

Receiving the Little Ones

Matthew 18:1-14

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Introduction:

I suppose every society has its great ones.

- The great ones are the ones that define the society—
 - They are the ones that all the other members of the society look to...
 - They are the ones that everybody else must honour and imitate if they are to be accepted in the society.
 - They define what is acceptable and what is not acceptable...
- Our national society is not as unified as perhaps it once was,
 - And so it is that not everyone agrees about who are the greatest ones...
 - But it seems clear that entertainers, whether they are Hollywood celebrities or professional athletes, are at the top of the list.
 - They are given an almost royal treatment and are often imitated by their devotees—from the lives they live to the clothes they wear...
 - Every society has its great ones, and these are the great ones in our society...

But there are also great ones in the society we call the church—the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

- In Matthew 18:1-14,
 - the Lord Jesus presents to you the great ones of His kingdom.
 - First, He tells you who the great ones are...
 - Secondly, He tells you how you are to treat them...
 - And finally He tells you just how important they are.
 - Let us consider each of these points in more detail.

I. First of all, Who are the great ones in Christ's Kingdom?

- . In verse 1, you are told that the disciples came asking Jesus this question...
 - They said to Him, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

0. Now you will remember that when Matthew talks about **the kingdom of heaven**, he is talking about **the kingdom of God**.
 - He calls it **the kingdom of heaven** so as not to needlessly offend the Jews to whom his gospel was written...
 - They were very careful about the way they used the name of God—they did not want to use it in a careless manner,
 - so when they wanted to speak about **the kingdom of God**, they would often substitute the word “**heaven**” in place of the word “**God**.”

0. In the past, we have seen how the disciples held to the popular expectation about the kingdom of God...
 - They were up on the latest best sellers from Jewish Book Distributors...
 - And so, like their brethren, they looked for a temporal kingdom—
 - for Jesus to be established on an earthly throne with even greater riches and honours and power than King Solomon had enjoyed!
 - They envisioned themselves in places of earthly advancement at His side, and wanted to know who among them would be the greatest!
 - It seems that there was a spirit of vain ambition that was feeding a spirit of jealousy...

0. If you look at the context, you can see how alien their mind was from that of the Lord Jesus...
 - He had just announced to them for the second time that He would be delivered into the hands of men and killed...
 - You can see that in Matthew 17:22...
 - They had been very sorry to hear Him say it...
 - but like little children, they had quickly dismissed it and were already back to their dreaming about positions and honours!
 - They wanted to know who among them would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

- . To answer this question, Jesus does something very surprising!
0. He calls a **little child** to Him and sets him in the midst of them...
 - We are not told the exact age of this child,
 - but we know that he was old enough to come to Jesus when he was called...
 - and we know that Matthew calls him a **little child**...

- and we also know that when Mark tells this story, he mentions that Jesus also took the child up into His arms...
 - So the child must have been anywhere from 1 to 3 years old.

TRANS> You can imagine the disciples standing around this little child and wondering what Jesus is going to say...

0. He says two things to them that must have been very surprising to them...
 - . First, He tells them with an oath that unless they are converted and become like this little child, they will never even enter His kingdom!
 - His words are...
 - v. 3 “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven!”
 - They were concerned about who would be the greatest in the kingdom, but Jesus tells them that they won’t even enter it unless there is a radical change in them!
 - A conversion is needed!
 - A complete turn around!
 - They cannot go on as they are and expect to even enter the kingdom!
 - They must become like this child...
 - If that is true of Jesus’ disciples, it must surely be true of you too...
 - Unless you are converted and become like a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of righteousness that Jesus came to establish!
 - . Then He goes on to tell them who the greatest in the kingdom will be...
 - In verse 4 He says:
 - “Whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven!”
 - The greatest one in Christ’s kingdom is the one who becomes the most like this little child that Jesus is holding in His lap!
 - . What does Jesus mean?
 - In what way must you become like a child to be great in His kingdom—indeed, even to enter it?
0. Jesus tells us what He means...

