

Sunday, March 16, 2014

“At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 18:1-4)



This event is a lesson in humility. It is described in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and putting the three accounts together, it went something like this: Jesus and the apostles had gone to Caesarea Philippi, about 20-25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. A lot of important events happened there. This is where Peter testified that Jesus was the Christ; where Jesus told his disciples for the first time that he would be killed, and after three days rise again; where the transfiguration took place; where Jesus healed the demon-possessed boy that the apostles were not able to heal. They then headed back to Capernaum, where they lived. On the road back, Jesus reminded them again of His impending death and resurrection. After all of these wonderful words and amazing events, the apostles got into an argument about which

one of them would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. They came into the house in Capernaum, and Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, and knowing what they had been disputing, asked them about it. Being ashamed, they at first did not answer, but eventually responded by asking him the question: “Who is the greatest in the

kingdom of heaven?” (Matthew 18:1). He said “if any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all.” (Mark 9:35). Then He called a little child to him, “and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3-4). And “Whosoever shall receive this child in my name receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me receiveth him that sent me: for he that is least among you all, the same shall be great.” (Luke 9:48). “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matthew 18:6).

Note that this isn’t the only time that the disciples had such arguments. Another time right after Jesus prophesied of his death, we read:

“Then came to him the mother of Zebedee’s children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom. But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able. And he saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father. And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren.” (Matthew 20:20-24)

And even on the night of the Lord’s Supper we read:

“And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest.” (Luke 22:24)

This is a sobering thing, that the very apostles, walking on earth with Jesus, could so quickly and easily leave spiritual things, forget the death of Christ, and fall into this sin of pride and ambition.

The commentators universally say that the apostles thought that Jesus was going to set up an earthly, temporal kingdom. They thought he would be a king and that they would hold positions of honor, wealth and power. Their pride and lust of those things caused them to fight among each other.

“Only by pride cometh contention.” (Proverbs 13:10)

Desiring to be the greatest is an especially pernicious sin when it finds its way into the church. It leads to people having an ambition to be lords over God’s heritage (1 Peter 5:3), like Diotrephes:

“Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words; and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church. Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God.” (3 John 1:9-11)

In the story that we’re considering, the answer by Jesus of who would be the greatest was to call a little child to him, as an emblem of humility. Matthew Henry says “humility is a lesson so hardly learned, that we have need by all ways and means to be taught it.” I would like to focus on:

“Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3-4)

When I see Jesus Christ saying that something is going to keep me from entering into the kingdom of heaven, I want to make sure that I have an understanding of that thing. So, the first thing he says is “Except ye be converted.” This isn’t talking about being initially converted and making a first profession of faith, because this had already happened with the apostles. This is talking about the fact that the elect of God are constantly sinning and constantly needing to repent. This conversion is a repentance, a turning aside from a path of backsliding.

He says “Become as little children.” The word translated “little child” means “infant, or half grown boy or girl.” Probably, this child He used as an example was big enough to walk or crawl, because Jesus called him over. He is certainly not saying that children are, by nature, holy and righteous, because they aren’t. They are conceived in sin:

“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” (Psalm 51:5)

In fact, there are many ways in which this metaphor of being like a child is used negatively.

We should not be like children in understanding:

“Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.” (1 Corinthians 14:20)

We should not be fickle:

“That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.” (Ephesians 4:14)

We should not be unskillful in the word:

“Every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” (Hebrews 5:13-14)

Likewise, there are many ways that we should be child-like.

We should not be malicious, but rather desire the sincere milk of the word:

“Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.” (1 Peter 2:1-2)

We should behave and quiet ourselves:

“LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me. Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child.” (Psalm 131:1-2)

We should be governable and teachable:

“Now I say, That the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father.” (Galatians 4:1-2)

We should be absolutely dependent on God:

“And as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to supple thee; thou wast not salted at all, nor swaddled at all. None eye pitied thee, to do any of these unto thee, to have compassion upon thee; but thou wast cast out in the open field, to the lothing of thy person, in the day that thou wast born. And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live.” (Ezekiel 16:4-6)

And of course, in the text we’re looking at in Matthew 18, Jesus is primarily saying that we should be humble like a child. This is one of the ways that Jesus chose to teach us humility. Every time we see a child we should think of this verse, and we should think of being humble. Calvin says “the tender age of little children is distinguished by simplicity to such an extent that they are unacquainted with the degrees of honor, and with all the incentives to pride.” They have no worldly ambition. No lust for power or riches. They don’t even understand the concept of those things.

Jesus says if you don’t become like a child, “ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” He is not saying that you can work your way to heaven by becoming like a child. These people who do enter into the kingdom of heaven are synonymous with those which are written in the Lamb’s book of life (Revelation 21:27). These words are intended to excite us to behave ourselves, and this type of preaching is the means by which God teaches His loved ones how we ought to act. Jesus is basically saying “you are so sure that you’re going to enter into the kingdom of heaven, but I’m telling you that unless you change, you won’t enter the kingdom of heaven at all, let alone be the greatest there.” This is a rebuke to his disciples, and there is some evidence in the original language that His tone was very severe.

This phrase “kingdom of heaven” is an interesting phrase, and it is only used by Matthew. Some people say that it is talking about the church on earth. Some say that it is talking about heaven. It probably can mean either one, or both, depending on the context. It makes sense to me that it would apply to both of those things in this verse. A prideful, contentious, impenitent person should not be allowed membership in the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and such a person will not go to heaven either.

As I said, the apostles appear to have had a particularly hard time learning this lesson, especially early on. But they did learn the lesson, and made it one of the bedrock principles in their epistles. For example, James said:

“But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble... Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.” (James 4:6,10)

Peter said:

“Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.” (1Peter 5:5-6)

John said:

“For all that *is* in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.” (1 John 2:16)

And Paul, not one of the original twelve (he was “as one born out of due time”), but carried this doctrine through all of his writings:

“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.” (Philippians 2:3)

“For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think *of himself* more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.” (Romans 12:3)

I love you. Amen.