

Matthew 18:1-6

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[0 : 00] Again, Matthew 18, verses 1 to 6. This is what God's Word says.

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 depths of the sea.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning and welcome to Christ Church Chicago. A special welcome to Jeremiah Wigman.

First time ever in a church service. Born just a couple of weeks ago. I've always loved the presence of children in the assembly of the church service.

[1 : 28] And today we certainly will see why that value should be emulated by us all. Well, we're in the midst of a fall series following Jesus as King listens along the way.

Today, simply this, be humble. Be humble. Humility in our world is in short supply.

It just seems as though humility cuts the cross, the grain of our nature.

I mean, think of it. Not many of us are aiming for self-effacement, are we? Not many looking to make their mark through the means of mediocrity, are we?

Not many content with simply being good, especially when the prospect of being great is still out there.

[2 : 35] But to a person, not just in our day, but I think throughout the centuries, we prefer to be recognized, do we not, for being exceptional? For being distinguished?

For standing out? Aren't these the things we strive for? In fact, not only to stand out, but to stand above. Who doesn't want to be head and shoulders above their peers?

And yet, in the simple six verses that were laid down for us this morning, our desire for greatness stands in contrast to Jesus' demand for humility.

Let me say it again. That's the first four verses. It's the text of contrast. Our desire for greatness stands in contrast to Jesus' demand for humility.

Take a look. Verse 1. At that time, the disciples came to Jesus saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Well, it might be an innocent question.

[3 : 43] It certainly is possible that one would desire to be great out of motives that would be useful. And perhaps this is it for the disciples.

This sense that they appear like athletes, don't they, who are in search of greatness. They appear like musicians who want to make their mark by sitting in the first chair.

They appear like students who are looking for the upper echelon of the grade level. They appear like businessmen who want to move from good to great.

The question is there, Jesus, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Notice the phrase there, the kingdom of heaven. Their aspirations are on something above this earth, above this world.

Perhaps their desires for greatness are rooted in a motivation that's eternal and good and godly. Jesus, how do you tell who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

[4 : 48] In fact, Jesus earlier in this gospel on at least two occasions has already said or hinted that there will be gradations in glory.

That there will be rewards in heaven. That some, on the basis of what they have done here and now, will be honored uniquely for their contribution, whereas others will be saved and enjoy God

forever, but almost as though they were plucked from the fire.

Don't get this wrong. What you do here matters there. There are actually stories that Jesus will tell later in this gospel about those who are investing now, perhaps by giving more responsibility then. We'll all be able to enjoy him. That is, those who have found their entrance through heaven's gate. We'll all be able to enjoy him. Nobody will have a sense of loss, but believe me, some will have an increased capacity to enjoy God.

If God is greater than any of us, think of putting a thimble cup in the ocean. It can be full, but it can only capture the fullness of the cup of all the enjoyment of the ocean.

[6 : 07] But put a larger object in and a larger object in. You'll never get it, but some, some of you will have greater capacity to enjoy God than others. Some will be given more responsibility than others.

Lord, who's going to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Who will have the most capacity to enjoy you? Who will sit closest to you?

Who will be given responsibility to do more with what you give them there because they did more with what you gave them here? It is possible that the disciples' question stems from good motives until, of course, you move beyond verse 1 and see how Jesus handles it.

Can you take a look? Let me show it to you. Verse 2 through 4, 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 into the kingdom of heaven.

Notice, notice what Jesus does here. He, he actually, the surprise is, I'm not going to answer your question on who's the greatest. I'm going to take your question and turn it so that you'll know the grounds of even getting in to begin with.

[7 : 27] In fact, he tells them, You turn, unless you turn. Gentlemen, he says, You're asking the wrong question. You are concerned with power, privilege, status.

And unless you turn from that, look at it. Unless you become like a child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

In other words, I don't know if you've ever been traveling in one place and thought you were on the right road until your, whatever they call it, GPS in the car indicates to you that all the lines are reprocessing the route and they're indicating to you the need to get off at the exit and turn and actually go the other direction.

What the GPS is indicating to you is, I know that you think you're going to the destination of your desire, but unless you turn around, you're going to never even enter into the gates.

That says something, doesn't it, about the world in which we live? Our desire for greatness is palpable. Our desire to be distinguished, to be elevated, literally head and shoulders above others is what we are seeking.

