

# Like a Little Child: Greatness and Accountability in the Kingdom

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**References:** Matthew 18, Romans 12:2; John 20:20; Luke 19:10

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## Greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven

Matthew chapter 18, verse 1 says:

[Matthew 18:1-14 NKJV]

<sup>1</sup> At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" <sup>2</sup> Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>5</sup> Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.

<sup>6</sup> "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. <sup>7</sup> Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!

<sup>8</sup> "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. <sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> "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. <sup>11</sup> For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.

<sup>12</sup> "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? <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

What's interesting about Matthew chapter 18—I have no doubt that the passage is connected. There's a thought flow, as Matthew is writing. He's moved, we are aware and believe, by the Spirit of God. And so there's a process. He's working through a thought flow that is helping the disciples, helping them to have, as Paul says in Romans, their thinking changed.

Paul says in Romans chapter 12 that the great need in the world today is to have our thinking conformed to the mind of God. You know, he uses the word transformed, having our minds renewed or transformed by the Holy Scriptures.

[Romans 12:2 NKJV]

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

And so this passage specifically has to do with children. But what's interesting about it is it's one of only two passages—now hear me out—one of only two passages in all four of the Gospels that mention the church. And that's a bit shocking when you think about it. You know, we're living in what's called the church age, and there's lots of... thank you... differences of opinion in evangelical Christianity of how these things fit together.

But we know that the church started in Acts chapter 2. That was its birthday: Pentecost. And so because we're in the church age and we read the New Testament, we have the New Testament, we wonder, What about the church in the Old Testament? Well, the word is never used in the Old Testament. You know, scholars point that out all the time, that the word is not used. And then good, sound theologians will go to the next level and tell us that the church and Israel are distinct. They're not the same. The church didn't replace Israel. The church is unique to Acts chapter 2. And so we think about all those things.

We say, "Well, how about in the Gospels when the Lord Jesus came?" Well, interestingly enough, in all four Gospels, the church—the word church—the Lord Jesus mentions it only three times, and all three times are in Matthew: once in chapter 16 and twice in chapter 18. And so this seems to be in this idea of this core doctrine, this moving forward, this

transforming of our minds—you know, changing our thinking—that fundamentally, changing our thinking in church fellowship has to do, as we said, with children.

So, I'm not sure if that's true. Is Christian culture against children? Is Western civilization—is Western culture—against children? Well, you know, with the age of AI—now of course, we'll debate how true all of that is, but certainly it goes through and lists things, and it must search databases; that's how it obviously works. And if you type in, "Which countries in the world treat children the worst?" it'll put a list for you.

And so, I've done that. It has a list; it has five countries. And all of them, two through five, have something in common: they're the same faith system, the same belief system, the same religion. Number two, according to AI, is Syria. We say, "Well, we're not surprised by that, right?" We know what the religion of Syria is, so yeah, we're like, "Yes, of course, we knew that."

Do you know what number one is on the list? Congo. Do you know what religion it is, almost unanimously? Would you like to guess? Well, you don't have to; I'll tell you. It's Christian. You're like, "What?" Yeah, it's Christian—now, names of Christianity, you know.

Now, we know, right, we agree that not everybody who says they're a Christian is a Christian. Not everybody who says they're a Christian follows the teachings of Christ. That's what makes you a Christian: if you have a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ and you follow Christ. That's the Bible's definition. But, you know, the world has taken and said, "We're Christians, too." So the Congo is number one on the list. It's a mostly Christian country, and it is guilty—guilty of most of the crimes against children.

And so we read this passage, and actually, if we look at it, we see there is a bit of an issue here. These disciples to whom the Lord Jesus is talking, they've already been with him for a period of time. But no, even beyond that, they were raised in God-fearing homes. Right? They were raised in God-fearing homes by God-fearing parents. When they met the Lord Jesus in John chapter 1, that was not their point of conversion. No doubt they were converted as children. Right? That's when they met the Lord Jesus. That's when they met Christ in person, the Messiah.

