

## Matthew 18:1-14

This Message will focus on Matthew 18:1-14. Let us first get fully acquainted with the broader context before reviewing it piece by piece:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, 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.

"Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! 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 two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

"See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. (Matthew 18:1-14)

*\*For additional background and insight see parallel passages Mark 9:33-37 and Luke 9:46-48.*

I personally find Jesus' teaching about being like a child to be the richest material in the gospels. By "richest" I mean it has many layers and dimensions of insight that can fill hours of reflection and seemingly keep growing as the experiences of the believer expand and transition. In this Message I will drill a few holes into this rich gold deposit, but I am confident the spiritual assay results will still leave us quite shy of knowing the full extent of its value.

## Childlike Humility

The disciples were vying to be the greatest in God's kingdom. Jesus warned His ambitious disciples:

"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:3)

And then for clarification He added:

Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (18:4)

Children do not have ambitious desires to be great. It is not even remotely on their thought radar. To broaden their perspective, I tell my sons and daughter that they can be kings or a queen in God's kingdom, if they do what He says, but never are such statements by me met with personal aspiration.

Jesus told His disciples a turning (repentance) was required from their pursuits of greatness. He then more broadly advised, "whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven," revealing that *the highest ranking class of individuals in His kingdom will be comprised of those who conducted themselves in service to Him in this life with child-like humility.*

Jesus said that I need to humble myself like a child. How do I do this? The gospel of Mark also recorded Him saying, "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (10:13-15). So how do I receive the kingdom like a child?

Let us consider the life of a child. I have the advantage right now of having a six, four, and two year old. Also, I am around them all the time, because I work from home and they are homeschooled. Here are some reflective points on childlike humility:

- **Dependence** - Children are totally dependent on their parents for provision, instruction in everything, practical and emotional healing love (e.g., after falling down and getting hurt), encouragement, and leadership example. They cling to their parents.
- **Imagination** - Children are very imaginative. Their creativity is not restricted by established mindsets. They easily believe the supernatural works of God.
- **Never Complain About Material Circumstances** - Children fuss about what is on the dinner plate, but they never complain about where they live, how big their room is, or what type of car their parents drive. I have found this to be one of the most refreshing aspects of children.
- **Do Not Categorize People** - Children do not care about how much money people have, their accent, their appearance, or the color of their skin. Like God, they are not respecters of persons. They treat everyone the same. It is not hard for them to process the Biblical fact that we are all descendants of Adam & Eve and there is only one race.
- **Transparency** - What you see is what you get with children. There is no fake veneer. Just like Jesus

Christ, the truth of their heart shines in the open.

Learning from a summary of these points, we see that child-like humility encompasses total dependence on God, unrestricted faith, complete transparency of the heart, disregard for material pursuits, and freedom from manmade ideologies that divide people. Taken together, child-like humility points to the individual having a pure and innocent heart in the presence of the Almighty Creator and his fellow man.

I personally fear having humility slip from its full possession of my heart and mind. For without humility, the refreshing land of innocence is even further away. I think the best answer to the questions I asked earlier of, "How do I humble myself like a child?" or "How do I receive the kingdom of God like I child?" is to pursue innocence. I am reminded of the simple words of Jesus: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).

Children are simply content living life and their greatest joy is having fun with loving parents. They thrive in the love of God's ordained family where innocence abounds under His protection. *Child-like faith is incubated in a personal friendship with Christ where we are immersed in His joy, peace, and love.* When we become obedient children in God's family our relationship with Him and the things He calls us to do become an adventure with our Father. Our loving Father is with us, ready to do amazing things.

## **No Really, He Means It**

The fundamental issue that many disciples face is that they are not taking Jesus at His word. *Revelation is left uncovered in their adult-like unbelief.* Jesus was dead serious when He said we must become like children. I repeat, few are taking Him at His word on this non-negotiable point.

