

**Mark 9: 33-37; “Whoever Receives this Little Child”, Sermon # 77 in the series –
“Astonished at His Teaching”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on September 25th, 2016, In the Morning Worship Service.**

We have been looking at the subject of greatness. And we saw, the last time that I spoke to you from this passage, that whatever true greatness which a Christian attains to in this life (and we may add, will be rewarded for, in the life to come as well) is the greatness which is found in them in relation to God’s evaluation of that person; not men’s evaluation and approval of them. True greatness is related to doing what is right, and faithfulness to God. The Lord Jesus Christ was, it says in Isaiah 53: 3, “despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” “He was despised and we did not esteem Him.” But in the eyes of His Father, He was perfect, pure, and holy, and all men ought to have listened to Him. Jesus was, and He is, the epitome of true greatness. Today, we want to look further at what true greatness is, in the kingdom of God, by looking at the example which Jesus set before these disciples. He took a little child and He set him in the midst of them. The parallel passage to this is found in Matthew 18, and verses 1-5. We find that that passage more extensively relates Jesus’ thoughts on this subject.

So if you will turn there, I will read it for you, and then I will relate to you what ideas that Jesus would present to you through the consideration of this child. “At that time the disciples came to Jesus saying, ‘Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ “Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.’ “Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” “Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.” From these words, let me relate to you 3 truths which are essential to your coming to understand whether you are one of those who will be great in the kingdom of heaven. 1st of all – You will have the potential to be great in the kingdom of heaven if you are one of those who have humbled themselves to believe that they needed to be converted. 2nd – You have the potential to be great in the kingdom of heaven if you are one of those who humbles themselves to receive a little child. And 3rd – You will have the potential to be great in the kingdom of heaven if you are one of those who has humbled themselves to become like a little child in certain very important ways. Let us pray, at this time, to learn these things and to put them into practice, so that we will prove that we are Christ’s disciples.

1st of all – You will have the potential to be great in the kingdom of heaven if you have humbled yourself to believe that you need to be converted.

(Matthew 18, verse 1-3)

Matthew 18: 3 says, “Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” The kingdom of heaven is entered into in this life when we believe in Jesus Christ our Lord. It is at that very moment when faith is exercised in the Person and the finished work of the Lord Jesus, that the kingdom is entered. It is a heavenly or spiritual kingdom. It is not of this world. It does not have earthly territory and boundaries. It is within your heart if you believe, and it is in the hearts of all other believers as well. This common territory and atmosphere is the spiritual realm; whether it is in the hearts of believers living upon the earth at this time, or whether it is the realm of heaven, the place where God and His glory dwells, the place which we come to when we die as believers. The Greek word for “converted” here in this text is “strephe”. It means to turn; to turn yourself around and head in the opposite direction. You had been going in the direction which sin had led you, and you now turn back from following and serving sin and you turn to God. And you begin to do what He would have you to do in accordance with His revealed will in the Scriptures.

In regard to a person’s initial conversion to God and His Son Jesus Christ, there is a description which is given to us in 1st Thessalonians Chapter 1, verse 8 and following, if you will turn over there

with me. “For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place.” “Your faith toward God has gone out so that we do not need to say anything.” “For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and the true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” There is that word “strepho” again. Being converted to Christ always involves turning. You turn from your own way, you turn from the world’s way, you turn from your unsaved friends’ way, you turn to God from idols; those things which you once put before God, and in the place of God, things that before meant more to you than God. And you began to serve the true and living God by faith in Jesus Christ. That is conversion.

But conversion is actually more than just the initial conversion, and this verse in Matthew 18: 3 proves it. The disciples, except for Judas, were already converted, in the sense of which I have just spoken; when He spoke these words to them. They had heard Christ’s call some time before this, and they had left all, and were following Him. They were men who had owned Him as their Master and Lord. They believed in Him. So what is Jesus talking about, when He warns them and says to them that unless they are converted and become like little children, that they will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven? I believe that He is speaking about their on-going need to repent; their need to turn away from these sinful thoughts of thinking about their own, or each other’s greatness. They needed to change their sinful way of thinking. They could not enter into the kingdom of heaven, either in this life or in the life to come, with this unrepented-of sin in their lives. They were selfishly ambitious and proud at certain major points in their lives. And one of the reasons was, because they had a wrong view of Christ’s kingdom. And when they finally asked Jesus who then is the greatest in His kingdom, Jesus had to warn them, lest they thought that being a Christian did not involve humbling of oneself to do the will of God at many points.

