

Little Children and the Kingdom - Pt. 1

Matt. 18:1-9

Intro. Did you ever have a conversation with someone who wasn't at all on your wavelength? Their mind was somewhere else and they just weren't tuned in to what you were saying. I can be so drifty and preoccupied, I'm sure I've done this to others more than you've done it to me. Yet in the past my enthusiasm has been met by some far away looks when sharing the joy of ice fishing with Peggy. She says, "*There are two things I hate about ice fishing...the ice and the fishing.*" I'm sure I return those same distant looks whenever she talks about crocheting.

During our years of Bible School in Md., Peggy and I worked with a youth group. When planning an activity, we did our best to describe what a Progressive Dinner is to 5 moms who had offered to open their homes and provide one of the 5 courses. On the night of the activity, we piled the teens in the church van and headed for the first house. Upon arrival we were greeted by all 5 of those moms. Their spokesman said, "*Dean & Peggy, it seemed like such a fuss to haul the kids from house to house, so we brought all 5 courses to Gladys' house.*" Needless to say, the activity lost its pizzazz like air escaping from a pin pricked balloon. We suffered a failure to communicate. We were not at all on the same wavelength with those dear ladies.

The Bible prepares us to never expect the unsaved to be on our wavelength. **1 Jn. 4:5, 6** say, **They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.** There will always be a communication barrier between the believer and the unbeliever. That's one reason the NT forbids a believer to marry an unbeliever. Communication on the deepest level... communication that is so essential to a healthy marriage...isn't possible for two people who don't have Christ as the common denominator in their relationship.

Yet throughout our study of Matthew's gospel, we've discovered another communication breakdown...a break down that existed between Jesus and His disciples. Apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who came to indwell believers on the day of Pentecost, Jesus and His disciples were often on different wavelengths. The classic example of this break down is **Matt. 16:21-23** - where Peter, speaking for the Twelve, presumed to rebuke Jesus. **From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."** It was like Jesus was speaking FM to men tuned in to AM receivers. They didn't get it.

To grasp the context of the verses before us this morning, we need to compare **Mk. 9:30-37** where a more detailed order of events is given. Please open to that passage and I'll refer to it in a moment. When Jesus tried to teach His disciples about the cross and the plan of God to save sinners, they seemed to tune Him out. They had "*selective hearing.*" His coming suffering, death and resurrection was too painful for them to absorb. They were on a different wavelength. This communication barrier shouldn't come as any great surprise because Jesus is God in human form. The disciples were real people like us...people who spent their entire lives occupied with earthly thoughts about earthly matters. In **Isa. 55:8, 9** the God of Israel said, "**For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,**" declares the LORD. "**As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.**" It would take these men longer than 3 yrs. to learn to think God's thoughts and tune into His program.

Apart from salvation and the entrance of God's Holy Spirit into our lives, we too would have no chance of ever being on the same wavelength with God. The Bible would remain a closed book or like a book written in a language we don't speak. **1 Cor. 2:14 - The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.** But with salvation, God's Spirit enters our lives, becomes our teacher, and God's Word comes alive in us.

Let's see the order of events as they unfolded in Mk. 9:

- **v.31** - Jesus **was teaching** His disciples.
- **v.32** - **But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.**
- In **v.33** Jesus questioned them about an argument they had on the journey from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum.
- **v.34** says, **But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.** They were embarrassed and perhaps ashamed.
- Then in **vs.35-37** Jesus told them He knew what they had been arguing about...they argued about which one of them was the greatest disciple.
- Finally, Jesus **took a little child and had him stand among them.**

Along the way, Jesus taught the disciples about a world in desperate need of a Savior. He spoke of His cross-death and the resurrection that would follow. He spoke of the salvation God would provide as a free gift to all who would believe Him and receive the gift. But the disciple's minds couldn't absorb this. Their thoughts were locked on a glorious kingdom of power and greatness...peace and prosperity. Even when Jesus explained how His life would be offered as a sacrifice, they drifted off point to selfish arguments about which one of them was the greatest. The fact that Peter walked on water / was given the keys to the kingdom / was so often the spokesman / and was one of the 3 disciples privileged to witness the Transfiguration...this Peter pre-dominance may have provoked jealousy among the Twelve. The one redeeming point in all this is the fact that the disciples seem to have been embarrassed when Jesus asked them what they had been arguing about. And wouldn't we all be embarrassed if Jesus asked what we'd been talking about?

