

Matthew 18:1-14 | “We are to be Little Ones”  
*Preached on January 21, 2024 by Pastor Matt Brown*

You can turn to Matthew 18 this morning, as we will be covering verses 1-14 today.

We are picking back up in the gospel of Matthew, seeing what the Lord desires to teach us about being disciples of Jesus. *[pause]*

I'm going to do something unique this morning to begin.

I'd like for 3 men to come up here, and just stand with me. *(Dave, Ed, Austin?)*

Don't worry, the only thing you need to do is stand, and it will be brief. *[pause]*

Now I'll ask Dawson to come up here and stand in the middle of us. *[pause]*

As you look at all of us up here, who would you deem as the greatest?

Some of you would choose Dave because you know, he's been a successful baseball coach and teacher.

Some of you would choose Austin because he's so smart, as he's an engineer.

Others of you would choose Ed because he has some high up education degrees, and knows a bunch about various topics.

Or some of you would choose me because I get to speak publicly and so more people get to see me front and center.

But Jesus does this same thing with His disciples, asking a young child to stand in the midst of them, and says, “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” *[pause]*

Is that the picture of greatness that you think of?

Would anyone in our world choose the child over the accomplished, knowledgeable, and experienced adults?

No, because we don't usually link greatness with children. *[pause]*

Thanks guys, you can return to your seats. *[pause]*

You see, what I just did is similar to what Jesus does here in Matthew 18 to make a point about greatness.

He turns the world's value of greatness on its head, and shows that true greatness is humility like a child. *[pauseeee]*

In our society, we look to the high up, the powerful, and mighty.

We look to the honored, prominent, self-reliant ‘go-getters’ among us. *[pause]*

Just think about how celebrities in our nation are almost worshiped.

Think of how we look to the wealthy people as the ones who “have it all”.

Think of how we look to the successful business people and athletes as the ones who can give us the lessons for life and tips to success, for they are deemed as the greatest. *[pauseeee]*

This understanding of greatness is ingrained in our minds, for just listen how the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines greatness...

It says that greatness is “the quality or state of being great (as in size, skill, achievement, or power).”<sup>1</sup>

And the *Cambridge Dictionary* says it’s, “importance and fame, power, or success.”<sup>2</sup> *[pause]*

Did you notice how greatness was linked with fame, power, success, skill, and achievement? *[pause]*

When we think of the greatest, our minds go to the people who are the strongest or smartest, or our minds go to the most accomplished or skilled. *[pauseeee]*

This understanding of greatness has also sadly infiltrated our Christian circles.

We lift up the celebrity pastor, and we look to the Christian with the most social media followers.

We think the greatest are the Christians with the longest resume or list of accomplishments. *[pauseeee]*

I think of the famous boxer, Muhammed Ali, who would say of himself, “I am the greatest!”

He even said, “It’s hard to be humble when you’re as great as I am,” and he also said, “Humble people, I’ve found, don’t get very far.”<sup>3</sup> *[pause]*

Muhammed Ali is the prime example of how our world views greatest, and how it despises humility. *[pauseeee]*

But is all of that true greatness?

What does God think?

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “greatness,” accessed January 9, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/greatness>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/greatness>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/sport/boxing/16146367>.

What we see is that God doesn't actually view greatness the same way that we typically do, and definitely not as the world does. *[pauseee]*

Do you realize that the majority of people that are lifted up as great in our world aren't actually great in God's eyes?

And yet we are so influenced by the world's view of greatness that countless Christians are enamored with the celebrities of this age, and the influencers of our culture. *[pauseee]*

So who are the greatest?

Jesus tells us that it's the humble, who are lowly like a child. *[pause]*

And we will see that the great ones are NOT actually the independent, self-reliant go-getters of the world, who have accomplishments under their belt, money falling out of their pockets, and who stand in the light of fame.

Rather, it's the humble, dependent, child-like people, who simply trust in God. *[pause]*

Listen to verses 1-4. *[READ]*

*Here we see Jesus telling us to...*

### **I. Become a little one. (1-4)**

The disciples ask Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" *[pause]*

They bring in the world's typical thinking into following Christ, and we often do the same...

