

September 13, 2009

**THE KINGDOM AND THE LITTLE ONES**  
**MATTHEW 18.1-14**

*In dealing with the disciples' aspirations for greatness in the kingdom, Jesus instructs them that greatness in the kingdom is dependent upon how they relate to the little ones in the kingdom.*

**1. BECOME AS A LITTLE ONE (1-5)**

***The question of greatness in the kingdom of heaven (1):*** "In that hour" - refers back to the previous scene(s). Jesus and disciples are sons of the king. Now, who is the greatest in the hierarchy? There are aspirations of greatness.

"Kingdom of heaven" (KH) - God's promised future for him and his people. The kingdom of heaven involves God's promised reign of justice upon the earth in which he puts down his enemies and exalts his people to reign with him in the world. KH is breaking in even now in the Person of Jesus and will consummate on the last day (1Cor 15.20-28).

Disciples argue about who is the greatest (cf. Mk 9.34; 10.35-45). They want "a name." Not thinking properly about what it means to be greatest in KH. Not like the kingdoms of the world.

Do we still do this today? Yes. We try to make a name for ourselves by striving to be "out front," show people how smart we are, call people out on blogs, being "edgy" for the sake of drawing attention, etc.

***The epitome of kingdom greatness (2-4):*** Note: this is a real child not merely an example. He is the embodiment of what Jesus is calling for in his disciples. Note also: not a "special" child, just one of the children around Jesus.

Unless the disciples turn or are converted and become as little children, they will certainly not enter into the kingdom of heaven; i.e., they will not inherit God's promised future kingdom.

Characteristic that is emphasized: humility (v. 4). Opposite of self-assertion and prominent status. Not primarily a feeling but a position of lowliness. Child = lowest position of society; weak, no great rank, & vulnerable to abuse and mistreatment; completely dependent upon others.

The disciples must embrace a status of lowliness and absolute dependence just as this child has done.

Note who needs to be converted: the adult disciples, not the child.

Note also: the humility of the child is not just the standard of greatness in the kingdom of heaven, but it is the standard of *entrance* into the kingdom.

***Receiving Jesus in the child (5):*** cp. 10.40ff. dealing with receiving those whom Jesus sent as receiving him (i.e. 'little ones').

Jesus so identifies himself with this child that to receive the child is to receive Jesus. In other words, if you want to receive Jesus, you will receive this child. Jesus is, you might say, the true child.

Receiving Jesus is receiving those with whom Jesus identifies himself. How we receive little ones, the weakest and lowliest in the KH, is how we receive Jesus. They should be the most cared for and exalted members of the church in one sense.

**2. DO NOT CAUSE THE LITTLE ONES TO STUMBLE (6-9)**

***Stumbling blocks, millstones, and swimming with the fishes (6):*** "cause to sin" or "offend" is the word from which we derive our word "scandal" or "scandalize." The idea is that something is put in front of someone else that causes him to trip up so as to fall into sin or to be caught in a trap.

Here Jesus is speaking about someone scandalizing these little ones so as to cause them to lose faith and turn away from God.

"Little ones" refers back to little children in vv. 1-5, but it broadens out a bit to those who might even be adults (cp. 10.42).

"Little ones who believe in me" does not exclude even the smallest of children. (1) Why would Jesus hold up an unbeliever as an example of true faith? (2) Scripture teaches that covenant children believe; cf. Pss 22.9-10; 71.5-6; cf. also Lk 1.41 (John).

Doesn't exclude children but also includes all of the other "little ones," the lowly of society (even society of the church).

Causing one of these to lose faith is a serious sin. Jesus illustrates the seriousness of this sin by saying that a large millstone, the one literally that must be driven by a donkey, should be hung around the neck of those who cause such offenses, and they should be cast into the deepest part of the sea. They are to sink into death never to rise again.

***Stumbling blocks must come (7):*** B/c of sin in the world there must be these causes to sin. Sin will and must run its full course and exact its last penalty. This is seen preeminently in the death of Jesus.

"Woe" is the opposite of being "blessed" (as in the beatitudes; 5.3ff.). Woe is a state of ruin, destruction, and death. They must come but you better not be the one by whom they come!

***Deal radically with stumbling blocks (8-9):*** Literal? Wrong question. Right question: "How serious is my sin in causing someone else to turn from the faith and how seriously must I deal with this cause of offense?"

Jesus is emphasizing that we do not need to deal gently with our sins. We must deal radically with our sin of causing others to sin.

Those who cause others to stumble so as to fall away are in danger of the fires of hell. That is serious business. This must shape the way we think about how we receive children and all the other lowly or little ones out there and even within our own church.

We cannot be a church of "those who have arrived;" whether that means socially, financially, theologically or otherwise. We are the people who must see and receive Jesus in these little ones.

### **3. DO NOT DESPISE THE LITTLE ONES (10-14)**

***Little ones and their angels (10):*** "Take heed" - give special attention to.

"Despise" conveys the idea of looking down upon someone with contempt. This is the attitude and consequent action that these little ones are not worthy of your time and effort.

"... one of these little ones." - not to despise any one of them in particular, not just a general class of people.

Not one of these little ones is to be treated like second-class citizens of the kingdom. Remember, they are the greatest. They are the ones with whom the King himself identifies most intimately.

"Their angels always beholding the face of the Father in heaven." Cp. Isa 6 and seraphim covering their faces. These are angels closest to the Father and are assigned to little ones (guardian angels?). Heb 1.14 - minister to those who inherit salvation.

Jesus' point is that if God has assigned his closest angels to watch out for these little ones indicating that he himself does not look down on them with contempt, how much more should we take up that role as well and look after these little ones?

***Seeking and saving the little ones (11-14):*** They are the focus of Jesus' redemptive ministry.

"Going astray" has a resonance of being led astray as a particular type sin emphasizes in the Scriptures. This would be the opposite of sin of a high hand. Being led astray or even caused to stumble is something that happens when a person is taught wrong by those in authority over them, e.g. He doesn't know any better and follows that way.

This sheep has gone astray and the shepherd goes out to find him; leaving all of the others. The importance of this sheep is found in the fact that the shepherd is willing to leave all of the others for this one.

If you want to be great in the kingdom, you must identify yourself with the ones with whom the King himself identifies. If you want to be on the inside group with the King, you must befriend those whom he befriends.

1. *Rearing Christian children is a tremendous kingdom responsibility.*
2. *Caring for the other little ones should be a major focus of the church.*