The order of events in Mark is supported by Luke who condensed the narrative in just 3 verses. **Lk. 9:46-48 - An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all--he is the greatest."** So remember the argument. It's key to understanding the teaching Jesus gave in response. So now let's go to **Matt. 18**. I've called the first point...

1. The Prerequisite of Humility – vs. 1-4

This chapter introduces the fourth major discourse recorded by Matthew. **Chap.18** begins with the time notation, **At that time**. Then, notice that **19:1** begins, **When Jesus had finished saying these things...** This means the content of **chap.18** was a single lesson taught in one session.

Mark tells us Jesus had been talking about His suffering and death, but the disciples argued about who among them would be the greatest. Jesus described the traumatic events that would happen to Him yet all they could think about was what would become of them. I've labeled these first five verses **the prerequisite of humility** because they set the stage for the rest of the chapter. The chapter can generally be described as principles for Christian living or life under kingdom authority. Though this chapter has been misinterpreted, what Jesus taught here is not that hard to understand.

What stands out as we read the chapter is the use of *family terms* for believers who are referred to as **little ones**, **children**, and **brothers**. This family terminology reminds us of our relationship and responsibilities to each other in the family of God, the church. But equally striking is the seriousness of what Jesus taught. 3x's in this chapter He said, **"I tell you the truth."** By use of this phrase, Jesus underscored the fact that these teachings are binding. The severe punishment for those who cause harm to **little ones** emphasizes the importance of these teachings.

The setting was probably Peter's house in Capernaum. The lesson began when Jesus asked His disciples the very question they had been arguing about...**"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"** When no one answered, Jesus **called a little child and had him stand among them.** The Greek word translated **little child** is *paidon* in Greek. A *paidon* was a child ranging in age from infant to toddler. The verse says the child was a **him**...a boy, and that he was able to **stand** on his own. Most suggest he was between 2 and 3 years old.

In Jewish and Graeco-Roman societies, children had little to no value. Mature adulthood was idealized and childhood was despised. To disciples who had been arguing about rank, status and who was the greatest, Jesus responded in a shocking way! **He said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."** They argued over which one of them was top dog in the kingdom and Jesus said, *"Wait a minute guys... you're talking like you're in. Who said that? Don't be so presumptuous!"* **"I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."**

I had a Scandinavian soccer coach in HS who used every psychological trick to get the most out of his teams. During practice one day I asked if I would be playing mid-fielder in the game the following day. With a grin that was barely detectable, he said, *"Who said you're playing tomorrow?"* With that he turned and walked off. Jesus did something like that. The disciples argued about the batting order or positions they'd play in the kingdom...and Jesus threw them a curve ball. He said, **"unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."**

The word **change** indicates the need for a radical shift in thinking. The Greek word can be translated to turn about or be converted. Though a child can exemplify many things, Jesus used him to illustrate the virtue of humility. A child isn't concerned about social status (although he quickly learns this from adults). Howard Hendricks writes, *"Children can't advance your cause, they cannot enhance your prestige, children don't give things; they need things. They don't do things for you; they need to have things done for them."* By the example of this **little child**, Jesus encouraged humility of mind, not childish thinking. This is clarified by **v. 4** where He said, **Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.** Out of childlike humility comes childlike trust. The order is critical. First, comes humility that accepts what we are and who God is.

The point is this...the kingdom operates by different principles and the entrance requirements are unique. Entrance to the kingdom can't be gained by performance, merit or force. The disciples, with their passion to be great, had to change and become like children. Jesus went on to say that the person who truly humbles himself will be the greatest in the kingdom. The disciples had begun their journey to kingdom greatness by trusting the Lord; but now they're told they must set aside the selfish *"I'm better than you are"* rivalry and remember they were made from dirt. C. S. Lewis wrote, *"Humility is not thinking less of yourself...it's thinking of yourself less."* Lewis provides us with a way to measure our own humility. Just ask yourself...*"How often am I thinking about Christ and others and how often am I thinking about myself? That's a great question! Someone else has written, "The problem with the virtue of humility is that as soon as you think you have attained it, you've probably lost it."* Then of course, as Yogi Berra, that great orator once said, *"It ain't the heat...it's the humility."*

But an example of childlike humility is King Solomon. Though greatly gifted with natural abilities Solomon humbled himself and prayed for wisdom to govern the people of Israel. In prayer He said, “...**I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties.** - **I Kings 3:7** Because of his humility, the Lord made Solomon great in every way. John Calvin said, “*It is always God’s way to make something out of nothing. If you will become nothing, God will make something out of you.*”

