

## Jesus and Children

Matthew 18:1-14

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### Matthew 18:1-14

**1** At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" **2** He called a little child and had him stand among them. **3** And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. **4** Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

**5** "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. **6** But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

**7** "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! **8** 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 maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. **9** And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

**10** "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

**12** "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? **13** And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. **14** In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

### Introduction - Jesus and Children

This morning I am going to speak about the theme: Jesus and Children. It might surprise you, that while we will have some moments of levity (because of the funny things children do), we will also have some moments of challenge, some moments of warning, and lastly some words of hope.

To get us in the mood about children I want to begin with some quotes about children:

You can learn many things from children. How much patience you have, for instance. ~Franklin P. Jones

In America there are two classes of travel - first class, and with children.  
~Robert Benchley

A characteristic of the normal child is he doesn't act that way very often.  
~Author Unknown

Children are one third of our population and all of our future.

Even when freshly washed and relieved of all obvious confections, children tend to be sticky. ~Fran Lebowitz

Children are unpredictable. You never know what inconsistency they're going to catch you in next. ~Franklin P. Jones

There was never a child so lovely but his mother was glad to get him to sleep. ~Ralph Waldo Emerson

A rose can say "I love you,"  
orchids can enthrall,  
but a weed bouquet in a chubby fist,  
yes, that says it all. ~Author Unknown

There is something very endearing about children! They capture us. They have a vitality in life. And they don't have any filters either! They do and say what's on their minds. Children can teach us a lot about the kingdom of heaven. And we are going to look at that this morning.

Back in June, Cornerstone hosted more than 400 children for Vacation Bible School (VBS). During that week we learned about some wonderful truth through the theme: "Isn't God Creative!" I'd like to give a "shout out" to Rachelle Brown our coordinator of VBS, and to Bonny Linder, our Dir. of Children's Ministry here at Cornerstone. Together they put on a wonderful week of learning for the children of our church. It was exciting to see many generations coming together to share in the gospel together.

During VBS we taught the children: a) that God he created us with a special design, b) that he saves us with his work on the cross, c) that protects us from the devil, and also d) that he has designed us to certain specific ways in his kingdom. The children were learning about our God through specific concrete examples in creation.

One of my favorite moments was when we had a real-life porcupine on in the room with 200 children. This animal helped demonstrate how God gives us special protection. Children respond very well to concrete examples.

At the same time, I've also begun working on my doctorate of ministry in family ministry. Much of my reading during the month of May and June centered on the issue of children's spiritual formation. I must say that I was very interested in many of the themes that came out in the literature on children's spiritual formation. Children have such a tremendous capacity to be engaging with God. To be in a word, spiritual. And part of my burden for this message is to help us to value children, that we see that they are members and partakers of the family of God. They are valued in the kingdom of God and that we as adults share grace with them. We as disciples of Jesus, have the responsibility to shepherd and nurture them as children of the church.

The Bible speaks a fair a bit about children. First off, there are all kinds of things such as the "begats" of the Bible. Every character in the bible was once a child. One person once said, "a new baby is God's confirmation that the world should go on."

There are lots of examples of children in the Bible. There's Isaac who was a willing sacrifice. There's Miriam, Moses' older sister who plays an influential role in securing Moses' safety. There's Samuel, the boy prophet. There is David, who was too young to go to battle and yet bested Goliath. Josiah, who became king at age 8. And then there's also the servant girl of Namaan who had the boldness to speak up to her master and report that a prophet in Israel could cure his leprosy.

The Bible speaks about children as a blessing. The Bible says "blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them" (Psalm 127). I know that when I go out in public with my seven children people usually make some kind of comment. If they don't say "well are you blessed!" they usually say, "you should have your hands full." Yes, "that's true," I reply, "but we certainly have our hearts full."

The Old Testament speaks about the preciousness of children by condemning child sacrifice and by directing Israel to care for the widow and the orphan—those who need special help raising their children and those children who are otherwise alone and abandoned and need protection. The New Testament church demonstrates this love for children by rescuing children from infanticide throughout the Roman Empire. In addition, the Bible speaks about training children in Proverbs, Deuteronomy, and Ephesians—just to name a few.

