

“UNLESS YOU CHANGE...”

Matthew 18:1-14

Key verse 3

“And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’”

One goal we had in starting Matthew’s gospel was to grow as Jesus’ disciples and disciple-makers. Matthew is unique as a gospel in that he divides Jesus’ teaching to his disciples into five major sections, called discourses. Matthew 18 is the fourth. As all relate to the kingdom of heaven, a subject Matthew refers to nearly 50 times, it seems pretty important to understand how to enter that kingdom, and how we are to live among one another. What do you think is most important in the kingdom of heaven? What is considered great, or awesome? Would you be surprised that it is revealed in little children, not in the wise and learned (11:25-26)? Let’s learn how to enter the kingdom of heaven today.

First, become like a little child (1-5). Look at verse 1. **“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’”** Where does this question come from? All three gospels put this conversation and its content a little differently, but the common factor is that it appears after Jesus’ second prediction of this death. It seems the reality that Jesus wasn’t going to be with them much longer was beginning to sink in, as they had been filled with grief (17:23b). So why would they discuss greatness in the kingdom of heaven? Perhaps they wanted to keep a stiff upper lip, and fill in the gap? Perhaps Jesus’ death and resurrection would provide a path for upward mobility? For sure, they had not understood the teaching about Jesus’ death and resurrection: not what it meant in terms of God’s redemptive plan, nor how central the gospel should be in the new covenant community Jesus was building.

This fixed way of looking at the world: jockeying for position, competing, trying to find a means to consider yourself great – is an ancient thing. Why are we so uncomfortable just being? It began with a snake in a garden, who tempted Eve, saying, **“You will be like God...”** as if who she was, created in the image of God, was suddenly not enough. Inferiority, pride, shame and fear came to our world that day, and the quest for greatness began. Brother killed brother from jealousy, and

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the violence and evil of the world has continued for countless generations. In our world, there is no other way. We each have elements of greatness, and elements of weakness, so it has become natural to compare, measure, and judge. But is the kingdom of heaven subject to such a paradigm? Is the pursuit of greatness – and the necessary corollary of making others less – the principle of Jesus kingdom, as it is in our world today?

Jesus patiently helped his disciples to understand using an illustration. Let’s read verses 2-4 together: **“He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’”** What a surprise for the child and for the disciples! Debating who is the star player made no sense if you don’t even make the team! I want to think about two phrases here to try and unpack the meaning of Jesus’ illustration:

Jesus says: **“unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** The language here can’t be anymore absolute: this change is not optional, or for a select few, and the disciples were not exempt. So what did Jesus mean by, “change”? We live in a world of choices, where radical changes are readily available: name, hair, clothing, weight, music, cell phone, church, school, career – even spouse or gender – what a time we live in! But Jesus isn’t talking about changing our preferences. Other translations use **“unless you turn (ESV)”** or **“unless you are converted (NASB, KJV)”** to convey that the change Jesus is looking for is from the inside: matter of inward attitude, direction, worldview, and desire, not just outward behavior or appearance. He says we have to become like little children. One reference described it like this: “The humility of a child consists of childlike trust, vulnerability, and the inability to advance his or her own cause apart from the help, direction, and resources of a parent¹.” Any change requires commitment and struggle, and when accomplished can give a sense of achievement, but the change Jesus is talking about is not something we bring about through our effort, performance and discipline. Like little children, we have no power in this area to bring about this change. We need

¹ ESV Study Bible, Crossway Bibles, 2008

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someone to do it for us, to change us from the inside out. That someone is Jesus, our Lord and Savior. He has done so through his death and resurrection. Through union with him, the old has gone, the new has come!

This is basic gospel faith: to trust what Jesus has done for me, since I'm totally incapable of entering his kingdom on my own. Due to our sin, which we were born with and spend a lifetime indulging (intentionally and unintentionally), we have no claim on Jesus' kingdom. Nor do we seek it, in our endless pursuit of self-masquerading as self-improvement; growing in greatness. We need to fundamentally be changed. For those of us who have discipline, and have accomplished much in our pursuit of greatness, this is difficult to accept. In John 3 Jesus was visited by such a person, named Nicodemus. Jesus told him the same direct teaching: **“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again (Jn 3:3b).”** The destiny of every human being, whether great or petty, is the same: death, and after that, judgment. Yet God so loved the world, he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. To change is to accept this gospel: to trust in the grace of God alone. This requires humility and submission to Jesus (5:3,10; 6:9-10; 7:24; etc...)

