

As a Child

Please open your Bible to the book of Matthew 18, or turn to page 783 in the Bible under the chair in front of you.

Now in this teaching section, Jesus is going to give us instructions for life in the church. How should we live in the community of disciples? How do we follow Jesus together? What is required of us in order to 'do life' together as a church?

Let's learn from Jesus this morning...

Read **Matthew 18:1-9**

Intro

Have you ever had the experience of being around a crowd or group of people who were noticeably proud and self-focused?

Around 21 years ago, I was on a senior class trip to Florida to go to Walt Disney World. We had been planning this trip for years, serving and working in all kinds of fundraisers throughout high school to go to Disney World near the end of our senior year.

And that sounds great on paper. The problem is that the Disney World was full of other members of the class of 2005 from all around the country, who were also there on their senior trip. And as a group, we were terrible.

There were fights and arguments all through the park. People were shoving and mean. Everyone thought the world revolved around them. They were on their senior trip so they deserved whatever they wanted! They earned it! Everyone thought they were the greatest, you might say.

So while the trip as a whole was fun, I have to say that I never forgot that experience. What we were lacking was humility. We were lacking love and service of one another. We were lacking the ability to say, "excuse me" or "I'm sorry" in a crowded place that was supposed to be the 'happiest place on earth.'

And sadly, that kind of experience is not only limited to a group of teenagers on vacation. Even in the church, we can become proud and arrogant against one another. We can struggle to love and forgive and serve each other.

So what the class of 2005 could have used and what we today need is the teaching that Jesus gives us here in Matthew 18. Jesus wants to teach us what we need to know if we are to follow Him as His disciples, in community with one another.

Christianity is not a solo experience. When Jesus saves a person, He saves that person into a new family, the church.

And I see in this text, three traits that we need to flourish as a community of Christ-followers. Three characteristics that should mark the lives of all His followers, both back then and today.

Humility

Look again at verse one.

Matthew 18:1

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

What is greatness in the kingdom of heaven? Who is the greatest? And is it me?

Now, the disciples ask this question on a couple occasions. And we’re not told exactly what prompted it here, but it may have been some jealousy or envy because of Jesus’s interactions with Peter, or the fact that He took just three disciples up on that high mountain. Whatever the reason, the disciples want to know, and so they come to ask Jesus this question.

They want to know what He will say. And we too might ask that same question today. We too want to have status. We too want to know how we rank.

And what is Jesus’s response? Once more, verses 2-4...

Matthew 18:2-4

And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them **3** 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.

So Jesus’s reply here is to warn his disciples that their concern about status and being the greatest, which they have just shown, is totally incompatible the kingdom of heaven that He is bringing. William Barclay writes, “the very fact that they asked that question showed that they had no idea at all what the Kingdom of Heaven was” (II, p. 174).¹

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew—Volume 2 Chapters 11–28* (Revised Edition)

He's telling them that true discipleship is going to involve turning away from their natural desire for being greater than everyone else, and to instead put on humility, lest they fail to enter the kingdom.

And to do that, Jesus uses this striking visual aid. You can picture the scene with a little imagination. Perhaps they're sitting in Peter's house. And Jesus calls a young boy to him. And he knows his name. And children love Jesus, so this young child comes running over. And Jesus has the child stand before them. Now, they can all see this child, perhaps around 5 years old.

And now, Jesus says to the disciples all gathered around, "You all need to be like this child."

There is something about children that Jesus is trying to get into their hearts and minds. And what is that? What is it about the child that Jesus is trying to draw their attention to? And commentators have a wide range of thoughts on that question.

And Jesus tells us that it's the humility that He has in mind. But in what sense are children humble? Some suggest that it's the child's innocence. Or the child's trustfulness. Others think it may be the child's lack of concern for status. But honestly, I wonder if those commentators have met children. It seems to me that whenever you get more than one child in a room, there is often very much concern about status and rank and who's the best. They care very much is one if treated differently from the rest.

No, I don't think that it's the humility as an ethical virtue that He has in mind. He is fully aware of the sinful nature of children. Rather, I think He is highlighting the simple reality that is objectively true of children – their position of need and dependence and helplessness. That's not a moral virtue; it's a statement about what is true of children.