Here in today's passage we have the very words of our Master and Savior Jesus addressing the subject of children. Let's walk through the passage together:

Look with me at verse 1-4 which form the context of Jesus' words.

**1** At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in

the kingdom of heaven?”

**2** He called a little child and had him stand among them. **3** And he said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. **4** Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

**POINT ONE--HUMBLE YOURSELF LIKE A CHILD** (verse 1-4)

It’s interesting that in these first two verses Matthew, the gospel writer, is pointing out the contrast between Jesus and his disciples. The word for “greatest” is **MEGA**, as in Megatron, Mega-mall, Mega-church, and MEGA-Mind. In other words, the disciples have asked “who is the MEGA-disciple in the kingdom?” Instead, Jesus looks to the **MICRO**-disciple, the child.

Jesus tells his followers that they need to change and be like a little child. He continues, “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven!” So you asked about being the greatest? If that’s your quest, you’re headed in the wrong direction entirely. The destination for which you’ve purchased tickets don’t value greatness. In fact, a little child, on Jesus’ kingdom standards is the greatest!

Now in saying these things, Jesus is not saying that all children at all times are good and are the final model of mature behavior. He knows the nature of children. He knows that children have a fallen nature, that they are a mixture of good and bad. He knows that they come preprogrammed to lie or steal (and more!). No one ever has to teach a child how to claim, “MINE!”

One minute they are smiling like cherubs, the next they are fighting like cats and dogs. One minute they astound us with deep altruism and compassion, the next minute they are shouting, “MINE!” Perhaps you’ve heard a child’s rules of what’s mine.

1. If I like it, it’s mine.
2. If it’s in my hand, it’s mine.
3. If I can take it from you, it’s mine.
4. If I had it a little while ago, it’s mine.
5. If it’s mine, it must never appear to be yours in any way.
6. If I’m doing or building something, all the pieces are mine.
7. If it looks just like mine, it’s mine.
8. If I saw it first, it’s mine.
9. If you are playing with something and you put it down, it automatically becomes mine.
10. If it’s broken, it’s yours.

Deb Lawrence, Missionary to the Philippines with SEND International, quoted in Prokope, November/December, 1992, p. 3.

So what does Jesus want us to see and imitate in children? That children have a humble place in life. That they are not working so hard to strive for the top and do the best and become famous. Jesus selects a small child and tells us whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

In contrast to the religious leaders who are **independent, religious and proud**, Jesus values the perspective of children who are **dependent, trusting and humble**. Which one of these approaches best describes you today?

Jesus' word to you this morning is that you need to humble yourself and become like a little child. With child-like faith, receive from your heavenly father the good that is promised you and know that is good enough. God your heavenly Father has adopted you and as a result you do not need to strive for the top or climb up the ladder of success (which is usually against the wrong wall anyway!) You have the freedom to be who God made you to be and in humility explore the world around you.

One person once said that to adults there are 7 wonders of the world, but to children there are 7 million! Through the eyes of a child we will see more of the wonderful things God is doing all the time.

Through the gospel we have been included in God's blessings and made his children. Amen? Do you know that you are God's child today?

**POINT TWO—WELCOME AND PROTECT CHILDREN**—“whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.” (verses 5-9)

There is an interesting question about the subject of these remaining verses from verse 5 through to verse 14. The question is whether Jesus means “children” in the next verses or “all disciples” since he has asked all disciples to be like children. So when he says, “whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name” does he mean welcoming another believer no matter who they are? Or specifically children?

Commentators are divided about this question. In fact, John Calvin takes the view that Jesus is referring to all believers. Others point out that Jesus is speaking about vulnerable people within the kingdom thus it cannot be all believers everywhere, but some specific subset. Therefore, some have said that Jesus is now addressing all believers who are lowly believers, or vulnerable believers. Even if Jesus is speaking about lowly (or vulnerable) believers than just children when he says, “little ones,” children are the most vulnerable of people and therefore are included within this second view. In the end I think it easiest to interpret if we have children in view. For the remainder of this passage I'm going to address the issue of children exclusively although this passage could be applied more broadly. I would apply all

my comments to children who are little children or students or school age through HS. All minors.

