"Great Like a Child"
Matthew 18:1-4
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November 15, 2026

"You're so childish!" "When are you going to grow up?" "I can't believe how immature you are." Friends, those are not complaints, though we, like children, we expect people to move out of that category within a few years. We think it is very unfortunate when because of a disability someone 40 years old is still essentially a child. We value maturity. This was true in first century Israel as well, thus when Jesus told people (adults) to become like little children, it sounded strange.

Folks, today our text is Matthew 8:1-4. Let's pause and pray the Lor will help us understand what these words mean and, most importantly, what they mean for our lives.

Matthew 18:1-4 At that time the disciples came to Jesus saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them 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."

Mark and Luke record that the disciples had arguments about which of them was the greatest. It is not hard to imagine this happening when you get twelve guys together. Jesus rebukes them for their rivalry, and this apparently leads to a sincere question. "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Now, Jesus has already talked about (Matthew 5) those who would be great and who be least in the kingdom. The fact Peter is becoming the leader of the group is probably why the mother of James and John approaches Jesus (Matthew 20:20) and ask if her two boys could have the positions of greatest honor in God's kingdom.

Something about human nature often makes us want to be ranked above someone else. In fact, we are seldom content with second place. We don't want to be better than average. We want to be number 1. We want to be considered the best, maybe even the greatest.

As godly young men, the disciples thought they had a good goal. Each wanted to be great in God's kingdom. Now, I suspect some of them were more concerned about this than others. James maybe thought about this more than Bartholemew. Yet I think everyone of the 12 would have been ecstatic if Jesus would have said to him, "Hey, come here. I want you to be my right-hand man. You're the one." Those words would likely thrill any of us. Frankly, a desire to be great in God's kingdom is not a bad thing. Yet the disciples have a kind of warped view of what real greatness involves.

So, Jesus gives them a little illustration to help them understand true greatness. **Matthew 18:2 And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them**. Can you imagine when this kid was grown, telling his own children how Jesus picked him for this role? **Matthew 18:3 and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."**

Oh-oh. The disciples were worried about who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom. But Jesus says, "You better first make sure you will be there. Because if you don't become like this little kid, you are not getting in." Now, I don't know if the disciples were shocked or puzzled at this point, but I suspect Jesus got their attention.

And then He says, **Matthew 18:4 Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.** There is the answer to their question. Be like this little child and you will be on the path to true greatness. Become like a child, and the deepest desire of your heart will become reality.

Now, I suspect some of the disciples were thinking, if not saying, "What in the world is Jesus talking about? Become like a child?" And over the past 2000 years, many Christians have been asking, "What is Jesus really asking us to do? How does He want us to be like a child?"

Let's first consider a couple of answers people have given that kind of miss the mark. First, some suggest Jesus wants us to be pure and innocent

like a child. Oh, there is nothing wrong with being pure and innocent, but children are not really pure and innocent! Anyone who has been a parent or even remembers being a kid, should know that. Oh, yes when we first bring them home from the hospital, babies look very blameless. But it doesn't take long for their selfishness to be exhibited. A baby cries when he is hungry, or when she is wet. Babies never cry because they feel sorry for parents suffering from sleep deprivation. And as they get older, the selfishness becomes even more apparent. When a 4-year-old is asked to share her toys with someone else, the suggestion is not always met with enthusiastic compliance.

Now, children aren't necessarily more selfish than adults. As we get older, we usually learn to disguise it. But that really doesn't make us any less self-centered. The Bible tells us we have all inherited a sinful nature. Thus, from the moment we took our first breath, you and I, and everyone else, have been sinners. In **Psalm 51:5**, David writes, **"Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."** So, if you want to become pure and innocent, you need another model than a little child.

Another problem is purity and innocence are not something we can attain through our own efforts. I can wake up tomorrow and decided, "Okay, from now on, I am not going to sin anymore. I will live a perfect life." However, ultimately, I would blow it by noon, or probably before 8:00 am.

However, even if I did succeed in living a perfect life for the next 10 years, a very big if, I would not be innocent. All my sins from the past 69 years, a considerable list, would still make me guilty. We cannot choose to become pure and innocent. Only God can make us that.

And that is exactly what He does through Jesus. When the Lord Jesus died on the cross, He bore the guilt of our sins. All who place their trust in Him are indeed pure and innocent. Having Jesus' perfection counted as my own. It is called imputed righteousness, meaning my very imperfect, failing score has been wiped out, and Jesus perfect score is now beside my name.