[8 : 52] It's certainly what they were seeking. And Jesus now contrasts their desire with his demand. They were worried about a comparative pecking order.

And he's worried about whether they'll even go in through the gates. Evidently, the things that you and I desire most need to be renounced if we are going to have any opportunity to dwell in heaven forever.

That's what it looks like. The entrance is in another direction. A turning must take place. A reorientation must be in play.

Literally, it says, the humility of a child. Unless you become like children, whoever humbles himself like this child. Let's talk about that for a minute.

Let's sit on that for a minute. The humility of a child. The word humility in a wooden way could simply be stated getting low to the ground.

[10 : 08] That's what it is. So think of our desire to rise above. He places a child in their midst and says, let's talk about humility. Humility is getting low to the ground.

In fact, I love the way it's phrased here. It says in verse 2, he called a child and he put him in the midst of them. I mean, it's almost like a visual object lesson.

These grown men of great stature pursuing wonderful things and suddenly a small one of indeterminate age is put in the middle of them.

Crowd separates. Mother brings a child into the middle and they're standing around. He says, unless you become like this, unless you're going to get low to the ground, well, you don't even get in.

This child standing in the center of them all, this visual image, which really puts this, you don't get into heaven if you think there are things that are beneath you.

[11 : 18] You know, right now, as we sit here, there are six men and women beneath us in the nursery with two-year-olds and three-year-olds who scurried out under our smiles.

They're actually getting down on a knee. There's actually somebody looking eye to eye. There's someone that's descended into glory.

This is what he's saying. This is what it takes. The kingdom of heaven turns all the value systems of our world on its head and it is actually freeing.

Think of how freeing it would be for you to not feel that you have to out-distance all those around you. Think of how freeing it would be if your life didn't actually depend upon rising above others or taking advantage of others.

Think of how wonderful it would be if your acceptance by God had absolutely nothing to do with your performance in the midst of peers.

[12 : 31] It's attractive. He put in the midst of them this child. I believe that's what humility looks like.

It looks like getting low to the ground. A child is by nature small in stature. Thus, standing in the center of them all is the visual imprint upon their eyes.

Nothing is to be beneath me. Not only that, but think of a child in regard to their need for protection, well-being.

They're entirely dependent upon adults to care for them, to feed them, change them, clothe them, nurture them, guide them, direct them, protect them, to take their hand, to make sure that cars don't come out in front of them.

A child is in a state of need. And that's what Jesus wants. He wants that from you. He wants that from me.

[13 : 42] He'd like you to not think about rising above, but bending down. He'd like you to think about not necessarily always having to be self-sufficient. As we know, self-sufficiency is good and proper and right to care for yourself.

But when it comes to eternal matters, when it comes to the kingdom of heaven, it doesn't matter how good you are, how efficient you are, how effective you are. You can't enter in unless you're actually fundamentally dependent on your heavenly father for care, for protection, for guidance, for entrance.

You ever see a young child try to get open a heavy door, leaning on it, pressing on it, trying to open it, unable, an adult comes by with one hand, swings it open, and the child goes through.

That's dependency and care. A child's well-being depends on the adult's care, thus the connection between the child here and the little ones who are like him in verse four.

Whoever humbles himself like this child, the little ones in the text, move from simply being an object lesson of a child to anyone, all adults even.

[14 : 54] Who don't think that anything is beneath them, who are willing to acknowledge their need before God, who are willing to fall on their knees, in one sense, to ask for mercy.

These childlike ones are given entrance into the kingdom. Let me put it as clearly as I can. what do I want to convince you of this morning?

It's simply this, heaven is reserved for the humble and the humble alone. Heaven's reserved for the humble. There will not be anyone in heaven who is yet still prideful.

Heaven is reserved for the humble and the humble alone. I do want you to know that it will be worth it.

It will be worth it for you to set aside the aspirations of your life for attaining the reward in heaven.

[16 : 05] Did you see how verses five and six play off of verses one to four? If verses one to four contrast our desires for greatness with his demand for humility, then verses five and six contrast humility's reward versus heaven's warning.

Can you just put that in your mind? Verse five begins to now show you humility's reward, reward, while verse six will shut it down on heaven's warning.

What is the reward for humility? There it is, verse five, whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.

Get low to the ground, you get Jesus. Stay vertical and upright and in control of your own direction and you forfeit the Savior.

