

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

MATTHEW 18:1-14

THE main purport of the King, in the period covered by this last division of Matthew, was not that of presenting His Kingdom to the outside world as He had done before, nor that of demonstrating His power to the outside world; it was rather that of gathering His disciples about Himself, and instructing them carefully, in view of His coming Passion. His public ministry continued. The multitudes came to Him with need, and He always turned to them graciously. He never refused to respond to the approach of the multitude even though He was devoting Himself to this training of His own.

This chapter records instructions which our Lord gave to these disciples in view of the work that lay before them.

It falls into two parts:

The Master's instruction,

- First concerning greatness,
- Secondly concerning forgiveness.

The first part was His answer to their question "**Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?**" Then He merged His teaching concerning greatness, into His teaching concerning forgiveness, the attitude of His people towards wrongdoing. Our present study is concerned with the first of these teachings, that concerning greatness.

Now, in order that we may understand our Lord's teaching, let us consider it:

- First, by the examination of its method;
- Secondly, and principally, by the consideration of the teaching itself.

Our Lord made His answer clear and definite, precise and immediate; but He recognized that in the question asked there were many other matters involved.

He dealt with them, leading these men a great deal farther than they expected He would lead them, when they asked their question.

We will first notice the method of this section, and the method of our Lord's answer to His disciples' question. **"At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"**

What did this question mean? It is an indication of the fact that these people were thinking about our Lord's teaching, and they were greatly puzzled by all the new things He was saying to them about the Kingdom. They had looked for the Kingdom, with its gradations from King, through officers of State, down to the common level of the people; the ordinary human ideal of a kingdom, which is so utterly and absolutely false. They had looked for a King and a Kingdom upon the pattern of material purposes and ideals. They had expected Him presently to assert Himself in the midst of the age in which He lived, to break the power of Rome, and to re-establish the throne of David in Jerusalem; to appoint Peter in all probability as Prime Minister that was the natural order of things and the other apostles to all the other offices of State.

He had said to them, Your King is going to Jerusalem to suffer, to be murdered, and to rise again. They said, "Who then is greatest?" All the hopes of Himself that they had been cherishing, had turned into dust, and they stood in the midst of the wreckage of their own ideals, and hopes, and aspirations.

They may not have been personally seeking for office, although there evidently was a consciousness that they had lost the chance of office. This is a greater question than it appears, for as a matter of fact the actual word is, **"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"** What they really asked was, What is the condition of greatness in Thy Kingdom? They said in effect; Greatness in our kingdom is manifested by some high office, dignity issues in notoriety. If you rob us of our ideals, what is Thy ideal of greatness? In consequence of His strange prediction of the Cross they were completely baffled and perplexed.

Let us now consider Christ's answer, observing carefully His method.

We have first of all the action; **"And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them."**

We miss all the poetry of this if we do not see the actual scene in Galilee. Behold the King! We should never have taken Him for the King if we had been tourists through that district, and passed by while He was talking to those men. There was no beauty that material eyes, seeing, should desire Him. He wore a plain seamless robe woven from the top throughout; a home-made garment. But home-made garments are very beautiful when love's fingers have made them; and love made that robe for Jesus.

It was perfectly evident that He was a Man of the people, a carpenter. Round about Him we see these men, for the most part young fishermen. They were men of infinite capacity, men capable of splendid daring, yet frail, fickle, feeble, and often faint-hearted. These men asked this Man this question, a perfectly proper and pertinent question. In all likelihood some Hebrew lad was playing near, and Christ called him, and he came, and Jesus put him in the midst of these men. That is the first fact of His answer.

Then, after this action, came the answer direct. There was a kindly satire about the speech of Jesus, but His satire never wounded men. He said, You want to know what is the law of greatness. You must get down there, to the level of that boy, before you get in at all; **“Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”** But if you be as little as the child, **“the same is the greatest.”**

He meant first that everybody is great inside; there are no little souls inside the Kingdom. Thus He swept away any incipient desire for caste, and class, and gradation, that lurked in their question. He had said on another occasion, **“Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”** Christ had a majestic conception of His own Kingdom. That was His answer direct.