We sometimes think, "Who is the greatest pastor or preacher?"

Or, "Who is the greatest Christian of our day?" Or, "Who is the greatest in this church?"

And when we do that, we are acting like the disciples here, thinking about who is at the top, who is chief, and who is most prominent. *[pauseee]*

Apparently the disciples haven't "gotten it" yet.

Don't they remember that He told them that the meek are the blessed ones, and that following Him involves denying yourself?<sup>4</sup>

Haven't they seen His humble character on display everyday? *[pause]*

But that's just like us, how long have we been Christians, and yet we revert back to wrong thinking?

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<sup>4</sup> See Matthew 5:5 & 16:24.

Thankfully, Christ is patient and gracious with us, as He was with His disciples here, and uses their wrong thinking to teach the correct way to think. *[pauseee]*

He calls a child, and puts the child in the midst of them - kind of like how I did earlier with Dawson.

*And like you saw, it makes the child look insignificant standing among grown, mature men.*

And that's when He teaches us that "unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

*Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."* *[pause]*

Now at first this sounds so crazy.

*He wants me to become like a child?* *[pause]*

Usually we say, "Grow up," or "Don't act like a child," so it doesn't compute with us that we need to become like a kid.

*We typically grow up and become less like children, well Jesus is telling us that we should shrink back down in some ways to be like children.* *[pauseee]*

So what does Jesus mean by this?

*First, we must understand how children were viewed in that day.*

Commentator R.T. France says, "A child was a person of no importance in Jewish society, subject to the authority of his elders, not taken seriously except as a responsibility, one to be looked after, not one to be looked up to."<sup>5</sup> *[pauseee]*

*So what's Jesus saying?*

We must become humble like a child, accepting the lowly status of children.

*As children are dependent, weak, helpless, and unimpressive, so we must take that position and mindset as Christian adults.* *[pauseee]*

Typically as we grow and mature, we start to rely upon ourselves: our own wisdom, strength, and righteousness.

*This is not good as a Christian.* *[pause]*

Instead, we should be like children, and so we should think of ourselves as weak, dependent, and lowly.

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<sup>5</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 274.

We must think, “I am nothing without the Lord. I need Him for everything!” *[pauseeee]*

To many of you, you may even be inwardly scoffing at this idea because our world has ingrained it in our brains that you are strong, enough, and capable of doing anything you set your mind to.

And I’ll put it bluntly: that thinking is the polar opposite of what Christ calls us to, and you must shed that thinking as fast as possible. *[pauseeee]*

Christ wants us to be humble, knowing that we are dependent on the Lord *for everything*.

We don’t pursue the “top”, but we accept that we are lowly.

Because here’s the problem with thinking that you are high up and self-reliant: where does trust in God fit in? *[pauseeee]*

Jesus even makes it clear: “unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Wow, this is a big deal! *[pause]*

If you don’t do what He’s saying, you won’t ever receive eternal life! *[pauseee]*

You must “turn”, turn away from the world’s greatness mentality to a childlike dependence to enter the kingdom. *[pause]*

The reason is because you can’t enter the kingdom, if you are self-reliant and prideful, for you won’t humble yourself to see your need of salvation.

You will think that you can do it yourself, that you can save yourself, that your own righteousness is enough.

You will rely on your good works, instead of the work of Christ. *[pause]*

But the person who enters the kingdom is the one who knows that they are a sinner in need of grace and saving.

They are the person, who becomes like a child, dependent on Christ alone for salvation. *[pauseeee]*

I remember one time walking with my son, and we came to some deep snow that he couldn’t walk in.

Instead of just thinking, “I can do this on my own” and struggling forever, he looked to me, reached out his arms, and I carried him through the deep snow. *[pause]*

That’s a picture of how we should be with Christ.

We know we can't do it, so we reach out to Him and cling to Him, for we know that only through Him, can we be saved and forgiven.

That's childlike faith, and that's the kind of mindset we should have not just at salvation, but everyday that follows. *[pauseeee]*

You see, what helped my son depend on me in the snow was that he knew he was small, weak, and dependent on me.

