

Date: February 9, 2020

Title: *Children First*

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Scripture: Matthew 18:1- 6; 10-14

Have you notice that being the GREATEST is very important in our world? Think of it. Last week we joined with millions of Americans to watch the Super Bowl, that game to determine the GREATEST football team.

We see more of our culture's focus on "THE GREATEST" on magazine covers.

- When Daniel Day-Lewis portrayed Abraham Lincoln years ago *Time* magazine called him, "*The World's Greatest Actor.*"
- *Time* also once did a cover story of "*History's Greatest Minds.*"
- Of course, there are the coveted "*Person of the Year*" issues.

But *Time* is not the only magazine that uplifts the world's GREATEST people.

- There's a magazine devoted to Top Doctors
- And Best Mom
- I even found one that portrays the Greatest Pastor

Of course, I'm kidding about that last one; but be honest, wouldn't you like to be known as THE GREATEST something or other?! Well, as you'll see in today's text, Jesus' first followers were no different that you and me. Take your Bibles and turn to Matthew 18 and follow along as I read:

1 - At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?"

2 - He called a little child to Him, and placed the child among them.

3 - And He said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

4 - Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

5 - And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes Me.

6 - If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in Me—to stumble it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

10 - See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in Heaven always see the face of My Father in Heaven.

11 - For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.

12 - What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?

13 - And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.

14 - In the same way your Father in Heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

Now of course when Jesus' first followers asked that question in verse 1, when they asked, "**Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?**" they were really asking, "*Which of US is the GREATEST?*" And, in answer to their prideful question, Jesus did something completely unexpected. He reached out and put His arms around a child in the crowd and said, "*See this little guy—in My kingdom, he comes first. He is the greatest! In fact, unless you become like him, none of you are going to get into My kingdom!*"

This shocked the disciples. I mean, they had been with Jesus from the beginning. Surely, THEY deserved front row seats. Plus it was totally contrary to their way of thinking for Jesus to say a CHILD was the GREATEST. I

mean, in those days, children had no rights, no status, and no economic value until they were no longer children, old enough to work. This attitude is why on another occasion, when mothers brought children to Jesus, the disciples turned them away.

In their minds, Jesus was an important person. He couldn't be wasting his time with children when there were so many adults waiting to see him. Adults were at the front of the line, children belonged in the rear. But Jesus went against this way of thinking. Both times, he brought those children to the front of the line. Both times, he said: *"These are the most important people in this world. CHILDREN are the greatest."*

That's a principle that we must embrace because in many churches, caring for children is often not the priority it should be. In fact, I decided to interrupt our study of Joshua this morning because like all Children's Ministers before her, recently Peggy has been having a hard time getting members of our church to put children first by volunteering for extended session, and other children's programming.

Don't get me wrong. Redland has always prioritized children.

- That's one reason we built that \$4 million dollar building we call "The ROC."
- It's why half our paid ministerial staff are assigned to work with children.
- It's why our summer calendar is filled with children's camps.
- It's why we do Upward and AWANA and Rumpus at the ROC---and so much more.

The problem---which is not new and not limited to this church---is enlisting people to help staff children's programming, especially nursery care. And I have to point out, it is obviously important to Jesus that we get this one right. I mean, our Lord went so far as to say that anyone who causes children to stumble by not putting them first, and I think that would certainly include making sure they are cared for and taught the Scriptures, anyone who causes little ones to stumble, should have stone tied around their neck and be thrown into the sea.

So, why ARE children the greatest? Why must they come first in the church?

(1) First there is what is called the TEACHABLE MOMENT.

You see, there is a time in life when we are most likely to make life's most important decision---to choose to follow Jesus as Savior and Lord---and that moment comes when we are children. I know you've heard that before, but have you ever wondered why that "moment" comes then? I mean, what is it about children that makes them more likely to decide to follow Christ than their elders?

- Is it their innocence?

No, anybody who knows kids knows they aren't innocent. Even toddlers do things they know they shouldn't.

- Is it their obedience?

No, even the most compliant kid isn't always obedient.

- Is it their enthusiasm?
- Their naiveté?

No, it's none of these things. So what is it about kids that makes them most likely to follow Jesus? Our Lord answers this question in our text when He says, ***"Whoever takes the LOWLY position of this child---whoever HUMBLING himself like this little child..."*** Jesus was reminding us that kids are better at HUMBLING themselves and admitting their needs than adults.