Yet pride or the tendency to think we’re all that runs deep in the fiber of our being. The central focus of Matthew’s gospel is to present Jesus as the Messiah and to draw men and women into the kingdom through faith in Him. Yet humility is the essential prerequisite for entrance. When John the Baptist and Jesus preached, “**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near**”...they were calling for a change of mind and heart with respect to thoughts about ourselves and the sin that separates us from the God who is holy. This is a radical turn for people who by nature are proud and self sufficient. Humility admits our lives are broken and spiritually bankrupt. We are beggars who have no resources or leverage to bargain or strike a deal with God. The blessing that accompanies this attitude of humility is expressed in the Beatitudes where Jesus said, “**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.** - **Matt. 5:3-6**

For years to come it would be difficult for the disciples to erase the image of this **little child** standing in front of them. They had behaved arrogantly...like big shots. Instead of thinking about Jesus and all He would suffer for them, they were thinking about themselves and what seat they’d have at His table. Jesus said, unless you cast off those attitudes **you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.** So in the opening of this chapter Jesus laid down a radically new formula. He said, “*to be great is to be humble,*” like a child. It’s a lesson and formula we all must be reminded of time and time again.

2. The Protection of ‘Little Ones’ – vs. 5-9

These next verses form a tight unit built around a promise and a warning. They’re held together by the *stumblingblock* theme. (although that word doesn’t appear in the NIV) The reference to believers as **little ones**, builds on the teaching of **vs.1-4**. The first part of the teaching is a promise: **And whoever welcomes a little child like this in My Name welcomes Me.** As we see from **v.4**, the phrase **little child** wasn’t meant to be taken literally. Besides, it isn’t possible for anyone to turn back the clock and become a child again. Instead, Jesus referred here to a person who has humbled themselves and received Christ by faith...His disciples. By the new birth, these people are sinners God has saved and brought into His family. And listen...it doesn’t matter if we have as many degrees after our name as the alphabet has letters...we all enter the family of God as children. We enter the family childish and immature with so much to learn.

And notice, this **little child** or believer is not to be welcomed because he/she is somebody special or great. They are welcomed because they are fellow believers in Jesus. The phrase **in My Name**, signifies Christ’s authority over their life as well as ours. This is the basis for welcoming our brothers and sisters. What Jesus said here presupposes the animosity of the world. He’s talking about the loving protection and spiritual care needed by all who are truly His followers and children. This is instruction for the Church Jesus was beginning to build. This teaching represents all the many “*one another commands*” in seed or germinal form.

Now the Church hasn’t always done well in this regard. Among the variety of disciples, we pick and choose those we like and dislike. We’re slow to accept, receive or welcome those who are different in ethnicity, worship style or some minor point of doctrine. The Church is so divided someone has said, “*Even the splinters have splinters.*”

We have great difficulty accepting other believers who aren't just like we are or don't see things just the crystal clear way we see them. This command to welcome fellow believers is the subject of **Rom.14**. That chapter begins this way...**Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. (Rom. 14:1)**

So **v.5** introduces a promise to those who welcome fellow believers because in doing so they are welcoming Jesus Himself. This unity or oneness between Christ and His people is stated many times in the NT. Some are: **Jn.13:20** where Jesus said, **"I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me."** Then when Saul was persecuting Christians, Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and said, **"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" - Acts 9:4** Over and over the OT repeats the principle that those who bless God's people are in effect blessing God and those who curse God's people are cursing God. If we really grasped this it would radically affect the way we treat each other!

On the other hand, it was imperative for the disciples to understand that God's children are susceptible to danger and can stumble...even the strongest and greatest of them. So a warning is given to those who actually cause **little ones** to stumble. The main idea is that when we refuse to accept others who believe...we may cause them to stumble in their faith. When they feel rejection from other believers it may lead them into serious sin. Our concern should be their spiritual growth. If welcoming them is welcoming Jesus, rejecting them is rejecting Jesus.

Because the crime of causing a child of God to sin by turning away from Christ is so great, the denunciation and punishment is harsh. Jesus said, **But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.** It would be better for the offender to be drowned in the sea before doing this, than to do it and face God in judgment. The **millstone** Jesus referred to could weigh several hundred pounds. This heavy round stone was pulled by animals in the process of grinding grain. The Romans sometimes executed criminals by tying a millstone to a man's neck and pushing both the man and the stone overboard in deep water. Listen...nobody treads water that well! The warning here is very forceful. The point is that the little ones...disciples of Jesus...are under His care. Whatever people do to them, touches Jesus. This again fits the imagery of a family. It's one thing to hurt me, but if you want to see rage...lay a hand on one of my children or grandchildren!