It is when people want the pre-eminence, that other people, even other seemingly less important Christians, are hurt and mistreated by those who are claiming to be great. This whole mindset must change if you are guilty of it. You cannot really be useful to Christ now, or think that you will somehow enter heaven later on, without repentance and the development of a humble mindset. It is good for all professed Christians to be warned in regard to unrepented-of sins. Jesus was not hesitant to do this here, or at many other points in his earthly ministry. In just a few verses down the page, we find Him giving a warning to anyone who might be “causing one of these little ones who believe in Him” to sin. And He warns that, “If your right hand or foot causes you to sin, you must cut it off and cast it from you”, or you will, in the end, go to hell. (verse 9) Repentance in the Christian life is not just a one-time action at the moment of conversion. It is turning from all of your sins every day. It is something to be engaged in whenever necessary, all through your life here upon the earth. Wherever and whenever you find sin working in your heart, or breaking out in your actions, you need to repent of it.

But let us see how this “being converted” worked itself out in Peter’s life. You remember that Peter was not going to let His Master go to the cross and suffer; he was going to prevent it if he could. Our Lord rebuked him and told him that He must go to the cross. Peter continued to hold on to this idea that Christ’s kingdom was going to be an earthly one, and that he would fight for Him to establish it. He was going to protect Jesus from being taken away to the cross and death. And this issue of greatness kept coming up with him and with the other disciples. If you will turn with me to Luke 22, and verse 23, you will see what I mean. Our Lord has just observed His Last Supper with His disciples and Jesus has just told them that one of them would betray Him. In verse 23 it says, “Then they began to question among themselves, which of them it was who would do this thing.” “Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest.” “And he said to them, ‘the kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called benefactors.’ “But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves.” “For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves?” “Is it not he who sits

at the table?” “Yet I am among you as the One who serves.” “But you are those who have continued with Me in My trials.” “And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on the thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

And notice now – “And the Lord said, ‘Simon, Simon!’ “Indeed Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat.” “But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.” The words, “when you have returned to Me”, are translated in the King James as, “when you are converted, strengthen your brethren”. The word in the Greek is “epistraphas” which meant that when Peter turned back from his denial, when he returned and repented of his sins in relation to this denial of His Lord, that this would be a conversion. So we need to understand that there is not only a repentance or turning to be engaged in, in initial conversion, there is also a continuing need for repentance, or turning from sin, which needs to take place at many points in living our Christian life. This took great grace, for the Lord to make sure that Peter’s faith would not fail and that he really would return, to strengthen and feed His brethren. I like what Matthew Henry says at this point: “Those that have fallen into sin must be converted from it; those that have turned aside must return; those that have left their first love must do their first works.” On Matthew 18: 3, he says, “Besides the first conversion of a soul from a state of nature to a state of grace, there are after-conversions from particular paths of back-sliding, which are equally necessary to salvation.” “Every step out of the way by sin must be a step into it again by repentance.”

Let me ask you this morning if you have come to recognize this great truth? There is no salvation without this kind of repentance taking place in your walk with God. You may say that you have faith; but do you have repentance with it? Have you turned from serving idols to serve the true and living God? And are you turning from every known sin in your life as you look at your heart every day? If you are finding this to be true, and acting upon it, you now have the potential to be great in the kingdom of God. Not great as men would look at you and evaluate you; but great in the eyes of the Lord. Think about these verses in Jeremiah 31: 18. “I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself: ‘You have chastised me, and I was chastised, like an untrained bull; restore me, and I will return for You are the Lord my God.’” The King James Version says it even better I think: “I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus: Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke: turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the Lord my God.” This is the yoke which the true Christian takes up, and they are willing to bear it with Christ’s help; turning from sin and repenting of sin, all their days.

Now, 2nd – You will have the potential to be great in the kingdom of heaven if you are one of those who humbles himself to receive little children.

Mark 9: 36 says, “Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them.” “And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, ‘Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me; receives not Me but Him who sent Me.’” Our being saved is when Jesus, takes us up into His loving care, and into His loving arms; spiritually speaking. And when He saves us He sets us in the midst of His Church, spiritually speaking. What a beautiful picture is given to us here. The way that Jesus words this first, however, shows us that He loves the little children, all the little children of the world. He words it, “Whoever receives one of these little children in My name.” He is thinking of all the little children in general. He is speaking of those who have been given a life which is from the hand of God; they have been given a mind, a heart, and a body; all of which are going to grow and develop. But they have not yet developed to the place where they understand the meaning of life, and many things in this life. They are at the very point where they need to be received, and not turned away. There are so many children in the world who do not have parents at all, or if they do, their parents do not care for them enough to receive them.