Now notice that He proceeded from that point to bring out of His answer involved truths, and to apply them.

First, He applied practical tests to these men. **“And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth Me: But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.”**

There seems at first sight to be a lack of continuity in these words, but as a matter of fact there is a most intimate connection. If we are like the child we shall receive the child. A man to be successful in the Sunday school or the day-school, must have the child-heart. Only those who lack the child-heart themselves could cause the child to stumble. Of such the King declared, **“it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.”**

The thick millstone, not the millstone at which the two women ground, but the great upper millstone that had to be turned by a beast of burden. They knew what He meant. Put that round about his neck, and drown him in the depth of the sea. “It is profitable for him;” he will make more in the economy of God out of such drowning, than out of being a stumbling-block in the way of a child.

Then followed His resulting warning. **“Woe unto the world . . . Woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!”**

Here was a curious change of application. He was talking about offences coming to some one else, and then He said, **“If thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee,”** by which He meant to say that the man who causes the stumbling-block becomes a stumblingblock to himself, and if we destroy a child we destroy ourselves. So He solemnly warned them.

Now let us more particularly examine this, in order that we may have the teaching of it for ourselves.

What was this that Jesus said and did when He took the child and set it in their midst? He gave us the type of character in His Kingdom, and of such as may enter that Kingdom. No man has ever entered the Kingdom of God who has not taken up this place, and come to the level of a little child, which is the level of imperfection, of simplicity, of submissiveness.

It is the level of imperfection.

Perhaps that is where most men stumble. The little child is the emblem of imperfection, waiting for correction and instruction, in order to development. No man can enter the Kingdom except upon this level. Jesus Christ did not say, in order to enter My Kingdom you must be perfect. When we have entered He will say as one of the severest things, **“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father . . . is perfect.”** But the condition for entrance is imperfection. That does not mean that the condition for coming in is hopeless imperfection. A little child is not forevermore troubling about imperfection. The child subconsciously knows it, and in the knowledge of its imperfection yields itself to instruction, and correction, if it have a true child nature.

It is the level of simplicity.

In the child we have all the things that are elemental. Complexity is not yet. All the powers of its being express themselves freely, readily, naturally; there is no guile.

But the final thing is that the child is plastic, submissive.

It was a Roman Catholic Prelate who said, Give me the children until they are seven, I care not what you do after. It is perfectly true. A little child is always plastic. There may be a good deal of inherited sin in the child, but give the child its opportunity, it is submissive, and yields to the touch of our hand. All this is for us, and it is fearfully solemn and searching for any who have children in the home, or who teach them in the schools. The little children will bear our impress to the end of their lives, and through eternity.

What, then, did He say to these men who wanted to know what was the condition of greatness in His Kingdom? **“Except ye be converted, and become as little children.”** He was stating a general principle, that a man must turn back to that.

Mark the recognition that when the child leaves childhood, and enters upon its youth and manhood, these very things pass and fail; and therefore He said, You must get back again to that condition of imperfection, and simplicity and submissiveness; if you will humble yourself to that, then you will realize the ideal of greatness.

But now, following along this line of application, let us look at the practical tests. The child-heart receives the child, and the being who has lost the child-heart will offend the child.

Now while our Lord makes these statements and they become tests, they are not tests only; they are words of terrific meaning and importance, words full of comfort and encouragement. Do you know what it is to receive a little child?

Do you know what it is to take a child into your heart and life in Christian sympathy? In the moment you of the child-heart receive a little child, you receive to yourself the Christ Himself. **“Whoso shall receive one such little child in My name receiveth Me.”**

Offend that little child and you offend Him. By comparison **“it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.”**

He was teaching His disciples by that which is dear to God’s heart, a child; and He was teaching them that they could test their own spirit by their relation to the child.