Then Jesus announced a woe to the world...especially to those who would entice others to sin. **"Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!** In the context of this chapter, the particular sin in view is the sin of rejecting or turning away from following Christ. The woe is pronounced against anyone who would cause people to disbelieve or turn away from the faith. I immediately think of the godless leaders and educators who Satan is using to destroy the faith of our young people. Did you know that sins like abortion and euthanasia were greatly encouraged by the teachings of Charles Darwin and his book, The Origin of the Species? Any teaching that removes God, causes people to sin. So this is a sober warning of judgment. It focuses on any who erect stumbling blocks. In Russia, as in many parts of the world, the false cults prey on weak and immature believers. These false teachers operate just like Satan who **prows around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. – I Pet. 5:8**

While *stumbling blocks* or **things that cause people to sin** will always be present, the **woe** is directed against those through whom they come. Here Jesus is telling us there will always be opposition and occasions for stumbling. Until Christ returns to make all things right, there will always be people and influences that seek to dissuade us from following Christ. In the end, God's children will prevail, but there are many dangers between now and His momentous return. These warnings are repeated throughout the pastoral epistles.

In **vs.8, 9** Jesus instructed His disciples to get rid of things that cause us to sin. **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 maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.**

The language here is extravagant. Unlike the teachings of liberal theologians today, the eternal fire or the fire of hell isn't open to question...it's the most fearful reality of all. Jesus wants us to know that disciples can actually become antagonists and not just victims. This can happen by a Christian who sets a lousy example for his neighbor. It can happen when Christian liberties are flaunted irrespective of the impact they have on others. Years ago we had a rebellious young man in our college/ career group who did this. He was a leader who had the benefit of lots of Bible teaching. But by his bad influence, his best friend and several others turned from the faith to a careless lifestyle. Because his negative influence was so profound, God may have taken Him home early.

Failure to deal radically with sin in our own lives...especially the types of sin that can harm other believers...shows where our true allegiance lies. James minced no words when he wrote, **You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. - Jas. 4:4** It's not enough for Christians to confess sin and then skip off on our merry way. We must deal decisively with sin. Like the severing of a hand or foot or the removal of an eye, we must determine to rid ourselves of the opportunity and the inclination to commit these sins. Some have taken these verses literally and cut off hands and maimed their bodies in an attempt to root out sin. But physical surgery is like picking dandelions. By the way, how's that working for you? Do they disappear when you pick them? The taproot of sin is the heart. We can be certain Jesus was speaking figuratively and not literally because no one will enter the kingdom maimed. Those entering the kingdom will be raised / changed / and made whole. So what we have here is the language of hyperbole. The message is, get rid of the sin and whatever tempts you to commit that sin, especially if that sin is harming or destroying **little ones** who believe. But don't miss the warning. It would be better to cut off that hand or foot that is causing you to miss the kingdom heaven. It would be better to have one eye on earth than to have two eyes in Hell. Sin, especially the sin of rejecting Christ, is serious business. Yet sadly, there are many who love and cling to their sin more than they love Christ.

So in this section Jesus builds on the teachings of humility introduced before, but he does it now with several 'better and worse' sayings, to teach His followers what we must do. The teaching was never given to encourage us to throw wicked people into the sea or cut off hands that offend; rather, it was given to warn us from sinning against others...especially believers. To encourage them to sin and lose faith is serious business. Down through the centuries, the Church hasn't taken this teaching to heart. Our history is filled with acts of wickedness against other believers...often committed by those with the power to do so, but not by them alone. That sort of behavior is the antithesis of the humility the kingdom demands and those who do it are certainly not great in the kingdom if they're in at all.

Let me close with a wonderful verse found in **Isa. 66:2**. Here the Lord says, **Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?" declares the LORD.** In other words, look around you. Consider the majesty of the mountains / the splendor of the spring flowers / the miracle of child-birth and the unspeakable design of the human body. Reflect on the fact that in His greatness made all these things. Then the verse continues..."**This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.** As you consider God's greatness...reflect on your own littleness. You have no business thinking you can come to God on your own terms...none at all. God is holy and you are not. Your only hope is to humble yourself and run to Jesus.