

Matthew 18:1-20 **Matthew 18:1** ¶ *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"* ² *Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them,* ³ *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."* ⁴ *"Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."* ⁵ ¶ *"Whoever receives one little child like this 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 if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea."* ⁷ ¶ *"Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!"* ⁸ *"If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire."* ⁹ *"And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire."* ¹⁰ ¶ *"Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven."* ¹¹ *"For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost."* ¹² *"What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying?"* ¹³ *"And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray."* ¹⁴ *"Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."* ¹⁵ ¶ *"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother."* ¹⁶ *"But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.'"* ¹⁷ *"And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."* ¹⁸ *"Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* ¹⁹ *"Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven."* ²⁰ *"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."*

Faith doesn't put itself first

Perhaps you have heard this story too, but when I was a kid I remember Missionary Koenig (he was a missionary at the time) describing cars meeting at an intersection in Nigeria. There often

aren't stop lights or even stop signs so how do you decide which car goes first? Well if you owned a car in Nigeria you were pretty rich and probably thought that you were pretty important. So when two cars met at an intersection, one would flash their lights saying I am more important than you, I will go first. To which the other car would probably flash his lights twice which meant no I am more important I will go first. At which point the first car would flash his lights three times saying no I am more important I will go first. This could go on for ridiculous amount of times so that it would have been time efficient for one just to let the other go first. But they often weren't willing to do that because it meant lowering themselves.

Such a game of arrogant chicken is funny and pathetic and is exactly what the disciples were doing that elicits the sermon in our text. The disciples had for some time been expecting prominent positions of power and authority in Jesus kingdom and had begun arguing about who should have the greater authority. These arguments show their continued misconception of Jesus's kingdom . Jesus was not going to set up an earthly empire and appoint them to cushy positions like king of Egypt or ambassador to the Caribbeans etc...

Jesus very dramatically takes a very young Christian, puts that child in their midst and tells them that unless they convert (change they very way they think of things) and become like this little child they will by no means even get into the kingdom of heaven, much less have positions of power and authority. Jesus was in effect saying that faith doesn't even ask who will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven because that is not how faith thinks, that is how our sinful nature thinks, but if you want to know who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven this is who - the one who is like the believing child Jesus put in their midst.

What was so special about that child? Jesus doesn't mean some ridiculous notion of children being innocent. Notice later on in our text he talks about even believing children being able to sin and fall away from faith. What Jesus was pointing the disciples to in that child was its un-presumptuous faith. Faith that, unlike the disciples, didn't think it deserved some great post in the kingdom of heaven, but knew it didn't even deserve to be in the kingdom of heaven at all but rejoiced that by the grace of Jesus, Jesus who was standing there right next to him looking down at him with love, he was part of Kingdom

of heaven. What Jesus was pointing the disciples and us to in that child and in this sermon is that faith isn't arrogant or presumptuous. Faith doesn't put itself first. Now as Lutherans we are pretty good at that. It sometimes seems impossible to get someone to go first in a potluck line or to get Lutherans to sit in the front of church. But that is not what I am talking about.

Faith doesn't flash our lights insisting that we are more important. Faith doesn't demand the glory and honor and recognition we think we deserve because the humility of faith realizes what we deserve for our sins is death but what we are given by the grace of God is forgiveness and heaven. Thus faith doesn't think we are too good or too smart or too important to spend our effort on behalf of those the world views as least important. Faith lets the other car go first. Faith would lower itself to sit on the ground and teach those little children even if Jewish society at that time would find that demeaning. Faith wouldn't find it demeaning because faith is humble. Faith cares more about the soul of a another than your own earthly life for the son of man came to seek and to save the lost and that includes children. Children are born lost too but are also loved and saved by the Son of

man just as much as me. Faith rejoices that God has saved me a sinner and rejoices to tell all, even those society might see as less.

Jesus harshly condemns the opposite attitude. He harshly condemns exalting ourselves before Him or one another. What can happen when we exalt ourselves in our own estimation? We end up doing exactly what Jesus warns about in verse 6- putting stumbling blocks before other believers. Now in verse 6 of our text Jesus is specifically talking about believing children because they are very susceptible to offense and because they weren't valued by Jewish society but the lesson is the same for many circumstances. It would be better for us to physically die then for a person whom Jesus loves whether young or old to spiritual die because of us!

Imagine, I know this will be difficult to imagine, but imagine someone who is really difficult to communicate with. Imagine someone who really annoys you and who keeps causing problems and you just want to throw up your hands and be done with them. Faith no more thinks about what place we deserve in the kingdom of heaven than it thinks or acts like that. Faith doesn't go first, doesn't exalt itself saying "I am worthy of Christ's patience and forgiveness but

that person no longer is". Instead we lower ourselves in loving concern to do what Jesus says in our text "If your brother sins against you, go and tell them their faults between you and them alone." When we exalt ourselves and our time and earthly enjoyment then we will think that calling a troubled sinner back to Jesus is not worth our time and the headache and the name calling we might have to endure if we seek to call another to repentance. And when we exalt ourselves instead of humbling ourselves we won't go first to them in secret to call them to repentance as Jesus instructs in our text. Instead we will want to tell others what sin so and so has committed that we might look good in comparison.

Have you ever thought that way- that you are too busy, too exhausted, to deal with so and so since they never learn their lesson and probably won't listen? Do you think about how underappreciated your work in Christ is by your brothers and sisters in Christ? Such thoughts continual creep from sinful hearts and when we think and act like that we are acting just as foolish as the drivers in Nigeria and the disciples in our text.

Thankfully Jesus is The son of David, The Son of Abraham

promised through whom all the nations of the earth are blessed and who has delivered us from all our enemies all around us which includes sin, Satan, death, and ourselves. Christ came to seek and to save the lost and that includes me. You want to know the only way Christ put Himself first while on earth? When it came to time to take the blame and punishment for the sin of the world. That is the only time Jesus put Himself first. But He wasn't acting selfishly or exalting Himself but just the opposite.

Lutherans are good at fighting for the last pews in the church. That isn't necessarily a good thing but not putting ourselves forward declaring we are deserving of great reward or putting ourselves forward claiming we deserve heaven is a good thing. Jesus starts the sermon in our text by pointing to a believing child and says unless we change and become like that little child we can by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. He was not pointing to any supposed innocence. He was talking about that child's un-presumptuous faith, humble faith. As one commentator put it "humility means first of all recognizing personal sinfulness and unworthiness and inability to do anything at all to become worthy before God and earn salvation wholly or even partially.

Humility depends entirely on God's mercy for forgiveness and salvation." - People's Bible.

Blessed are the poor in spirit like that child! Why are they blessed? Because by the work of the Holy Spirit they realize how broke they are spiritual and so they don't have airs about deserving a place in the kingdom. They don't flash their lights at one another or even worse with God thinking they are deserving of anything . Instead the humility of faith falls down before God saying "God be merciful to me a sinner. I don't deserve anything from You but wrath and punishment". But they also fall down before Jesus who offered and went first to take the sin, the blame, the guilt , the punishment for the world and don't argue but gratefully say " thank you Lord Jesus." These, you go home justified and forgiven. These, you are in the kingdom of heaven now and forever. Amen.

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