Humility's reward is nothing less than the reception into heaven by Jesus. And notice how it puts it, whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.

[17 : 36] In other words, there's a cognizant belief in your spirit where you begin to give yourself to the little ones or to the young ones or to those who are looking and asking the questions, how am I to be rightly related to God?

as you give yourself to protecting them, nurturing them, watching over them. Jesus says, you'll get me.

Let me think on this just for a moment. That's the humility's reward. By receiving the little ones, you will be received by Jesus.

I want to apply it to the ministry of our church. Any man or woman under the hearing of my voice who is exploring the Christian message for themselves ought to find in this place the protection to think through their doubts, ask their questions, be steered in ways that are profitable without taking advantage of them, without being dismissive of them, without overlooking them, without diminishing them.

Because as this church of followers gives themselves to the growth, the development, the time for others to ask questions, that's one way in which we are actually receiving them in Jesus' name.

[19 : 22] name. And I think this applies to kids especially. I can't think of a cleaner line that would demonstrate Jesus' value on children.

Whoever humbles himself like this child will be greatest. Whoever receives one such as this child will be received by me.

Put it differently, you better think differently about little children than you do about your pets. I only got one amen on that. Too many of you got pets.

Sometimes we treat our pets with greater care and concern than we do our little ones. The little ones are an irritant to some.

Children become like those that people don't want jumping up on them or spitting on them. children are, well, let's just get to it.

[20 : 24] They're just a waste of our time, are they not? From the very beginning of this church, I have made it clear that one of our values is the significance of family.

I've held it for 26 years amid many who would tell me it shouldn't be a value of the church. church. Because the family then makes a distinction between those who are single.

And to say that we have significance on the family or children means that we're saying we don't think of others in the same way. Which, of course, doesn't actually equate at all. We treat, or we believe everyone's equal, but that doesn't mean you treat everyone the same.

You treat your children with greater care, as you should. If I'm on 57th Street Beach, with my children in their youth, and they once were, and Noah goes off to swim in the water, and I'm sitting on the beach, I can sit from afar and watch him bounce along the waves and back in and out of the sand, you might say to me, wow, you don't care that much for Noah.

No, I do. He's fine. But Mariah, a tender age. Were she to get close to the water, you would have found me jumping out of my chair and over there to make sure that she was okay in both her hands and my hands and her feet between my feet so that I would protect her and nurture her.

[21 : 57] Both my children, both loved equally, but I didn't treat them both the same. Nor should we treat our children beneath us this hour the same. They should receive special care.

They should receive unique attention. They should receive particular protections. And Jesus says, as you do that, you receive me.

The value of children. we have a commitment to kids in this place. We're getting close now, 25 years in, to providing material for families that would help them nurture their children through daily devotions.

We have a devotional that we've written, congregants have written, taking the time, the big picture devotional. It takes a young family through the entire plotline of the Bible over the course of a year. We have another one that we wrote, such as our concern for children, that takes a child all the way through the Westminster confession so they can learn about God and what he requires of us.

[23 : 09] We have another one that we're working on now that thinks of church history and all of the things that we think a child should know even before they reach the age of fifth or sixth grade.

Today there are people in the nursery with infants who won't be able to comprehend much speech, but they're not doing child care. They're doing soul care of children.

Someone will open the Bible today or a story and they will read so that in the hearing of the little ones they will be guided into the way of truth. And as we do that, as we value children, as we watch more and more young children be born into our midst, there are probably a dozen now infants just over the last few months.

And as that increases, it ought to increase the joy of our church. Every time I hold a child in my arms at their baptism or dedication in their infancy, I say the same words and I've said it for 26 years.

I say their name, you are loved by God and you will be adored by this church. It's celebrated, it's championed.

[24 : 18] Think of the children of our city who need protection. Those who are not even of your own household, think of Milton who will spend his days at the charter school of junior high students one block away and see how the Lord will bring many of these children right into the youth ministry of the church and the youth ministry of the church into the youth of our city.

Think of a church that cares for the youth in the name of Jesus. Christ Church Chicago, may we stay low to the ground and never try to rise above the rest.

May we reject the notion that life is about elevating oneself above one's peers. When we receive children in his name, he will receive us.