They were waiting for him, but they were already believing in him. That's why they were waiting and watching. That's the kind of language they used. They said, "We have found him for whom we were searching, waiting." Renald Showers from Friends of Israel says that John chapter 1 is how true Jews—true Jews—received the Messiah, not apostate Jews. Most of what you're reading in the Gospels is apostate Judaism. And the Lord Jesus says that. You know that. You read through that. You see these verses where the Lord Jesus says things like,

"If you believed in Moses, you would what? What would you do if you believed in Moses?" If you really believed in Moses, Jesus said, "You would believe in me, because Moses wrote about me."

David—who did David write about? I was reminded of David this morning. I love John chapter 20 where, you know, the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

[John 20:20 NKJV]

When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

You know, David experienced that. He writes about it in Acts chapter 2. He writes about it in Psalm 96—that he was glad. Well, he marveled at the works of God in creation, but he was glad at His one-time work. People say, "Well, we don't know if David could have known about the cross." David did know about the cross. He wrote about it in Acts chapter 2. That's actually who Peter is quoting. David knew about that. He knew about the cross. He knew about the resurrection.

So how did he know that? Well, the Bible tells us he was a prophet. We often think of him as a king, and he was, but the Bible in Acts says, "the prophet David." David knew the Lord, and he knew lots about the Lord. And so he was glad about the cross work of the Lord Jesus. It made him glad. It made his heart glad. The word—you look it up in Strong's—and it was a glad leap for joy, right? It wasn't just joyful. He actually was jumping up and down as he thought about what the Lord Jesus had done at the cross of Calvary. Made him jump for joy. And we actually see that, right? We'll disdain him sometimes for his exuberant joy over the cross of the Lord Jesus.

And so these cultures, these men, they're waiting. They're waiting for the Messiah. And so they're from a godly home. But yet, when it comes to children, they're a little bit off. And that's what we have here. This is how this passage starts out. They're thinking about greatness in the kingdom of heaven. It's interesting. That's the first question: "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

You know, I would have thought—you know, we have the advantage of what's called 20/20 vision, which we know isn't always 20/20 looking back, but we at least have the opportunity to have the whole story before us. And so it seems odd that in the presence of the Lord Jesus, you would have thought that they would have said something like, "Well, like, Lord, obviously

next to you—you're the greatest in the kingdom because you're the king." They're still unsure of that. "Who then would be the greatest? Not to exclude you." They don't say that.

And so the Lord Jesus uses a child. He calls, says, "a little child," and sets a child in the midst of them, and so links greatness in the kingdom of heaven with a child. So we have to, you know, we have to, if we're going to have our minds changed, we have to conform, transform. We say, "Well, what is a child—what advantage does a child have over us, you know, adults? What's the key?" Well, it has to be that trust, that humility linked with trusting, believing.

And actually, that's what the three paragraphs have in common. That's what's connected, is that believing. You know that it's been said, and it's true, that you have to teach a child not to believe in God. If you've ever taught Sunday school and you've worked with children, you realize you don't have to teach them to believe in God. They are born believing that. That's what this passage—and I'm telling you, this is mind-altering stuff, because lots of people don't believe it, but this is what the Lord Jesus taught.

You know, they have all these views in culture and all these different opinions, and Paul had it in his day, and his argument always was—and it's the strongest argument—in Romans, he says, "What does the Scriptures say?"

You know, Brother Eric [Peterson] in the break was, or before the meeting, was talking about the preaching of Billy Graham. And so people have tried to assess that. You know, scholars have tried to assess what made Billy Graham so effective in his preaching. And you know what they came up with? A statement that he says over and over. And if you listen to his preaching, you will see it. It goes like this: "The Bible says. The Bible says."

Okay. That's what ultimately, at the end of the day, matters. Now, Billy Graham didn't come up with that idea; Paul used to preach like that. He says, "What does the Scriptures say?" And so the Scriptures... the Lord Jesus' teaching... all standard Scriptures teach the value of children. And so he talks about how people are received into the kingdom like a child: the faith of a child, the belief of a child, the believing that a child is born with. That's the first paragraph.