And then it seems as though the eyes of the Master, from that moment, looked on down the centuries **“Woe unto the world”** and the first woe of that verse, by its setting, is evidently not the woe of a curse, but the woe of a great lamentation.

“Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!”

The second woe is the same, but it has taken on the nature of a curse.

- First Christ’s pity for the world,
- Then Christ’s pronouncement of punishment upon men by whom the offences come.

He traced the woes of the world to those from whom they proceed, such as cause stumbling and offence; and gathering up the world’s sorrow, He fastened it upon the head of the man that causes it.

In it we see the infinite equity and justice of Christ. That is His attitude to-day.

- Woe to the city where the offences come! That is a lamentation.
- Woe to the men from whom they come! That is a fiery word, burning with anger.

Thus He gathered up into the economy of His ultimate dealings with men, all the woes of the race, and fixed them upon the men that have been the cause of them. The spirit that receives a child and will not offend it, is the spirit that will not put a stumbling-block in the way of the world.

The man who offends a child is the man who wounds the world.

Let there be no softening of these words of Jesus. He talks about the age-abiding fire, the Gehenna of fire, always burning, where refuse is flung. That is the place for the man who lacks the child-heart. He will be treated in the economy of God as outside the city, fit only for the rubbish heap. So there rings through this great speech of Jesus His tenderness and His thunder.

What is the ultimate instruction? He came back again to the child.

Maybe he looked once again on the boy who stood there wondering at the words which, perhaps, he did not understand at all more occupied with the loveliness of the face of the One Who was uttering them and He said, **“Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones.”**

He gave them three reasons.

First of all, **“That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.”**

The children have angels who behold the face of the Father, and who minister to them, and Jesus said, to these men who were going to be in His Kingdom, and who wanted to know about greatness; Do not forget that the angels do not despise the children.

They watch them and guard them, and stand in heaven’s Court for them. The angels are all ministering spirits, sent forth to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation. And if you have wandered from the tender Fatherhood of God, your angel is still following you, and if, without sound or sigh, you turn back again to God, all the angels will join in the joy of that angel who announces your turning, because he has watched you so long. The little ones have angels waiting.

But that is not the highest reason for not despising them. He moved on to a higher level. In the Revised Version verse eleven is omitted, but the truth is not omitted. The revisers felt it was out of place here, and ought to be omitted!

“For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost.”

Even though we miss that, the next statement is the same thing; **“How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that He find it . . . he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which were not gone astray.”**

So if we ask, What about the inherited sin of the child? The Shepherd came to seek such. He was still talking about a child, so that another reason we are not to despise a child, is the fact that He has come to find the little child.

Once again, there is yet a mightier reason than the reason of angel ministry, and the reason of the Son’s interest and mission; **“Even so”** as angels are interested, as the Son is interested **“Even so, it is not the will of your Father . . . that one of these little ones should perish.”**

If you despise a little child, then you are against the angels, you are against the Son of God, you are against the Eternal Father. Oh the false measurements of greatness!

A man is sometimes thought great because of his notoriety. It is often a more unpleasant word but a truer word than popularity.

Men sometimes measure greatness by a man's power to manage other men and reign over them. But there is another word for that tyranny.

What is Christ's standard?

Begin with the last thing and move backwards.

- Despise not a child,
- Offend not a child,
- Receive a child.

What is the condition for all that? Be like a child, and when you become like a child, you become great.

- To despise a child is to be out of harmony with the angels, the Son, and the Father.
- To offend a child is to make it profitable not to be.
- To receive a child is to entertain Jesus Christ.
- To be like a child is to be great.

As we listen to the King talking to His disciples and to us, we see how close heaven and hell are to each other!

In the words of His lips He illuminates for us the infinite spaces, and we see the glories of God's own heaven; and in another moment, He lights for us the lurid depths of the underworld, and of judgment and punishment! May God give us the heart of a child! May God help us to put upon our own ambition the measurement of the little child.

~ end of chapter 51 ~

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