Jesus, therefore, says these words, “whoever welcomes a little child in my name welcomes me.” A funny story is told about a group of expecting fathers welcoming children:

These expecting fathers were in a waiting room, while their wives were in the process of delivering babies. A nurse came in and announced to one man that his wife had just given birth to twins. “That’s quite a coincidence” he responded, “I play for the Minnesota Twins!” A few minutes later another nurse came in and announced to another man that he was the father of triplets. “That’s amazing,” he exclaimed, “I work for the 3M company.” ...At that point, a third man slipped off his chair and lay down on the floor. Somebody asked him if he was feeling ill. “No,” he responded, “I happen to work for the 7-up company!”

Well, welcoming children doesn’t necessarily mean having multiples! But it does mean that we make room for them in our lives. Any way that we welcome children, whether into our home or in public places fulfills this verse.

Do you want to welcome Jesus? Then welcome a child in his name.

- If you are a parent, know that every time you welcome a question, or hear a request you are welcoming a child in Jesus name.
- Every time you welcome a child through birth, adoption, or foster care, you welcome Jesus.
- Each time you greet and talk to a child here at church or out in public you are welcoming Jesus.

I want to encourage you, that even if you are not particularly gifted at ministry to children, you too can participate in welcoming children. I want to encourage you to go eyeball to eyeball with little children. It helps to get level with them.

When you talk to them, take the time to really listen. Ask them about their world. Enter into the process of the way that they are thinking. I assure you it will be interesting!

- Each time you call a grandchild or spend special time to bless them, you welcome Jesus.
- Each time you serve in children’s ministry or student ministry. You allow Jesus to have more involvement in your life.
- When we care for, listen to and be present for children, we are making space of Christ to be present in our lives.

Isn’t that the way it is with so many things in life and ministry? When we give we receive.

Now, not only is there a blessing, but there is also a warning. On the contrary, (v. 6) “if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin (be scandalized), it would be better to have a large millstone tied around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matthew 18:6)

Did you hear that? That’s kind of a rated-R scene there, isn’t it? This kind of thing happens in bad movies. Why is Jesus using such vaulted language to talk about protecting children? Because Jesus cares very deeply about children.

Jesus knows that the world can be a rough place for children. At his birth, the entire vicinity of Bethlehem lost all it’s children 2 years old and younger in Herod’s mad search for the Messiah. He gives this warning because children represent the most vulnerable strata of society.

Sadly, two thousand years later, the world is still hostile to children. Nowhere is this more dramatic than in the recent news about the Casey Anthony verdict. While the public has clearly concluded that she is guilty of murder, the prosecution was unable to convince a jury of her peers beyond a reasonable doubt that she’s guilty of the crime for which she was accused.

We do know that one-way or another this child’s death was covered up, and that Casey is a pathological liar. If she is indeed guilty, she may escape the judgment of men, but she will stand before God.

That’s exactly what this passage is talking about. Hebrews 4:13 says,  
“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account.”

It’s not just Casey Anthony who must give an account. Each and everyone of us must give an account. Jesus gives this warning. It would be better for you to die than to bring harm to a child. It would be better to have a brutal death upon yourself than to face God’s wrath for harming a child. Since you will have to give an account to God, make sure you’re on the same side as God the Father and his son Jesus.

A relevant point of application is for me to speak briefly about the issue of child abuse. I told you that the sermon would get a little bit heavier at moments. And so, here it is.

If you’re aware of abuse being done to a child this is a serious matter. Not only is God entirely aware of it, but he is also entirely opposed to it. Harming children physically, emotionally or otherwise is one way that adults have brought woe to the world. If you are a perpetrator of abuse, that is, you have abused a child or are abusing one right now this is my pastoral word to you:

- Remove yourself from the situation to keep yourself from perpetrating greater harm, and

- Seek out a Pastor or a licensed counselor and tell them frankly what is occurring or has occurred.