And second incorrect answer people sometimes give is that we should be like children in our thinking. Now folks don't usually use those words, but they want everything to be kept simple. "We need to avoid complicated issues." Or "We need to just stick to the basics of the Christians faith." This often sounds like a very spiritual attitude. The problem is that it contradicts what the Bible teaches.

In **1 Corinthians 14:20**, the Lord tells us, (NIV) **Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil, be infants, but in your thinking be adults.** In **Hebrews 6:1** we read, **Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teaching** (basic teachings) **about Christ and be taken forward to maturity.** And in **1 Corinthians 13:11**, Paul says, **When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child. I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.**

Now, this doesn't mean that our Christianity should be some type of intellectual exercise. The Bible also contains warnings to not get caught up with vain philosophies, or wrangle over words, or be always learning but never coming to a knowledge of the truth.

We are reminded in **1 Corinthians 8:1 Knowledge puffs us, but love builds up.** In fact, I believe some of the most childish thinking takes place at universities, where political correctness and critical theory have replaced the pursuit of truth as the goal.

A good example of what I would call childish thinking is the claim by psychology professors and others that it is important to help young people who struggle with gender dysphoria transition to their preferred gender. That is childish thinking in intellectual clothing. Important facts are often ignored such as how at least 85% of youth struggling with gender confusion identify as their birth gender by the time they are 18. The girl who wanted to be a boy, almost always wants to be a girl again. There is also no evidence gender transition surgeries improve the mental health of those who undergo them.

I admire the college professors and public-school teachers who have the clarity and courage to speak truth in what is often a hostile environment. In the church, and in society as a whole, we desperately need less childish thinking

and more clear thinking. We need folks who are not concerned about whether something is simple or complicated, popular or unpopular, but care about whether or not something is true. And friends, you don't need a college degree to do this. You just need to be committed to understanding and believing the truth. That will keep you from being childish in your thinking.

I would also add that when Jesus said we need to become like children He did not mean we should be gullible. Some Christians promote gullibility by believing outlandish things and then reporting them as fact. My favorite example is still the story from 30 years ago that scientists in Siberia had discovered hell. They supposedly drilled holes deep into the earth, put microphones down, and were able to hear people screaming. That story was reported as fact by TBN, a major Christian network. A year or so later, a couple of guys in Finland, yes Finland, admitted they had just made the whole thing up and were basically just trying to see how gullible people would be. They found that many Christians could be fooled.

Now Christians are not necessarily more gullible than people as a whole. But in a culture overflowing with unsubstantiated internet social media and AI rumors, it is important that we check things out and not be gullible. We need to think, not like children, but like adults.

Okay, that is what Jesus did not mean when He said we should become like little children. So, what did He mean? Well in the text Jesus answers that questions. "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." It is not being innocent like a child. It is not thinking like a child. It is being humble like a child that should be our goal.

Humility is the opposite of pride, which is at the top of the list of deadly sins, and an attitude the Bible frequently warns against. The type of pride we are talking about here involves an inflated view of who we are in relation to God and to other people. While children are selfish from day one, pride is something people develop as they get older. An infant's selfishness is because he/she is unaware of the desires or needs of others. Proud people are usually aware of others. They just believe their own concerns are more important. The humility of little children, allows them to be free from the concerns about social status and pecking order that plague adults.

One example of this involves clothes and fashion. Let's say you have two sons, a 5-year-old and a 15-year-old. I never had a daughter so I will stick with boys. The child Jesus used as an example may have been about 5. When a 5-year-old boy chooses which sweatshirt to wear, his number 1 priority is "Does this feel good? Is it soft and comfy?" Oh, he may like a color or design, but the one thing he doesn't care about is the label. I suppose it helps if he cannot read, but he doesn't care if the sweatshirt came from Macy's, Walmart or a garage sale. And when he is playing with other kids he doesn't care where they bought their clothes either.

It is only as we grow older and become "more mature" that we decided things like clothes, money and cars supposedly determine the value of a person. I hope we are smart enough to realize that whether it is our culture or parents who teach us that, it is simply a lie.

Now, this is just one example of childlike humility, but I think it confirms Jesus' wisdom in using a little child as a model for us.

