

Matthew 18:1-6 – “Like a Child” – Mar. 10, 2024

1. Today’s text marks another shift from the narrative of Jesus’s travels and His actions back to His preaching
2. He is going to use a small child to teach a lesson about the kingdom
 - a. We are going to learn about childlike faith, which is different than childish faith
3. Kingdom has been a major theme in this gospel
 - a. Most would agree that the “kingdom of God/heaven” is the primary theme in Matthew
 - i. The terms are interchangeable
 - b. The point of Christ’s lesson in this passage is to show how a child teaches us about life in God’s kingdom
4. V.1 – *“At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?””*
 - a. Just because Jesus is talking so much about the kingdom of heaven doesn’t mean that everyone is catching on yet
 - i. After all, in North America today we have a lot of marriage books
 1. This isn’t a sign that we’re really crushing it
 2. The books exist because of the ocean of confusion around us
 - ii. Likewise, one of the reasons that Christ spends so much time preaching about the kingdom of God is because it is an incredibly important theme, and the 1st century Jewish people had a lot of confusion over this theme
 - b. Mark and Luke show that the disciples had been arguing among themselves about who would be the greatest

- c. This account skips that detail and starts with this question coming to Jesus with their argument
- d. The whole question is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the kingdom
 - i. Remember if we go back into recent Jewish history, the Jews had organized themselves into sub-groups largely based upon their political theory
 - 1. Sadducees – Pharisees – Essenes – Zealots
 - 2. What defined each group was their approach towards what it looked like to live as a faithful Jew when your homeland was occupied by a foreign power
 - 3. The Romans were ruling the Jewish homeland
- e. It is understandable that the disciples would have been thinking about regaining political control of the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel when they heard Jesus talking about the kingdom
 - i. They assumed that Christ was going to establish a political government which was going to administer a national kingdom
 - ii. They were jockeying for plum government jobs
 - 1. Minister of Finance, Ambassador to Morocco, etc.
- f. These men are still expecting the kingdom to come like the 82nd Airborne division, seize control of Israel, and then run a national government
 - i. Like the first century Jewish leaders, many today have the same assumptions about the nature of God’s kingdom, but because these things haven’t happened, that this kind of kingdom must still be future

- g. Christ has been consistently pushing back against this assumption by teaching about the nature of His kingdom
 - i. Starts small like a mustard seed and grows into a large tree
 - ii. Acts like a pinch of leaven which slowly but surely works its way all through a large lump of dough
 - iii. The kingdom enters history in stages, as we most recently saw in 16:28
- h. Some make the opposite kind of assumption that because the kingdom is spiritual, it doesn't really do much in the world; it's a kind of anti-creational gospel of escape
 - i. The wisdom of Christ's kingdom teaching shows us that while the kingdom is spiritual, it very much enters physical reality and goes about making real-world changes;
 - ii. *After all, it is leaven that gets into the *whole* lump*
- i. this spiritual kingdom makes landfall in the person of Jesus Christ
 - i. the kingdom keeps coming gradually through history until Christ's prayer is answered that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven
 - ii. this is the long process of remarrying heaven and earth, so as time goes on, this invisible spiritual kingdom gets more and more visible and physical
 - 1. it is entirely fitting that the spiritual kingdom comes to the physical earth through the God-man Jesus Christ
 - 2. He is the embodiment of heaven and earth; God and man touching each other
 - iii. To a large degree, this is how our individual salvation works as well

1. What starts as an invisible declaration by God that we are justified and righteous starts bearing visible fruit of the Spirit in the real world
- iv. The Christian church is also of heavenly origins, and yet is very visible and physical when we meet together for corporate worship, and when we, Lord willing, construct church buildings as a testimony to God's work on earth
- v. When Jesus says that His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36), He's not saying that His kingdom is not in this world or that it won't change this world; He's saying it doesn't originate from this world
 1. When Great Britain established colonies in North America, we could say that the colonies were not *of* North America, but they most certainly were *in* North America
 - j. So when the disciples are essentially asking who is going to get the best cabinet positions after they get Jesus elected president, they are working with mistaken assumptions about how this all works
5. VV.2-4 – *“And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them 3 and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”*
 - a. Now Christ starts His object lesson with a child
 - b. The word “turn” in v.3 can be understood to be a reference to repentance and conversion