And yes, at times children are aware of this dependence. They may recognize their need and helplessness. Like when they're putting on a winter coat and can't get the zipper to work. Or they need help getting something to eat or drink. You know, my wife and I rejoiced the day when our kids could get in and out of the car on their own. What a great day that is. It's something to look forward to, for you parents whose kids are still young.

But it's not that this child or children are always aware of this need that Jesus is pointing to, but the reality of their dependence. They are humble in that they are in a position of need. And Jesus is saying – you need to become like that.

You need to 'turn' and acknowledge that reality. You must come to the place where you recognize your need and inability, or you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Unless you have come to recognize and confess that, you cannot enter. And unless you live in light of that, you cannot be great.

Notice, Jesus doesn't dismiss their desire for greatness. But He wants to radically re-orient how they should think about greatness and pursue it. He wants to rid us of this idea that greatness is found in the praise of others or in our being greater than someone else. The problem is in the pride in our hearts and the comparisons that we try to make with others.

And Jesus is saying a couple of things about why that's a problem. First and most importantly, unless you come to the place where you see your own inability, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

They're asking, "Are we on the 'All Star Team'?" but Jesus wants them to realize that they need to first be on the team.

And Jesus begins by telling them that to even enter the kingdom of heaven, you must humble yourself like a child. He has said this before. I have come for those who recognize their sickness and need of His healing. Jesus came for sinners, not for the self-righteous.

And the rest of the New Testament echoes this teaching. All people are born 'spiritually dead.' We are unable to save ourselves. We need God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves – He must save and deliver and rescue and redeem. And the good news is that Jesus did that by taking on flesh, dying on a cross, and rising again.

The apostle Paul writes about how Jesus changed His whole world. His old values and priorities have been radically transformed. He sees now that it was Jesus that He needed the whole time. His old boasting in himself is worthless.

Philippians 3:4-9

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: **5** circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; **6** as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. **7** But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. **8** Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ **9** and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith

Paul has come to see that all of his good works, all of his efforts to be a good person and do the right things, all of that is considered rubbish to him. He's saying all of that – and I was really good at doing the right things – but all of that is nothing, so that I might gain Christ and be found in Him. I need His righteousness, not my own.

And friend, this is what it means to become a Christian. You have to come to the point where you confess your need for Christ to save you. You must count all of your own good works as nothing. You must put all of your hope in Jesus to save you. It's His goodness and His righteousness and His death on your behalf that you need.

As the song goes, 'Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.'

So let me invite you and urge you and plead with you that you will come to Jesus like this today. You must humble yourself like a child and come. Won't you do that?

Back in Matthew 18, Jesus continues. In addition to seeing your need for Jesus like a child, in verse four, Jesus presses the point even further.

Matthew 18:4

Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

If you are to be great in the kingdom, you must walk in humility. You must clothe yourself with humility. It must be the attitude that you carry with you throughout your week every day, and indeed your whole life. You must walk in the awareness of your need for Jesus.

In fact, Jesus is saying here that the greatest in His kingdom are those who are most dependent on Christ. The goal is for you to rely solely on Him, for you to trust in Him, for you to bring glory to Him through your whole-hearted dependence.

So, what does that look like?

Let me talk about something that may be familiar to you. You fall into or perhaps run into some particular sin. Maybe it's an angry outburst with your family, or a lie you tell at work, or a temptation to lust that you give in to, or engage in gossip and slander someone behind their back. Whatever it is, you sin.

But you become aware of it. Maybe right away, or maybe sometime later – you realize what you've done. That experience is familiar to every Christian. And the question is, what do you do then? What is your response when faced with your sin?

Listen to the words of this Scottish pastor from the 19th century...

Robert Murray McCheyne –

"I feel, when I have sinned, an immediate reluctance to go to Christ. I am ashamed to go. I feel as if it would do no good to go – as if it were making Christ a minister of sin, to go straight from the swine-trough to the best robe – and a thousand other excuses; but I am persuaded they are all lies, direct from hell. John argues the opposite way: "If any man sins, we have an advocate with the Father;" ...I am sure there is neither peace nor safety from deeper sin, but in going directly to the Lord Jesus Christ."²

Before we were Christians, we trusted in our own goodness and in the things we did to feel good about ourselves. And our shame would have kept us from running to Christ when confronted with our sin. And the residue from that kind of thinking gets stirred up with every sin we commit.

