

BaptistWay Bible Series for Feb. 6: Believers are to come with a childlike faith_20605

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Believers are to come with a childlike faith

Matthew 18:1-14

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Thus far in this series of lessons on the discourses of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, we have examined the sermon on the mount (chapters 5-7), the missionary discourse (chapter 10) and various parables regarding the kingdom of heaven (chapter 13). A thread woven throughout is the character of the kingdom of heaven as proclaimed and incarnated by Jesus and his disciples.

The theme of the kingdom of heaven also features in chapter 18 (vv. 1, 3, 4, 23), the fourth of five discourses recorded by Matthew. In this week's lesson, the first of two focusing upon the contents of chapter 18, Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a little child (18:2-5) and calls his followers to care for the "little ones" (18:6, 10, 14).

Matthew's record of Jesus' teaching regarding what constitutes greatness in the kingdom and how believers are to interact one with another in the church commences with a question. Following a curious conversation between Peter and Jesus concerning the temple tax (17:24-27), Matthew reports that the disciples approach Jesus and ask him about greatness in the kingdom of heaven (18:1). Mark and Luke indicate the Twelve had occasion to discuss among themselves which of them was the greatest (Mark 9:34; Luke 9:46).

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Along similar lines, in Matthew 20:20-21, the mother of James and John enjoins Jesus to arrange special seats for her sons on either side of himself in the kingdom. Mark reports the sons of Zebedee themselves had the audacity to ask Jesus directly for special heavenly seating assignments (10:35-37).

Differences in minor details between the synoptic accounts notwithstanding, it must have been much to the shock and chagrin of the status-seeking disciples that Jesus would appeal to children as paradigmatic and constitutive of the kingdom. So radical and revolutionary was Jesus' kingdom vision, he had to reiterate to the Twelve that the kingdom of heaven is comprised of children (Matthew 19:13-14).

Along with women, children frequently were undervalued and mistreated in the world in which Jesus lived. They had no status and were comparatively

helpless. In short, they were powerless and depended upon their elders, particularly their fathers, for their well-being. Even as Jesus is a different kind of king (a king who enters into Jerusalem on a borrowed burrow and dies the death of a criminal), he reigns over a different kind of kingdom

According to Matthew 18:2, Jesus offered his disciples a tangible illustration of his instruction regarding greatness in the kingdom of heaven by taking and placing a child in the middle of them. Having done so, he tutors his disciples in kingdom matters by earnestly enjoining (note “Truly I say to you...”) them to recognize that unless they turn and become as children (that is, powerless and dependent) then they will never ever enter the kingdom of heaven (18:3). Moreover, he explicitly answers their question regarding greatness in the kingdom by declaring the greatest person in the kingdom of heaven is the one who humbles oneself like the child in their midst (18:4). Furthermore, Jesus informs his followers that whoever receives a child in his name receives Jesus himself (18:5; 25:40).

At 18:6, Jesus shifts from speaking about literal children to spiritual “little ones” (vv. 6, 10, 14). Earlier in Matthew, those on mission for Jesus were depicted as “little ones” (10:42). Here, “little ones” appear to describe disciples who are for whatever reason(s) spiritually (and culturally?) vulnerable. These believers may be similar to the “weak” of whom Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians (8:7, 9-12) and Romans (14:1-2; 15:1). Even as Paul cautions the Romans (14:13, 21) and the Corinthians (8:9) not to become a stumbling block for a weaker Christian, Jesus declares that whoever might cause a little one to stumble would be better off with a large millstone hung around his or her neck and drowned in the depth of the sea (18:6).

A millstone is a large, circular stone driven by a donkey and used for grinding grain. I will never forget being taken aback by the sheer size of a millstone when I first had the occasion to see one in Capernaum five years ago.

Two “woes” follow the stark warning in 18:6—a woe to the world and a woe to the one who causes a “little one” to stumble (18:7). In biblical literature, a “woe” tends to introduce a prophetic oracle of lament or condemnation. Here, one can detect an admixture of doom and pity. Although stumbling blocks invariably will arise (because of the fallen state of humanity), this serves as no consolation to either the cosmos or the one who gives offense. The person who compromises the faith of a “little one” is subject to divine chastisement, and there are cosmic repercussions of human disobedience to God as the world is further reinforced and ensnared in its sinful, sin-filled state (Romans 8:18-25). Auditors of the first Gospel would probably have regarded Judas as a woeful individual (26:24).

Believers should see themselves as vulnerable and susceptible to sin to the extent they are willing to take extreme precautions to protect both themselves and others from stumbling, that is, falling away from the faith (18:8-9; 5:29-30). We would do well to pray with regularity: “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love; Here's my heart, Lord, take it, seal it; seal it for thy courts above.”

Disciples are not to cause “little ones” to stumble, nor are they to look down upon them. If angels who continually gaze at God care about and advocate for them, how much more so should mere mortals (15:10). Each and every “little one” is of great value to God, even as each and every sheep is of tremendous worth to a shepherd. It is not sufficient for a good shepherd to be satisfied with the loss of a single sheep. Rather, a shepherd who cares for his flock seeks out a lost sheep and rejoices greatly upon finding it (18:12-13).

If we would feign to work with God, then we will recognize that the Lord values all people, be they lost, little or numbered among the 99. It is not the Father's will that a single “little one” be lost. Neither should it be our desire. “I love thee, I love thee, I love thee, I know; just how much I love thee my actions will show.”

Discussion questions

- ◆ What does it mean to come to Christ with a childlike faith?
- ◆ What characteristics seem to come naturally to children that people seem to lose as they age?

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