This is because kids are dependent. They're smaller and younger than everyone else around them. They look UP at others most of the time. So, they know they need help, and they aren't afraid to ask. *"Grandma, can you get me a drink of water?" "Teacher, how do you spell 'civilization?'" "Granddad, your old Super-Nintendo won't work. Can you help me turn it on?" "Dad, the world's 'best pastor' is talking too long. I'm bored. When can we go home?"*

Kids have no problem admitting they need help. Requests like that just roll off their tongue. And so do requests like these: *"Lord, help me not to be afraid." "God, please heal my friend." "Jesus, will you forgive my sins?"* Kids know their needs. They recognize their limitations. They're honest about their requests for help. They have a much easier time humbling themselves than you and I.

Plus, kids are more likely to believe in God than their elders. Psychologist Paul Bloom at Yale University reports that, *"when children are directly asked about the origin of animals and people---they tend to prefer explanations that involve an intentional creator, even if the adults who raised them do not."* In other words, children tend to embrace a concept of God even if their parents are atheists. Bloom says, *"Scientific evidence has shown that built into the natural development of children's minds [is] a predisposition to see the natural world as designed and purposeful--and that some kind of intelligent being is behind that purpose. Even if a group of children were put on an island and they raised themselves, I think they would believe in God. It appears that we have to be educated OUT of the knowledge of God by secular schools and media."*

One 3-year-old girl grew up in an atheistic home where no one ever spoke of God. One day she asked her dad, *"Where does the world come from?"* Her father replied—in a manner consistent with his ideas—by saying the world just happened. Then he added: *"However, there are those who say that all this was made by a very powerful being, and they call him 'God.'"* At this point the little girl began to run like a whirlwind around the room in a burst of joy and exclaimed: *"I knew what you told me first wasn't true! It's Him! It's Him!"*

This is what is meant by the "teachable moment." Children must come first because it's the best time to teach them about God. PLUS, psychologists tell us that moral and spiritual development begins at about age 2. And that by the age of 9, many of the foundations of faith have been laid in a child's life---such that most of what a child believes at 13 she will believe for the rest of her life.

George Barna, along with others, has done significant research in this area in recent years. He says that somewhere between 76 and 85 percent of all Christ-followers make their decision to follow Jesus before the age of 18 and that the vast majority of those decisions will be made before the age of 14. The sad but true fact is, the older we get the less likely we are to become Christians. All this has led church leaders to talk about something called, *"The 4-14 Window"* referring to the age span when people are most likely to come to faith.

So, do you get it? Do you see the urgency here? We must focus on reaching that most-responsive age group. We must strike while the iron is hot. Children must come first.

Several years ago, a psychologist named David Heller set out to study children's attitudes toward God. He interviewed hundreds of 4 to 12-year-olds, asking them to draw pictures and write letters and answer questions about God. Some of them were a bit off-the-wall. Like the 12-year-old who wrote a letter to God saying: *"Dear God, how is it up there in Heaven? How is it being the Big Cheese?"* But he found a common thread running through them all. See if you can pick it up.

A 7-year-old drew a picture of himself sitting on the floor with God playing a board game. When Heller asked him what game they were playing, the kid said, without blinking, *"Life."*

A 9-year-old girl said: *“I love God so much it’s hard to put in words. I’d like to be in a palace with him in Heaven—but not yet.”*

A 12-year-old wrote: *“Dear God, I had exams this week and I’m nervous about what I got on them. I know you can’t help me since they’re all done, or could you? Tell Mary I said hi. I’ll talk to you later.”*

Did you get the common thread? Children show a readiness to relate to God on a personal basis, to include him in their daily life and experience.

But notice that Jesus didn’t just say that children were most likely to enter the kingdom. He said they were most likely to be GREAT in the kingdom—most likely to follow Him with all their hearts, most likely to advance His work in the world. Children are eager to grow in their faith, eager to learn and to serve. And recent studies have revealed that children are the most effective evangelists in the church. They share their faith freely and easily with others, and are most likely to invite their friends and family to church. I remember Cruz Carbonnel telling me very enthusiastically of his plan to share Jesus with every kid on his bus. Would an adult be as eager to do that with everyone in the car pool? No, we’d be much more hesitant---but not kids, not children.

So, children must be first because of this TEACHABLE moment deal. Barna rightly says, *“If you want to have a lasting influence upon the world, you must invest in people’s lives---and if you want to maximize that investment, then you must invest in those people while they are young.”*

(2) A second reason for keeping them first is what I will refer to as the CRUCIAL MOMENT

I mean, the children of today DESPERATELY need to be told of God. The current generation of children and young people is growing up in the most secularized environment in our nation’s history. They will not be hearing the stories of the Bible or the message of Christ anywhere but in their homes and churches.

Listen, the world KNOWS about this teachable moment deal. Advertisers know that if they get a child to embrace their product, they have a customer for life. So, they put children first. They AIM at reaching our little ones. And they are very good at it. Studies show that as a result a child as old as 18 months can identify a brand logo. When you drive by those golden arches---they respond!