He knew that he was a child of mine, and the way for you to stay childlike is to remember that you are a child of God, who is dependent on your Father. *[pauseeee]*

If you have trusted in Christ, you are and will always be a child of God, so never lose sight of that fact.

You don't grow and mature out of your need for the Lord.

And it's this humility and dependence that Jesus says is *true greatness*. *[pauseeee]*

This is the opposite of what we think.

We think the independent, strong, and capable ones are the greatest...

...But Jesus flips the script and shows us that it's the dependent, weak, and incapable ones who simply trust Him, who are the greatest. *[pauseeee]*

This should radically change our view of greatness.

We shouldn't lift up the ones who self-reliantly beat the odds in life, but we should lift up the ones who showed dependence, humility, and trust in God. *[pauseeee]*

This should radically change our view of ourselves, too. *[pause]*

Would you readily say, "I'm a little one of Christ."?

How many Christians have on their social media bio, "I'm a little one of Christ," or, "I'm like a child in faith?" *[pause]*

How often do you view yourself as a "little one"?

We don't like that phrase to describe ourselves because it makes us feel lowly and unimportant, but that's our pride speaking.

That's our incorrect view of greatness talking. *[pauseeee]*

Are you willing to be seen as lowly in this world?

Remember that no matter how the world views you, it matters how God views you.

And if He says that being a little one (a person who becomes like a child) is greatness then it's greatness, and we should embrace it. *[pauseeee]*

You see, being lowly and humble like the status of a child can make you feel insignificant and unimportant.

But in the rest of this passage, Jesus helps us to see that that's not the case, for the Father absolutely loves and cares for each of His little ones, and so we should, too. *[pauseeee]*

*That's why point two is that we should...*

## **II. Care for other little ones. (5-14)**

Let's READ these verses. *[READ 5-9]*

Now to understand who Jesus is talking about in the rest of these verses, you must understand that Jesus isn't talking about mere physical children anymore. *[pause]*

He just made it clear that His followers must be like children, and become like little ones.

Well now He will use those terms to continue speaking of true Christians in the rest of the passage. *[pause]*

This is why in verse 5, He doesn't say, "Whoever receives a child in my name receives me," but rather, "Whoever receives *one such child* in my name receives me."

He's talking about a person who has become like a child. *[pause]*

Another indicator is that Jesus goes on to say, "whoever causes one of these little ones *who believe in me* to sin."

So the little ones are true believers in Jesus -- keep that in mind as we look to these verses. *[pauseeee]*

In our world, we often care about and treat those who are prominent people well, but the lowly of our society are often despised and disregarded.

And we can be tempted to think that God is the same way, treating the prominent people of our day well, and ignoring the lowly.

But verses 5-14, show us God's care for each of His little ones. *[pauseeee]*

In verse 5, Christ tells us to welcome such people, and if we do it in His name, we receive Him. *[pause]*

To welcome them is to show hospitality in caring for them, loving them, and protecting them.

So this is a call for each of us to care for and treat well every other believer, no matter how low society views them. *[pause]*

We must realize that the Lord cares for each of them so much that caring for them is caring for Christ. *[pauseeee]*

**You know how if someone treated your child badly, it's kind of like treating you badly?**

Well that's similar to Christ with each child of God: we dare not treat one of them badly, for in doing so, we are treating Christ badly. *[pauseeee]*

**Shouldn't this radically change how we treat any and every Christian that we meet, no matter what they look like, and how society views them? *[pause]***

What if every person we looked at that was a believer, we saw as a precious child of God, who is closely linked to Christ?

**Wouldn't it cause us to care, love, and show kindness to them?**

They are precious to the Lord, so I should receive them and treat them well. *[pauseeeee]*

**Welcoming and caring for such people is like welcoming and caring for a child. *[pause]***

A child won't bring you amazing benefits and cause your status to rise, but they will be dependent on you.