- He says, “whoever humbles himself...”
- . He is not talking about immaturity!
 - Children of this age can be very proud, very selfish, very inconsiderate, and even whiny.
 - They are surely ignorant of many things, and not very reliable...
 - Jesus is not talking about becoming childish...
 - But He says, “Whoever humbles himself...”
- . There is a way that a child can be very proud, but there is also a way that little children are very humble.... or lowly...
 - A little child of this age is **absolutely dependant** on his parents...or guardians...
- 0) Where does this little fellow get his food?
 - Does he go out hunting and fishing?
 - Does he plant his own fields and vineyards and harvest them?
 - Does he go to market with his wages to purchase it?
 - Does he grind his wheat to make his bread?
 - No, he depends entirely upon his parents to provide for him.
- 0) What does a child like this do if danger comes?
 - Does he take up his sword to fight off a dangerous animal?
 - Does he build a house to shelter himself from the storm?
 - No, when there is danger, he goes to his mother or father for protection.
 - He depends entirely upon his parents to protect him.
- 0) And what about his training?
 - How does he learn to read?
 - How does he even learn to speak?
 - How does he every learn how to plant crops or harvest them?
 - He is entirely dependent upon his parents or some other authority to teach him.
 - How marvellous is the learning of such little people as they watch their parents.

TRANS> A little child like this is constantly receiving from others...

- He is constantly in communion with them.
 - If he is left alone, he would surely die.
0. If you wish to enter the kingdom of Christ, you must become like this!
- . You are to look to the Lord your God for your food, for your safety, and for your training.
 - The fall of man came when we severed ourselves from the living God who created us.
 - Of course even though we did, in His great mercy He continues to sustain us.
 - But we pretend that we can live on our own instead of looking to Him.
 - The day will come when He will not longer sustain us, but will turn us over to eternal misery.
 - At the fall, the human race, represented by our first father Adam,
 - made a conscious decision to go our own way, to rely on our own counsel instead of living according to God's word.
 - That is how we severed ourselves from the life that He appointed for us and became dead in trespasses and sin.
 - Though He mercifully restrains us, He has allowed us to walk in our own way.
 - Instead of His life and wisdom flowing through our veins, we have sin and corruption.
 - We are not like a little child before our heavenly Father.
 - We have our own system of righteousness—our own way of life that we try to make for ourselves...
 - But our way of life is nothing but death and ruin.
 - . But Jesus has come and He is like this child!
- 0) Does that seem strange to say?
- Well it is true...
 - Jesus tells us so.
 - In John 5, He tells us that He does not take one breath or move one muscle independently of the His Father in heaven.
 - Listen to what it says in John 5:19:

- Then Jesus answered and said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.”

- In John 5:30, He says

- “I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.”

0) Jesus lived among us as the perfect man,

- And perfect man lives in absolute dependence upon God...
- He does nothing but the Father’s will...
 - He receives all things from the Father.
 - As a child depends on his parents, so the Lord Jesus depended entirely upon His Father when He came as a man.
 - He lived in the dependence that every man **ought** to live in.

0) And as Jesus is the receiver of God’s Spirit and life and wisdom,

- So He is the receiver of God’s Spirit, life, and wisdom for all His people...
 - He is the connecting point between heaven and earth for the whole human race.
 - It is only through Him that you can have communion with God restored...
 - Communion that gives you life forever in holiness and truth.
 - The Father has truly given all things to His Son, our Mediator, and we have these things by trusting in Him.
 - We do not have them in ourselves or in this world,
 - but we have them all from Jesus.

TRANS> So you see that you cannot be great in God’s kingdom—

- you can’t even enter God’s kingdom...
 - unless you completely change...
 - You have to stop relying on your own righteousness and wisdom and become dependent on the Lord Jesus the same way a little child depends on His parents.
 - You have to become a receiver of the grace of God through Jesus.
 - If you are on your own, you will die...

