

Matthew 18:5-6

Introduction

Matthew eighteen, we remember, is the fourth of five major discourses of Jesus that Matthew records. The specific theme of this discourse is how we are to live together in community as the true assembly of the Messiah (we could summarize the theme as “life in the kingdom community”). Chapter eighteen began with the disciples asking Jesus a very “practical” question about who the great ones would be in this new assembly of the Messiah. But Jesus knew that behind the “practicality” of the disciples’ question was a very deeply rooted and fundamental problem in their attitudes and in their thinking. So Jesus first warned the disciples that unless *they* turned and became like children they would not even be granted *entrance* into the kingdom of heaven! But if the disciples’ want to talk about *greatness* in the kingdom, then they must know that the requirement for greatness is no different than the requirement for “getting in”.

“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” The truly “great ones” in this assembly are not those with the most gifts, and abilities, and talents, or those who have contributed the most in terms of resources and service, or those who hold positions of authority and leadership. The truly “great ones” in this assembly are those who have humiliated themselves by assuming the status of an insignificant little child living in a world full of important grownups. As those who have humbled ourselves to be like little children, we have no “self-respect” or dignity left to maintain. As those who have humbled ourselves to be like little children, we don’t expect any of the recognition, and credit, and appreciation, and respect that is given to the adults. The greatest in the kingdom of heaven are those who humble themselves as if they themselves were only little children surrounded by important grownups. This is the key to living together in true community, as the true assembly of the Messiah.

So Jesus has answered the disciples’ question, but there is more now that needs to be said. On the one hand, we must all turn and become like little children ourselves. But on the other hand, what should be our attitude towards the “children” that are all around us? Jesus goes on to say:

I. Matthew 18:5 — Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.

Notice that Jesus says “one such child”. Of course, there is a literal child still standing in their midst, but that child is still serving as a *symbol* of *all* those who have very little significance and importance in the world (cf. 1-4). This would certainly *include* children, but it would not be *limited* to children. In verse five, instead of saying “one such child”, Jesus will refer to “one of these little ones”. When we hear “little ones” we can tend to think of words like “sweet”, and “innocent”, and “cute”. But this was not necessarily the connotation of “little ones” in Jesus’ day. Instead of “little”, we could translate “*small*”, or “*least*” (cf. Mat. 13:32; Mk. 15:40; Lk. 12:32; 19:3; Jm. 3:5) as opposed to “big”, and “important”, and “great”.

✓ Matthew 11:11 — The one who is *least* [*littlest/most insignificant*] in the kingdom of heaven is *greater* than [John the Baptist].

In the New Testament, one vivid way of referring to *everyone* and to *all* was to add something like “from the least to the greatest.”

- ✓ Acts 8:10 (cf. Heb. 8:11) — They *all* paid attention to him, ***from the least [the littlest and most insignificant] to the greatest.***
- ✓ Acts 26:22 (cf. Rev. 11:18; 19:5) — I stand here testifying both to ***small [the little and insignificant] and [to] great.***
- ✓ Revelation 19:17-18; cf. Rev. 20:12 — Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of *all* men, both ***free and slave***, both ***small [little and insignificant] and great.***
- ✓ Revelation 13:16 — [The beast] causes *all*, both ***small [little and insignificant] and great***, both ***rich and poor***, both ***free and slave***, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead.

We can see in these last two references that the “little ones” are not only children, but also the “poor” and the “slaves”. So the true connotation of “little one” is not sweet, and innocent, and cute, but rather small, and insignificant, and unimportant. And it’s this very same thing that is being symbolized by the child in the midst of the disciples. So Jesus is saying in verse five: “Whoever receives the small, and the insignificant, and the unimportant in my name receives me.”

But now we have to ask what it means to “*receive*” such a person. Some translations say “whoever welcomes” (NIV; NRSV). But behind this idea of receiving and welcoming is the picture of biblical *hospitality* and of welcoming and receiving someone into one’s own *home*.

