

Matthew 18:1-6 “Who is the Greatest?”

7.30.17

Wednesday night we talked about the various titles used in the Bible to describe Christians. It was a great time of encouragement about “Being an Overcomer.” That title (OVERCOMEER) is one that the New Testament uses to describe Christians... And since many of you weren't here, I want to share something with you that's pertinent as we begin today's message. (BTW...I know it's summer, but just a reminder we do have service here on Wed. nights at 6:30 and I've heard it's pretty good...this Wed. night we're going to have our meal at 5:30...fish fry, slaw, French fries and Key Lime Pie...and a full service at 6:30 with music and worship and message).

So, here's a rundown of some of the various titles used in the NT to describe Christians: We are called **believers**, the faithful, and the friends of Christ. We are called brothers and sisters. We are called sheep, saints, holy ones and soldiers. We are called witnesses, stewards, fellow-citizens, lights in the world and the elect of God. We're called the **chosen, ambassadors for Christ, ministers, and servants**. We're called disciples, joint-heirs and branches of the vine. We're called members of the body, living stones, temples and the beloved. But, perhaps the most endearing title used in the NT to describe us as Christians is the simple title of: Children. As followers of Christ, we are simply: “children of God.” That's such a beautiful phrase!

And so, when we hear that we are children, we should celebrate and rejoice in that fact because that means that we belong to God, who is our Father! The God of the universe...we GET to call OUR FATHER. It's that profoundly rich and powerful! Yes, indeed it is... but, it also means (as children) we are therefore, imperfect, weak, dependent, stubborn and very vulnerable.

This morning we're going to see why the **greatest person** is described by Jesus as simply: a child. The title of this morning's message is: “Who is the Greatest?”

Matthew 18:1-6

1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2 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. 4 Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 “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.

Scholars break down the teachings of Jesus into what are known as “discourses.” Bible scholars have broken Jesus' teachings into 5 of them. You've heard of some of these...like the Sermon on the Mount and the teaching of the Kingdom Parables and the Olivet Discourse (where Jesus teaches about His Second Coming from the Mount of Olives in Matthew 24-25). Well, Chapter 18 is one of those discourses. In fact, all of chapter 18 can truly be summarized with one word: Humility. Thus, chapter 18 is often described as the teaching of Jesus or His discourse on Humility.

Now, please remember where Jesus is as He is teaching... He's in a home... Scholars believe it's Peter's home in Capernaum on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. Here's a picture of where they've dug up the foundation of this home...



It was a large home with a large courtyard area and it had to be large to house all the apostles. (BTW...I've nailed down the dates for the Israel trip. We'll travel there next year, November 5-14 and we'll see this in Capernaum. I'm going to have brochures for the trip in a couple of weeks and we'll have an interest meeting after school starts back. The all-inclusive cost for the trip...including flying out of Charlotte will be \$3,896 per person.)

Well, Jesus is teaching in Peter's home in Capernaum and Mark and Luke also record this event in their gospels and so we have much material to choose from today. It's VERY interesting to consider how all of this unfolded.

Remember with me... Jesus had been asked about paying the Temple Tax for the upkeep and maintenance of the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus said, (and I'm paraphrasing), "No, we don't have to pay the tax because we're not part of this kingdom...we're part of another kingdom...my Father's kingdom and the King's kids don't pay taxes in the King's kingdom; however, because we're not home yet...and so as **not to offend**, Peter...go catch a fish and take the coin from it's mouth and pay our tax."

Now here's what's interesting to consider. There had to be an interlude of time for Peter to leave the house and go to the Sea of Galilee (even though it wasn't far) and catch the fish. It appears during that period of time there was interlude or break in Jesus' teaching and perhaps some small talk or chatter and it appears that talk turned once again to who would be the greatest in the kingdom.

Now think with me. Peter's gone to catch this fish and please remind me...who is it that's been the unspoken "leader" of the Apostles from the beginning? Peter. Yes...Peter... And remember to whom did Jesus say: "Who-POG-oh Satanus," get behind me Satan? Peter. **That all happened in Caesarea Philippi, remember?** And the apostles must have thought, HMMM...there's an opening here in this "unspoken leadership position."

Perhaps someone else might ascend to the leadership position both here on earth and in Jesus' kingdom when it comes... and according to Mark's gospel (chapter 9), they had been arguing about this same thing on the road back from Caesarea Philippi. Oh...it's amazing how fast a mutiny can happen, just while somebody goes fishing!!!

You know as a leader, you always have to stay on your toes...because people are people...and they have desires and the desires can be good...but, those desires can also lead to agendas and

pride and that can lead to putting those desires ahead of what's best for the whole. I'm so grateful that we have people here in this church who care about the church and the kingdom much more than they care about themselves or any other agenda. That is a huge blessing!