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## **The Danger of Offenses and the Reality of Hell**

Then the second paragraph, verses 6 through 9: offending children. Well, the number one offense has to then be teaching a child who believes not to believe. That's a serious offense. And I'm not saying how it happens; I think education does it. I have a friend who said that children are born believing, they go off to school, and then school undermines their belief in the Lord. They really don't get it—don't really embrace the idea of "no to God" until post-

secondary education. And so you hear testimony of parents who say that, you know, their child was saved and baptized and in church fellowship, and then went to university and came back to be an atheist or an agnostic or something—I'm not sure what the word is—but no longer having so-called faith in the Lord.

And so this paragraph, this paragraph here, the Lord Jesus—"offenses might come"? No, "offenses must come." They must come. And no doubt, because we are offensive people. So it happens. But it's serious. He says, "Woe to those to whom it happens."

And then the Lord Jesus in verses 8 and 9 talks about something else that's under attack in the world today—now, not in the world, but in the church. He links with the offense "everlasting fire." Is hell everlasting? Well, what does the Bible say? This is the word the Lord Jesus uses: **everlasting fire**.

Now, you probably know that this is under heavy attack in the last six months in evangelical Christianity. You have men who have been used of the Lord, used to further the gospel of the Lord Jesus and to make people think about the next life. Think specifically of Kirk Cameron. He did this famous Left Behind series. And it's a movie series of the idea of the Lord Jesus coming and rapturing the church. You know what's going to happen after the church is gone. And so the church is gone and life is changed. And so this is for these people who are left behind and, you know, taking from the book of the Revelation some of the things that are happening. And so he made this movie series, and it's quite, quite famous. It was years ago.

And, you know, he's changed his theological view on that. He says, "I've left Left Behind behind. I don't believe in the rapture anymore." What does the Bible say, though? What does Kirk Cameron say? What does the Bible say? Well, people ultimately, sadly, don't really often care about that. What does Hollywood say, or what do the movie experts or the movie stars, what do they say? Well, he's moved on from that, and now he's talking about—there's no such thing as everlasting fire, hell. That's not what the Lord Jesus meant. No, hell isn't everlasting; it's actually annihilation. This is what they believe. This is what they're promoting. And so he's getting experts to come on, and they're propagating this stuff on the internet and YouTube, and people who had listened to them in the past are still listening to them, and now they're like, "Well, I think he's right."

And they say, "Well, I don't know how you get around the clear words of the Lord Jesus." Children are precious to the Lord. He loves children. They believe in Him. And if you or I offend, there are serious consequences. This is what the Lord Jesus is talking about: everlasting fire, and hell, hellfire, and better to be maimed than to cause one of these little ones to sin.

## Seeking, Saving, and the Age of Accountability

Then he goes on to talk about a parable, a parable of the lost sheep, but it's in the context of children. And he says this, verse 11: "For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost." Now this verse, this verse is very helpful. Mr. Robert Anderson, famous scholar from a past generation, a true theologian, said that the Bible, being inspired by the Spirit of God, selects verses and selects words. He says nothing finds a place in the Word of God that doesn't belong there. There's no filler words. There's nothing that's there that shouldn't be there.

The opposite is also true. If something's missing, it's missing for a purpose. And we say, "Well, what do you mean missing?" Well, we say, "Well, sometimes you look at verses and they're quoted here and they're quoted differently here." And people say, "Well, maybe the writer didn't know that verse, or he didn't quote it wholly or completely for space." Sir Robert Anderson—it's with a purpose.

And so this verse is quoted in Luke chapter 19. In Luke chapter 19, it says:

[Luke 19:10 NKJV]  
for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Here in Matthew, it says, "For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost." What's the difference?

Well, in the assemblies, as we know it, in the last hundred years, in this part of the world—North America, but especially this part, the border between America, you know, between the United States of America and Canada, this vein that runs across the country—in a past generation, there were hundreds of assemblies, many, many large assemblies, a great work of God. And in and amongst there, the Lord raised up able Bible teachers. And if you read some of their stories, some of their biographies, for instance, you'll hear things like, "You know, while I was preaching in Victoria, or I was preaching in Calgary, or I was preaching in Vancouver..." These would be places you could still visit. These men were preaching.

