

The Necessity of Becoming a Little Child

Matthew 18:1-4; 1 Peter 5:5

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This world teaches you that life revolves around you, that your chief aim in life should be to please yourself, to let nothing stand in the way of pursuing your dream, and to make yourself great. In other words, the center of the universe is you. Nothing is too good or too great for you.

In this world, there is no longer a problem with selfishness or pride—for such a person is just looking out for himself/herself first. Even in helping others, it is all about how it makes you feel about yourself. Education, advertisements, and training in the family and workplace are all directed toward your own ambition above everything else. It's Me First.

This kind of a world has a very big problem with humility. The world sees the humble as being weak, spineless, and a doormat upon which everyone around them wipes their feet.

What a diametrically opposite view of humility and meekness God has. Meekness is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23), and you are commanded by the Lord to be clothed with humility as Christians (1 Peter 5:5). In fact, God says pride (Me First) is an abomination to Him (Proverbs 6:16-17—"a proud look").

If we are honest before God, we all struggle with the sin of pride wherein life is not about pleasing the Lord Jesus Christ first and foremost, but is rather about pleasing ourselves. This sin of self-centeredness even manifested itself in the lives of the apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us consider their pride and the words of correction uttered to them by the Lord Jesus: (1) The Shame of the Apostles (Matthew 18:1); (2) The Greatness of a Little Child (Matthew 18:2-4).

I. The Shame of the Apostles (Matthew 18:1).

A. The disciples approached the Lord Jesus with this question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Actually, they did not first bring this question to Christ, but first were arguing among themselves as to who would be the greatest (#1) in God's kingdom. So Jesus asked His disciples what it was they were debating (Mark 9:33), and now that they have been caught, they must acknowledge to their shame what it was they were debating (Matthew 18:1). The kingdom of God in their view was about their honor and glory. It was about their exaltation before others. And they didn't even try to hide it from one another. Sadly, this discussion not only happened once, but other times as well (Matthew 20:20; Matthew 22:24).

1. We see that God does not hide the sins and weaknesses of even the prophets or apostles. Though they were mightily used to exalt God through miracles and preaching, they were yet weak and frail in themselves. You see, God doesn't use great men or women. God uses weak men and women who trust and love a great God.

2. Jesus did not come to save those who believe they are already good enough, but those who know and confess they are sinners in need of a Savior—who know they deserve God's righteous judgment and cannot save themselves from His judgment (Matthew 9:13). This is the condition of us all—not some of us, but all of us. We have all drowned in our sin (Romans 3:23). We don't need a life preserver so that we can put it on and save ourselves, for we are at the bottom of the sea. We need Jesus to dive (as it were) to the bottom of the sea and to bring our dead corpse out of the sea of our sin that condemns us and to breathe into us new life—His life and faith into our soul so that we can trust Him alone as our Savior from sin and condemnation.

B. The pride and self-exaltation of the disciples at this point is all the more shameful and contemptible because Jesus had just before been preparing His disciples for His self-sacrifice on the cross for the sins of all who will trust Him (Matthew 17:22-23).

1. What a contrast we see between the Savior whose love is manifest not in seeking His own life, but shines forth in all of His glory in laying down His life as God's sacrifice for the sin of all who are chosen in Christ Jesus from eternity and who are brought to trust in Him as Savior and Lord.

2. Here were the apostles sinfully seeking to make a name for themselves in the sight of all; whereas the Lord Jesus humbled Himself in coming into this world and made Himself of no reputation in receiving the hatred of men against Him and taking upon Himself the form of a servant and a sacrificial lamb out of love for those who were ungodly and hated Him (Philippians 2:3-11). That is the very nature of true love—it is sacrificial in giving to the one loved (Ephesians 5:25).

3. Who has ever stooped so low, or given up so much in order to serve and rescue such undeserving, unworthy sinners as us? Was He forced to do so? Absolutely not! He freely humbled Himself to save those sinners He loved from eternity. There was nothing good in us that compelled Him to do so. If anything, our sin should have immediately called down upon us His righteous condemnation in eternal judgment. No, it was not our worthiness, but His mercy. It was not because we were so righteous, because there is none righteous. It was not because we were so loveable; it was because He is love.

4. This is the greatest love story ever told. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about pride; it is about self-sacrificial love and humility. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about exalting yourself and serving yourself; it is about lowering yourself to be used by God to serve Him and bring Him glory rather than to bring you glory. It is about boasting in Christ, and not about boasting in yourself. Sadly, the disciples had fallen into this very temptation of exalting themselves rather than exalting Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus, however, was not finished with them—He changed them by His Word and Spirit, and all but John laid down their lives for Jesus as martyrs and for others to hear and receive by faith the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the work of humility in the life of a Christian.

5. The greatest ministers and elders are the greatest servants in putting aside all selfish ambition in serving Christ and ministering to the flock. And even if you do not have the title of a minister or elder, you can be the greatest servant of all by your service to Christ's sheep (beginning with the sheep in your own household). Such loving service that is blind to selfish ambition will be honored by the Lord.