It's very important that the church speak about this issue because Jesus speaks about this issue. And he wants his word obeyed.

If you know someone who is abusing another, you are called to defend the vulnerable and do what is right. Abuse and neglect are punishable by law in the state of Michigan and rightfully so. This is not an easy subject to address in so varied an audience, but it is important that we take Jesus' words seriously and protect young and vulnerable lives.

- o Child abuse occurs at every socioeconomic level, across ethnic and cultural lines, within all religions and at all levels of education.
- o Almost **five children die every day** as a result of child abuse. More than three out of four are under the age of 4.

Harming vulnerable people is exactly what Jesus is saying through the words, "cause to sin." Perhaps that way of rendering the text doesn't fully convey the meaning here.

The phrase in the text is, "any one who causes one of these little ones to sin." That's an okay translation, but word translated "sin" here could also be read, "cause to stumble" or "become ensnared." In the original language the word is "skandalizo" from which we get the word, scandal or scandalize.

The reason, however, that most translations don't use the word scandalize is because we mean something different with that word. We usually mean that we are greatly offended by a morally or legally wrong action.

What this word means is that a behavior that causes another to be ensnared, or to stumble and fall away. If you do something that harms the body or conscience of a little child or a young person such that they turn from God or struggle untold agony to recover, you have "scandalized," according to Jesus' words.

### **POINT THREE—VALUE AND ESTEEM TO CHILDREN**

If we love children like Jesus loves them, we will not only welcome and protect them, but we will also value and esteem children. Jesus continues now here in verse 10 until the end of the passage to speak with hope about the subject of children.

Let me see if I can describe the way I believe this passage moves in its momentum. Jesus begins by telling us, his disciples, that we need to be humble like a child if we want to be great by kingdom standards. He then takes the opportunity with the child on his lap to open up short message, a short homily if you will, instructing his

followers about loving children. He speaks of protecting them from ravages the dangers of the world. And warns against the evil that happens on in the world. He finishes by telling us that the father is seeking after children. And he invites us to join with the heavenly father in seeking children like the good shepherd. If we are going to seek like the Father seeks it begins by valuing children.

Jesus turns the corner now and in verse 10 says these words, “see that you do not look down on one of these little ones.” Jesus says, “see to it, that you don’t underestimate children.” They have great value.

You know, children do have great spiritual capacity! Children can experience God’s presence every bit as much as ay adult. Let me first speak from experience and then return back to the words of Jesus.

My youngest daughter, Eliana, for example, likes to speak about Jesus. In our household, we like to speak about Jesus in very concrete ways. In fact we don’t actually use the phrase “invite Jesus into your heart.” In my view that’s rather confusing. That’s a very abstract way of speaking about the Holy Spirit’s presence in our spirits. Instead, we speak in very concrete terms about what Jesus has done. We tell our children that they are guilty of sin. We tell our children that they inherited sin from their first parents, Adam and Eve. We tell our children that Jesus died on the cross to pay for the sins that we have committed.

And so, when Eliana speaks about Jesus, she reminds us that Jesus died in the cross. Lately she’s been saying the phrase repeatedly, “Jesus died on the red, red, cross.” For quite some time we couldn’t figure out why she was saying that. After all, the crosses that we see are all brown, aren’t they? We asked ourselves, “is she speaking about the blood that on the cross?”

In visiting with another family, and talking about this saying, our oldest daughter Rebekah, age 12, reminded us that the cross in the sanctuary is made out of red stained glass. Suddenly we realized! Eliana was speaking about the red, red, cross in sanctuary. Each week when she attends worship with us, she looks up to a red cross. Spiritually, there is an indelible impression being made upon her. Children definitely have a spiritual awareness!

We can also see Jesus’ estimation of children’s spiritual capacity here in our text in verse 6. Therefore Jesus said, “if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin.” Stop, there it is, “...little ones who believe in me...” Little ones can, and do, believe in Jesus.

