

## 6.16.24 *Who is the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?* Matthew 18:1-7

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This past week it was my privilege to represent Brewster Baptist Church and The American Baptist Churches of MA at the American Baptist Churches USA Board of General Ministries meeting in Green Lake, Wisconsin and to attend the Installation service for our new General Secretary, Rev. Dr. Gina Jacobs-Strain. I'm the Chaplain for the Board of General Ministries and the Executive Committee, so I had the opportunity to share five messages this week. It was a blessing for me to be with sisters and brothers in Christ from the west coast to New England and everywhere in between. Thank you for enabling me to do this for our denomination.

This is an exciting Sunday. We're welcoming over twenty new members into our church family! We're going to be voting to call the Rev. Nate Ryan to join our staff as the Pastor of Discipleship working with students and adults to help us make disciples and grow mature followers of Jesus. As I prayed about what to share on a Sunday when we're welcoming new members, I thought it would be good to talk about what we need to do to enter the Kingdom of heaven. The disciples of Jesus heard about the Kingdom of heaven a lot, and thankfully they had the humility to allow their less than finest hours to be shared so we might learn from them. Today's scripture from Matthew 18:1-7 is one such moment.

"At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, **"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"**<sup>2</sup> He called a child, whom he put among them,<sup>3</sup> and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you **change and become like children**, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.<sup>4</sup> Whoever **becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.**<sup>5</sup> Whoever **welcomes one such child** in my name welcomes me.

<sup>6</sup>"If any of you put **a stumbling block** before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if **a great millstone** were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.<sup>7</sup> Woe to the world because of **stumbling blocks!** Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom **the stumbling block** comes!"

Matthew's Gospel is divided into five major discourses just like there are five books of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus...). The Fourth discourse begins in Chapter 18, which is about **life together in the Church**. It begins, "The disciples came to Jesus and asked, ***Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?***" The disciples are asking, "Who's the MVP in the Kingdom of heaven, who's the best disciple, the most exemplary follower, which one of us do you like best, who's the most indispensable, whose opinion matters the most, which one of us is the most important, who is the greatest" The hearts of the disciples were filled with ambition, and they wanted to know where they fit in the religious hierarchy below Jesus.

Consider for a moment the absurdity of asking Jesus who is the greatest. Asking Jesus, who said earlier in Matthew 5:3-11: "Blessed are the poor in spirit and those who mourn, Blessed are the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, Blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." It's like these guys missed the entire Sermon on the Mount. Jesus could've responded in a lot of ways. I'm sure a few came to mind, but rather than calling them selfish, prideful, slow learners, or worse; rather than saying, *"The greatest is the one who remembers what I told you already and does it!"* Rather than rolling his eyes and sighing in exasperation, Jesus tries to teach them using a visual aid to assist their memory.

*"He called a child, whom he put among them."* When Jesus put a child in their midst the disciples had no clue what he was doing. Jesus was shifting their focus from greatness to the Kingdom of heaven. Jesus says, *"Truly I tell you, unless you **change and become like children**, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser wrote in their book *Leading the Congregation* that **childlikeness** is the first quality that Jesus is looking for from all who would follow him. To be like children is a foundation block of discipleship and Christian leadership. Jesus' statement must have shocked the disciples because rather than announcing what the spiritual organizational pyramid looked like and where they were on it, Jesus tells them he came to announce the reign of God in which there is no hierarchy and no superiority.

Yet time after time, to the very end, the disciples kept raising the question of greatness in the Kingdom (Matt. 18:1-5, 20:20-21, Mark 9:33-37, Luke 9:46-48). Luke says that this question even came up at the Last Supper (Luke 22:25-26) and Jesus' reply ends with these words, "***the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.***" To the end, the disciples kept raising the question, and to the end Jesus gave the same answer: the greatest will be like the youngest and the leader will be a servant.

