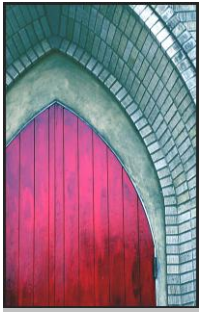


# "That the Next Generation May Know"

TEXT: MATTHEW 18.1-14



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## SOMEWHERE I BELONG

My freshman year of college, my church was 50 yards from my dorm room. I lived in the south wing on the second floor of a dorm on the southern edge of campus. In the 1980s the church had acquired property and built a building. When I was in school, church attendance was easily more than 50% college students. The church knew its vision included a focus on college students but for me trying to connect was difficult. I tried to get to know non-students from the church, but those attempts never developed. I was living on my own for the

first time ever, and though I was raised in a family in which church life was valued, I didn't have a clue about how to connect personally with this congregation. Now, I can see that this struggle to connect was at least 75% my fault. I had no idea how to see life from the perspective of anybody except a student who's meals were prepared for him, who's bathrooms were cleaned for him, and who had very little responsibility outside of making it to class getting stuff done. My selfish, ignorant assumption, was that the non-students in the church had no idea what my life was like.

This is why I often have conversations with students getting ready to graduate from high school about life in church post-high school. I like to say: "This will be a strange time for you, because churches often struggle to know what to do with young people once they're done with high school, and young people who have just finished high school often don't know what to do with the rest of the church." Before finishing high school, our places in the church are defined for us by our parents, our siblings, and even our friends. And once we've transitioned into 'real adulthood' (job, apartment/house, etc.), we define our own place. But in between it isn't well-defined.

This is a gross over-simplification of life in the church. Many of us would acknowledge that we struggle to know our place in this local church—regardless of age, gender, race, employment, marital status or any other demographic marker. We are not wired to view life by walking in someone else's shoes. Even in a room full of people, we can feel alone. Coming to church may be difficult, even painful. It's easy to look around and see many 'young families' and feel like there isn't anything here for you because that's not you. We can extrapolate this for all of us. The ages of your kids creates a structure of life that limits what you can do on a week-night. Where your house is located limits your availability. Balancing school and a job and decisions about your future takes enough mental and emotional space—how can you add to it? We approach our text, then, to ask: how does Jesus keep us here and help us connect?

## MATTHEW 18.1-14

<sup>1</sup>At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" <sup>2</sup>And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them <sup>3</sup>and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless

you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>5</sup>"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, <sup>6</sup>but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

<sup>7</sup>"Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! <sup>8</sup>And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. <sup>9</sup>And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

<sup>10</sup>"See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>12</sup>What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? <sup>13</sup>And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. <sup>14</sup>So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."

## "LIKE CHILDREN"

The disciples approach Jesus with a question: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"<sup>18.1</sup> Having experienced a barrage of top ten-lists for both the past year and the past decade, we might hear this as a simple enough question. We know, however, that the disciples had the habit of asking this question about themselves.<sup>Mk 10.35-45; Lk 9.46-48 22.24-30</sup> It's a question of status, of rank, of authority, of prestige.

Jesus' response is intriguing. First, he pulls a child into the discussion,<sup>18.2</sup> a move that would have grabbed everybody's attention. He then proceeds to answer a question not asked: "unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."<sup>18.3</sup> It's like the friend of mine who was taking a philosophy exam and after deciding he didn't like the question, he proceeded to cross off the question, write his own exam question, and answer that one instead. He received a B+ on the exam. Jesus sets aside the question about greatness, to challenge His closest followers with the more fundamental question: are their lives lived according to the rule of God?

The content of Jesus' answer is alarming. The disciples are thinking about greatness, Jesus wants to talk about the basics, and He points to a child. In the ancient world children were valued only in the promise to carry on the family name; as children they were viewed as weak, vulnerable, and without reason. Jesus says clearly: "unless you turn and become like children . . . Whoever humbles himself like this child . . ."<sup>18.3-4</sup>

Entering God's kingdom—living in submission to His rule over our lives—cannot be understood as a great career move or as

taking control of our lives and doing what's right. It is not a statement about returning to childhood innocence and playfulness. Entering the Kingdom begins (humanly speaking) by acknowledging our weakness and vulnerability. Entering the kingdom comes through a declaration of need. But this need runs deep for us. On our own, we are sinful, and as one theologian has commented, sin is not simply a list of things we've done wrong; its' anarchy against our Creator. Even in the face of need, we turn around in stubborn rebellion. Jesus calls us to humble ourselves, and the promise of Scripture over and over again is that as we humble ourselves before God, He promises to answer us.<sup>Ps 51.17; Lk14.11; Jc 4.6, 10</sup> This is the Gospel—the good news that Jesus proclaims.