Perhaps this is where we are prone to make the most significant assumption about children. Namely, that since they are still developing, they are not spiritual engaged yet. If they haven’t verbally professed faith in Christ then they are spiritually not attuned. Consider the words of Psalm 22.

- 9 Yet you brought me out of the womb;  
you made me trust in you  
even at my mother's breast.
- 10 From birth I was cast upon you;  
from my mother's womb you have been my God.  
(Psalm 22:9-10)

What a testimony of a grown person writing about their life in Christ! The inspired writer of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm says, that God has always been his God, that from the beginning he trusted the Lord. Before he could speak!

While children lack they developmental progress to articulate their faith in ways that adults have reasoned and spoken, they have access to God nonetheless. We all have access to God through the same Holy Spirit. And like John the Baptist in Elizabeth's womb, children can be filled with the Holy Spirit from even the earliest of days—days in the womb!

So Jesus says, "see to it that you do not look down on one of these little ones, for their angels in heaven never cease to see the face of my Father in heaven." This is actually a difficult phrase. And to be perfectly honest, I'm not sure exactly how best to understand these words.

What does it mean when he speaks of their angels in heaven who always see the face of the Father? It's probably going too far to assume a theology of guardian angels. As if each person has an angel continually present and assigned just for them.

In Hebrew, the word "face" is often used as an idiom for blessings and protection, and presence of God himself. The sense we are meant to get from these words is: Angels who protect children have God's special blessing and power to succeed.

God cares about children greatly. To demonstrate that another way, Jesus turns to the parable of the lost sheep. We know this parable in it's other context in Luke with the "Lost items theme." Therefore, Luke speaks of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. But here, Matthew isolates the lost sheep and report Jesus using to speak of the important of the Father seeking children.

The parable is well known, that a shepherd is missing one of his 100 sheep. Yet he resolves to get everyone of his sheep. He will leave the 99 on the hills and make a careful search are recovery for the one who has wandered. Jesus applies this parable by saying, "In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost."

That is good news—God is seeking. The God who is stronger is seeking and searching. God is seeking little children. And even though there is woe in the world through the man hands of men, there is blessing in the world because of the seeking, searching heavenly Father.

And here is the kicker. God who is seeking wants others like you and me to join in seeking and saving that which is lost. We are therefore called to join Him in not being willing at any one of these little ones should be lost.

So how about you? Do you have the father's heart? Are you willing to seek little children? I would like to invite you to join us in whatever way, God is calling you. I know that not all of you are particularly gifted at serving and ministering to children. For some of you children are your specialty and it comes as easy as making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich; for others of you about the only time he so competent with children is while they're napping.

I encourage you to take small steps forward, and serve as you are able. God doesn't only call those who are highly gifted to engage in ministry. For example, we don't only ask people who have the spiritual gift of giving to give it our morning offering we welcome all donations the matter what your gift! Not everyone has the gift of intercession, but all are called to pray in Jesus name. So it is with children. God simply asks you to be faithful.

Now, one particular way in which you can serve, is to volunteer in Cornerstone's children's ministry. Today in your bulletin there is information about how you may become more involved in children's ministry. We have opportunities that range from one-time events, to once a month commitments, to weekly service opportunities.

I'd like you to take this home with you today and seek God's face and asked him if he'll let you off the shepherd's crook. I think he wants you to serve! Wouldn't it be great if instead of spending many hours in recruiting, Bonny Linder and children's ministry could spend their time training and equipping those of you who will serve? Whether it's on Wednesday nights or Sunday mornings or some other time within children's ministry, I'd like to ask you to join us in joining God to serve some of the micro-disciples. After all, children represents one third of our population and all our future.

*Let's pray.*

"Most gracious heavenly father, thank you that you are indeed seeking children. You are a God who's on mission. Thank you that you call us to participate in your mission. Lord God, please give us strength to obey and fulfill your words given to us this morning. Help us to be humble. Help us to value children among us. Help us to welcome and protect children. Help us to value them so much that we seek them out for the kingdom of heaven. In Jesus name, Amen."