- You way will fail—it will end in destruction...
- But if you have come to Jesus for life and light, you will never perish...
 - The greatest one in His kingdom is the one who is the most humble.
 - The one who forsakes his own wisdom and ways and receives everything from the Father through Christ.
 - The greatest one is the one is the dependent one.
- Now that you know who the great ones are...

II. The Lord Jesus tells you how to treat these little dependent ones who are the great ones...

- . In verse 5, He counsels you to receive them—
 - He says, “whoever receives one little child like this in my name receives me...”
- 0. You see here that you are to receive them **in His name**...
 - . That means that you act as His representative when you receive them.
 - You are, in other words, to do what He would do if He were here...
 - You are to welcome them among God’s people as He welcomes them—in His name.
 - You are to receive them as those who are exemplary members of the church.
 - . It was very important for the disciples to understand this because when Jesus went away, they were going to be responsible for setting the pattern of how things were to be done in the church.
 - 0) You can see how Jesus is very deliberately instructing about who is to be received and who is to be rejected in His kingdom...
 - Next week, we will see how those who refuse to repent of their sins are to be rejected, and those who repent are to be forgiven and received.
 - 0) But here in 18:5, Jesus is saying that little children are to be received or admitted to the church.
 - They are to be taken in as members...
 -) Of course, as you might expect, the disciples didn’t get this lesson at first.
 - They never seemed to get lessons the first time, and this is certainly the case when it comes to receiving children!
 - You don’t have to go any farther than Matthew 19 to see them forbidding little children to come to Jesus...

- In Matthew 19:14, Jesus has to tell them:
 - “Let the little children come to me and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”
-) But as with other matters, they finally come to understand...
 - At Pentecost, at the first preaching of the gospel as recorded in Acts 2,
 - Peter makes a point of including the children of those who believe...
 - Having commanded those who received the gospel to repent and be baptised...
 - He adds, “The promise is to you and to your children” and then He baptised them.
 - He remembers that the little ones are to be received...
 - From the start, he establishes the pattern of household baptism for the church.
 - From this time on in the new testament, ever time there is a family with children, the whole household is baptised...
 - The little ones are received in Jesus’ name.
-) However, it is sad to say that there are some who do not receive little children today.
 - I read several commentators who read these passages about receiving children and conclude that Jesus can’t possibly be talking about little children here...
 - that He is only referring to those adults who have become like children.
 - But this is not what Jesus says...
 - He says very plainly that we are to receive the little children in His name...
 - And in chapter 19, the very point He makes is that children are not to be excluded because the kingdom belongs to them...
 - The very issue is that children—not those resembling children—were being excluded.
 - It is amazing to see how men will twist the scriptures to suit their own opinions.
 - But let me add that this is not just about baptism...

- There are many Baptists who wrongly refuse to baptise them,
- but then do a far better job at training them up in the nurture and discipline of the Lord than those who do baptise them.

TRANS> Clearly, we are to receive the little children in His name.

0. When you do receive them, Jesus says that you receive Him.

- . You must always remember that the way you treat His people is the way you treat Him.
 - If you want to find out how you would treat Jesus if He were here today, just look and see how you treat the little children who belong to His kingdom.
 - Jesus says, “If you receive them, you receive me.”
 - . This is just like what we will find Him saying later in Matthew 25 about the judgement...
 - You know, the passage where He says,
 - “If you have done it to the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me.”
 - This is where the early church came up with the saying,
 - “In your brother you have seen the Lord.”
 - However you treat the ones that belong to Christ is the way you treat Him.
 - If you receive them in His name, you receive Him.
 - If you reject them, you reject Him.
 - . What a blessing it is for us to be able to pour out our love for Jesus by pouring out our love on the children who belong to Him!
 - If we love them for Jesus sake, He counts it as if you have done it to Him!
 - That’s how closely He is connected to these little people.
 - What a sweet encouragement this is!
 - . But this sweet encouragement also carries a dreadful warning!
0. The Lord Jesus Christ burns with indignation against you if you cause even one of these little ones who believe in Him to sin.
- He says:

- v. 6: But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung about his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea.
 - . A millstone was an instrument that was used for grinding grain to make flour.
 - Almost every house had a portable mill.
 - It was a common sound to hear a woman working the stone as part of the process to make bread.
 - But the millstone in view here is literally the “donkey millstone.”
 - This refers to a very large stone that could only be worked by donkeys.
 - It had a large hole in the middle into which the grain could be poured, and it was this hole that Jesus speaks of as being hung around the neck.
 - . He says to have one of these stones hung around your neck and to be cast into the depth of the sea would be better for you than to make one of the little ones who believe in Him to sin...
 - He burns with fiery indignation against those who cause little children to stumble because He loves these little ones.
0. I am sorry to say that causing little children that believe in Jesus to stumble is a very easy thing to do!
- . The very characteristic that Jesus commends in them is a characteristic that makes them very vulnerable to stumble.
 - We have seen that these little children are dependent on their parents
 - Whatever a parent feeds his child, that is what it eats...
 - Whatever a parent or guardian teaches his child whether by word or example, that is what the child learns...
 - If a parent does not protect his child from the wolves, the child will be devoured.
 - The child doesn't have much say about these things because he is dependent.
 - . Now you understand that this is true of spiritual matters as well...
 - 0) As a parent, you either feed your child the gospel, guide Him in God's law, and guard him from danger...
 - Or you lead him to idols...
 - you cause him to sin.

- If you go to an idol temple, you take him with you and he has no say about it.
 - If you take him to a place where there is worship that is contrary to what God has commanded, the child had no say.
- If your own life is full of idols, you will cause your children to stumble.
 - That is why the second commandment (forbidding idolatry) expressly declares that God
 - “visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of them that hate Him...”
 - When you reject what God has said and you allow corruption into your home,
 - or when you look to find your life in riches or in the pride of life...
 - or when you are careless and negative about the worship of God...
 - you cause your children to sin!

0) It is a terrible thing to do!

- You take these little children that Jesus has entrusted to you to command in the ways of the Lord—
 - to lead into the joys of salvation...
 - to bring up in His nurture and admonition...
 - and you offer them up to the idols that you worship!
- Here is this little one who is looking to you, dependent on you...
 - And instead of giving him God’s counsel, you give him worldly wisdom...
 - instead of giving him the bread of life, you give him the chaff of the world...
 - instead of protecting him from his enemies, you invite the enemies right into your home and sit down with them as friends!
 - How is a child supposed to escape these things?
- Don’t offer him to your idols!
 - It would be better for you if a millstone were hung about your neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble!

0. I want you to notice that Jesus calls these little children “the little ones that believe in Me.”
- . How can He call them that if they are only little children?
 - He calls them that by virtue of the covenant.
 - God has told believing parents who keep His covenant that He will be a God to them and to their children after them.
 - From the time of Abraham, He commanded the sign of the covenant to be given to them.
 - Circumcision was the old sign, and Romans 4 tells us that it is a seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith...
 - All who received it were marked out as believers—
 - and yet, this sign of faith was given to children on the eighth day of life—before they could even speak.
 - . Why does the Lord command that a sign of faith be given to infants?
 - He does this because of what we have already seen about children...
 - It is because they are dependent on their parents.
 - That means that if their parents are believers,
 - it is expected that they will bring their children up in the faith...
 - It is because of this expectation that the apostle Paul tells us in 1 Cor 7 that children who have at least one believing parent are holy...
 - They are set apart to the Lord because of a believing parent who will surely train them up in the faith.
 - He says that they are holy if they have at least one believing parent,
 - and that otherwise they would be unclean...
 - that is, they would be excluded from the covenant as those who are rejected of God.
 - When they are little, we are to regard them in the same way we regard their parents.
 - Christ commands us to receive them as in the same way we receive adults who profess the gospel if they have a believing parent.
 - With their parents, they are called, “those who believe in Jesus.”
 - If a child’s parents do not profess Christ,
 - it is to be regarded as an unbeliever until such time as it repents...
 - If a child’s parents profess Christ,

- it is to regarded as a believer until such time as it rejects the faith—either by professed unbelief or by refusing to repent of its sins—
 - by refusing to walk in the covenant.
- . Now you can see how bad it is if a parent plays the hypocrite...
 - That parent is received into the church and so are his children...
 - They are baptised and set apart to the Lord according to His commandment...
 - But rather than being trained up in covenant faithfulness, they are trained up in hypocrisy.

