

Chapter 72: Humility like a Child

Matthew 18:1–9

In the last two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, the looming shadow of the cross of Jesus has come more into focus. Whereas earlier Jesus taught about the kingdom, healed people, and sparred with religious leaders, now Jesus' attention becomes fixed on the sufferings that he must endure at Jerusalem. As we enter a new chapter, Jesus begins to unpack the full meaning of going to the cross, even though he does not explicitly mention his sufferings throughout this chapter. In this first section within Matthew 18, Jesus redefines greatness in the kingdom of heaven as humility, for *our great King humbled himself even by death on a cross*.

Redefining Greatness (Matt. 18:1–4)

Most commentators see the entirety of Matthew 18 as a tightly integrated whole, dealing with various subjects related to sin and forgiveness.¹ Furthermore, many commentators acknowledge the difficulty of dividing the chapter into subdivisions, with a variety of proposals to mark off different sections within the overall logic of the chapter. As we begin our study of Matthew 18, we must do so by recognizing that the first passage we will study within the chapter could either be shortened or lengthened while retaining thematic continuity.

To begin, then, Matthew transitions into this chapter by the phrase “at that time,” or, more literally, “at that hour” (v. 1a). This indicates a close connection in *time*, and, as Hendriksen also notes, there may additionally be “a *material or thought* connection” related to the seeming ascendancy of Peter's role among the disciples in the last few chapters.² Beyond Peter, Jesus had selected only James and John to accompany him and Peter up the mountain to witness the transfiguration, and Jesus forbade the three disciples from telling the other nine disciples what had happened during the time that they were away (Matt. 17:9).³

Beyond these general issues that may have contributed to hurt feelings and defensiveness within the Twelve, Matthew does not record the specific “strains and tensions” that led to this particular “hour,” the disciples get to a point where they ask, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

¹ e.g., France writes, “The theme of this discourse is not so much individual discipleship (though several of the examples and instructions are expressed in the singular) as the corporate life of those who are joined by their common commitment as disciples, with special attention being given to the strains and tensions to which such a life is exposed through self-concern and lack of care for fellow disciples, through bad examples and errant behavior, and through an unwillingness to forgive as we have been forgiven.” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 672.)

² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 684–85.

³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 272–73.

(v. 1b). More literally, the disciples ask, “Who, then, is greater in the kingdom of heaven?” The word “then” may suggest a certain exasperation, where the disciples are appealing to Jesus after a long conversation, hoping that their Master will settle the argument.⁴ Additionally, Lenski observes that “the comparative ‘greater’” implies “that all of the Twelve would be great, yet some would be greater than the rest.”⁵

Jesus’ response is astonishing on two fronts. First, Jesus calls to himself a child within a culture (unlike ours) where the status of children was quite low.⁶ The disciples asked about greatness and Jesus calls to himself a child whom no one would recognize as great in the world. Second, Jesus not only points to the child as representative of greatness, he shifts the conversation into a warning to the disciples that they might miss out on the kingdom altogether, to say nothing of failing to attain greatness in the kingdom:⁷ “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3).⁸ France notes the severity of Jesus’ words: “To abandon human thoughts of personal status and to accept or even seek a place at the bottom of the pecking order implies as radical a change of orientation as our term ‘conversion’ involves.”⁹

Specifically, Jesus says that, far from seeking greatness, his disciples must instead seek to *humble* themselves like the child. On through through humility can one attain to being the “greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (v. 4). Blomberg is correct when he writes, “This humility cannot be a subjective attitude (children rarely *act* humbly) but an objective state (children do depend almost entirely on the adult world for their protection and provision).”¹⁰ Jesus’ words, then, represent a stunning paradox, since the kind of humility that Jesus mentions “makes no claims, insists on no rights, comes with no demands, but bows lowly and humbly under the Lord’s will and Word, yields completely to him, and is happy and content in doing that.”¹¹ In what sense can we consider that to be greatness?

Receiving a Child (Matt. 18:5–6)

At this point, Jesus expands the conversation beyond individual salvation and individual greatness. That is, Jesus intends to show how the humility he demands acts in relation to other people. First, Jesus states that “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” (v. 5). To receive such a child in the name of Jesus is fundamentally an act of faith. No upwardly mobile person would seek to “receive” a child, because serving and caring for a child contributes nothing to the

⁴ “While the question is posed in general terms, the preoccupation of the disciples with their own greatness is noted in 17:19; 20:20–21.” (Osborne, *Matthew*, 668.)

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 678.

⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 460.

⁷ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 273.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 680.

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 678.

¹⁰ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 273.

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 683.

person's status in the eyes of the world.¹² Only someone who serves Jesus and learns to value what Jesus values would care for a child, since there is no obvious *worldly* reason to do so.

