

“God Bless the Children”

(Matthew 18:1-5; 19:13-15)

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What do you think is the greatest symbol of humble service? Christians believe it's the cross of Jesus Christ, because he loved us so much that he died so he wouldn't have to lose us. The Bible says “he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:8) Jesus said about himself,

“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28)

But some people don't like the cross, that symbol of humility. In 2003, a Muslim man brought a lawsuit against crucifixes in a city 140 miles east of Rome, and three years ago a secular woman brought another lawsuit. And just this past week, the European Court of human rights ruled that Italy had to remove the crosses from every classroom in the country.

This morning, we're talking about children as a picture of humbleness, and Jesus tells us that kind of humility doesn't come easy in this world.

Chapter 18 makes up the fourth out of five great teaching discourses from Matthew. Sometimes they're called the Sermon on the Mount, the sermon on mission, the sermon on the kingdom, sermon on the church, and the sermon on the end times. It's a similar idea when he teaches about children again in chapter 19. It's a part of Jesus' teaching on the church, what Paul calls the Body of Christ, and how it relates to the kingdom of God.

The section starts out with a question that reveals a lot about the people who ask it, and it reveals a lot about the one who answers it, too. The question is, *Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*

To answer the question, Jesus called a little kid to himself, and said if the disciples didn't turn, if they didn't *convert* and become like this child, they would never enter the kingdom at all. That means they were heading in the wrong direction. They needed a definitive change—a change of heart and a change of direction.

Jesus is making himself very clear. He is *not* saying that failure to be childlike will simply get them into the kingdom more slowly than they would have otherwise gotten in. He is *not* saying that failure to be childlike means that their status in the kingdom won't be quite as good as it would have been otherwise. No, he is declaring that they're not going to get into the kingdom at *all* unless they turn around completely. The kingdom is in a God-direction, and anything else is going in a self-direction. The kingdom means forgetting about yourself and looking at Jesus, and the irony is that when you forget yourself is when you really find yourself. If you're still looking out for number one, that means you're not in the kingdom.

The question showed a lot about the disciples.

You have to give the disciples credit for this, at least: when they have an embarrassing question, they take it straight to Jesus! But it is an embarrassing question, nonetheless.

Think about their timing. Jesus has already told his disciples he is going to lay down his life to save the world, and he is going to say it three times in Matthew's gospel.

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. (Matthew 16:21; see also 17:22, 20:17)

Maybe the disciples were already trying to make plans for the leadership once Jesus was gone. Maybe they were scared, and thinking “What are we going to do? Jesus is going to die soon!”

But the question also shows they were still caught stuck in being competitive with other people. They were still comparing themselves with others. After all the time they spent with Jesus, they were still worried about competing with others, still stressed about what their position and status was. In fact, the question really showed they didn’t have any idea what the kingdom was about in the first place. In the next chapter, the mother of the disciples James and John is going to try to gain a higher position for her sons than the others in the kingdom. So when the disciples ask about who’s the greatest, it’s telling.

The answer showed a lot about Jesus and the kingdom.

But Jesus doesn’t want any princes in the church, no big shots, no bullies. In Jesus’ book, a little child is the best definition of greatness. In fact, Jesus is saying, don’t worry about greatness. Forget about it. Just worry about getting in--and that happens by being like a little child. You don’t become like a little child, you won’t get into heaven.

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.” (Matthew 20:25-28)

But that’s not all. The tense he uses is focusing on the present. Jesus warns about our future in eternity when he says, “Unless you become like a little child, *you will never enter the kingdom.*” But he focuses on the present when he says whoever is like “a little child *is* the greatest in the kingdom.” That’s because there are two senses about the kingdom. It’s in the future. And yet it *is* here, breaking in on us, bubbling up around us, like Jesus announced “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”—at *hand*. (Matthew 4:17).

Let me share some characteristics of children that I think would apply to us.

Dependence.

Little kids know they need help. It’s one of their primary cognitive characteristics. They know they can’t make it on their own: they can’t make their lives secure. They can’t provide what they need. They can’t find shelter, or provide their meals, or pay their bills, or get themselves to school. They’re happy to just depend on someone who loves them and takes care of them. If we were more like that—if we remembered how we need Jesus—we wouldn’t get derailed in life, and we wouldn’t get into such trouble.

Children are humble.

Sure, children are sinners like the rest of us, and they can be self centered. Or doesn’t that apply to your kids?

But I think there’s a sense in which there’s no pretense, especially in younger kids. They’re not caught up in the pride and arrogance that seem to come along later. They know they’re little. They know they’re dependent. Isn’t that the heart of being humble? To know you’re needy?