Let me ask you this morning, very simply, very directly, whether you are a person who receives children? Do you receive them when they run up to you? Do you smile at them or do they get the

impression that you do not want them to come near? When they speak with you, do you listen to their observations and their concerns, or do you just think of them as a bother? Whenever you think of Jesus, you ought to think of His tenderness toward children and how He received them, and how He held them in His arms, and how He made time for them. Let that great example influence you to receive them as well. I mean not only the little children in your family alone, but do you also have a tenderness, do you have a love for children in general; a love that translates into receiving them? Let me ask you whether you receive your own children? Your own children are going to grow up and eventually they will leave your house someday. Spend time with them now, while you can. Receive them up on your lap and read Bible stories to them. Pray with them. Take them places and do things with them. Let them know that they are always welcome to come and talk with you. They'll be grown up before too long. And will you have received them, or will you be too busy for them? Spend time with them now. Read to them now. Pray with them now. Work with them now, and play with them now.

But what about those of you whose children are grown up, or those of you who have no children? You can still, by grace, have a tender place in your heart for all little children in general. Even if their parents will not bring them to Sunday School and to church; perhaps you could. Even if they have never heard of Christ or the Bible or a Vacation Bible School, perhaps you could introduce them to these good things. I would urge you in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by your love for that great name, that you would think upon those who are little and weak, ignorant and sinful; and attempt in whatever way that is Biblical and good, to receive them. Think about how you can share with them the goodness and truth of Christ and His gospel; that which has been shown to you. Those things were shown to you because of the strength and power of God working in the heart of an adult. You should receive the little children in Jesus' blessed name.

"How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear!" "It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds, and drives away his fear." "It makes the wounded spirit whole, and calms the troubled breast; 'tis manna to the hungry soul, and to the weary rest." "Dear Name! the Rock on which I build, my Shield and Hiding-place, My never failing Treasury filled with boundless stores of grace; Jesus, my Shepherd, Brother, Friend, My prophet Priest, and King, My Lord, my Life, My way, my End, accept the praise I bring." (John Newton's hymn 544 in the Trinity Hymnal) This is how you ought to be with little children; you ought to be sweet to them, you ought to soothe their sorrows, heal their wounds, drive away their fears, attempt to make their wounded spirits whole and calm those who are troubled, and by all means give to them the hope of the gospel. You ought to be a Christian who cares enough to feed a hungry child; whether it is a spiritual hunger or a physical hunger. And, you ought to be able to be a sympathetic listener, and one who prays for their souls. This is what is being communicated by this passage that we are studying. "Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me."

In other words, Christ takes personal notice and has an eager interest, as He sits on His throne in the heavens, to see whether you care enough about children to receive them. He thinks of your receiving them as your receiving Him. That is how close their interests are to His great heart. And He even goes farther than this. He says: "And whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me." The loving care of children, and the salvation of children is close to the heart of not only the Son, but it is also close to the Father's heart. When you care for the true and real needs of children, you are receiving the Father and His love; in caring for a world of lost sinners, a world which needs to know the love of God in the gospel, for it. The world needs to know that someone cares about fallen and needy people of all kinds. Will you be that person?

When you think about and pray for little children and other needy folks, when you think about what you might do in relation to them for the sake of the Lord Jesus, will you not remember the words of Jesus in John Chapter 16, verse 23? "And in that day you will ask Me nothing." "Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you." "Until now you have asked nothing in My name." "Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full." "These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; but the time is coming when I will no longer

speak to you in figurative language, but I will tell you plainly about the Father.” “In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God.”

God so loved the world that He gave His only Begotten Son, and in giving Him, He made sure that His grace would work so powerfully and so effectually that you who now believe in Him would come to know Him. But there was another part of that great work which is found in the life of many young people and children who are saved; there was a believer who loved children enough to receive them. When you receive little children, the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Christ enough to reach out and touch their young lives. May the Lord make this kind of good work to abound in our church. May He bless the Sunday School, and may He bless the Vacation Bible School. May He bless the Bible Club. May He bless all the efforts of parents to receive and love and raise their children to His glory! It is when you participate in this loving serving way, that you will become great in the kingdom of heaven.

And then 3rd – You will have the potential to be great in the kingdom of heaven if you are a person who has humbled themselves to become like a little child in certain very important ways.