- i. It is a turning around; a change of mind and lifestyle
- c. The necessary first step of entering the kingdom is personal conversion
 - i. Nobody will enter the kingdom by birth or by good behaviour or good motives
 - ii. Whoever is in the kingdom is in the kingdom by conversion
 - iii. John the Baptist and Jesus Christ both came preaching the kingdom of God, and the first words out of both of their mouths were “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand” (Matthew 3:2; 4:17)
 - iv. There is no entry into the kingdom apart from bending your knee to the king and submitting your life to His will
 - v. Psalm 2 speaks of this as “kissing the Son”; Ezekiel 36 describes it as God taking out a heart of stone and putting in a heart of flesh; in John 3, Jesus describes this as being born again
 - vi. Here Jesus says we must turn and become like children or we will never enter the kingdom of heaven
- d. Repentance and conversion involves humility (v.4)
- e. Sometimes people assume that children are a model of kingdom citizens because they are innocent or because they are unlearned
 - i. Scripture is clear that we are all born in sin and are by nature children of wrath
 - ii. Hebrews also warns us that we need to be eager to move on from milk to red meat
 - iii. Staying naïve or staying sheltered is not what is in view here

1. Being ignorant of the Scriptures would be childish, not childlike
- f. So what is being commended here?
- i. One of the joys that children experience is actually moving from naivete to maturity
 - ii. Children love to explore and to learn and to try things, and this is exactly what we are commended to do as well
 1. Psalm 1 opens up a glorious vision of the man of God whose

“delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.”
 - iii. Child-like faith has such deep trust and comfort in the wisdom and goodness of one’s Father that it keeps coming back to ask questions and to learn
 - iv. Child-like faith also looks at the world with awe and wonder and joy
 - v. There is a sense of adventure and fearlessness that can be present in children if they feel utterly secure in the care of their parents
 1. Kids don’t worry about getting lost on a road trip – they see dad behind the wheel and they have enough trust that they can concentrate on the more important things like games and laughter
 - vi. Children are likewise humble because they have not yet learned the folly of self-sufficiency
 1. As we get older we tend to see ourselves more and more as the masters of our own ship and the commanders of our own destiny

- a. Not surprisingly, carrying that weight is precisely what makes us unhappy and old and dull and tired
- 2. Children know much better than adults on this
 - a. They get fed and dressed and carried around by their parents
 - b. Their days are planned out for them by another, so it is not hard for a child to be humble and trusting, and this is the key to their youthfulness and to their humility
 - c. They have no pretence of being powerful or important – they enjoy the freedom of being guests in someone else’s world
 - d. Small children know they don’t know what mom and dad know, and this doesn’t discourage them. This humble acknowledgement actually stimulates their desire to learn.
 - i. “Daddy, why?”
 - e. Chesterton – *“Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, “Do it again”; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do*

it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we."

f. Henry – *"We must be humble as little children; the child of a gentleman will pay with the child of a beggar. The age of childhood is the learning age."*

vii. It is not innocent or ignorance which are commendable in small children

1. Innocence doesn't exist
2. Ignorance is not a virtue to be commended but a deficiency to be overcome
3. *It is the humility of a trusting and teachable spirit*

viii. Application for small children (Family Integrated Worship)

1. Children learn to become adults by observing adults
2. Children learn how to speak not from baby talk, but from listening to grown-ups talking
3. Children learn how to become Christians not from being separated from the life of the church, but from being part of it
 - a. If they are only surrounded by other children they will never learn how to sit still in church

- b. If they are with adults, they have a tremendous blessing of seeing that we listen carefully during a sermon, and we learn the words to old hymns so we have natural *affections for other Christians who were dead for many years before we were born*
 - c. We see and hear the glory of pages turning in Bibles
 - g. So when the disciples of Christ are thinking about political power and palace intrigue, Christ is telling them that in His kingdom, the way up is down
 - i. If you want to be first, you must have the humility to put yourself last
 - ii. If you want to rule over people, become a servant to all
6. Application for young men
- a. Your desire to rule and to lead and have dominion and to achieve things is a masculine expression of the image of God
 - i. It is good, but like all good things, Satan is doing his best to twist and distort it
 - ii. A wonderful principle to remember is that we must take dominion the way Christ does
 - iii. If you want to be greatest in the kingdom of heaven, learn how to bleed for other people; most especially your wife if God should be so kind as to give you one
 - iv. Whether with your family, or at your work, or here in church you will notice a principle that is always at work
 - 1. *Authority flows naturally to those who take responsibility*

- a. Cleaning up chairs and befriending a newcomer when nobody is watching is just as much preparation for becoming an elder as advanced theological training
- b. I say that as someone who things advanced theological training is vital

7. VV. 5, 6 – *“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, 6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, 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.”*

