The first way that we can treat these heavenly children is to receive them in the name of Jesus. This tells us that in the way we deal with one another, we are representatives of

Jesus who are acting under His authority. That's what obliges us to receive one another, to welcome one another into our lives in every way possible. If we do this, Jesus tells us we have actually welcomed Him.

- B. The other way, though, that we can deal with one another is to cause one another to stumble, if we do things that lead other Christians to sin. This could be nearly anything. We could lead children of God astray through the evil of our example. We could cause such contention and strife in the church that they leave in disgust. We could even cause them to stumble through our apathy, by not reaching out to them and causing them to feel isolated and left out. Just as the honor we gain for receiving one another is great, so too the penalty for causing a child to stumble is great. To rephrase Jesus' words here, we would be better off in concrete overshoes, sleeping with the fishes at the bottom of Lake Michigan. That's how seriously He takes the harm we inflict on one another. As Jesus says in the next verse along, it's inevitable that someone isn't going to listen. It's inevitable that someone's going to cause problems in the church, but woe to them when they do!
- C. If we see that we have been or are being a stumbling block, Jesus tells us what we need to do about it in Matthew 18:8-9. Interestingly enough, this is a reiteration of His warning during the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. The point is that if we are being a stumbling block, we ourselves are stumbling too, and there's something in our lives that is making us harm other Christians. Whatever it is, we need to get rid of it. Maybe we need to get rid of sin in our lives that is alluring others. Maybe we need to learn to be less contentious. Maybe we just need to give up the solitude we value too highly and spend some time being welcoming to the brethren instead. Whatever it is, though, it's less important than our salvation is. Let's act accordingly.

III. The Value of a Child.

- A. Jesus then goes on to explain why this is so. God doesn't punish us so severely for causing others to stumble because He's a mean God and enjoys blasting people. Instead, the sanction is so severe because those other Christians are so important. Consider Jesus' thoughts on this in Matthew 18:10-14. He begins His discussion by noting that every Christian has an angel who continually sees the face of the Father. It's not entirely certain what this means. This could be referring to literal guardian angels that every Christian has, or Jesus could be speaking in a metaphorical sense, in the same way that He refers to the angels of the seven churches during the first three chapters of Revelation. Whatever the case, though, the implication is the same. It means that the Father is specially concerned with the situation of every single Christian on the planet, and when we despise another child of God, we are valuing them far less than He wants us to.
- B. Jesus emphasizes the importance of every Christian by telling the parable about the shepherd who will leave behind 99 sheep who are safe to seek out a single sheep who is lost. God is not content to hold on to the majority of His sheep. He's not even content to hold on to the vast majority. Instead, God wants every single baptized believer to remain faithful until the end of his time on earth, then to dwell with God in heaven. That's an attitude we need to share, folks. It's not OK for somebody to fall away. It's a tragedy, and we need to act.
- C. It's in this context that we see Jesus' comments in Matthew 18:15-17. As I was preparing this lesson and studying this passage, I realized for the first time that I've been missing the point here for my whole life. Jesus isn't telling us how to deal with the sin of a brother here so that we have a bureaucratic procedure for disfellowshipping somebody. He's not even going through these steps as a warning to go to somebody we have a problem with, instead of gossiping about them to a third party. Instead, the reason why Jesus outlines this procedure is to emphasize the care we need to take with a soul that is in danger of being lost.
- D. First, when we see somebody who isn't living right, we need to go to them personally and make an appeal to them to consider the state of their soul and repent. Sure, that's a scary thing to do, but if we truly love the souls of our brothers and sisters, it's a scary thing we're going to be willing to do. If all the persuasion we can muster doesn't do the job, we can't give up. We need to find some other Christians who will come with us to this erring brother and persuade him to see the light before it's too late. That way, the sinner can see it's not just our distorted perspective that sees a problem in him, that there's a real problem there he needs to fix.
- E. Then, if our combined efforts don't work, we need to tell the whole church about the problem. Friends, this should be a call to arms! When we learn that a fellow child of God is in danger of being severed from Christ, that's the worst danger they can possibly be in. They're sleeping in a building that's burning down, and we need to wake them up while they can still escape. If they won't listen to the frenzied efforts of the entire church, we need to put them out, not because we don't care, but because nothing else can be done.
- F. If we've done all we can do, the stumbling of that child will not be reckoned as our fault, and this is exactly the point that Jesus raises in Matthew 18:18. Before we get on to what this means, it's interesting to note that the wording here is exactly the same as what Jesus says to Peter after Peter's confession of Christ in Matthew 16. There are those in the denominational world who want to say that these words from Jesus gave Peter special authority, but here, we see them being directed toward ordinary disciples. Clearly, this is not any kind of grant of authority at all. Instead, Jesus is just saying that when we mark a brother after having done everything we can to save him, our actions just reflect the actions that God has already taken in heaven. God doesn't want anybody to be lost, but He knows that even the blood of Jesus can't save someone who doesn't want to be.

Conclusion. If you want to be saved, though, you can be. Seek the grace of God tonight.