**So also, other Christians, especially those of lowly worldly status, aren't going to bring you amazing benefits and aid you a lot, for they will receive and depend on you.**

But we still love them and treat them well, for they are Christ's and we welcome those who belong to Him. *[pauseeee]*

**So we must welcome and care for other little ones, that is, other believers.**

But also, we see in the next couple verses that we dare not cause them to sin. *[pause]*

**Just listen to what Jesus says...**

“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.”  
*[pause]*

**That's intense, isn't it?**

And yet that shows us how much Jesus utterly cares for each of His people that to do them harm has severe consequences. *[pauseeeee]*



Jesus is talking about people who intentionally cause believers to stumble, ensnaring them in sin and purposely leading them to stumble. *[pause]*

This is what some people do, they take advantage of Christians, especially new or immature Christians, and lead them down the wrong path.

Doing this is not some small, little offense, but the Lord takes it very seriously.

He says it's better for them to have a heavy millstone placed around their neck and be drowned in the sea. *[pause]*

Do you see what He's saying?

It's better for them to experience a horrific physical death than to face what they will face in eternity.

That's how seriously God takes those who take advantage of His children. *[pause]*

You see, our world takes advantage of those who are little, dependent, and weak.

And most often Christians are the lowly of this world and are meek, and they take advantage of this and cause them to sin.

But little do they realize who our Father is.

He's not this gentle Grandfather in Heaven who won't do anything, but He's the Lord of Heaven and Earth, and the all-powerful sovereign Judge!

He will deal out justice! He will not let this atrocity go!

He cares for us with such a loving fierceness -- you do not harm His children and get away with it. *[pauseeee]*

Do you realize that the Father loves you that much? *[pause]*

So many times, we think that He doesn't care because we don't see Him doing anything in our lives, but believer: know that He sees, knows, and cares so greatly. *[pauseeee]*

Becoming a little one doesn't mean that you will be despised by God, but the opposite: you will be cared for greatly!

You may be despised by others, who try to take advantage of you, but God knows and judges for that.

So rest in being a little one of the Lord, but also, treat other little ones with love.

Make sure that *you* aren't causing other believers to sin, and leading them astray. *[pauseeee]*

That's why right after this, Jesus talks about how if *your* hand, foot, or eye causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away, for it's better to enter life without those things than to be thrown into eternal fire. *[pauseeee]*

*We should take sin seriously. [pause]*

Now Jesus isn't telling us to literally mutilate ourselves, but His point is that we should deal with sin with drastic measures, when needed.

*We should not toy around with sin, letting it linger.*

We should definitely not be trying to cause others to sin, but we must remind ourselves of God's view of sin: He hates it. *[pause]*

*If you are struggling with porn, take drastic measures, getting rid of the temptation, or at the very least get an internet filter.*

If you are struggling with anger, take drastic measures, and tell someone to hold you accountable by calling you out for it. *[pause]*

*So many times, we take small, tiny measures against our sin, if we even do anything.*

But Christ wants us to take sin seriously, and do what we can to turn away from it, relying upon His strength, of course. *[pauseeee]*

*So we must care for other believers, especially not causing them to sin, but also, we are not to despise them.*

Look down at verses 10-14. *[READ]*

*It's sometimes easy to despise other believers, especially those who are often looked down upon by others. [pause]*

We tend to despise those who are young, immature, or seemingly unimportant.

*Yet Jesus tells us to see to it and be careful not to despise them. [pause]*

Have you ever despised a certain Christian?

*Have you ever looked down on them in scorn, and deemed them insignificant? [pause]*

Maybe it was because of their low social status, or what they looked like.

*Maybe it was because of their disability or immaturity or youth. [pause]*

How dare we do that to a fellow little one of Christ!

*Who do we think we are? [pause]*

I know of one person, not of this church, who showed scorn for young people in the church.

The teens weren't doing anything, but standing there talking, and he acted like they shouldn't even be there.

How could we think that way?!

If God cares for someone, so should we!

Every Christian that you meet should be valued in your eyes, for they are valuable to God.

*[pauseeee]*

In fact, it says that the reason we shouldn't despise them is because "in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven." *[pauseeee]*

God cares so much for that person that that person has an angel who represents him in front of the Father, having access to Him.