So, Jesus is going to have to address this divisiveness! BTW...it's amazing to consider...but the apostles will actually argue about this again in just few weeks... According to Matthew chapter 20 they'll be in Jerusalem awaiting Jesus' death and James and John will send their momma to ask Jesus if they can sit at His right and left hand in the kingdom! Man...it's amazing how thick-headed these apostles were. They were amazingly slow learners... but, so am I. Thank you Jesus for being so patient and long suffering with me!)

Well, "Who is the greatest?" That's the question. Let's see how Jesus addresses it?

Matthew 18:2

² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them

Mark's gospel records an even more specific detail about this child (paidion...in the Greek...meaning "small child")... See it...

Mark 9:36

³⁶ And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them.

Now, I want you to take a look at this artist's depiction (and it's a good one)...other than the bald-headed apostle in the front... We saw last week that most of the apostles, would have been under the age of 20...



Nonetheless...there's Jesus... seated...(That's how Rabbi's taught.) And Jesus liked to teach often at meal times. And this could have been the occasion in Peter's home when Jesus overhears this bickering again about who's going to be the greatest. So, He reaches out takes a child and places the child in His arms (lap).

Now, church, I'll never get tired of teaching this principle: Jesus taught with children in His midst. There is no question about that in the Gospels and we see it here again...children were in the room! And he grabs up a little boy and puts him on His lap. **And folks,** that's why we have children in the meeting...the ecclesia...the gathering...the church service. We don't suck them out of here and place them in a separate room for Children's church and we don't suck out the teenagers and put them in a room with used sofas and game boxes and ping pong tables. We have the church body...the church family, together...and that's the practice of Jesus and it's the teaching of the New Testament...children in the midst of the teaching!

Now, let me ask you something...Whose child do you think it was? Well, the other apostles weren't married...only Peter was...could it be that it was Peter's child? We don't know...but, I'm thinking...it's possible. How cool is that to consider!

You know Jesus loved children... I love this depiction of that...



Isn't that precious! Do you remember when He rebuked the Apostles when they tried to keep the children from Him? He said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me..." and Mark 10 says, "He took them in his arms and blessed them..." The same thing is happening here in Peter's house. And don't forget this either...when was 12 years old, He was in the Temple asking questions of the Elders and the Teachers of the Law. No! It's never been the practice of Jesus to exclude the children from His teaching.

So, what's the point? What's Jesus teaching here? Well, let's see it...

Matthew 18:3-4

3 "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

So, what's Jesus saying? I mean...is it like Jesus when Jesus was with Nicodemus and the whole misunderstanding that Nicodemus had when Jesus said, "you must be born again?" Nicodemus asked if he had to go back into his mother's womb. Of course not! Folks, this isn't literal...it's spiritual. Jesus isn't teaching that we must literally become a baby or a child to enter the kingdom. But instead, we must become **"like" a child**. That's what He said in verse 4 "like a child."

So, what's a child like? Well, we all know that. Think of a small child. Think of this little boy again...



Does he have a job? Can he support himself? He's probably just now able to even dress himself. Can he provide his own food? His own clothes? Of course not! He's a child! What achievements does he have? What accomplishments? Can he protect himself? What wisdom does he have? Listen...do you understand what Jesus is teaching??

Children have nothing to offer. They're vulnerable and they need help AND they know it. Children are unassuming. They're not presumptuous. They're simple-minded. They have no

credentials...nothing to offer...nothing to brag about and they're totally dependent and that's Jesus' point! You and I cannot enter His kingdom...we cannot be born again...saved...until we see ourselves in this way...totally dependent.

Matthew 18:3-4

3 "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus said, "unless you turn and become like a child." What does it mean to turn? Well, it literally means you humble yourself. You see yourself as having nothing! The word in the Greek for turn is "strepheo." It means to turn your back... **On who? you ask.** Yourself! You humble yourself to the point that you become like a child who has nothing to offer...totally dependent...totally vulnerable and you turn your back on any accomplishments or achievements or power or influence or agendas and you become humble like a child in the arms of Jesus. That's the point. And when you come to Him in that way, you can be born again...saved.

The word turn used there is interchangeable with the Greek word METANOEO, which means to repent... do a 180...go in the opposite direction. Sadly, a lot of people won't do that. What's the opposite of humility? Pride! Pride! It's what got Lucifer kicked out of heaven. Pride keeps a lot of people from the kingdom of light and Jesus...shackled in the kingdom of darkness with Satan. They're worried about how they're going to look and be seen if they give their life to Christ.

May I remind us of one of the other great discourses...the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus said:

Matthew 5:3-8

- 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
5 "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
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You see, in my mind, those beatitudes are really descriptions of a child.

