BECOME LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN

Matthew 18:1–14

Key Verse: 18:3

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

Everybody loves a winner. We see it in sports, in entertainment, in business and politics. We admire people who make something of themselves, who aspire to be or achieve something great. But in today’s passage Jesus teaches his disciples about the kingdom of heaven, and again, it’s the opposite of how most people think. Jesus says it’s the lowliest person who’s the greatest. He tells us to change and become like little children. What does it mean? And how can we do it? May God speak to our hearts through his word.

A major theme of Matthew’s Gospel is discipleship. Jesus trains his disciples and challenges them to make disciples. But who’s a real disciple of Jesus? It’s the person who obeys everything Jesus taught. In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus’ teachings are organized into five major discourses, and chapter 18 is the fourth one. If we want to be disciples of Jesus and make disciples of Jesus, we need to focus on learning and practicing Jesus’ teachings.

Before we get started, we should pay attention to the context. It’s now the final months of Jesus’ life on earth, and he’s on his way to Jerusalem. He’s repeatedly been predicting that rejection, suffering and death await him there. He’s been trying to help his disciples grow in personal faith and follow him in the way of the cross. In today’s passage he begins to help them build a new kind of community among them. Over the next three weeks we’re going to be taking a closer look at what this new community is like. In today’s passage we’re going to zero in on the foundation of this new community. What is it? Let’s see.

Read verse 1. We wonder why the disciples are suddenly asking about this. We can understand when we review what’s been happening. Back in chapter 16 Simon Peter had made a confession of faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God (16:16). Jesus gave him his new name, Peter, and promised that he would be the rock on which he would build his church (16:18). But when Peter tried to dissuade him from taking the way of the cross, Jesus called him “Satan” (16:23). The other disciples began to wonder about Peter’s leadership. But after that, Jesus took only Peter, James and John with him up a high mountain to witness his transfiguration (17:1ff.). When they came back down the mountain, the other nine disciples were unable to heal a demon-possessed boy (17:16). They were really wondering why not (17:19). We can imagine that Peter, James and John started looking down on the other nine as less than them. And the other nine really resented it. In fact, the other Gospels tell us that at this time they began arguing about which of them was the greatest (Mk9:33,34; Lk9:46). None of them wanted to be second; each wanted to be first. No one wanted to be under anyone else. As human beings we’re all made in the image of God. Because of that, we all have a desire to be great like God, which is good. But we all also have a sinful nature. Our sinful nature makes us want to be great without God; it twists our good desire for greatness into pride and selfish ambition, which are toxic to human relationships (Gal5:19,20; Php2:3a). Even Jesus’ disciples had this hiding deep within them.

How did Jesus respond to their question about being the greatest? Read 18:2–3. Jesus was such a good teacher. Bringing a little child among them, he was showing them a vivid example of what he meant. It must have been so heart-moving to see a little child among all those competitive grown men. At the same time, Jesus was giving them a very powerful challenge. He said if they didn’t change and become like that little child, not only would they not be great, but also they wouldn’t even enter the kingdom of heaven.

What did he mean? Here the word “change” literally means “turn.” They needed to turn from struggling with each other. They needed to turn to a new direction. What was it? It was to become like little children. Really? Little children can be difficult. Little children can be noisy, fighting over candy, throwing tantrums, so self-centered and demanding. Jesus couldn’t mean for us to become like that. We can understand when we see what else he says. Read verse 4. Here, to take “the lowly position of this child” literally means to humble oneself. In their society, children were unimportant, powerless and even invisible. In brief, Jesus meant that to become like little children was to become humble.

So, how can we change and become humble? That’s a really good question! Many people aren’t even aware of how proud they are. Many try to act like they’re humble in many ways, but in their deep hearts, they’re still proud and conceited, thinking they’re superior to everybody else. The Bible calls it “false humility” (Col2:18,23). It’s easy to say, “Change and become like little children,” but it’s so hard to do. Often, we become humble only when God forces it upon us, when he strips us of the things that make us proud. And as soon as we can get out of that adversity, we become proud again. When everyone is striving to go up, it’s so hard to step aside, or even worse, to step down. When people brag about themselves, it’s so hard to remain quiet and make ourselves like nobodies. In church we would expect people to be humble. But even in the church people provoke and envy each other (Gal5:26). In church people compete about how much they know the Bible, how much they are faithful, how much they pray, how much they sacrifice, how fruitful their ministry is. It may be hard to detect at first, but honestly, it eventually drives people away.