6. How different it is in the world. If one wants to be first, one must climb up that ladder stepping on and over others in order to get to the top. How wonderful are the ways of the Lord in that He works by contraries: in order to be great, you must be the servant of all; in order to live, you must die to self; in order to be exalted, you must be humbled; in order to reign with Christ, you must suffer for Christ.

7. Dear ones, if you do not understand and love the humiliation of Christ, you will never know what it is to be truly humble. If you are unwilling to take up your cross daily in dying to your pride, your arrogance, your boasting, your self-exaltation, you will not grow in the grace of humility. If Christ's death is an example to us of humility and through His death we have life, how can we grow in humility as Christians, if we are not willing to die to self rather than exalting self?

II. The Greatness of a Little Child (Matthew 18:2-4).

A. Consider here the patience of the Lord as He tenderly corrects the shameful pride and behavior of His disciples who have been with him now three years in their seminary training. The Lord did not react in a fit of rage, "Are you guys just plain stupid!" If the Lord was patient with these weak but foolish disciples, will He not also be so with you as you stumble along the way? He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). How patient are you, husbands, in teaching your wives, or parents in teaching your children? The patience of the Lord with us is a further incentive to our growth in humility (not to beat one another up

with the lashes of our angry tongues, but to patiently and humbly instruct those entrusted to our care). Jesus was strong and forceful in His rebuke of the proud, obstinate Pharisees. But He tenderly welcomed all sinners who fled to Him in faith for forgiveness and eternal life.

B. Jesus now instructs His disciples by means of an object lesson. He tenderly calls for a little child and takes him up in His arms (Mark 9:36). This was either an infant or a toddler. There are two points about this little child that Jesus uses to instruct the disciples in regard to humility.

1. First, one cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven (kingdom of grace in salvation) unless he/she is converted (changed) and becomes like a little child (Matthew 18:3). Wow! This is of the utmost importance. This is a life and death matter. Don't ignore what Jesus says here.

a. Jesus does not point to this little child because he is sinless, perfect, strong, and able to provide for all his needs. To the contrary, an infant or a toddler (though being a sinner as evidenced by his temper tantrums when he doesn't get what he wants), nevertheless is needy and dependent upon his parents for everything he needs in this life. An infant or toddler is weak and must trust the strength of his parents. An infant or toddler is ignorant and must not lean upon his own understanding but upon the knowledge and understanding of his parents. An infant or toddler is not puffed up about his gifts or his rank and position in life. The toddler of a king will not despise the toddler of the peasant as inferior to himself.

b. So likewise all those who enter into God's kingdom of salvation must humble themselves before the Lord confessing their sin, their absolute need of Christ, their weakness and inability to save themselves, their ignorance, and Christ's power alone to save from sin and hell. In order to be saved, you must come in faith looking to Christ and trusting in Him alone to forgive you, save you, and grant you eternal life just as that infant or toddler looks and trusts that his parents will care and provide for him. You cannot come to Jesus thinking you are great and worthy of His salvation. You must be converted (changed) and be humbled (in the passive not active tense). It is Christ that does the changing, and it is you that lives out that change.

2. Second, Jesus then teaches that it is not those who exalt themselves that will be the greatest in His kingdom of grace, but those who see themselves as little children in having absolutely nothing without Him (Matthew 18:4; John 15:5).

a. Is it easy to grow in humility? Is it comfortable to grow in humility? Of course not! It goes very much against our pride and against what the world all around us stands for. In fact, it's impossible with man. But by the grace of God it is not only possible, but a certainty (Philippians 2:13). For the grace of humility was purchased by Christ on the cross for every believer in Jesus Christ. The grace of humility is implanted in the heart of every Christian at their regeneration. You need not cut yourself or abuse yourself in order to receive the grace of humility. You simply need to take hold of Jesus by faith who is humility personified. You simply need to learn of Him and to grow in Him. It is through Christ's humiliation (in becoming flesh and dwelling among us and suffering and dying for His people), that He entered into His exaltation (at His resurrection, ascension, session, and second coming).

b. In so many churches today people will be promised prosperity and exaltation if they will support that "minister", but what the people will not be told is that exaltation only comes through suffering and humiliation for Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 2:12).

C. What can you do that you may grow in humility before God and man?

1. In order to grow in the grace of humility, you must be honest and transparent before God and with yourself about your pride. You must sincerely ask the Lord to show you the ugliness of your pride in all the many ways in which you exalt yourself, draw attention to yourself and to your knowledge, put others down to make yourself look good, or pursue promotion out of selfish ambition rather than out of love to serve Christ and others.

2. In order to grow in the grace of humility, you must understand that being like Christ means becoming a servant of God and a servant to others, especially if you are called to be a leader. For the greatest leaders are the greatest servants. The greatest leaders in the home, in the church, at work, and in a nation are not those who shout out orders and demand that you respect them, but those who through loving service earn the trust and respect of others by humbling themselves (1 Peter 5:6). The Lord Jesus teaches us here the absolute necessity of becoming a little child. We never become so great or too old to become a little child before God. Come to Jesus even now as a little child and receive from Him forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life.

May this be your goal and mine in life: Jesus must increase, and I must decrease. Let Jesus be exalted, and let me be humbled.

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