Jesus urging childlikeness is good news because it's within anyone's reach. Childlike spirituality means being open to the Kingdom of heaven as a gift, a joy and a blessing. Shawchuck and Heuser note that like Jesus' first disciples, many Christians and Christian leaders tend to take themselves far too seriously. They're devastated by the slightest criticism and are jealous and possessive of their position. Children, on the other hand, are playful and creative; they take their play seriously, but not themselves.

To participate in the kingdom of heaven, we need to be as **teachable** as children in learning God's ways and living accordingly. One of the cool things about children and grandchildren when they're quite young and haven't yet learned to speak is watching their eyes and you can almost hear their little brains whirring with activity as they're processing all they're hearing, seeing, touching, and sticking in their mouth. Children are always learning for good and for bad from what they observe going on around them. You're always "on" when you're in the presence of children.

Jesus wants us to be teachable as children and to consider the **dependence of children** on parents and loved ones for food, shelter, care, and nurture. I don't know of a creature on earth that's more dependent on others for survival for longer than human children. Fish, turtles, and many other creatures – they're on their own from the moment they're born, and the world can be a brutal place with other creatures just waiting to eat you. Human beings are dependent on their parents or guardians not for minutes or days but for years. **Entering the kingdom of God like a child means recognizing our dependence on God and learning to trust in and depend on a Heavenly Father who can be relied on as no human parent can be, no matter how devoted.**

Entering the Kingdom of God as a child means we're teachable, we recognize our dependence on God, and Jesus clearly states it requires **humility**. Jesus says, "*Whoever **becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.***" In their book *None of These Diseases*, doctors S. I. McMillen and David Stern tell the story of a young woman who wanted to go to college, but her heart sank when she read the question on the application that asked, "Are you a leader?" Being both humble and honest, she wrote, "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst. To her surprise, she received a letter from the college that began: "*Dear Applicant: A study of the applications reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower.*" It's possible to be humble not only in life but in death. Nearing the end of his life, Christian leader John Calvin gave strict instructions that he be buried in the common cemetery with no tombstone. He wished to give no encouragement to those who might make it a Protestant shrine. Today, his grave site is unknown.<sup>[1]</sup> Jesus desires humble, teachable, trusting followers, rather than those who are arrogant, prideful, and trusting in themselves.

Keeping the child next to him and in full view of all the disciples, Jesus continued, "<sup>5</sup> *Whoever **welcomes one such child** in my name welcomes me.*" Jesus is urging his followers to treat even the youngest, the most helpless and powerless, as we would welcome and treat Jesus himself. This is something many of us can improve on. Do we treat every child that crosses our path as if he or she was a little Jesus? What's hard to believe after this teaching by Jesus in **chapter 18** is the disciple's attitude in **Matthew 19:13-15**. "Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. **The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them;** but Jesus said, "*Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for **it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.***" And he laid his hands on them and went on his way." How soon we can forget or ignore Jesus' words. No wonder Jesus needed time alone away from the disciples!

Perhaps that's why in Chapter 18 Jesus said, <sup>6</sup> "*If any of you put **a stumbling block** before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if **a great millstone** were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.* <sup>7</sup> *Woe to the world because of **stumbling blocks!** Occasions*

*for **stumbling** are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom **the stumbling block** comes!”*

Jesus repeats his warning about stumbling blocks **four times** in these few verses. Anyone who has stumbled while hiking or walking on a trail, trying to cross the living room, or to get to the bathroom at night, knows that you can get badly injured by stumbling. Unfortunately, that’s happened to some people in our church. Stumbling hurts, and we may feel embarrassed if someone else sees us. One of the first things we do if we stumble is look around to see if anyone noticed us in our less than graceful moment. When we were helping clear the walking trail for our son Greg’s Eagle Scout project for what is now the Eddy Bay Trail on Lower Road, part of what we had to do was clear every tripping hazard that could cause someone to stumble. These were naturally occurring things like old stumps and roots - no one had put them there intentionally. It would be far worse to stumble because someone tried to trip us up. Jesus is strongly warning us not to put a stumbling block in front of a little one who believes in him. A “little one” could be a child or one whose faith is still in its infancy.