Listen, in the face of our sin, every failure to go to Christ will result in some attempt on your part to deal with your sin yourself. And it will make you miserable. And it won't work.

What we need is Christ! You need to go directly to Him! Don't wait! Don't try to atone for your sins yourself. Don't wallow in shame and despise yourself. Don't try to make up for it by just 'working harder' or 'trying to clean yourself up first.'

You must go to Christ! But we will not go there unless we are convinced of our own inability. We must daily remind ourselves of our need for the grace and mercy of Jesus. It must be something we do every day. Just like you get dressed every day (at least, you should be doing that...), you should preach this truth to yourself every day. The NT writers tell us repeatedly to 'put on humility' (Col. 3:12).

1 Peter 5:5

Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

This is an intentional metaphor. You should wear humility like you wear clothes. And again, clothing yourself is a daily thing. There's an order and routine to it. You put on

² Robert M. M' Cheyne, as found in Andrew Bonar's, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M' Cheyne*, Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987 ed, p. 151.

probably put on your clothes in a similar way, every day. Pants, then a shirt, then socks, then shoes.

And here's the idea – there should be a similar, daily routine 'clothing yourself' with humility. And that's opposed to what would happen more naturally, which is to clothe yourself with self-reliance. Preparing yourself to be seen as 'great' or maybe 'greater than' someone else.

And this is part of the reason why having God's Word as a daily part of your routine can be so helpful. It can help re-orient your thinking, away from self-reliance and toward humility and dependance on Christ. There's probably not a page in the New Testament that doesn't, in some way, address your need for God and how He shows Himself able to supply what we need in Christ.

So have a routine. Acknowledge your need for God. That can be as simple as, "Lord, I need you today. I depend on you." And then declare your confidence in the work of Christ for you in the gospel. "Jesus, you have forgiven and cleansed me, and I have all that I need because you died for me and rose again." Finally, express your intention to rely on God. "I want to follow Christ today, and live for you. I trust you." Do this to clothe yourself with humility.

And though this is simple to say, it's hard to do. It's hard to become like a child. It requires a dying to self and pride and our sense of greatness. But this is essential for a community of believers to do life together. It's critical for the church. It's critical for this church, for Cornerstone to be clothed in humility.

And then secondly, Jesus teaches that we must be characterized by service.

Service

That's the word I'm going to use to describe the kind of loving welcome and receiving that Jesus speaks about in verses 5 and 6. Look there...

Matthew 18:5-6

"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, **6** 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 depth of the sea.

On the face of it, this seems like a pretty heavy warning against causing children to sin. And indeed, it is that. But there's a question that we need to wrestle with if we're going to rightly understand this section. Who Jesus is referring to as 'children' or 'little ones' in this passage? He mentions children or 'little ones' in verses 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, and 14.

As we just saw, Jesus has placed a literal child right in front of the disciples. So that seems obvious – Jesus is talking about actual children.

But, as we just saw in the first section, Jesus has taught that whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom. And verse five continues, ‘whoever receives one **such** child...’

It seems pretty clear that He has in mind, real children. They are definitely in view. But I think Jesus is also widening the scope to include those who have become like children, those who have recognized their need and put their trust in Him.

So I think it’s both. He’s speaking about those who are vulnerable to being tripped up (v6) or despised (v10). Children and new believers are in a position where they are easily influenced by others.

And this passage makes it clear that Jesus really cares about the little ones. It’s not that He doesn’t care about the big ones. But Jesus has a particular care and concern and protectiveness over the little ones, precisely because they’re so vulnerable.

We see that in the warning he gives. It’s a pretty graphic and scary statement in verse 6, that it would be better for you to have a millstone (one of these huge, round stones used to grind grain) tied around your neck and then throw you into the sea. And the wording there is emphatic – literally translated, it would be into the ‘ocean of the sea.’ In other words, the deepest part. There would be no hope of survival. It would be better for that to happen to you, than for you to lead one of these little ones astray or to sin.

The point is that Jesus really cares about the little ones. Don’t mess with them or you will face His wrath. Don’t cause them to stumble or sin.