The problem is what many of these advertisers are “selling” is BAD for our kids. It leads them to focus on the THINGS of THIS world. Plus, much of today’s child-focused media harms our little ones. I can’t help but think of last week’s half-time show. Would you like your little girls to embrace pole-dancing; would you like them to dress like a Victoria Secrets model? Then let them watch shows like that.

In his book, *Making Grateful Kids*, Jeffrey Froh tells us that the American child who watches three hours of children’s television will see over fifteen thousand acts of violence. Evidence shows that this is linked to children developing aggressive attitudes and values and behaviors.

My point is it is CRUCIAL that the church do its part. We must prioritize working with parents in helping children embrace Godly perspectives---Godly behavior.

(3) Here’s a third reason children must be first. It’s a FAMILY REACHING MOMENT.

Look at verse 5 where Jesus says, *“And whoever welcomes a little child like this in My name welcomes me.”* What does Jesus mean by this? Well, the word, *“welcome”* can also be translated *“receive.”* It’s a hospitality word, describing a person opening their home to strangers and visitors and receiving them. Jesus is saying that

children are so near to His heart, so important to His work in this world, that when we make room in our hearts for children, we are also making room for Him.

And Jesus not only wants to reach children, He wants to reach their parents. In verse 14 Jesus says, ***“Your Father in Heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.”*** But in 2nd Peter 3:9 it says Jesus is waiting to return because ***“He is not willing that ANY should perish.”*** Adults are just as near and dear to our Lord’s heart as children and He knows that when you reach a child, you get an opportunity to reach the parent.

Have you ever invited someone to your house for dinner, and when you open the door you discover they have a friend with them, too? That’s how it works with kids. When we open the door of our home or church to a child, they bring their parents. So prioritizing children opens the door for us to reach an entire family.

Like our own Pastor Kevin, Brian Wilkerson took a mission trip to India a few years back. He writes, *“Northern India is a very difficult region of the world to reach with the message of Christ. The majority religions are very resistant to claims of Christ. When people become Christ-followers, they will often be rejected by their families, harassed, and persecuted. There are many remote towns and villages in the mountains that are hard to reach and suspicious of outsiders. Progress is very slow. But missionaries have discovered that one of the ways they can establish themselves in a village is by starting an English-speaking school—because the people are so desperate for their children to be educated. They teach reading and writing and arithmetic, and also a class in morality in which they are able to introduce Bible stories and songs. One day, we drove two hours up into the mountains on winding roads to visit one of these schools. We stepped into one of the classrooms, no bigger than a foyer in some of our homes. It was crammed with kids, who stood and welcomed us by singing, ‘This is the day that the Lord has made’—their smiling faces lighting up the windowless room. In that moment, I realized how north India could be reached—through the children. Each day, when they return home, those children bring the joy of the Lord with them to their families and neighborhoods. By the time they graduate, foundations of faith will be laid in their lives, and many will make decisions to follow Christ. They will go on from there to the university or the marketplace carrying that faith with them. How much easier will it be 10 or 20 years from now to share Christ and raise leaders when the next generation has been raised in the love and truth of Christ? The schools were originally begun as a means of gaining access to the adults, but I believe that in the providence of God, they will become the primary means of reaching the nation.”*

The same principle is true here. Many of our ESL students are not Christians but they have kids, and they want child-care so they are thrilled to learn they can bring their kids to children’s choirs while they learn English. These children take the songs they sing home with them. The parents come to worship to hear them perform and in that way they hear the Gospel.

In my Upward teams over the years, I’ve had lots of unchurched families; children from Moonie Families and Mormon homes. These kids hear the gospel and they take that home with them. Their parents hear it. So, the fact is putting children first opens a door for parents and entire families to receive Christ.

(4) Finally, similarly, we must put children first because doing so is a church growth moment.

The fact is, churches don’t grow numerically or spiritually, unless they put children first. Think of it this way. If you were a Christian family new to our area, looking for a place to serve, what would your reaction be if you entered our building and saw a nursery with stains on the carpet and realized the room was cold because the heater wasn’t working properly, or came to the childcare area to find no workers or just one worker with a dozen little ones? You’d probably leave, never to return. Remember, you only get once chance to make a first

impression and this is especially true when it comes to new families looking for a church home. Families with children will never GET to the Sanctuary for a worship service. They will never get to a Grace Group if we fail in caring for their kids.

This week Bob Owers sent me an article that featured another Barna study. It says, *“Nearly six in 10 churchgoing Christian parents say their congregation’s children’s programming was the primary reason they chose their current church. [Children] carry big weight when it comes to family decisions about where to worship. This suggests that, for churches to attract and retain strong Christian households, children’s programming must be a key part of holistic family ministry.”*

Understand, it’s not the preaching or the music that draws most Christians to a place of service. It’s the children’s ministry. That’s what GROWS a church numerically.