TRANS> Oh how our Lord burns with jealousy when we take His children and teach them to love idols!

- Let ungodly parents take heed!
 - It is better to have a millstone hung around your neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble!
- Let ungodly ministers take heed who preach a false gospel!
 - It would be better for them to have millstone hung around their neck to teach lies to these little ones.
- Let ungodly grandparents and uncles and aunts and brothers and sisters and school teachers and governments take heed!
 - It would be better to have a millstone hung about your neck than to cause these little ones who believe to sin.
- Jesus says, “Woe to the world because of offenses...”
 - by “offenses,” Jesus means doing things that cause these little ones to sin...
 - He says, “Offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes.”
 - The covenant people are going to be tested to separate the true from the false.
 - There is both wheat and chaff in the church,
 - and the good must be separated from the bad...
 - the true from the false...
 - but how great will be the punishment of the one who leads others away from the Lord!
- . But let no disciple use offenses as an excuse...

0. If your parents or your ministers have caused you to stumble, God will deal with them about it...
 - But you must not use it as an excuse.
 - You must not say,
 - “I can’t help the way I am... it is the way I was brought up... it is the way I was taught.”
 - “There were so many stumbling blocks I could not help but stumble upon them...”

TRANS> Oh no, you must never say such things!

0. It is the duty of everyone to repent...
 - . In Ezekiel 18, the Lord complains at his people for using this excuse...
 - 0) They were saying,
 - “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”
 - 0) God says, “Then let the children repent—if they repent, they will be forgiven of their sins and restored to Me.”
 - . Jesus calls you to the painful process of amputation in verse 8 and 9...
 - 0) In short, He says,
 - “Don’t go to Hell for the sake of anything—if your own foot or hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you.”
 - Do whatever is necessary—
 - No matter how dear the thing is that causes you to sin—no matter how closely it is attached to you...
 - Cut it off.
 - 0) It may be anything that is dear to you...
 - Perhaps it is a cherished practice, the making of excuses in which you have long found comfort, movies or music that cause you to stumble...
 - No matter what it is or how dear it is, if it causes you to stumble into sin, cut it out of your life...
 - But in the context of this passage, it seems that most of all it refers to a relationship with a parent...
 - If you have idol worshipping parents, you can no longer go along with it.
 - They may become so incensed with you that they will disown you...

- But so be it!
- Nothing is worth holding on to if it is going to bring you down to Hell...
 - Jesus pleads with you...
 - “It is better for you to enter into life lame of maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the lake of fire... It is better to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into Hell fire.”

TRANS> See how Jesus loves His own!

- He does not want you stumble, and so He instructs you what to do if there is something that is leading you away from Him...
 - But now He returns to His main point...
 - “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones...”
 - Solomon says that you despise them when you will not chasten them to deliver their soul from hell...
 - What is a parent thinking who would not think a moment about commanding his child off the railroad tracks when a train is coming...
 - But will not command Him to flee from God’s wrath when He is on the path to Hell.
 - Such a parent surely despises Christ’s little one.
- But now for your encouragement—

III. Just look at how important the salvation of these little Ones is to God!

- . First, Jesus reminds you that the Father has given His most choice angels charge concerning them...
 0. Of these little ones He says,
 - “for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.”
 - By “their angels” He surely means those angels that are given to minister and look out for these little ones...
 - as Psalm 91:11-12 says:
 - For He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you in all your ways. In *their* hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.
 - Their duty is to guard us so that we will not stumble into sin...
 0. Jesus says that the angels given this job concerning his little ones are of such a high rank that they “always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.”