- ✓ Matthew 10:14 (cf. 10:40-41) — If anyone will not ***receive*** you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet *when you leave that house* or town.
- ✓ Luke 9:52-53 (cf. John 4:45) — [Jesus] sent messengers ahead of him, who went and *entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him*. But the people did not ***receive*** him.
- ✓ Luke 16:4 — I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may ***receive*** me *into their houses*.
- ✓ Luke 16:9 — Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may ***receive*** you *into the eternal dwellings*.
- ✓ Hebrews 11:31 (NRSV) — By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had ***received*** the spies in peace.
- ✓ Galatians 4:14 (cf. 2 Cor. 7:15; 11:16) — And *though my condition was a trial to you*, you did not scorn or despise me, but ***received*** me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

Now hospitality in the eastern cultures of the Bible times was a much different affair than our western version of hospitality today! The fact is, we would label the hospitality of the Bible times as “over the top”. To show hospitality in that time and culture was to bend over backwards in every way possible to make one’s guest as comfortable and as happy as possible in the shortest amount of time possible (we need only remember the example of Abraham in Genesis 18)! Today we might even call this kind of hospitality “fawning” – except for the fact that this fawning was *sincere*! Because of what hospitality looked like in Jesus’ day, to show hospitality

was one of the highest signs of *respect, and honor, and deference* that any one person could show to another! And it's precisely this display of "over the top" respect and honor and deference that Jesus has in mind when He talks about "*receiving*" and "*welcoming*" *one such child*.

Receiving and welcoming *who*? A mere *child*! Now it's difficult enough for us to show *anyone* the *utmost* respect and honor, and to truly be *sincere* about it. But to show this "over the top" respect, and honor, and deference *to the smallest, and the most unimportant, and the most insignificant disciple*—and to truly be *sincere* about it—is absolutely impossible because it grates against everything within us... *unless*, of course, we have already assumed for *ourselves* the status of an insignificant child who is surrounded only and always by important "grownups"! If I have already turned and become like a little child, then why should I have any problem "fawning" over even the lowest and most insignificant of all Jesus' disciples and *sincerely* treating him or her like a king or a queen – like true *royalty*? And of course, if I'm called to receive and welcome even "one such child" in Jesus' name, then I am called to receive and welcome *all* of Jesus' disciples in the same way – from the least to the greatest, because after all, even the least are *greater* than I am!

O brothers and sisters! Can't we see what an extreme, and radical, and even revolutionary calling this is?!? On the one hand, we are to assume for *ourselves* the smallness, and the insignificance of little children living among important grownups. On the other hand, we are to show the utmost honor and respect even to those who are "smaller," and "less significant," and "less important" than we are! In a manner of speaking, we are to make the comfort and happiness of even the least of all Jesus' disciples *our* first and highest calling! While I humble myself to be like a little child, I am to receive and welcome you like true royalty – like kings and queens. While you abandon all expectations of respect and honor for yourself, you are to lavish this respect and honor upon everyone around you – *even*, and *especially*, upon those who are less "important" than you are. But how can this ever be?!? It's completely and totally *contrary* to every single instinct of our sinful and fallen natures. If we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that it doesn't seem *right* to us – it doesn't seem *fair*. Is there no compensation? Is there no reward for denying myself the respect and honor I thought I deserved, and then giving that very same honor and respect to the *least* of all Jesus' disciples? Well, of course, the question itself betrays how corrupted and depraved our hearts really are, but at the end of all that the answer, believe it or not, is *yes*! There *is* a reward for receiving and welcoming even the most "insignificant" disciple, but the reward is in the actual *doing* of the deed, because to receive and welcome the least disciple in Jesus name *IS* to receive and welcome *Jesus Himself* – the one who is infinitely *more* "significant" and *more* "important" than any other person on the face of the earth! And so to quote one commentator, "In this way Jesus gives to the least important person a significance *out of all proportion* to their human standing. The last is indeed first" (France). Jesus is turning *everything* on its head – upside down and inside out! He's calling us to think and act in ways that are the complete and total opposite of our most "logical" assumptions! How far away we are from anything that comes close to the extreme and radical nature of this picture! But once again, *here* is the *secret*, *here* is the *key* to living together in true *community*, as the true *assembly* of the Messiah! By the grace of God, and by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit, are *we* receiving and welcoming one another – *truly*?

But what's the alternative to "receiving and welcoming"? Well, in Jesus' world there were only two very black and white alternatives. "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me..."