So how can we change and become humble? Jesus wants us to start by thinking about little children. Read verses 3,4 again. A little child has no wealth, no power, no wisdom, no achievements. A little child is actually unaware of these things. In a crowd there are many tall adults, but a little child crawls close to the ground. From carefully observing a little child we can learn many things. A little child is totally transparent, unassuming and vulnerable. A little child is trusting. A little child receives and gives love freely. A little child doesn’t despise anyone. A little child is constantly watching and learning. Jesus wants us to become like little children. For that to happen Jesus said we need to “change.” Change what? Change our mentality, our worldview, our value system, as well as our view of ourselves and each other. How can we change that deeply?

Jesus invites us all: “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” (11:29). Real change starts when we begin learning from Jesus. We especially need to be learning from his gentle and humble heart. We can see Jesus’ gentle, humble heart in the way he treated people. The author Matthew experienced it personally. After living as a selfish tax collector he’d become so sick spiritually. But Jesus didn’t despise him. Jesus saw him with hope. Jesus treated him with grace. Jesus showed him love. So Matthew described Jesus based on the prophecy of Isaiah: “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out…” (12:20a; cf. Isa42:1–4). Jesus tenderly cared for people who were like bruised reeds or smoldering wicks until they were healed. As we fix our thoughts on Jesus and personally come to him, we learn his gentle, humble heart. Philippians 2 tells us we need to be united with Christ so that we can grow in his humility, especially in the way we treat each other. Changing and becoming like little children isn’t a one-time event, but a life-long process.

Read verse 5. Not only should we be humble like a little child, but also we should welcome little children in Jesus’ name. What does it mean? In light of the first part of verse 6, “little children” aren’t just toddlers, but adults who believe in Jesus (cf. 10:42). Our fellow Christians usually have many weaknesses and struggles. They need a lot of help. It’s not easy to “welcome” them, for the same reasons it isn’t easy to welcome little children: we’re busy, and they’re needy. But Jesus says to do it “in my name.” It means to do it for his sake, for his glory, not our own—mainly because we love Jesus. Welcoming fellow believers in the name of Jesus requires humility.

Many years ago there was a woman who came from Korea as a missionary. Back in Korea she’d been an officer in the army. So when she came among God’s people in Chicago, she was accustomed to teaching and ordering people around. The pastor took notice and gave her training. It was training to be the babysitter for everyone. During the training, changing diapers, feeding and caring for many little ones, she wept a lot, and her inner person began to change. Actually, we all need training in the true humility of Jesus.

Read verse 6. Here we see Jesus’ shepherd’s heart for those who are young in faith. He wants us to take seriously our influence on them. Literally, the word “stumble” means to put an impediment in others’ way, to cause them to trip and fall. It’s an intentional act, but sometimes we do it unintentionally. Spiritually, “stumble” means to “offend.” It’s the same word Jesus had just used when he said we should not “offend” outsiders (17:27). Not offending others is hard, because we can’t always be aware or sure of how we might be doing it. Some of us may have no qualms about offending others—we do it all the time and may even seem to enjoy it. But Jesus says that to grow in true greatness, we need to learn how not to offend others, especially those who’re young in faith. Of course, the message of the cross and the message to repent are offensive, and we should never compromise them. But we should do our best not to offend others with unnecessary words, behavior or attitudes. Why? It’s because being offensive may cause young believers to stumble in their walk with God. In this case, “stumble” means to lose respect for God’s authority, to begin to rebel against him, to be enticed into sin, and thus, to “fall away.” We have to acknowledge that many things Christians have said and done in history have caused people to fall away from Jesus. We may not be able to repair the damage or change the history, but we can do our best to be accountable for our own actions.

Jesus wants us to be serious about what is going on inside of us, because it seems that when we begin to give in to our own sins, that’s when we cause others to stumble. Read verses 7–9. Here, Jesus uses hyperbole not to make us start cutting off body parts—for that wouldn’t really change the sinful desires within us—but to help us have the right attitude toward sin. Instead of loving and secretly enjoying sin, we need to hate sin and cut it off. We need to struggle against the sins within us before God as a matter of life or death. Then we can be a good influence to others.

Jesus taught more about the attitude we should have. Read verse 10. Here he again mentions “little ones.” They may be children, or, those who are young in faith. To “despise” them literally means to think little or nothing of them, to treat them as not important or significant. This is especially clear in the context of sinning. When we sin, most often it’s because we’re treating others as unimportant. Jesus wants to replace our tendency to despise others with something quite opposite. Read verses 12–14. His point is to teach us God’s heart for even one little one who wanders off. It’s not a smart business plan, but it’s a true shepherd’s heart. This heart is another illustration of humility.

Today Jesus taught us to change and learn humility, as the foundation of a new community of the heavenly kingdom. May God help us all learn the humility that pleases Jesus.