



## **Matthew 18:1–5**

18 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2 He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. 3 And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in

the kingdom of heaven. 5 And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

## **Reflection**

Ever since the Pharisees resolved to kill Jesus back in Matthew 12:14 opposition to him from the religious establishment has been steadily rising. Twice now, Jesus has predicted that he will soon suffer at their hands, be crucified and then be raised again. Jesus' time is running short and so he's spent a large part of it with his disciples over the course of chapters 14–17, teaching and preparing them to continue his ministry after he is gone. In Matthew 18–20 Jesus now teaches them about Christian community before heading to Jerusalem to die.

You'll remember that Matthew's gospel contains five extended speeches or discourses that Matthew has woven into the story of Jesus as the key teachings of Jesus. The first was the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5 to 7, next was the Missionary Discourse in Matthew chapter 10, then his Parabolic Discourse, made up of seven parables about the kingdom of heaven in Matthew 13. Now we come to his Discourse on the Church which extends from Matthew chapter 18 to the end of chapter 20. Much of these chapters are unique to Matthew. In them Jesus will teach us about how the church, the community of his followers, will witness to the reality of the presence of the kingdom of God down throughout the ages.

Jesus' Discourse on the Church begins with little children. The church and little children. Even if we were to stop right here, with this comparison we've already learnt much. Jesus is going to use little children to teach us about the church over the next few days.

Today's five verses contain a question in verse one, an illustration in verse two, and three teaching points in verses three, four and five. First the question from Jesus' disciples,

‘Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ (v. 1)

But instead of responding directly Jesus calls a little child to come to him. He then places the little child amongst them. As an

illustration. Jesus will use this little child to bring to life the three points he's going to make in the next three verses.

But first let's live in this scene for a moment. Jesus' disciples are asking him about greatness. They're his disciples, there were twelve tribes of Israel, there are twelve of them. They've left everything to follow him, made great sacrifices, and he's even given them power to heal and to cast out demons. There's ambition to greatness in us all, and these select men are asking about the greatest in the kingdom of God. Amongst them, Jesus places a street urchin; probably a little girl, to make his point even more strongly.

Now don't get me wrong, this child was certainly loved by someone. If not she

wouldn't have survived. That's because in the ancient world, children were only valued for the benefit they brought to their family. They had no rights or significance and were powerless in society. They were utterly dependant and barely worth noticing before their teenage years, and given that infant mortality rates were around 50% many of them would not ever be of any significance. Just a nuisance underfoot that probably wouldn't make it anyway.

With this little girl standing amongst them, Jesus says to them:

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (v. 3)

One. You want to know about greatness in the kingdom of heaven? Well let's start at the beginning, you won't even enter the kingdom of heaven unless you change and become like a little child. Ouch. Jesus is speaking to his disciples here. Unless you change and become like this little child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Utter dependency. Child-like humility. No possibility of advancing your own cause except through the resources of your parents. Utter dependency on your Heavenly Father. Here Jesus is teaching them about grace.

Two.

‘whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the king-

dom of heaven.’ (v. 4)

Standing amidst them is a shy, vulnerable child, unsure of herself, but trusting with clear eyes, ready to listen, to be loved and to love, to learn and grow. Being like her, says Jesus, is the path to greatness in the kingdom of heaven. Recognising your utter dependency on your heavenly Father, realising like that old hymn that ‘nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling.’ Trusting him, loving him, delighting in him with a childlike innocence and dependency, wanting one day to grow up and be like your Dad. That’s the path to greatness in the kingdom of heaven.<sup>1</sup>

Three.

---

1 N. T Wright, *Matthew for Everyone. Part 2, Chapters 16-28*, 2014, 28.



‘And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’ (v. 5)

With this statement Jesus turns his culture and our world on its head. The rights of infants and children are changed forever in this moment. ‘Treat them as you would treat me.’ In a society where children were only half-human until they reached puberty, where often newborn girls especially were thrown away at birth, in a society where the rights of children were non-existent, Jesus changes the course of the world forever with the words ‘whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’

One commentator, N T Wright, warns us particularly about this last verse. We like

to think we've come a long way since Jesus' day. And yet we can easily point to stinking, smouldering garbage heaps on the edge of South American cities where little children barely old enough to go to school are already streetwise. They know what to look for, things they can sell for few small coins to get a little food and drink. Or whole schools in Uganda where almost every child is an orphan because of the AIDS epidemic, and every single teacher has a class of over one hundred for the same reason. 'Treat them as you would treat me', says the son of God. And we are, aren't we?

And then there's rich, spoiled children growing up in the Western world, needing more electronic toys and gadgets to keep them amused, because to too many adults, chil-

dren are still just a nuisance. They disturb our organised adult world because they are real people. If they were toys or machines we could put them in a cupboard. But we can't. They have their own dignity, their own questions, their own future, their own unique identity. 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me', says Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

## **Think & Pray**

Take some time now to think deeply over Jesus' teaching this morning. Think about the comparison he draws between the church and little children. Think about the childlike dependency on our Heavenly Father that is essential not only in order to enter his kingdom but that also marks

<sup>2</sup> N. T Wright, *Matthew for Everyone. Part 2, Chapters 16-28*, 2014, 26-29.

out the path to greatness within it. Do you wake up every morning as a dependent child of God? Happy, joyful, trusting, wanting to make your Dad proud today, and wanting one day to grow up to be just like him?

And what part can you play in welcoming little children in our world? In treating them as we would treat Jesus? Is it teaching Scripture in schools or at Sunday School? Could it be sponsoring children through Christian organisations like Compassion? But not just sending them money, praying for them, writing to them, entering into relationship with them so that they might come to know Jesus and experience his love first hand. [www.compassion.com.au](http://www.compassion.com.au). Why not sign up right now? Or perhaps it's reducing the screen-time of your own

children, and replacing it with Mummy and Daddy time.

However you've been challenged by today's passage please close now by expressing your utter dependency on our Father in prayer. Tell him that you love him and that you need his help in everything today.