Instead, the call for the Christian community is to receive such ones. That’s what verse five is teaching.

Matthew 18:5

Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,

We are to receive and welcome and love and serve such ones, whether children or Christians, just as we would treat Jesus. Part of the call on the church is to care for little ones and not despise them. The point is that we should actively care for the spiritual and physical needs of the little ones. And that reflects the heart of Christ.

And so let’s take that truth and flesh it out. What does it mean to actively care for children and little ones as a church? You ready?

I have eight ways, eight biblically-rooted ways that we can put this call from Jesus into practice. And I think that all of us have some role to play in walking out this call from Jesus.

1. Share the gospel with children.

Parents, this starts with you. Lead your children to Jesus. Recognize that they are people who bear the image of God, both body and soul. And speak the gospel to them.

That's more important than preparing them for the job market or helping them develop skills in sports or music. It's more important than seeking to give them a good education, though you should do that. Tell them about Jesus. Let them see in you a love for Christ.

Those who do not have children in your home, you can still get involved with sharing the good news with the children in your life. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, friends – whatever role you find yourself in, there are likely children in your orbit in some way. Look for opportunities to share the good news with the children in your life.

2. Adopt or foster children.

As of late 2025, Indiana has nearly 12,000 children in foster care, and most of them end up there due to neglect. There is a vast need for Christian families to prayerfully consider and step in to this world where there is so much hurt and need.

Yes, not everyone is called to do that. And not everyone is able to address every need we see. But as Jesus says, "Whoever receives **one** such child in my name, receives me."

Adoption and foster care is an honorable, noble, and worthy cause to give your life toward. Praise God for those who have taken on this call to care for the little ones in this way.

3. Support those involved with adoption and foster care

Even if your family is not personally involved with adoption or foster care, you can support those who are involved. See if there are tangible ways that you can encourage those moms and dads who have stepped in to this area. Serving those who have adopted or are providing foster care is a way that you can walk in obedience to Jesus's call to care for the little ones.

4. Get involved with CarePortal

In recent years, our church has been partnering with a ministry called Hands of Hope. And one of the programs that they run in our area is a website in which workers for DCS

or the department of child services can post needs that they see in the families with whom they work. That can be small things like diapers or clothes, or larger things like beds and mattresses.

There are a couple small groups who are connected with CarePortal and get the updates when a need is entered into the website. And so maybe your grow group would like to get involved with that, or you individually would like to know when needs come.

If so, you can speak with Gretchen Pyper or myself. We'd love to get you more information about that.

5. Be intentionally pro-life

God's Word is clear that all life is valuable and precious to Him. All people bear his image. And that includes the unborn, the littlest of the little ones.

So pray against and speak out against abortion. Encourage mothers to choose life.

And hear this, there is no sin that is greater than the love and mercy and forgiveness of God in Christ, including abortion. And we are all, every one of us, desperately clinging to that hope.

But abortion is sin. So choose life. And support those moms and dads who find themselves with an unplanned pregnancy. That's why we support Bravely, a local ministry who serve women and families in our community in just that situation. I know several of you are involved with them, and I am grateful for that.

The CarePortal ministry I just mentioned also receives requests from the workers and volunteers at Bravely. And so you can step in and seek to meet needs in those situations as well.

Labor for and pray for and work to uphold the value of life.

6. Serve in Cornerstone Kids

This is a practical, tangible way that you can care for the little ones. Volunteer to teach in the kid's classes on Sunday mornings. Volunteer to help out and serve as an assistant in the classrooms.

As I speak with pastors and members of other churches, I don't know of any churches who say, "We just have too many volunteers for our children's ministries. There are too many people serving in the nursery!"

Actually, that's not totally true. There are some who have too many. But the reason is that there are very few children in those churches. But the Lord has brought families to this congregation who have little ones. And it is a privilege we get to enjoy to serve those families and care for the little ones. So yes, this is a need we have in common with many other churches. But it's such a blessing to have this need.

Brothers and sisters, there are huge opportunities for evangelism and discipleship in our building every week!

And let me just say, "Men – if you would be great, become the servant of all. Do not leave it to the ladies to invest in the next generation. Get involved."