Friends, we too, with God's help, should strive for humility. We should heed Paul's words in **Romans 12:3 Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.** We should work on, as we read in **Philippians 2:4** of humbly **"looking out not just for our own interests, but also for the interests of others**."

When we catch ourselves foolishly thinking we are better than other people, or that God is somehow mistaken, we need to stop and say, "That's wrong." And we need to readjust our attitudes and be a little more childlike, a little more humble.

Why? Because of the great benefits of humility. There are three important ones:
1. Humble people get along better with others. A big part of pride is competition. As C.S. Lewis said, "We say that people are proud of being rich or clever or good looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or more clever or better looking than others." Pride gives us pleasure by

making us think we are somehow superior to someone else. And that leads to conflict.

It is not easy to like someone whose actions, words, and attitudes all seem to be saying, "I'm a better person than you are." We tend to be turned off by people like that. That is why pride harms our relationships with others. As Lewis said, "Other vices sometime bring people together. You may find good fellowship and jokes and friendliness among drunken or unchaste people; pride always means enmity."

Friends, humbling ourselves, having that attitude of humility like a little child has, can be an important step in getting along better with others. Are there people around you, people in your family, at work, in your neighborhood, or at church, who you find irritating, and with whom you sometimes experience tensions and conflicts?

If so, your first step should maybe be trying to develop a little humility. A 5-year-old can go to a park and within 10 minutes make a new friend with another 5-year-old. Children are able to make friends quickly and easily because of their humility. Developing genuine humility in your life, will enable you to get along better with others.

2. Humble people are able to trust God. That is because they are under no illusion that they are somehow smarter than He is. Pride often says, "Yes, I know what the Bible says, but sometimes my way is better. God says no to taking revenge, but in this case, I need to get back at her." Or "I know God says not to lay up treasures on earth, but I need to do everything possible to protect myself from financial uncertainty." The humble person, however, is able to say, "I don't understand how this all works, but I know God knows a lot more than me, and I am going to trust Him and do things His way instead of mine."

Trusting God is at the root of the most basic issue of all, faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. In one sense, I cannot be a Christian unless I am willing to humble myself like a child. Unless I am humble enough to admit I am not good enough the way I am, that I deserve not God's blessings, but His wrath, that I cannot be saved except by God's grace through Jesus Christ. Unless I am humble enough to admit those things I cannot be a Christian, cannot be a part of God's family.

And friends, those rules are the same for you as well. The Bible makes it clear that God doesn't save people who don't think they need to be saved. Only when God's spirit opens our eyes and we become humble enough to see our need, can we truly experience His grace in our lives. Friends, if you are not willing to admit you need the Lord Jesus, you need to ask the Lord to enable you to humble yourself and become like a little child. Because, as Jesus says (verse 3). "Unless we become like little children, we will never see the kingdom of heaven."

3. Humble people find true greatness. Humility is the path that leads to greatness in God's kingdom. Noe, this is not an easy truth to grasp, but it is one Jesus makes a number of times. (Matthew 19:30) "The first shall be last, the last shall be first. (Matthew 20:26) Whoever wants to be great must be a servant. (Matthew 23:12) Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. And from our text today, Matthew 18:4 Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Oh, I don't understand exactly how it is going to work, but the humble will be rewarded. Does this mean humble people will get bigger mansions in heaven? I don't know. I suspect it probably has more to do with the joy we will experience when we arrive.

Just as I would be more excited about going to the hallowed ground of Lambeau Field in Green Bay, WI, than many of you would be, I suspect humble people will be more excited about being in heaven than those who were more proud. Humble people will find great joy, a reward, in simply knowing that their lives have been pleasing to the Lord, much as a little child delights in pleasing a parent or teacher. A humble person will find tremendous joy simply hearing the Lord speak the words, "Well done good and faithful servant," no matter what other rewards might follow. Though it may seem hard to believe today, one day it will be obvious: true humility, becoming like a little child, is the path to true greatness.

Friends, it is not easy to be humble. Even if you don't have a lot of money, are not real smart, or

are not very good looking, genuine humility is difficult to attain. Even when we understand and believe that we need to become humble like a little child it is still not easy. That is why we need God's help. That is why I encourage you to take an honest look at your own life this week, identify some of the foolish pride that is there, and ask God to help you get rid of it.

Because remember, James 4:6 "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." May the Lord enable us to grow in humility.