In contrast to Nicodemus, we have Matthew, who wrote this gospel. As a tax collector, he wasn't even welcome into the synagogue, let alone God's Holy kingdom! But when Jesus called him, simply saying, **“Follow me,”** he obeyed and went, surrendering himself and his future to this person, this Savior, this Lord, who came to seek and to save the lost. It is sad that the gospel is hardest not for the immoral people, like tax collectors and prostitutes, who were thronging to the kingdom of heaven through repentance, but for the righteous people, who did not repent (21:31-32). The gospel is hard to accept because it requires complete humility and submission to Jesus, to declare that I have no basis for God's acceptance, except for that which Christ has accomplished for me on the cross.

Jesus says: **“whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”** This doesn't actually support the view that human beings should have positions above and below one another, but instead “lowly position” means to “humble one's self.” To embrace the truth of the gospel and

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shift my life from dependence on myself, my performance, to Jesus’ grace alone. Think about this child: he stood where he was among them for only two reasons: Jesus called him, and Jesus placed him there (2). Was it any different for the disciples, or for us today? Yet it requires an act of submission, faith in Jesus, to come into the light of truth and believe the gospel. But to those who have done so, to those who have received the precious gift of Jesus, this is the only way of life that conforms to the truth of the gospel.

Following Jesus is not an act of personal greatness and achievement, but fundamentally an act of humble submission to the truth of the gospel. Jesus himself gave this example: **“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross (Php 2:6-8)!”** Jesus has done all for me; what keeps me from surrendering to him? Pride? Yes. But to be converted, to turn, takes only one step: even a simple prayer: Jesus, I’m proud. I want to know you, to know the truth. Would you help me? That will be the first step of a long journey to the kingdom of God. Humility.

What happens as a result of this change? Look again at verses 4-5: **“Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”** In our world, who can be the greatest? Only one person, and all others are less. Not in Jesus’ kingdom! All who humble themselves are the greatest, without ranking. This powerful truth gives us freedom to welcome even children in Jesus’ name. In the gospel we are all the same: a sinner saved by grace. So we can look others in the eye, and generously welcome, listen and understand one another. What divides us, or sets up apart, as great as these things sometimes seem, are insignificant in comparison with the blood of Jesus that was shed to make us one. When freed from the pursuit of greatness, we no longer need to be threatened by these differences, or have a burning need to criticize, minimize, or despise; we can enjoy the diversity, and work together in harmony. In fact, this is why Jesus has apportioned grace to us differently, in order that each may do their part in building up the body of Christ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the

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knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4: 7-13).

Jesus says this is the way to welcome him. Do you want Jesus in your home, your family, your fellowship, your church, your nation? Jesus says: **“whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”** What about the cost, and the burden? In a world of competition, striving, performance to standards and meeting ever increasing expectations: Ah: stress and anxiety! Did you know that stress and anxiety have eclipsed depression as the number one reason for young people to seek out a counselor? 41% of incoming college Freshmen said their previous year was beyond their ability to manage²; 18 years old, and suffering from crippling anxiety due to the pressure to perform.

Jesus’ kingdom makes a huge contrast: What happens when we submit to Jesus way? Jesus says: **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (11:28-30).”** This is the way to have joy and peace, while growing in relationship with Jesus: not pursuit of greatness, but welcoming little ones in Jesus’ name. Is Jesus welcome here? Do we welcome others in Jesus’ name? Imagine what the world would look like if we all humbled ourselves in submission to Jesus, instead of trampling each other in the pursuit of greatness.

Second, living and loving as the Lord’s little ones (6-14). In this section Jesus gives some clear instructions on what he expects from us in relationship with one another in his kingdom. Look at verse 6. **“If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”** Note the change of metaphor: all who humble themselves are like little children; here he qualifies that “little ones” are “those who believe in me,” so we are all “little ones” to Jesus, no matter our age or spiritual growth.