But giving our little ones priority also promotes spiritual health and vitality. Wilkerson writes, *“I’ve discovered that, when a church is committed to reaching children and teenagers, it breathes life and vitality throughout the whole church. You know why? If you’re going to reach kids, you have to be relevant, because they’re not going to stick around if you’re out of touch. If you’re going to reach kids, you have to be honest, because they can smell a phony a mile away. If you’re going to reach kids, you’ve got to be friendly, because kids won’t hang around when they’re not wanted. If you’re going to reach kids, you’ve got to relax, because they’re going to knock over the furniture once in a while.”*

In the process of helping children respond to their natural desire for faith, we find our own faith reawakened. Watching them respond to God’s love inspires us to return to a simpler, more honest, childlike faith ourselves. Several years ago, 3rd and 4th graders at Wheaton Illinois Christian Grammar School were asked to complete the following sentence: *“By faith, I know that God is....”* Listen to their responses:

Amanda wrote, *“By faith, I know that God is...FORGIVING, because He forgave in the Bible, and He forgave me when I went in the road on my bike without one of my parents.”*

Brandon wrote, *“By faith I know that God is....PROVIDINGFUL, because He dropped manna for Moses and the people, and He gave my dad a job.”*

A little guy named Paul wrote, *“By faith I know that God is....CARING, because He made the blind man see, and He made me catch a very fast line drive that could have hurt me.”*

Jeremy said, *“By faith I know that God is....MERCIFUL, because I prayed and my brother has been nice to me for a whole year.”*

Hanna said, *“By faith I know that God is....SWEET, because He gave me a dog. God tells me not to do things that are bad. I need someone like that!”*

One anonymous child wrote, *“By faith I know that God is...FAITHFUL, because the school bill came, and my mom didn’t know how we were going to pay it. Two minutes later, my dad called, and he just got a bonus check. Mom was in tears.”*

There are SO many things our children can teach us—lessons that we have forgotten as adults, truths we must remember if our church is to be spiritually healthy. One lesson they can teach us is the importance of IMAGINATION. You see when we grow old our imagination tends to fade away. We lose our ability to picture things better than they are.

In his book, *A Chance At Childhood Again*, Alan Wright says that adults who have lost their ability to imagine say things like, *"My marriage can never be healed....it is too far gone."* or *"My teenager will never quit rebelling."* or *"I'll never be healthy again."* or *"I'll never get out of debt."* But kids rely on their imaginations. Imagination is what empowers a parent's kiss to make a child's boo-boo all better. Imagination is what makes peekaboo fun. It is what makes little boys have more fun with toy trucks than construction workers have with the real ones. It is what makes pots, pans, and wooden spoons as splendid as any symphony's percussion. It's what makes cardboard boxes more fun than a Kindle Fire. And imagination is a vital quality for all Christians who want to grow. Think about it. You can't WORSHIP without imagination. Jesus said, **"God is SPIRIT and those who worship Him must worship Him in SPIRIT and in truth."** (John 4:24) Worship is not a PHYSICAL thing. It is a SPIRITUAL thing. We must use our minds and our imaginations in order to picture God and worship Him. Oswald Chambers said, *"Imagination is the greatest gift God has given us."* And I agree. No one has come to Christ without imaginations. They imagine that the eternal, unblemished God stooped to come into our dirty, time-trapped world, and that all the stupid mistakes, ugly stains, and haunting guilt could disappear...because He came. They imagine a Creator willing to be killed by His own creatures just to have their fellowship. Only a wild imagination could consider such love.

Children teach us the importance of God's gift of imagination.

Children can also teach us to have faith in God. Our little ones have not been so wounded by our fallen world that they have become cynical—like so many of us so, they don't know that they can't do something...which makes them more ready to believe God does the impossible!

In short, all disciples benefit from being around children because they can teach us so many of the qualities that go into helping us be all we need to be for God.

So, children must come first---Because of the TEACHABLE MOMENT, the CRUCIAL MOMENT, the FAMILY-REACHING MOMENT, and the CHURCH GROWTH MOMENT.

We come now to another important MOMENT. As we sing our closing song, this is a moment for you to make decisions based on our study. One decision I pray more of us would make in this moment is to do our part in putting children first. There's a table in the foyer, a place where you can sign up to work in extended session. Go by there and do that. Some may need to go to Peggy and say, *"I want to do my part---where are the holes that need filling? Put me in!"*

Others may need to come forward this morning telling me or Kevin that you have decided to come like a child to God---inviting Jesus into your heart and life. Others may need to join our church---serving God with us. Won't you come as God leads?