- a. Christ goes on to say that if we receive those of this childlike faith, that we receive Him
- b. It would seem that this is one of those instances where we have something of a continuous feedback loop
 - i. If we have the humility to receive humble people, we demonstrate that we have received Christ
 - ii. But further to that, by receiving these people, we become more like them ourselves; we become like the people we surround ourselves with
 - 1. So by receiving the humble, we grow in our own humility, and receive more of Christ in this way
- c. Because Christ loves these little ones, He loves it when we love them
 - i. But love is a two-sided coin
 - ii. Because Christ loves these people, He hates it when others hate them by leading them into sin

- iii. Christ is angry at those who hate the children He has adopted into His family
- d. This can be done in various ways
 - i. I think the most obvious and instinctive thought that many of us have when reading this verse is to think of grown-ups who lead children into sin
 - 1. And this is certainly the case
 - 2. How many parents teach their children to swear or to slander
 - 3. Worse, we live in an age that is both sexualizing children and dulling their consciences
 - a. I heard a report this last week of a young boy who was part of a class discussion about the impressions they had of a picture they had seen
 - b. A person in the photo had been holding a rainbow flag, and this young boy told the group what that flag meant and that that was wrong
 - i. His teacher quickly corrected him to let him know that we can't say other people's ideas are wrong
 - ii. In other words, *she told him that his ideas were wrong*
 - iii. She was using her authority to corrupt and numb the conscience of a young boy who was advocating godliness

- c. Dulling and warping the godly consciences of young children is a contemptible sin
 - d. Jesus gives the image of a great millstone being tied around one's neck and thrown into the sea to say that this would be preferable to the punishment that these people are on their way to getting
 - ii. But application is not limited to young children
 - iii. This can also apply to new believers or weak believers, or really any time someone entices another into sin
 - 1. Every time some pastor or Bible college or seminary instructor teaches their students that Moses didn't actually write the Pentateuch, or that gender roles don't matter, or that all the blood and penal substitution language of the Bible is outdated, they are guilty of leading these little ones under their care into sin
 - 2. Sometimes it's more slippery than this; sometimes we set things up that doesn't directly go against Scripture, but we elevate other things to a place of pre-eminence so that we effectively demote Scripture
 - a. How many pastors do we know that latch on to some sociology study and feel the need to revamp their church around this new ground-breaking insight?

- b. Or elder boards pick up some fad program or church growth model, and start to govern the church around this rather than the instructions given in Scripture?
 - c. How many of us parents are leading their children into sinning against the Sabbath by teaching them that church is important as long as there isn't something important like family brunch or sports happening on Sunday morning?
- iv. there are plenty of applications we can think of regarding how those who are responsible to teach and to lead end up using their authority to provoke people into sin
- v. I think it is also important to consider the contextual situation on the ground here thought
1. Christ has just given an important lesson on humility, teachableness, and trust when asked who would be greatest in the kingdom
 2. Christ not only corrects their view of the nature of the kingdom, but teaches a further lesson about the role of humility in the kingdom
 3. This is all in a setting where the Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes are all working not only with a faulty view of the Messiah's kingdom, but these men are all also incredibly proud and self-righteous

- a. They are weighing people down with heavy burdens and closing the door of the kingdom in their faces
 - b. The leaders are refusing to let God’s people have access to God – how perverse!
4. Jesus is going to boil over with anger about these people in Matthew 23

- a. *“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”* (vv.13-16)
- b. *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”* (vv.37-39)
- c. The judgement language here matches similar language in Revelation 18:21 –

- i. *“Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, “So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more;”*

8. We’ve learned yet more about the kingdom from the mouth of Christ here

- a. This kingdom works differently than some may have expected
- b. In the kingdoms of men, you promote yourself and use other people to climb up
 - i. In the kingdom of God, the way up is down
 - ii. The way to glory is humility
- c. The way into this kingdom is repentance and conversion, and neither of these happen apart from seeing ourselves for who we are; and seeing God for who He is
 - i. If we see this, humility becomes the only appropriate response
- d. One sign that we have grasped this spirit of humility is that we want the best for others; we want to encourage others to enjoy the peace of living in God’s kingdom instead of enticing them towards sin

9. CHARGE

- a. *The kingdom of God is here already, but not yet fully. Christ has given more instruction on how His kingdom is to be made increasingly visible in the lives of His people. In His kingdom, the way to dominion is through suffering, the way up is down, and the way to greatness is through humility. We must become like children to live in this kingdom – trusting, dependant, filled with awe and wonder, teachable, and humble. These traits are the fruits of repentance that demonstrate that we have bent the knee to the King and are fit to live in His kingdom. Our*

charge this week is to examine ourselves for these traits – is the conduct of our lives consistent with our citizenship?

10. BENEDICTION

- a. 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24 – *“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”*