- They are the ones who have very near access to God's throne...
 - God has appointed His choicest servants to look out for the little ones because their salvation is that important to Him!
 - Now if God has gone to such lengths to keep them in His way...
 - what encouragement that is to you who are also desiring to do that...
 - and what a terror it is to you who are neglecting the spiritual nurture of your children or who are leading them away to your cherished idols!
- . Secondly, Jesus shows you how important their salvation is to by showing what He has done for these little ones.
 0. He says, "for the Son of man has come to save that which is lost."
 - . As we have seen before,
 - when Jesus speaks of the Son of Man, He speaks of Himself...
 - He is reminding you here that He has come from heaven to save that which was lost.
 - . This is a very full and rich statement for us...
 - much fuller and richer for us than it was for the disciples at the time Jesus said it...
 - because we know what His coming to save entailed!
 - We know that it meant He had to go to the cross to take away our sins...
 - We know about the cursing and the shame and the whip and the nails in His hands and feet.
 - We know about the cry of agony under the wrath and curse of His Father "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken Me."
 - . None of the little ones—nor any other ones—could be saved apart from His coming...
 - It is through Him alone that our communion with heaven is restored so that we might receive life and light.
 - See how His love burns for His sheep!
 0. How could it be that the Saviour should come and do all this for their salvation...
 - . And that we should make one of His little ones stumble!
 - How could we do it in the face of such burning love?
 - . It is no wonder to see what He does for those He has purchased at so great a cost when they go astray...

- He leaves everything to find them!
- He leaves the 99 to go and find the one that has strayed...
 - And when if He should find it, He rejoices over it more than over the 99 that did not stray.
- . In this Jesus shows how much He cares for each and every one of His lambs.
 - It is for you to join with your dear Saviour in the hot pursuit of their salvation!
 - What encouragement it ought to be to you to know that Son of God is burning with zeal for them...
 - My brothers and sisters, He is with you when it is their salvation you are after!
 - Isn't it marvellous?
 - Every time you chasten your child and restore him to God's way, the Saviour greatly rejoices.
 - You have His help and His encouragement and support when you go to restore them.
 - How great His love is for your little ones!

TRANS> But He does not end His encouragement here...

- . He goes on to tell you that it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.
 0. And so not one will...
 - . The Lord will see to the salvation of every last one of them.
 - That does not mean that there is no such thing as apostasy...
 - Jesus has already told us that there will be many in the covenant who do not continue in the covenant.
 - . But as for His sheep—
 - not one of them will perish...
 - It is not the Father's will that they should...
 - All that the Father gives to Him will come to Jesus—
 - They will hear His voice and they will come.
- 0. Now you will say to me—
 - . But I do not know who the elect are—what good is this promise to me?
 - And I will say to you,

- It is a good promise because it tells you that if your children are elect, God will even overcome all that you or anybody else has done to make them stumble.
- . If that is so,
 - How much more sure can you be that He is with you if you are truly devoted to their salvation...
 - If you are feeding these who depend on you his word, and are leading them in His ways, and sincerely praying with them and for them...
 - Then these little ones will follow you and God will bless them.
 - God is not against you unless you are setting up stumbling blocks.
 - The encouragement if for you to follow your Lord with zeal,
 - remembering that He claims these little ones as His own because you claim to be His own...
 - So long as you lead them in His way, He will be with you.
 - He does not say that He will oppose you and sometimes overrule you when you lead them in His way...
 - He only says He will do that when you don't if they are His elect...

Conclusion

Is this not the lesson of this whole passage?

- It is not the ones who humble themselves like a little child so as to depend wholly upon Him that He opposes...
 - Oh no, those are the ones He helps along and blesses.
 - Those are the ones who enter His kingdom and are great in it...
- He will only oppose you if you set your idols...
 - If you look for your happiness in your idols...
 - If you set up your own way of salvation and walk in your own wisdom...
 - It is only then that you will lead your children away from Him and that He will oppose you.
 - But if you are earnest and sincere in your faith,
 - you can be sure that your God will be with you and your house.
 - Child-like dependency is what He supports and blesses.