Matthew 18: 3 says, “Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” “Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” You can see from the text itself, can’t you, in what major way that you are to become like a little child? It is by humbling yourself. Whoever humbles himself is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. This is true greatness and this leads to serving God and other people in Biblical ways. This is how you glorify God in the living of your Christian life. That child knew that he did not belong in that group of Apostles unless Christ brought him there. He came joyfully to Jesus’ arms and His embrace. But still, it was humbling for him to stand there in their midst. That was his natural reaction. That is also the spiritual reaction of the person who has come to know the Lord, and who is now spiritually held in the arms of Jesus, and who has been brought into the midst of His church. They are one of Christ’s “little ones”. They know that they were not worthy to receive the least of God’s mercies because they were false and full of sin before they were converted. But God has brought them to Himself through the perfect work and sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Jesus spiritually takes up every believer in His loving arms, and He will give them every saving consideration. But when He takes you up, He expects you to become as a little child in some very important ways. Everyone who knows their Bible knows that little children are not to be imitated in the ways that they sin. “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child”, it says in the book of Proverbs. Jesus is not telling us to be foolish. And in Psalm 58: 3 it says, “The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies.” So we are not to be like children or act like children in regard to lying, or ignorance and immaturity. How then are we to be like them? As I close this sermon, I want to give you 3 ways in which we are to be like children. We are to be persistent in our trust, contented in our dependence, and teachable in our disposition. These are three ways that you and I as Christians are to be like little children.

1st – Persistent in trust - Joseph Exell has a good section on this in his commentary. He says, “A child is remarkable for his persistency of trust.” “Children are the most logical creatures in the world.” “A lady once asked the small daughter of the missionary Adoniram Judson, “Were you not afraid to journey so far over the ocean?” “And the reply was, ‘Why, no, madam: father prayed for us when we started.’” Exell says – “It is that simple trust and faith in God and in what He has promised us in His word; that believing all things and hoping all things, that we should imitate. He says, “Do a boy a real kindness, and nothing on earth can keep him from insisting to all the others that you are a kind man.” “Help him once, and he will keep coming with a pathetic sort of confidence that you like to help him.” “For one, having stumbled around a good deal in this muddle of a world, in which nobody seems to stick to anything,” he says, “I am ready to say I know nothing more beautiful than the sweet forgiveness, and renewal of confidence, which a child shows

when, having met a rebuff once and been turned away, they sit wondering and waiting, as if they are sure that you will come round by and by, and be good to them again.”

That is being persistent in trust. I hope that you will become like a child in being contented to depend upon God for everything. A little child does not know how to provide for himself. He does not know how would he take care of himself, were it not for his father and mother. He knows that he is dependent, but yet he is content because he knows and trusts his father’s care. It ought to be the same with us. There are many situations in life where we do not know how we will get through them, or how we shall continue to obtain what we need. But God will provide, and we are content to rest in that provision and not be anxious about it.

And then, secondly, a little child is not proud of its own achievements; thinking themselves a great one because of the things that they can do. Now give that child a few years and it may come to them. Then they may quarrel with their friends about whose dad can beat up whose, and boast of their greatness and skill in some game or sport. But when children are very little, this is not the way that they behave; trying to determine who is the greatest. Let this child be an example to all of us. Let us not study to find our own greatness; let us not be proud of our achievements, but give all the glory to God. He is the One who gave me wisdom; He is the one who gave me righteousness; He is the One who gave me strength. Proverbs 25: 27 says, “It is not good to eat much honey; so to seek one’s own glory is not glory.”

And then lastly, a little child is teachable. A little child is not one to boast of their own knowledge and their own wisdom. They must often ask questions and they want to know the answers to what they are looking at, or what they are thinking about. But this is good in the life of a young Christian or one who wants to become a Christian. Proverbs 3, verse 5 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.” “Do not be wise in your own eyes.” Oh how many people are not like a little child in this way; they are wise in their own eyes. But rather, be as Solomon was. He prayed in 1 Kings 3, verse 7 – “Now, O Lord my God, You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.” “And Your servant is in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted.” “Therefore give to your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil.” “For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?” “The speech pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing.” Let me ask you in closing if this is the way that you pray in relation to any great thing that you would like to do or be? If you are, the Lord will be pleased with you as well, if you will also become like a little child before Him. And if you will become like a little child before Him, then you will find Him coming to answer your prayers, and showing what true greatness really is. May each of us seek our Lord for the grace to be more like a little child.