² Information taken from this New York Times article:
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/11/magazine/why-are-more-american-teenagers-than-ever-suffering-from-severe-anxiety.html?utm_source=pocket&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=pockethits

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Typically, verses 5-6 are translated together as one thought, as a contrast between welcoming and causing to stumble. Jesus teaches us that in his community we all have influence on one another, good or bad. No man is an island; when God created mankind, he said it is not good for us to be alone (Ge 2:18). But what kind of influence are we giving? As we welcome one another in humility, love and understanding, we give a good influence. But Jesus gives a stern warning about causing others to stumble, or sin. Millstones are large circular stones which require a donkey to turn them, grinding grain into flour. They weigh in tons, not just pounds. What a shocking visual! What kind of influence am I? Do I engage Jesus' community in a positive way in my speech and decisions? Am I consistent in revealing submission to Jesus, or do I act out of self-seeking pride?

We need to welcome each other in Jesus' name, giving a good influence, because we live in a world of woes. Look at verse 7. **“Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!”** Recently a man died who was largely responsible for shaping the acceptance of pornography in society. As I read reports, conservatives praised him for his achievements as a capitalist, while liberals talked about his contribution to sexual freedom. Yet, as I think about the rampant disease of pornography crippling generations of young men and women, I feel that woe! Yet, to escape such things, we'd have to leave the world. Yet this should not make us fatalistic, or worse, become a fanatic who seeks to carry out justice. I saw a video this week out of Egypt, talking about young women wearing revealing clothing. One lawyer said, “I say when a girl walks about like that, it is a patriotic duty to sexually harass her and a national duty to rape her³.” Although rare, unfortunately conservative Christian at times have also done and said some extreme things, usually in the form of islamophobia or homophobia. We don't need to respond that way, because Jesus tells us there will be a day of judgment upon those who perpetuate such things. Let's put our hope in Jesus, and give a good influence to one another. Let's call our young men up to a godly view of manhood and respect for women, and women the freedom to embrace their createdness. In any case, Jesus values our influence. We need each other.

³ Video included in the news link below: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/egypt-lawyer-rape-girls-revealing-clothing-ripped-jeans-nabih-al-wahsh-a8030831.html>

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At the same time, Jesus teaches us personal responsibility for our sins. Verses 8-9 are similar to what was said in the sermon on the mount. We cannot use the fallen world as an excuse not to struggle with sin. Instead, Jesus says, **“If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, 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 stumble, 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 (8-9).”** As we submit to Jesus and his cross, he gives us the grace that overcomes any sin. Instead of submitting to sin as a master, run to Jesus!

But what about the reality that we all fall sometimes? We should be very severe with ourselves, but what about others? Jesus says: **“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven (10).”** God is working through his angels. Hebrews 1:14 reads, **“Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?”** And this angel doesn’t report to you or your church authority; but to the face of God. Since we all have strong points and weak points, it is easy to despise someone who is weak where I am strong. Don’t do it! In 2009 I attended a conference held by a national evangelical coalition. The teaching and materials have greatly added to my spiritual growth. But over the past eight years I’ve seen many of these leaders publicly criticizing, condemning and vilifying other Christians who have made mistakes, sinned, or are in doctrinal error. Not to mention how this happens in every Christian community! We need a fresh movement of gospel-centered humility. How can we, as we strive for personal holiness, to be more like Jesus, at the same time avoid becoming judgmental and despising others when they are weak? How do we avoid building a community just like the world?

Jesus teaches us to know and share the Father’s heart. Verses 12-14 reads, **“What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones**

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should perish.” This is completely opposite than our expectation, where we want to value conformity and uniformity, and discourage and despise wandering and breaking the trend. Jesus says the joy of Christian life isn't found in keeping rules and expanding personal performance to a standard; in this life joy comes from finding the one lost sheep, and bringing him home. This is God's great joy, and he invites us to share in it today.

In this passage we thought mainly about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. The disciples saw it in terms of position, authority and opportunity. Jesus teaches us to be humble. Jesus died on the cross to forgive our sins and open a way to the kingdom of heaven. To do so requires us to humble ourselves and acknowledge that I need a Savior, I need to change. Let's newly decide today to humble ourselves and submit to the gospel of Jesus, be humble, and experience the joy of life living and loving as the Lord's little ones.