Listen, do you want to be saved? You've got to humble yourself and be so broken over your sin, that you recognize that you're poor in spirit and that should lead you to mourn over your condition and that should bring you to your knees in meekness and create a hunger and thirst inside of you, so that you will beg for mercy...the mercy of Jesus to make you pure in heart.

The humble make no claims, they make no demands, they don't insist on their rights! No! The humble bows low, seeking nothing but mercy...knowing they have nothing to offer...just like a little child. You see, that's greatness. Greatness comes when we humble ourselves! Greatness comes when we submit ourselves...our lives to Jesus Christ and when we do so, we get the kingdom! We get to be called sons and daughters...children of God and He becomes our Father!

Have you done that? Have you ever humbled yourself to the point that you realized you were nothing... you had nothing to offer...no way of saving yourself...any more than a child could drive tractor trailer and you surrendered. Oh...if you haven't, I pray you'll do that today!

Jesus...still holding that child in His arms said...

Matthew 18:5

⁵“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,

Now, it's this verse that messes people up and they start talking about literal children. But, that's not what Jesus is talking about and verse 6 makes that point crystal clear...

Matthew 18:6

⁶but 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.

“Who believe in me”... Jesus is talking about spiritual children. He's talking about young believers. He's talking about people who are new in the faith. And He said, you better not cause them to sin (some versions say, “to stumble”).

Hey folks, do you know what people call stumbling blocks? You might not know this? I'll tell you what people call stumbling blocks, who cause others to stumble and tsin...they're called hypocrites and they kill churches and their testimony in a community!

So many “so-called” Christians today, flaunt their liberty as Christians as they behave like unbelievers. And I'm telling you something...that kind of thing kills young, impressionable believers. It stunts their growth...and I'm not talking about 8 year old believers. I'm talking about any believer who is young in the faith...

You see, they might be 35 years and just gave their life to Christ and they work with you and they see you cutting the boss down right and left with gossip and even foul language, and they...like a little child...look at those actions and say, “Why are you doing that? That's not how Christians are supposed to be, are they?”

Oh...and that young Christian...so new in the faith...they stumble. But, then you tell them: Oh...you'll learn...you'll lighten up...you won't be so zealous and excited and on fire and righteous...just give it some time...loosen up and you'll be like me!! HOW SAD!!!

The Apostle Paul spoke about Christian freedom. He told the Corinthian believers, “All things are permissible for me, but not all things are beneficial.” Beneficial for whom? The young believer! Paul said in...

1 Corinthians 8:9

⁹But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

Paul would tell the Roman church...

Romans 14:13

¹³Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

Paul would go on to say...

Romans 14:21

²¹ It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.

Listen, we become guilty of being a stumbling block when we cause a younger believer (of any age) to fail, to stumble, to participate in unrighteousness. Please listen...I'm so amazed at how many Christians don't have a problem with being a stumbling block. They'll cuss, drink, party... They'll wear (or not wear next to nothing) and if you object...they say, "Deal with it! Get over it! I'm free!" And yet, a young believer sees that and they like a little child...can easily take the hand of that misguided person and be led astray.

How serious is this? Oh, it's REAL serious!

Matthew 18:6

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.

Here's an artist's depiction of a first century millstone.



Men or animals could drive that millstone. It was used to grind grain or corn...it WAS HEAVY. Jesus is making sure there is no mistake about the seriousness of leading one of His young believers into sin or error. He said, "You'd be better off to be in the bottom of the Sea of Galilee with a millstone around your neck, then lead one of my young believers astray."

Are you being a stumbling block? Are you, by your actions, by your speech, by your conduct, what you tweet, Snapchat, Instagram, post on Facebook...causing another believer to stumble? Are you by what you wear (or don't wear) causing anyone to stumble? Are you by how you work or don't work in your job causing anyone to stumble? Mom/Dad...are you giving mixed messages in your home and causing your children to stumble? Is there anyone in the room...by what you drink or don't drink, watch or don't watch at Two Rivers Cinema...causing another believer to stumble?

Hebrews 10:23-25

²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Who is the greatest? It's the one who thinks more highly of others than himself. It's the one who has the heart of a child. It's the one who is humble. It's the one who bows the knee and says, "It's not about me and my liberty...it's about Jesus and His kingdom." Do you want to be great? Do you want to rise in the eyes of Jesus...then fall. Fall on your knees and humble yourself before the King.

I close with this little poem that I read as I studied earlier this week. May it be our prayer...

***Make me, O Lord, a child again, so tender, frail and small.
In self, possessing nothing, in You possessing all.***

***O Savior, make me small once more, that downward I may grow.
And in this heart of mine restore the faith of long ago.***

***With You may I be crucified, no longer I that lives.
O Savior, crush my sinful pride by grace which pardon gives.***

***Make me, O Lord, a child again, obedient to Your call.
In self, possessing nothing, in You possessing all.***