And for those who do serve – thank you!

7. Pay attention to the children in this church

Here's a practical step you can take. Learn some names. Be purposeful. Be intentional. Next week, when we have families up here making some commitments to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, pay attention.

You don't have to know every child. But you can know some.

Think about those who paid attention to you when you were a child. Think about the investment that others made in you. It means something to a child that a grown-up would pay attention to and care about them.

8. Regularly pray for children and those who care for them.

Pray for parents. Pray for children's workers. Pray for Gretchen Pyper and Emily DeVon who lead in serving our kids. Pray for Pastor Josh as he seeks to shepherd and lead our ministry to families and children.

Pray for the little ones.

So there are eight, biblically-rooted ways to care for children.

And please notice how Jesus said it in verse 5,

Matthew 18:5

Whoever receives one such child **in my name** receives me,

Folks, don't do these things in the name of humanitarianism. I suppose that's better than nothing. But rather, do these things in the name of Christ.

That is, do it because of who Christ is. Do it because of your love for and your commitment to Jesus. The best way that you can care for them is to bring them to Jesus and serve them in His name.

Finally, then, look at the last section with me. And we'll see the third trait we need to flourish in Christian community: repentance.

Repentance

Matthew 18:7-9

“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! **8** And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. **9** And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

This portion can seem like a change of subject. He was talking about caring for children, but now Jesus it seems like He's warning against tolerating sin among your own body parts. So what's the connection here?

I would suggest that this isn't a change of subject. Jesus is still thinking in terms of the Christian community. And He's continuing to talk about humility and service of the little ones. He said in verse 6, if you cause a little one to sin or stumble, then you will face my judgment. It'd be better if you were drowned.

And now, continuing that idea, Jesus warns about how our sin affects other people. The tragic fact is that our sin does not just hurt us as individuals. It also has an effect on others. My sin brings consequences that sometimes others have to bear. And those consequences can lead to stumbling and sin and the falling away of other believers, and especially the little ones – both children and new believers.

I feel this as a pastor with kids who are pastor's kids. The stats aren't great for the children of pastors. But this is true for all the moms and dads with kids in your home. And it's true for our whole church because there are kids around here who are watching us. Your conduct is speaking a message about God and what it means to follow Jesus to the little ones.

So Jesus says, do not be the cause of harm for others. It is better for you to cut off that sin in your life, than for you miss the life that is only found in Christ. You need to acknowledge your sin, ask for forgiveness, and seek to change through the help of Christ.

Remember, the best way to care for others in need is to remember your own profound need. The best way to help those who are weak is to be mindful of your own weakness.

So what is Jesus calling for us to do as we live in Christian community, among others? He is calling for us to walk in repentance.

To repent simply mean to turn. It's an about face and a change of direction. When we repent of sin in our lives, we are cutting it off and going in the opposite way. So instead of proudly living for ourselves, regardless of whom we may hurt, we now live to serve and care for others.

For Christians to live in community with one another, we all must become quick to repent. We must be willing to cut off those attitudes and practices that lead to sin and cause others to stumble. And if we do, we will walk in the life that Jesus offers.

You know, I can imagine going back to Disney World, but with a totally different experience. I imagine that once again I'm there with my peers – the class of 2005. Only, this time, what if people are humble? I can imagine that they're warm and friendly and inviting. Yes, there's a crowd, but the people are quick to apologize when they bump into you. They're patient and kind, looking for ways to make the whole event better for everyone, not just themselves.

Wouldn't that change everything?

Now, imagine a church community. Think about this one, Cornerstone. Imagine on a Sunday, you walk in and are warmly greeted. You share the joys of the past week with a brother or sister, and you rejoice together over coffee in the café. And then you spend first service in the kids ministry, playing games with kids and talking about the Bible with them.

At your grow group later that week, you confide in a brother or sister what you've been struggling with in your walk with Christ. They ask intentional and honest questions and listen well to your responses. And you hear and offer words of encouragement, reminding each other of the gospel's power to meet you in your life.

Don't you want to be a part of that? This is the kind of community Jesus is calling for here. It's one marked by humility and service and repentance. So let's ask for Jesus to help us cultivate that in this place and in our lives for His glory, amen.

Let's pray...