

**“Lessons from Children”**  
**Matthew 18:1-9**  
**April 23, 2023**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Jesus’ disciples have a question they want Jesus to answer for them. **“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”** Mark fills in the context more fully than Matthew and informs us that this question arose as a result of an argument the disciples were having. They were on their way back to Capernaum, which served as something of their Galilean home base, and the disciples began arguing with one another as they walked along about which one of them was the greatest. They thought they were out of earshot of Jesus during the argument, but of course we are never out of earshot of Jesus. When they arrive in Capernaum, Jesus asks them what they were talking about, though he already knows the answer. They were too ashamed to answer, so they remained silent. Perhaps it was before Jesus’ question to them that they made their inquiry to Jesus about greatness.

So it would seem that the question that opens our text in Matthew was for the purpose of settling an argument. Perhaps they were disagreeing with one another about the standard of such greatness, with each one insisting that the standard was something true of that person. Maybe Peter would make the case that greatness was defined by the one who would take leadership, because Peter often did so. Maybe others of them were more naturally gifted in teaching and claimed that teachers were the great ones in the kingdom. Perhaps some of them had demonstrated special powers in healing and casting out demons, and they were convinced that great power equaled great status. So their question really amounts to, “Jesus, can you help us settle our argument about which one of *us* is the greatest?” They couldn’t agree with one another, but at least they could agree on letting Jesus settle the matter. If he would weigh in on the question of the standard for such greatness, it would settle the argument. I can imagine that each one of them was absolutely convinced that Jesus would endorse their view.

Not only did Jesus not endorse the view any of them had about greatness in the kingdom of heaven, he changes the topic from greatness in heaven to entrance into heaven. **“Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** Forget greatness in the kingdom, he is saying, you can’t even get into the kingdom without the childlike quality of humility. Let’s look more, then, at this lesson and another that children teach us.

**I. Become Like Them – v. 1-4**

Jesus proceeds to answer their question by calling for a child to be brought. We know from other passages the general attitude of the disciples toward children. That attitude, typical of the one that would have been shared by many in that day, was simply that children were merely unimportant necessities. Adults were the important ones, but since adults had to be children first, children were tolerated and cared for but not esteemed. So we see the disciples elsewhere shooing them away. Important people like Jesus and his disciples had no time for such unimportant people as children.

Jesus sees the world differently and more truly. While children often long for grown up status, Jesus says to grownups that they should strive to become childlike. He explains what he means in verse 4. **“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”** He is telling the disciples, “Your standard for greatness is all wrong; humility is the standard you should have.” Currency for greatness in the kingdom of this world is prominence. Great people, we think, are the ones with money, power, and giftedness. But in the kingdom of God the currency is humble dependence. Edith Shaeffer, wife of Francis Schaeffer, was once asked by an interviewer, “Who is the greatest Christian woman alive today?” She replied, “We don’t know her name. She is dying of cancer somewhere in a hospital in India.” Of course, she didn’t mean that literally, but was reflecting what Jesus is saying here. Since worldly prominence is not the standard of greatness in God’s kingdom, the truly great ones will be hidden from our view.

Since Jesus wants us to learn humility from children, let’s explore more fully the lessons children teach us about this. Three lessons on humility come to mind. First, children give ready acknowledgement of their helplessness. As a result, they are willing to be dependent. When a child has a need, their first response is usually to ask for help. When a two-year-old gets hungry, he doesn’t go and open the refrigerator door to make a snack for himself. He asks a parent or grandparent. When a child is terrified, what does she do? She runs as fast as she can to a mother or father, with arms out, wanting to be picked up and comforted. What is the opposite of this kind of helplessness? It is the settled conviction that I can do this myself. If I work hard enough and smart enough, then pretty much anything can be accomplished. Indeed, there are many things that require hard work done wisely. But there are not many things that can be accomplished by those things alone. So much that we do is out of our control, depending on the alignment of circumstances and people that we are unable to accomplish on our own. Furthermore, this attitude of self-dependence instead of self-helplessness will wear us out, fill us with anxiety and eventually with despair. So Jesus invites us into the attitude of a child, who feels absolutely no hesitation in admitting helplessness.

This readiness to admit helplessness leads to a second lesson on humility that children can teach us. They are not hesitant to ask boldly. Unlike adults,

whose pride makes us hesitant to ask anyone for anything, children are not bashful in the least to ask pretty much for anything they might want. And they are usually undeterred by negative answers. It doesn't slow down their bold requests in the least. During Thanksgiving a few years ago, several family members were staying with us over the holiday weekend, including our oldest grandson, who was two-and-a-half-years old at the time. Our mothers were still living with us, so we were a little short on bedrooms and Hastings slept on the floor of our bedroom. His normal wake up time was 6:00 a.m. eastern time. So just before 5:00 every morning, I was awakened by a little guy crawling up into our bed and saying, "Play, Pops?" It would be the first of many such requests throughout the day, and everyone would come with a simple willingness to receive whatever I wanted to give him.