Did you know that there's going to be a word picture of this a few chapters on? Jesus is going to have what's called the triumphal entry. He's going to enter into the gates of Jerusalem under the voices of children that are giving him praise.

Think of that. Jesus is entering into the city, kingdom city, and being received by the children and their praises in the same way when it comes time for you to die and to approach the entrance gate of heaven.

[26 : 07] heaven. He stands there ready to receive you with loud songs and singing as you have given yourself to children in his name.

Humility. Let me title the message again. Be humble. Let me state it as clearly as I can. Heaven is reserved only for the humble.

Second contrast in the text, and with this I close. The text doesn't merely contrast our desires for greatness and his demand for humility, but I said it also contrasts humility's reward and heaven's warning.

Verse 6 is that second contrast. It's but. There it is. Simple, single, solitary, small word in the text. 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 be drowned in the depths of the sea.

[27 : 25] This is a warning for the scandalous. The reward for true significance being received by Jesus.

The warning for those who are scandalous, that's really the word here again. It was here last week. It'll be here again in full force next week. The scandalous are the ones who put obstruction in the way of others finding their way toward what God would have for them.

any obstruction, any stumbling stone, any rock, any hindrance, any teaching that deviates from the apostolic gospel is a hindrance to someone coming to know who God is.

And woe to the one through whom it comes obstructing little ones brings judgment. The phrase here, although it doesn't appear in the English text, this millstone, this great millstone is actually described as the donkey's millstone.

I had to look at this. This is a cultural contextual clue that in that day and age you would have a mill. Think of a big circular piece of stone and on it two stone wheels with a long pole running through the middle and beyond it the harness on a donkey.

[29 : 07] And as the donkey walked his way around the big stone, grain would be thrown on the table and the stones would run over it.

the millstone of the donkey was the grinding stone of grain. And what he's actually saying here is if you want heaven's warning, it would be better, better, think of it, better to have that millstone on you and be thrown into the sea.

Not just the sea, not just the shallow end, not just the swimming pool. The word here is the depths of the sea. It would be better, better, how horrifying, better to plummet under the weight of a stone to the depths of the sea than to cause any little one to stumble in the matters of what it is to know

God through faith in Christ.

This summer I was on a lake at vacation and out in the waters somebody was under distress.

They had come off their wave runner and it was obvious that their life jacket was too small. And I watched for a while thinking they'd be able to get back to the wave runner but they weren't.

[30 : 47] Even when a friend came with another wave runner it became obvious they weren't even going to be able to get on the platform and I could tell that this distress was significant so down I ran through the 23 steps and lowered the Moon Biscine boat and turned the engine and backed out and headed over and got ready to help this individual get on the back of the platform and my first inclination leaning over was to grab them by the top of the life jacket because I thought you know it just gave me good handles and pull them up and then I realized right at that moment that if I did that this thing was going to slip over their head and they were going to go down they were going to go straight down they were going to be like a stone to the bottom there was really no hope at that moment for them and so the care and the discipline and the time the time to get that person situated protected on safe was there

Jesus says the one who misleads a child or a student or a neighbor who's walked in today wondering what does this church have to say about God one who mislead them one who would put a hindrance in their way one who would obstruct them better for you to have a millstone on your neck plummet to the bottom of the sea than to have to answer before God and be ushered off into eternity without entrance that's it it's simple six verses heaven is reserved only for the humble and heaven will be no help to those who aren't which brings me to the Lord's table there's the there's the sign there's the sign those are the elements of the deep humility of Jesus who although he existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God something to be grasped but humbled himself taking on the form of a servant and humbled himself to the very point of death that you might actually have salvation this table is for all who profess faith in Christ all who are like a child depending on him alone for your protection on that day for your sustenance in this day this table is open to all who have gotten low to the ground who know that they are no longer under the tutelage of trying to make your way to heaven but granted it as a gift by faith this table is your source of life this is your pattern for life this is it as you partake of the bread and of the cup you are saying as your head goes back

I need you and you are demonstrating in this world a posture of humility our heavenly father as we now come to the lord's table I pray that it would strengthen all who partake it that each one who comes would come like a child utterly dependent upon you for good things that we would come like children small in stature and I pray lord for those who are not yet ready to take of the table for those who are still trying to be vertical and to be above and to rise I pray that as they see men and women and children demonstrate that they need you that their own conscience would be pricked and that they would one day come to faith in you in Jesus name amen