

Why Children are Important in Church: The Kingdom Order

(First sermon in a series of three)

Matthew 18: 1-14

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A competitive spirit was alive among Jesus' disciples. Their view of the Kingdom of God was influenced by the Spiritual leaders, namely the Pharisees, and also by the politics of the day. An example of this attitude is clear in the story where they are on their way to Capernaum where the disciples discussed among themselves, 'who would be the greatest,' (Mark 9:34). Also in Matthew 20 we read about the mother of Zebedee's sons who came to Jesus and asked if each of her sons could sit on the right hand and the other on the left hand of Jesus in Jesus' Kingdom. This cultural climate of needing to be great – to be the best, and better than others was a sentiment prevalent in their cultural and religious thinking.

The teachers of the law who were the 'Pharisees' should have known better – that they were not superior to anyone else. They boasted about their morality in comparison to others' immorality. Consider the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18: 9-14: ⁹ ***He (Jesus) also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:*** ¹⁰ ***"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*** ¹¹ ***The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.*** ¹² ***I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'*** ¹³ ***But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'*** ¹⁴ ***I tell you (Jesus said), this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."***

The Henri Nouwen Society devotional put it this way, *'the society in which we live suggests in countless ways that the way to go is up. Making it to the top, entering the limelight, breaking the record - that's what draws attention, gets us on the front page of the newspaper, and offers us the rewards of money and fame. The way of Jesus is radically different. It is the way not of upward mobility but of downward mobility. It is going to the bottom, staying behind the sets, and choosing the last place! Why is the way of Jesus worth choosing? Because it is the way to the Kingdom, the way Jesus took, and the way that brings everlasting life (Henri Nouwen Society devotional, June 28, 2017).'*

The ego is so strong that it trips us up, makes us stumble and severely inhibits us from moving forward in advancing God's Kingdom.

Video clip: "Run Forrest Run!"

You can imagine Jesus hearing his disciples ask him, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" Jesus knew what they were thinking. You can imagine Jesus saying, "You have got to be kidding – you have totally missed the point- you do not get it at all!"

Big egos and competitiveness is alive in all of us and even creeps into the churches. We can become arrogant and proud of our faith. We may think in our hearts that we may know the bible the best and others are not as important because their knowledge is lacking. We may believe that we are good people and better than others because we follow the Bible closely. We can too easily fall into that trap of thinking we are greater in the Kingdom of God than others. Jesus would then say something like this, "You've got to be kidding- you have totally missed the point – you do not get it at all! Do not be self-righteous. Your righteousness or being right with God only comes from forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Be gracious to others as God is gracious to you. Crush those braces of ego so you can be free!

Seeking Christ's Kingdom is about changing your life, and not about out-doing your brother or sister! Jesus' language is strong, direct and demanding: ***"unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven."*** (Matthew 18:3b).

Humility is totally necessary for us to be open to the kingdom. Conversion to the way of Jesus Christ is seen clearly in childlike humility. Children are totally dependent on their parents, similar to how we are to be totally dependent on God. Compared to an adult, a child is usually more open to trusting and more teachable. Children who are loved are free to state their needs to their loving parents. Similarly, God wants us to totally trust him and be free to communicate with him in prayer and communicate our needs, challenges and hopes. These are kingdom qualities! ***Whoever becomes humble like a child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 18: 4).*** With humble awareness of our weakness, we are free to receive from God.

In the culture of the time, Jesus' words were so 'counter culture' and outside of the box in terms of how people were thinking about children. They would have been totally shocked hearing Jesus say this. The familiar New Testament scene of Jesus taking a child in his arms and receiving the child with love portrays an attitude of love, care and concern for children not to be found anywhere else in the ancient world. Children, all women, old men, and slaves, were considered physically weak burdens on society who had little to no value to the wider life of the community. In Greece and Rome, it was an accepted practice and not unusual to see abandoned unwanted children along the roadsides to die.

Jesus on the other hand always seemed to find time for youngsters. He intentionally told his disciples that unless they became like little children they would not enter the kingdom of heaven. He specifically warned his followers not to despise children or to cause them to stumble. Children were valuable to Jesus and were to be treated with love, care and encouragement.

Let's not stumble by trying to be competitive with others. Let's keep our ego in check. Jesus humbled himself even to death on the Cross to win the victory over death and everything that leads to death. Humility was (and is) necessary for salvation and eternal life through Christ! Humility was shown by Jesus in putting himself aside for the sake of others. To do as Jesus did means that we welcome children, talk to them, initiate a conversation with them, encourage them, get to know them as Christ would want you to! Let's remove the brace holding us back and run ahead for his kingdom. Run Forrest Run, could be inserted with your name – regardless of your age or stage of life. Humble yourself and be free to trust Christ and enjoy His Kingdom. Amen.