

Week 31  
April 26, 2009

## **The Kingdom of Children**

**Matthew 18:1-6, 19:13-14**

### **A question of greatness (Matthew 18:1)**

The disciples come to Jesus with a big question. “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

In the gospels of Mark and Luke, an argument is going on. *The boys* are playing king of the hill, debating over who will be greatest in heaven. In all three gospels, Jesus offers a typical answer, straight out of his personal ethic about humble service. “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all.” Service is the best exercise of our humanity and the truest mark of real character in leadership.

In a similar passage, brothers James and John ask for special favors. “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

Jesus is too smart to be trapped, even by friends. So he says, “What do you want me to do for you?”

“Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” On the upside, the brothers seem to be getting the fact that Jesus is the king of glory. On the downside, they seem to be a bit self-seeking.

Jesus’ answer isn’t quite what they are looking for. In essence, he challenges them. “You don’t know what you’re asking for ... you will drink the cup I drink ...” As if to say, the road to greatness in God’s kingdom is a path marked by sacrifice and even suffering for the sake of others. He tells them that the heavenly seating chart isn’t his to draw up.

Then Jesus gives a reiteration about servanthood. “You know that the unbelieving world gives rule and authority to those who lord over others. My way is different, so your way should be different. If you want to be great, serve. If you want to be first, make yourself a slave to others. Even the Son of Man,” Jesus adds, “didn’t come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

### **Jesus brings a child into their midst (Matthew 18:2-4)**

Then, to illustrate his view on these matters, Jesus brings a child into their midst and stands him up for all to see. He says, “I tell you the truth ...,” which is Jesus’ way of saying, “Listen up, people, this is important.” What’s important? “Unless you change and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven ...”

What does Jesus mean? What is it about a child that is so praiseworthy that it serves as a precondition for heavenly fitness? His answer follows immediately. He gives the big ‘therefore.’ “Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom.”

There are a host of scripture passages that give much the same message, before Jesus, by Jesus and after Jesus. Proverbs 3:34 and 11:2, Isaiah 66:2, Matthew 23:12, Ephesians 4:2, Philippians 2:3 and 8, Titus 3:2, James 4:10 and 1 Peter 5:5-6 all teach us this simple truth: **God loves humility and despises arrogance.** God loves teachability. God honors receptivity. God

blesses childlike simplicity and curiosity and purity. God opposes the proud. God finds the proud to be resistant and rebellious and bossy and abusive and self-seeking. The proud are often conniving, controlling, demeaning and disrespectful of God and others. This is a major theme of the entirety of the Bible.

### **Jesus speaks about the treatment of children (Matthew 18:5-6, 19:13-14)**

Jesus goes on to defend the interests of these walking illustrations of humility - the children.

“Whoever welcomes a little child in my name welcomes me.”

“If anyone causes one of the little ones to sin,” it’s very bad news. We’d be better off tied to an anchor that’s thrown to the bottom of the ocean than facing the consequences of causing little ones to stumble. Jesus goes on to pronounce a woe upon anyone who causes others to stumble or fall into sin. Jesus is no friend of sin, though he is absolutely a friend of sinners. But he has nothing gracious to say about the practice of leading others into sin; or being instigators of rebellion and deterioration in the lives of other people; especially the children. It’s one thing to do wrong, but still more serious in Jesus’ eyes to do things that infect others and cause a spiral in their lives. That might mean leading them into sin by persuasion or modeling, or it might mean harming them in ways that have residual consequences. For example, abuse does harm and abuse begets abuse.

Please don’t start getting hung up on the notion that Jesus heaps shame on those of us who have parented imperfectly or who have events and seasons in life where we know we left dents on the psyche of our children. Jesus forgives all of that, too. But his reason for being emphatic is to stop the madness. Not to heap shame or to send us screaming and running from his judgments. He wants change.

Sometimes, when I’m being stern with my children, they respond by whimpering. Depending on their age, it would be common for me to respond to the whimpering by saying, “I’m not doing this to make you feel bad. I’m doing this so that you will stop and do things differently. I am raising my voice to get your attention. I am talking stern so that you will know that this must stop.” Sometimes, they apologize, and I respond by saying, “I don’t want an apology. The one you are hurting is you. I want change.”

And that’s the goal of parenting ... to prepare little people for life by teaching them what is or is not useful or helpful or fruitful or healthful. The goal of any teacher, of course, is to instigate change ... to modify behavior. Jesus is a teacher. These statements are meant as a warning, and sometimes a harsh word like this is a useful teaching tool. Stop. If you are harming your child, stop. Sometimes we do harm by modeling badly and behaving in ways that actually pass on a legacy of dysfunction to our children. I really don’t believe that Jesus wants us to wallow in regret or swim in shame. He does want the madness to stop. He wants us to change.

Of course, Jesus always wants the innocent and the humble to be honored. It’s simply in the nature of God to want those things.

### **The little children come to Jesus (Matthew 19:13-14)**

As the little ones come to Jesus to touch him and be touched by him, the disciples have a natural reaction. They want the kids to stay clear so that the adults can do adult business.

Jesus’ response? “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to ones such as these.”

He places his hands of blessing on them and takes them in his arms.

Then Jesus offers some additional words, according to Mark 10:15 and Luke 18:17. “I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will not enter it.”

If we want to see heaven and enjoy the eternal kingdom of God, we need to adopt a childlike attitude and receive the kingdom.

### **Adulthood and the games people play**

Here’s our reality: we like to be sophisticated and appear smart. We are proud and polluted by an ambitious world. Becoming like children is not on the agenda of many people. To some of us, this sounds trivial and shallow and simplistic. We love to pose as big people!

Jesus is so clear on this matter that to argue or wordsmith too much is further evidence of our sickness. No, Jesus isn’t asking us to be childish or irresponsible or overly silly or needlessly simplistic about the complexities of life. He is asking us to be humble and innocent, to receive the gift of the kingdom with child-like faith and to learn from the very best that childhood has to model.

It might do us some good to ask the question, “What’s the difference between being childish and being childlike?” If childishness is something we should grow out of, then what are the things we should leave behind? And if childlikeness is something that we should grow into, what are the hallmarks of that better quality?

Childishness is fundamentally selfish. One downside of immaturity is the degree to which the universe revolves around “me.” All of reality and all relationships are measured and negotiated primarily for personal benefit. Maturity means learning to be God-centered and other-focused, but childishness lacks that perspective.

Childishness is also rash, impatient, restless, impetuous, easily offended, lacking in understanding and impulse control.

Growing out of childishness involves learning to see the wider world and mastering the arts of patience, rest, grace and restraint.

Childlikeness is humble, teachable, curious, innocent, guileless, honest and easily awed. Children believe readily and trust quickly. Childlikeness can also involve passion, play, wonder, imagination, inventiveness and joy.

Growing into childlikeness can involve overcoming the stains and strains of past wrongs suffered and disappointments, such that we are willing to actually **believe again ... in life, in God, in others, in ourselves**. We allow ourselves to be re-parented by God into a keener vision for life and a deeper peace and pleasure. And we shake off the need to pose and control and aspire to worldly images of success and sophistication. The world’s measures of our manhood or womanhood are not always the best measures of real growth and completeness. They are, in fact, often traps and rabbit holes that lead us onto long journeys of misapplied energy and investment.

Come back to God. Come as a child - eager, curious, trusting, wanting. Ask and ask some more. Touch. Smell. Listen. Laugh. God is your Father and you are his precious child. Enjoy. Crawl into the lap of the King and let him touch you and bless you.