Do you see the impact of Jesus' response on us, living together as a part of a church? It's like the famous football coach who, after his young team started win and gain notoriety, started training camp by holding up a football and saying: "Gentlemen, this is a football." Jesus won't let us walk away from what is most fundamental. The disciples ask a question of comparison, of division. Jesus' answer is what holds us together. Honesty before God and before one another must repeatedly drive us to the place of knowing that we have no eternal standing apart from God's grace meeting us in our need. God uses our awareness of our absolute need to bring us to Himself; it's this same need that holds us together.

## “ONE OF THESE”

As Jesus continues to teach, He outlines the impact of the unifying power of the Gospel in a community of His followers, of those who take the name Christian. In verses 5 through 14, Jesus builds on this call to humility with 3 implications:

**RECEIVE** First, He offers a test to his followers. Those who humble themselves will be those who receive “one such child” in His name.<sup>18.5</sup> He's drawing on the thought of hospitality—of making room for the weak, the helpless, and the vulnerable in our lives, as opposed to simply ignoring their existence. With this comes a serious warning to those who would seek to do harm to even the most 'insignificant' who believe in Him.<sup>18.6</sup> If you could choose between facing the consequences of leading one of God's little ones astray or drowning by being tied to a large rock, you would choose the water death every time.

There are two basic questions for us to consider. First, is there room in your life for those who are deemed insignificant? In other words, is there time in your day, week, or month for children? Second, do you know that you're being watched? Putting it another way, do you know that your actions may have repercussions that far exceed what you can see? These are community questions rooted in Jesus' call to humble ourselves like children.

**FIGHT** Jesus continues by picking up this theme of sin – or “temptations to sin”<sup>18.7</sup> He acknowledges they are inevitable, that the curse of this world is that we will always know the possibility of being drawn back into the anarchy of our sin. Jesus then turns his attention directly to the sin of His followers and commands us to fight against sin in our lives.<sup>18.8-9</sup> Jesus engages in exaggeration here (hyperbole), but I don't want to tone down his words.

On the heels of speaking of the danger of leading others into sin, Jesus asks each of us to consider our own lives. If there are things in your life that are significant to causing you to sin, cut them off and throw them away. This may mean getting rid of

the internet at home. It may mean simplifying your cell phone to limit your features. It may mean getting rid of credit cards. And know that we can be excellent at justifying our reasons for hanging on to many things which do us harm.

**CHASE** Jesus concludes this portion of the text by drawing our attention to the heart of God for those who are his—both to protect and to seek out. Volumes have been written on verse 10 and the idea of 'guardian angels.' Angels are real, they are at work in this world, and they serve the will of God for His people.<sup>Ps 91.11-12; Heb 1.14</sup> In context, we understand that this is a statement regarding the work of God in the preservation of those who are His. Jesus tells a brief parable to highlight this preserving work of God. He appeals to the practical knowledge of the shepherd, who would have chased hundreds of sheep as they strayed from their flock. The point of course is NOT that he's unhappy with those who didn't wander off, but rather that there is rejoicing when the lost sheep is found. God's will is that those who are His would not be lost, no matter how far they may wander.<sup>Jn 6.35-40; Jn10.27-30</sup>

Do you look down on those who are younger than you? What is it for you that makes you want to keep your distance? Starting with what's obvious, coming up with a list is easy: clothes, music, hair cut, hair color, manners, slang, and so on. And that's the 'little ones' who are sticking around! What about those who wander off? Jesus says that the heart of God is especially toward those who wonder off. The implication is that this would be our stance as well.

## THE NEXT GENERATION

This text has been on my mind for most of the past month. The unifying theme of these 14 verses is the way Jesus keeps returning to talking about children/'little ones'.<sup>18.2, 3, 5, 6, 10, 14</sup> There is an intentional vagueness in Jesus' words—he's probably talking about both young children who come to faith in Him<sup>18.6</sup> but also any who are young in the faith – note “one such child.”<sup>18.5</sup> The focus of this text is upon the extension of the rule of God in the lives the generations who will follow us.

With the Gospel as our foundation, for Oak Hills, the call goes out to receive “one such child.” As we remember when we celebrate baptism, we have a responsibility as a church family to the youngest among us. Make time and space in your life to get to know the children around you. But this extends beyond children—to any who follow behind us in faith no matter what their age. If you are a believer, there is a place for you.

Central to this call, though, is for each of us to stand up against sin in our lives. Jesus doesn't allow us to get away with blaming our culture, the media, or rock music for the challenges our kids face. What those who follow behind us need from us, possibly more than anything else is to see us give priority to the sanctifying work of Jesus in us. Pursue the Lord yourself—devote yourself to understanding His word, and to prayer. God will honor that and use that in the lives of others.

Know also, that there will always be a tendency among the generations that follow to wander away. This is nothing new, and it is not a simple issue of teenage rebellion. Parents, don't give up on your kids—your prayers and tears do not go unnoticed. Church family, don't give up on those who wander away from faith. Pray. Listen. Speak as you can. And for those who wander, the Shepherd who is pursuing you is Jesus Himself. The hope that all of us have is that we are but children, and it is the grace of our Father in Heaven that promises eternity.