There was a brother, Harold St. John. People who heard him said he was probably the best brother and theologian of his generation, the best Bible commentator, had the best grasp of Scripture. He must have preached here, Harold [Summers], right? I must confirm that. No, but he would have, because he preached like in Victoria, Calgary. Yeah, in his book, his

biography written by his daughter—this is a hundred years ago—she tells the story of a kid's meeting in Calgary.

Twenty dollars. Like, 100 years ago, \$20—might be able to almost buy a house with that, I'm not sure. That's a lot of money. So to start the kids' meeting, full—the building full of children—he held up a \$20 bill. He said, "Does anybody want this? They can have it." Well, they're in shock. And so a kid stands up, walks up, takes it, and Harold St. John gives it to him. And the boy goes, sits down, puts it in his pocket, goes and sits down. And the kids are in shock.

He says, "Now picture," he says, "the rest of you children, that feeling you're having right now, like you think of that feeling of missing out. You've missed out. 'I could have had that, but I didn't. I didn't go.'" He said, "Now I'm going to present you something that can't be purchased with money, that far in value exceeds what that child just received. Right?" And he said, "What I'm going to present to you now," he said, "you don't want to miss out on. You can have it, and there's enough for all and beyond." And he presented the gospel. And so you just read a story and you're like, Wow, he's got a grasp of the Lord and the heart of God.

He says this verse here is different than Luke because of the context. In Luke, it's talking about a tax collector, Zacchaeus. He's lost; the Son of Man has to find him and save him. Here, it's in the context of a child. He doesn't have to find the child, but he still saves him. And so Harold St. John says this is the presentation of the **age of accountability**.

Because people will tell, "Listen, Christians don't believe in that." I mean, you may not think that, but you listen to staff, no doubt. You listen to preachers, because you can't ask them what they believe—you don't know. But if you were to ask them if babies go to heaven, they'll say things like—and you can check this out if they say it—"Well, elect babies go to heaven." And that sounds good. People say, "Yeah, that's good." Say, "Well, just a second, what's the 'elect' in there? What's that there for?" Well, we don't like to say, but... well, they do. They say non-elect don't go to heaven. They go to hell, to a lost eternity, to everlasting fire. Say, "Well, again, what does the Bible say about this stuff?"

Well, Mr. St. John said, "No. This is the age of accountability. This is what Matthew is talking about." Matthew is very aware of what the Bible talks about as willful sin. There is a distinction between willful and unwillful—sins of ignorance, the opposite. And so, you know, Matthew, earlier in the teachings of the Lord Jesus, talks about these two roads—you know, the idea of choosing life. You've seen this chart maybe: Two Roads, Two Destinies. And, you know, it has the broad road and everybody's on it, and then it has partway down a little narrow road offshoots, and then they have Matthew 7, the verse underneath it, that story the Lord Jesus told. And so people can get off the broad road and get onto the narrow road.

That's not how the Lord Jesus actually presents it, though. He presents it as two gates. There comes the day of decision. He says on the day of decision, "Choose life, not the broad road that leads to destruction." So Mr. St. John says that it's possible, based on the teachings of Matthew, comparing Scripture with Scripture and what's there and what's not there, possible for a child never to be lost. Born believing, and then on the day of accountability, realizing—realizing about sin, and willful sin where that leads to destruction—chooses life. That's what he taught. And he would use this passage along with Matthew 7 to teach that.

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## **Conclusion: Loving What He Loves**

Whatever your view, what is the Lord Jesus talking about? He's talking about the love that he has for children. They're an example of entrance into the kingdom. If we offend them, it's a serious offense. He says, "These little ones who believe in me." So, we want to be sensitive to the things that the Lord Jesus is sensitive to. We want to love what he loves. He loves children, so we want to love children. We want to make sure we don't offend children.

I'm thankful for it. Chinese culture—Chinese culture apparently, according to AI, respects children, loves children, honors children. So, we say, "Well, praise God for that." But if that's true, remember that's from our Creator, our Maker, because He loves children.

So let's close with a prayer.

Father, we're grateful for the words of the Lord Jesus, and we ask that you would help us by your Spirit to be changed in our thinking in any area of our life that might be an offense to those around us, that might be an offense, more importantly, to you, Father. We ask for your help, and we ask for your blessing today. We pray in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.