A prominent obstacle of American Christianity—especially amongst off-course churches run like businesses—is an underlying pressure that comes down from "management" to accomplish so many different things. This hamster wheel of worldly ambition leads to self-dependent works, uninspired duplication, and comparison with others—*all the opposite traits of children.* Why would the lost want more of what they already have too much of 40 hours a week or more? It is a serious stumbling block to real liberty in Christ.

Furthermore, who tends to suffer the most in families caught up in this destructive ambition? The children. When those right in front of you are suffering and they are the ones you are supposed to be like, then you have a serious problem. Children suffer when the disciples they observe are not like children.

From the context of Matthew 18 and the parallel gospel passages we can see that there were children

right there nearby the disciples when they were arguing who would be greatest in the kingdom! *Their misguided ambition was already causing them to set the wrong example and ignore the children right next to them.* What a picture when Jesus says to them that they instead need to be like the children to enter His land! The King's word is law.

## The Millstone Proclamation

To make sure He was perfectly clear, Jesus uttered His millstone proclamation:

Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, 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.

God reveals Himself in this innocence for He said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." Think this through. Jesus said that He is revealed to those with the humility to receive Him through a child. This assertion is confirmed by the parallel verse in the gospel of Luke where Jesus is recorded as adding one additional statement:

"Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. *For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.*" (Luke 9:48; emphasis mine)

Jesus clarified here that the greater the humility, the greater the disciple. If you want to have a deeper relationship with the Lord, then seek humility because He is revealed to those with this childlike attribute.

Jesus then revealed just how zealous He is for the innocence of children and He made the fate of those who mess with them perfectly clear by specifying that they would be better off dying a quick and traumatic death. This is the King I gave my life to serve.

Science teachers telling children that they came from monkeys are clearly standing over hell's barbecue, yet there are many leading under the banner of Christ who would be better off dead than to continue to neglect and/or hinder children through their burdensome ambition, lifestyle compromises, and destructive false doctrines. Their end will be worse than their beginning.

Reflecting His loving desire to prevent disciples from going overboard tied to the anchor, Jesus then advanced His millstone warning (take note off the exclamation points):

"Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! 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 two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

Jesus warned all to not be a vessel for destruction: "Woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!" Then He sternly used a wild exaggeration for further emphasis *because God sees the pain of children suffering on the other side*. There are a great many evil acts that hands and eyes commit, but it is from the imagination of the heart that these proceed.

Sin has an astonishingly powerful ability to replicate itself amongst ignorant observers. Jesus was subtly letting His disciples know that their actions were leading the children under their influence astray.

## Hidden Treasure in the Home

Jesus ended this instruction to His disciples with a final revelation:

"See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. (Matthew 18:10-14)

The greek word *kataphroneo*, translated in verse 10 as "despise," also means "to think little or nothing off." Jesus was emphasizing the importance of not neglecting children. He then gave one of those curious statements that only God, having come down from heaven, can make:

For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

The guardian angels of believing children also report before the throne of God. God watches over the believing little ones with the same intensity that He watches over adult believers.

Jesus then revealed the heart of God for the lost, which intuitively includes children not going astray in the first place. Planting our children in the pathway of God is critical and the responsibility to make sure it happens belongs to us dads:

*Fathers*, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4; emphasis mine)

The heart of God is that children be brought up “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” The family where the Father is not teaching the Word and providing a model for prayer and faith is failing. It is the responsibility of the Father, not the church, so that the standards of God be established in the family from generation to generation.

There is a wondrous blessing hidden here for those who choose to take the Lord at His word. It is not directly spelled out in the gospels, but realized through action. I will conclude with it: *when we are attentive to discipling children, the thoughtful observation of them enriches us with the revelation needed to “become like children” so that we can truly be great in the kingdom of God.*

The springboard for jaw dropping faith in our own lives may be standing right next to us. Parents who pursue innocence are blessed by the example of their children and the children are further reinforced by the faith of the parents. It is a virtuous circle that sets the Spirit of God ablaze in the home.