The world says the greatest is the one who wields the power. But Jesus told his disciples that unless they changed, converted, they wouldn’t share in the blessings of the kingdom either in this world or the next. The disciples were so wrong in their point of view on greatness, you wonder if they understand the kingdom at all. It’s not about what we earn or win or achieve. It’s about what we *receive*. The kingdom is all about grace. You get in when you accept the free and undeserved kindness of God.

Did any of you see the Video Music Awards on MTV? Taylor Swift, the country artist, was awarded the award for Best Female Artist. She went up to give her acceptance speech, and she said, "I always dreamed about winning this..." when the rapper Kanye West appeared on stage, ripped the mic out of her hand, and suggested that Beyonce should have won the award. That's not humility!

What's the main sign of being a disciple, a Christian, a child of God? It's to be humble, and if that's the kind of heart we're growing, it makes us very different from the world.

Children know how to trust.

Children know they need help from big people. And they trust them to provide it. It's in their nature to trust, and trust is basic to our relationship with God. Children provide a model for us of how to come to Jesus, guilelessly, relying not on ourselves but on him.

Now, Jesus is not teaching about money in the passages we read this morning. But in this time of year when we look at stewardship, and our plans to give to God's kingdom work, I can't help but think about a possible connection. I've come to the conclusion that the themes of this morning directly relate to how faithful we'll be as disciples of Jesus in our use of money. Unless we have the attitude of a child, we have a hard time being the kind of people God wants us to be financially.

God wants us to depend on him.

As we grow a humble heart, we can pray "Give us this day our daily bread." Jesus tells us not to worry about the future. He doesn't tell us we need to pray about the needs of next year, or next month, or even the next day. We just pray for our daily bread, and that tells us we depend on the Lord for the needs of the day. We only give up the quest for power, the quest to be in charge, to be the boss, if we know the kingdom is coming, that this world isn't all there is. That we depend on God for, well, our everything.

God wants us to be humble about our money.

When we grow a humble heart, we don't think about money as something that belongs to us. It means we take what God gives us, whether it's big or little, and we receive it with gratitude as stewards, those who use what we have for kingdom purposes. We know it's not ours anyway, because it all belongs to God.

The Old Testament tells us to return the first ten percent of the money we make as a tithe to God. The New Testament tells us we have to be sacrificial givers: ten percent is just the starting place. The world sees that as crazy, because it says we have to be in charge. But it's really not a matter of how much we have to give away. It's a matter of how much out of what is God's we keep for our own use. It's not about us, because it's all from God and for God.

God wants us to trust him with what we have.

We learn to say like the Apostle Paul did,

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:11b-13)

So, God wants us to be humble, dependent, and trusting, just like little children are. But how do we do that? I think the second passage helps us know. It's where people bring children to Jesus, but:

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there. (Matthew 19:14-15)

This tells us that Jesus gives children what they need.¹ He gives them three gifts, and it's what he wants to give us, too, as we become like children:

First, he gives the gift of time.

Jesus doesn't tell the children he's too busy. He doesn't say he must be doing more important business. He has the time to be with them in a leisurely and unpressured way. The ministry of presence is first of all a ministry of time. If we're going to welcome our children, we have to have time for them. And if we're going to become like Jesus, humble and dependent on the Father, we need to spend time with him.

Second, he gives the gift of touch.

It says he laid hands on the children. That's the gift of proximity; it's contact with him. Jesus sees the children, really sees them, because they're not marginal to him. It means for us that children have a place in our church and in our worship services. If it gets a little messy or a little noisy when children are with us, well, that's a part of the joy. It's okay. Jesus sees that, and he doesn't mind being interrupted from the important things, because this is the more important thing.

Third, he gives the gift of prayer.

Jesus does spiritual formation with the children, what the Christian teachers used to call "cure of the soul." It means to help a person grow in their relationship with God. Jesus doesn't just play with the kids, he takes it to another level—he ministers to them.

Best of all, he gives the gift of salvation.

When we spend time with Jesus, when we let him touch our life, when we receive his ministry, we are entering into the gift of salvation. That's what he wants for you.

So spend time with him. Let him touch your life, and focus on him in prayer. That's a part of what he's doing to save you, and to make a difference through you. The disciples just thought of children as a distraction from Jesus' work, but he doesn't. He welcomes them as members of the kingdom and blesses them. Getting into the kingdom only happens by faith, not by what you can achieve. That's why little children have a special blessing in store for them in the kingdom.

¹ I'm indebted to Dale Bruner for these points. See F. Dale Bruner, *the Churchbook: Matthew 13-28*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005.