Third, children base this bold asking on a confidence in their identity as children of parents who love them. Their requests are often messy and silly, but still they come, confident in the welcome they will receive even if the request is not granted. I received a call this week from our four-year-old grandson, Max. He had a project at school to interview a community helper and give a report on that helper, and he wanted to interview me as a pastor. He called during a busy time on my day off. I was trying to get a bunch of overdue yardwork done, and in the middle of that, we had an electrical problem develop at our house. But what do you think was my attitude when he called? I was thrilled and would have dropped anything to talk to him. At some level, he is aware of that, and his confidence in his identity as a well-loved son and grandson gives him a readiness to ask.

I wasn't originally scheduled to preach either last week or this week. When emergencies required me to do so, I didn't want to break up the Romans preaching schedule. So I had the opportunity to select any passage both of these weeks, and I can't help but notice that God led me both weeks to passages that are relevant to things happening in my own life. I preached last week on the Canaanite woman with the demon-possessed daughter who, in her desperation, comes to Jesus for help. And this week, I'm preaching on a passage that calls us to seek greatness in the kingdom by being humble and helpless in bringing our needs to God.

One night this past week, I woke up at 3:00 a.m. with many things on my mind that I needed to attend to. The church staff has experienced numerous personal challenges since the beginning of the year. Our church administrator has been in and out of the hospital for the past two and half months and is still not able to return to work. Clint's mom almost died, and being her only child, he was out for several weeks to attend to her needs. Our bookkeeper of 28 years announced her retirement, and a decision was made to provide for this need through outsourcing, which has led to a great deal of work to implement this change. Steve Whitner's dad, who lives with Steve and Tracy, looks to be near the end of his life. Steve and Tracy are alone in attending to his needs

because they lost their sitters due to his dad's positive COVID test. Our children's ministry is bursting at the seams. God has brought many visitors to our church over the past six months. We are working hard in planning the pastoral transition. And there are still all the normal pastoral things needing doing. So when I woke up at 3:00 a.m., my heart was not at rest. Even though I had been meditating on this passage, it suddenly hit me that I wasn't practicing the childlike humility Jesus commends here.

The humility I was lacking in my 3:00 a.m. episode was the humility that should have had me take my helplessness to one who could help me. In reading Paul Miller's book, *A Praying Life*, I was reminded of the many examples just in John's gospel of people coming to Jesus out of their helplessness. His mother comes to him during the wedding at Cana and says, "They have no wine" (John 2:3). The Samaritan woman has no water. The official's son has no health. The crippled man by the pool of Bethesda has no help to get into the water. The crowd has no bread. The blind man has no sight, and Lazarus has no life.

There is a difference between a mental assent of helplessness and the actual feeling of helplessness. We can mentally assent to helplessness one moment, and then begin a new strategy of self-dependence the next moment. But when we feel our helplessness at a deep level, the only two choices we have are despair or the childlike humility of dependence on God. Ironically, greatness in God's kingdom begins with a feeling of great helplessness.

## II. Receive Them – v. 5-9

Verse 5 marks a new section. Jesus is still talking about humility and about "children" and "little ones," but he is not referring to literal children any longer. When he says that we are to receive "**one such child**" in his name, he is speaking of his followers as children of God. The "little ones" of verse 6 are also followers of Christ no matter what their age. He commands two acts of love, one which is positive and the other negative. The positive act of love is to receive or welcome other believers. We are not to observe the world's distinctions of race, education, social standing or political affiliation in determining those with whom we associate. We simply receive and welcome fully into our lives those God has received and welcomed.

The negative act comes with a strong warning. It is to make sure that we are not the cause of stumbling for one of Jesus' followers. Our translation here is a little weak when it speaks of being the cause of someone "to sin." The same word is used by Jesus just a few chapters earlier in the parable of the soils to speak of the rocky soil. This is the one who has the word sown in his heart, but his soil is shallow "**and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away**" (Matt. 13:21). The word translated

“falling away” is the same as our word. So the warning here concerns the person whose behavior or teaching results in another follower of Jesus falling away from faith. Jesus says that for such a person, it would have been better if someone had tied a millstone around his neck and thrown it into the sea. The millstone he is speaking of is the “great” millstone, to distinguish it from the small household grinder with a relatively small grindstone. This is the community millstone, the one so big that it had to be turned by a beast of burden.

What is it that a person can do that would cause another to stumble and fall away like this? Verses 8-9 answer that question by saying that it is unrepentant sin. So Jesus urges drastic measures in dealing with our own sin. **“And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.”** And then he urges the same with another body part, the eye. If it is the source of the sin, Jesus says, gouge it out. Of course, Jesus isn’t speaking literally. The truth is that such self-mutilation would have no beneficial effect in dealing with our sin, because its source lies deeper than any body part.

Let me point out a couple of things we learn from these verses. First, Jesus reverses our tendency to minimize our sin. He does so by speaking of what’s at stake, and it’s the lives of others. But our own lives are at stake as well. Jesus says that unrepentant sin is the path to hell. Better, he says, to pay any price necessary, no matter how painful, than **“to be thrown into the hell of fire.”**

We also learn here that repentance is painful, like the gouging out of the eye or the amputation of a hand or foot. If there is no sorrow associated with our repentance, it is not true repentance.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the one who is most helpless and most dependent. It is the person who has come to realize that he or she can’t do life by themselves. Help from God is needed at every point of life. It is needed for our sin problem, and God has provided that through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is needed as we move forward in this broken world too. May God give you greatness in the kingdom by giving you great, childlike humility!