Even the smallest millstones weigh several hundred pounds. Think what that implies about what Jesus is saying. If we cause a little one to stumble, we’d be better off with a 300-pound weight around our neck (which is called being an anchor), and being thrown into the sea rather than facing the Lord’s judgment for what we had done. This says something about the infinite value that God puts on every person. Jesus saying this four times couldn’t emphasize more strongly, ***“Don’t be a stumbling block!”***

Blocks of stone can function negatively as stumbling blocks that cause pain and hurt and yet the same stones can **also be used to serve a positive function as steppingstones or as part of building a solid foundation**. Jesus doesn’t want any of us to be a stumbling block, rather he wants us to be steppingstones and part of strong foundations. He wants us to help people move forward especially through challenging terrain in life – if you’ve ever gone hiking and been confronted by a stream or other water, it is so nice to have stones to help you get across. In 1 Peter we’re exhorted to be like living stones. The beauty of living stones compared to regular ones is we can move, and we can be

steppingstones for many people throughout the day. We can be part of many foundations, not just one. We're not static and stuck in one place.

Keeping the following idea in mind, is helpful in our relationships and interactions with others: ***"Am I being a stumbling block or something useful like a steppingstone, or helping build a foundation?"*** I realize stones can be used for other things as well like walls, wells, and fireplaces, **but the point is to be useful to the Lord and others rather than a barrier, a hindrance, or a pain.**

God wants all of us to be like children. Staying young at heart is good spiritually. Michael Quoist in his book *Prayers for Life* imagines God saying:

"I don't like old people unless they are still children,

I want only children in my kingdom...

Youngsters – twisted, humped, wrinkled, white bearded – all

Kinds of youngsters, but youngsters...

I like children because my likeness has not been dulled in them.

They have not botched my likeness...

I like them because they are still growing, they are still improving.

They are on the road, they are on the way.

But with grown-ups there is nothing to expect any more.

They will no longer grow, no longer improve.

They have come to a full stop.

It is disastrous – grown-ups think they have arrived."

Jesus combined childlikeness and humility in his own life and ministry and so should we. A woman named Lauri, shared the following experience. Recently I took my sons, 12-year-old Matthew and 6-year-old Ryan, to my parents' house for an afternoon visit. They spent some time playing and socializing with their grandparents. When we were ready to leave, my dad said to Matthew, *"You made my day."* Matthew replied, *"God made your day; we just put the icing on it."*

God made your day, now go put the icing on it for somebody else.

Don't be a stumbling block, be a steppingstone, or help build someone's foundation.

**Prayer:      Lover of the Children by Ken Medema**

Walking in the sunshine

Laughing in the rain;

Lover of the children make me young again.

Climbing in the treetops,

Running down the shore;

Lover of the children, make me young once more.

Vigorous & daring, teachable & mild;

Lover of the children,

Make me like a child.

Trusting in your goodness

Walking where you lead;

Make me young indeed.

Make me young enough to know that alone I dare not

Go through the darkness of the night.

Make me young enough to see your love will never let me go.

Make me open to surprise, put wonder in my eyes,

Make my vision clear & bright.

Make me willing to be led & to follow where you bid me go.

Fearing not tomorrow Trusting you today;

Lover of the children make me young I pray.”

**Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. What is a fun memory you have of a moment from your childhood?  
Helpful hint: think of a story you often recall or tell.

2. How do you think Jesus felt about the disciples asking, “*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*” What do you see in Matthew 18 and 19 that supports your answer?
3. Why is humility so vital and important to following Jesus? What does being humble enable and help? What does being prideful or arrogant hinder and harm?
4. Jesus repeats his warning about stumbling blocks **four times** in Matthew 18:1-7. How can you identify when you or someone else is being a stumbling block?
5. What does it look like to be a steppingstone or to be like a stone that helps build a foundation, a bridge, a well or wall that serves a useful and beneficial purpose to help others and ourselves? How can you be that kind of stone for others, rather than a stumbling block, barrier, or a hindrance?
6. What step(s) can you take to remain childlike in spirit and humble and young at heart?