Second, Jesus offers a contrasting warning about the one who “causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin” (v. 6a). Here, Jesus indicates that he is speaking of more than young children by speaking of “those little ones who *believe in me*.” Thus, Jesus is talking about those who trust in him, so that children are included in Jesus' meaning, but also all those who are depending on Jesus by faith *like* children.¹³

Additionally, the phrase “causes...to sin” here somewhat obscures that this is the word σκανδαλίζω (*skandalizō*), related to the noun σκάνδαλον (*skandalon*) that Jesus spoke about as the “stumbling-block/hindrances” that Peter represented when he forbade Jesus from suffering (Matt. 16:23), and that Jesus sought to avoid by paying the two-drachma tax (Matt. 17:27). The word would certainly include the idea of leaving someone into sin, but France notes that this word may also encompass ways in which “their life and development as disciples may equally be damaged by discouragement or unfair criticism, by a lack of pastoral care, or by the failure to forgive which will be highlighted in vv. 21–35.”¹⁴ In other words, while the disciples are asking about which one(s) of them might ascend higher than the others, Jesus warns about the danger of even the least of his disciples behind. Jesus describes this danger in horrifying terms: “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” (v. 6b).

Radical Vigilance (Matt. 18:7–9)

Jesus continues to warn against any σκανδαλίζω/σκάνδαλον (stumbling block/hindrances) in the next section by writing, “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!” (v. 7). The word “woe” announces a “proclamation of judgment” coming against those who cause stumbling to the little ones who have faith in Jesus.¹⁵ Jesus acknowledges that stumbling blocks must necessarily come into the world, but that the one by whom those stumbling blocks will incur severe wrath. In the same way, Jesus has already told his disciples that he “must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things” (v. 21); however, Jesus will later say, “The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born” (Matt. 26:24).

Thus, Jesus urges outright vigilance against ever being the cause of someone else's stumbling:

¹² Lenski writes, “This ‘me’ refers to the way in which the child is received, to the ὄνομα [*onoma*, ‘name’] of Jesus on which the act rests. And here all its spiritual greatness appears. The act is as great as Jesus himself who is the King of the kingdom. If it could be made a visible deed that the glorious Son of God and Savior of the world was being tendered a grand reception, the headlines of all the daily papers would appear in the heaviest type; but since it is invisible, it is covered with the humble mantle of faith, and its greatness will not appear until the judgment day (25:40, ‘unto me’).” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 685.)

¹³ So Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 685; and Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 462.

¹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 681–82.

¹⁵ Carson, “Matthew,” 452.

“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. 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” (vv. 8–9). Jesus had said something almost identical in the Sermon on the Mount to advocate for outright vigilance against the sin of lust (Matt. 5:29–30). In that passage as well as this one, it is a mistaken approach to dismiss Jesus’ words either by insisting that we cannot *interpret* Jesus’ words literally, or by insisting that Jesus intends for us literally *apply* his words by mutilating our bodies. Instead, we must recognize that the *literal* sense of Jesus’ words is as hyperbole that urges us to do whatever it takes to avoid sin. What Jesus wants us to recognize is that cutting off our limbs or gouging out our eyes will not amputate sin from our souls. What we need is what these “little ones” have: faith in Jesus for salvation and for preservation in our way. Jesus does not actually want us to mutilate *our* bodies. On the contrary, we need to believe in our Savior who submitted his body to be once mutilated on the cross for us.¹⁶

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think may have led to the disciples’ question about greatness in the kingdom of heaven (v. 1)? How does Jesus’ calling to himself a child defy the disciples’ expectations about greatness (v. 2)? What about the failure to “turn and become like children” is so egregious that it could keep the disciples from the kingdom (v. 3)? What about humbling oneself like a child qualifies someone for greatness in the kingdom of heaven (v. 4)?
2. What does Jesus mean when he says that “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” (v. 5)? What is the connection between the little child and Jesus? Why does God love children so much? How does our culture view children? What does it mean to cause a little one who believes in Jesus to stumble (v. 6)? Where else does Jesus give such a gruesome warning as he does here? Why do you think this is the case?
3. What does the word “woe” signify (v. 7a)? Why does Jesus acknowledge that stumbling blocks (ESV: “temptations to sin”) must come (v. 7b)? Why does the one who causes those stumbling blocks face such serious judgment (v. 7c)? What kind of sin is Jesus warning us to be so vigilant about in vv. 8–9? How should we interpret Jesus’ words about bodily mutilation? How should we apply Jesus’ words about bodily mutilation?
4. Why does greatness in the kingdom of heaven come through humility? How does humility like a little child conform us to the image of our great Savior? How did he humble himself (Phil. 2:8)? What exactly about humility does the One who existed in the form of God prize it so much that he took upon himself the form of a servant? How does this teach us about humility for our lives? What is one area where your pride is keeping you from serving others in humility?

¹⁶ For an extended discussion of this summary of how to interpret and apply these instructions of Jesus, see Jacob Gerber, “Does Jesus Really Want Me to Gouge Out My Eye or Cut off My Hand? The Literal Sense of Matthew 5:29–30,” April 12, 2022. <<https://www.twopathways.org/p/does-jesus-really-want-me-to-gouge>>.