But not only that, the angels can see His face and see His love and concern for His children, so they can be dispatched immediately to help, if needed. *[pause]*

Isn't that amazing to think about?!

Rarely do we think as we look at another believer, "They have an angel who represents them, who is right now seeing the face of the Father.

So who am I to despise one who is so precious to my Lord?" *[pause]*

But what a world of a difference it would make if we thought that way!

Would we end up despising them? Or would we cherish them and show them respect? *[pauseeee]*

Not only should we not despise other believers because they have angels representing them, but also, the Father loves them as a good shepherd. *[pause]*

Jesus gives the illustration of the man leaving the 99 other sheep to pursue the 1 wandering sheep.

And when the man finds the wandering sheep, he rejoices.

And in verse 14, Jesus relates this to the Father, "So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." *[pauseeee]*

God the Father is like that shepherd, who tirelessly pursues wandering believers, and has great joy when they are brought back.

He doesn't desire that any of His sheep perish, but pursues them.

That's the care of the Father for each individual, little one of His!

And that's the care of the Father *for you*. [pause]

If you are a true believer, He will pursue you, and not let you perish.

He will seek you out and find you, even if you wander. [pause]

What love of God! [pause]

He is a pursuing God!

He is a 'search and rescue' God! [pauseeee]

Some of you have experienced this firsthand.

You started going down a wrong path, but through a series of events, God chased you down and brought you back.

That's our God, the ultimate Shepherd, who values each and every one of His sheep. [pause]

You are important to Him, He does not forget about you, or ignore your plight.

He cares about you so much that He's willing to find you and bring you back. [pause]

He doesn't say, "Eh, she's a lost cause," or, "I don't care about that one over there."

But every little one, every believer, is precious to Him. [pauseeee]

And if God cares about every sheep in that way, how could we despise them?

If God is like that shepherd who leaves the 99 for the 1, how could we scorn the 1? [pauseeee]

Since God cares so much for each individual believer, then let's treat them as God does.

Let's welcome them, care for them, and pursue them -- not cause them to sin or despise them. [pauseeee]

How differently would we treat others, if we viewed them how God views them? [pauseeee]

*You see, this passage teaches us that...*

**We should seek to be like little ones, and we should care for other little ones.**

We should be humble like a little one, and this humility should be seen in how we treat other little ones.

So who could you care for, show kindness to, and pursue? [pause]

Are there people in our church, who are often neglected that you could welcome and love?

Will you go out of your way to care for them, knowing that God cares for them?

Let's not cause others to sin or despise them, but care for them, knowing how much God cares for them. *[pauseee]*

We must also realize that true greatness is humility and dependence on God.

We need Him every day, just like we needed Him to save us through Christ.

For we were dead in our sins, incapable of saving ourselves or meriting eternal life.

Yet Christ died for us, and rose again, so that we could be forgiven and given life everlasting.

He took our place, though we didn't deserve it, and did the work that only He could do. *[pause]*

What saving help, what loving care! *[pause]*

But we don't stop needing His help, for we are continually to be a little one, in need of our Lord. *[pause]*

So let's embrace being a little one of Christ!

We should be willing to be seen as insignificant and unimportant, for we know that we are nothing without our God.

But we should also be willing to be seen as insignificant and unimportant in this world, for we know that we are not those things *to* God. *[pauseee]*

When the world calls us despicable, when the world looks down on us, and makes fun of us, and sees us as low.

We can say, "You're right, I am low, for I don't deserve any mercy or grace, but Christ saved me, and now I am precious in His eyes." *[pauseeeee]*

"Hudson Taylor was scheduled to speak at a Large Presbyterian church in Melbourne, Australia.

The moderator of the service introduced the missionary in eloquent and glowing terms.

He told the large congregation all that Taylor had accomplished in China, and then presented him as "our illustrious guest."

Taylor stood quietly for a moment, and then opened his message by saying, "Dear friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious Master."<sup>6</sup> *[pause]*

May we always see ourselves as "little servants of an illustrious Master".

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<sup>6</sup> W. Wiersbe, Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching and Preachers, p. 243. Found at: <https://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/h/humility.htm>.