II. Matthew 18:6 — ... but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to [stumble], it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

This is truly one of the most severe and most terrifying things that Jesus ever says. Death by drowning is a terrible thing, and yet here Jesus doesn't hesitate to describe such a death even in the most vivid terms. Could there be anything worse than having a great millstone fastened around my neck and then to be drowned in the depth of the sea? Seriously now, what do you think? Jesus answers this question with an emphatic *YES*. Better a premature death by drowning than that we should live long enough to be the cause of stumbling for even the least and most insignificant of Jesus' disciples.

The picture here is that of an obstacle in a path that causes someone to trip and fall so that he is in danger of never getting up again. But where was this person headed? What path was this person on? Jesus says: "Whoever causes one of these little ones *who believe in me* to stumble..." So this small and insignificant person was on the path of discipleship. He was believing – he was trusting – in Jesus. But then someone came along who damaged and undermined that trust so that humanly speaking he was even in danger of permanently falling away from the faith. Brothers and sisters, better to have a great millstone fastened around our necks and to be drowned in the depth of the sea than to be *in any way even remotely connected* with the damaging or the undermining of a fellow disciple's faith and trust in the Lord Jesus. But the truly *fearful* thing here is to know that there are any number of ways that we can become guilty of this very thing! One commentator writes: "To lead a person into sin is one means of causing them to 'stumble,' but their life and development as disciples may equally be damaged by discouragement or unfair criticism, by a lack of [loving and tender] care, or by the failure to forgive" (France). Brothers and sisters, there are numerous ways that we can damage and undermine the faith of that disciple who is sitting next to us in the pew! Do we realize this? Are we aware of this? Do we truly understand the fact that as we live life in community, we are having a constant *affect and influence* upon the spiritual lives of everyone around us – whether for good or for ill – through our countenances, through our words, through our attitudes, through our actions? Not one of us is an island. So we must actually *wish* for a premature death by drowning rather than to live and cause any one of "these little ones" to stumble. And as Lenski says: "By forbidding the entrapment which *kills* spiritually all lesser spiritual harm to others is *equally* forbidden (emphasis mine)."

But at the end of the day, there's really only one sure way to avoid being the cause of stumbling in a brother's or a sister's life, and that one sure way is to *welcome* and *receive* one another in Jesus' name. That *one sure way* to avoid a preferable fate of death by drowning is to welcome and receive one another as true royalty – with true Christian honor and respect and love.

Conclusion

Once again, the stakes here are far higher than probably any one of us would have ever imagined (cf. Mat. 18:1-3).

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 3:17 — If anyone destroys God’s temple [church/assembly], God will destroy him.

If we would avoid causing spiritual harm to one another; if we would avoid damaging or undermining the faith, and trust, and obedience of one of these little ones; if we would avoid making death by drowning a preferable fate, then we *must* welcome and receive one another as true royalty, and with true Christian honor and respect and love. *While* I humiliate myself to be like a little child, I *must* receive and welcome you like kings and queens. *While* you abandon all expectations of respect and honor for yourself, you *must* lavish this same respect and honor upon everyone else – from the least to the greatest.

I want to ask us again: Can we begin to *feel* in our *hearts* what an extreme, and radical, and even revolutionary calling this is?!? Let’s not take it for granted, or quickly pass over it as something that we’ve always known. Jesus is turning *everything* upside down and inside out! He is calling us to think and act in ways that are the complete and total opposite of our most “*logical*” assumptions and our most *natural* inclinations. If any one of us thinks that this is not a pressing and a burning issue for us personally as members of this assembly, then we are indeed *very much* deceived!

Here once again is the *secret*, *here* is the *key* to living together in true *community*, as the true *assembly* of the Messiah! Are we a potential cause of stumbling to the brother or sister sitting next to us in the pew? Or are we receiving and welcoming one another (*no matter who he or she may be!*), *as we would receive and welcome Jesus Himself?*

- ✓ Philippians 2:3, 5 — Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others *more significant than* (“*more important than*” [NASB]; “*better than*” [NRSV]; “*above*”, [NIV]) yourselves... Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours *in Christ Jesus*.