

**6<sup>th</sup> September, 2020**

**“Greatness in Humility”**

**Matthew 18:1-14**

Happy Father’s Day to all the dads. 2020 has provided an opportunity to be creative in how we celebrate special occasions like Mother’s Day, Birthdays, Anniversaries and Father’s Day! I have a surprise, unable to get together, our two amazing daughters have arranged a meal (Surf & Turf) to be delivered to our door for lunch. Technology of course allows us to regularly connect, but it can never compare to being together. Don’t forget to pray for dads today! Especially for those doing it tough, those grieving, those broken hearted, those under financial stress.

### **1. A Lesson on Humility:**

Please read: Matthew 18:1-14. The next conversation the disciples want to have with Jesus is about which one of them is the best. Luke tells us this is more of an argument than it is a conversation (Luke 9:46). This seems completely out of line as the disciples just failed in an exorcism of a demonic spirit (17:14-21). However, this is often typical of humanity. Even our great failures don’t cause us to take our eyes off ourselves for very long. Even though Peter was called “*Satan*” and “*a hindrance*” in our reading last week, this didn’t take him out of the running for greatest in the Kingdom (Matthew 16:23). I can imagine he was bringing up the fact that he was the only one who walked on water with Jesus, and he was one of three who witnessed the transfiguration (Matthew 14:28-29; 17:1).

Our accomplishments usually drown out our failures. No one thinks of the excuses of Moses, or the murderous adultery of David, or the depression and lack of faith of Elijah (Exodus 3:11; 4:1, 10, 13; 2 Samuel 11; I Kings 19:4). Instead we focus on Moses leading the exodus, David defeating Goliath, and Elijah calling fire down from heaven. One thing that is so great about the Bible is that it shows how even the best men and women that God used have failed. Our questions should never be about us. Our hope always lies elsewhere... in Jesus and Him alone.

Pastors are reluctant to preach on humility, because how do we promote humility without sounding like we think we’ve attained it? I’m still working on it, and I’m preaching to myself. I don’t know if you need this message, but I do. Humility is elusive; when you think you have it, you’ve lost it!

Pride is a spiritual cancer. It was once seen as the deadliest of sins, but nowadays it has become a virtue in our culture of self-expression. We admire the proud. The advertising industry feeds our pride: “You deserve this product.” In sharp contrast, Jesus modelled humility. Before Jesus, no one ever used “humble” as a compliment. People desire power and glory; they’re driven by selfish ambition...yet Jesus wore a different kind of glory--the glory of humility. Jesus shows us that it’s not, “God helps those who help themselves”, but those who humble themselves. The proud don’t want any help.

Humility is honestly assessing our strengths and weaknesses in light of God’s holiness and our imperfection. Rick Warren says “*Humility is not denying your strengths; it is being honest about your weaknesses.*” To be humble is to do an honest self-appraisal, by admitting the truth about ourselves. This means that we avoid both bragging and putting ourselves down.

Humility is acknowledging the truth about what we are and what we're not. Humility requires a bit of self-forgetfulness. C.S. Lewis wrote, *"Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less."* Thomas Merton said: *"Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real"*.

In Matthew 18, Jesus is responding to His followers who were arguing over which of them was the greatest in God's Kingdom. Jesus had previously stated in chapter 11 that John the Baptist was the greatest. With him gone, who now has the #1 spot? This desire for prominence goes all the way back to Eden, where the serpent promised greatness to Adam and Eve. Why are we so competitive regarding who is the best?

## **2. Like A Child:**

Jesus bypasses His followers and calls a child over to the heated discussion. He turns their thinking around, insisting that they "change and become like little children" in order to have a place in God's Kingdom. He insists: "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven."v4 "He didn't tell the child to become like His disciples; He told the disciples to become like this little child" (Ruth Bell Graham). This fits with John the Baptist, whose motto was that *"Jesus must increase and I must decrease...I'm not worthy to tie His sandal."*

In Bible times, children were often regarded as insignificant, pretty much the opposite of modern times. Parents today often go overboard, lavishing gifts and smothering their kids with attention. In Bible times, children were nearly non-persons. Both are extremes.

So how do we *"become like little children"*? Being childlike means being humble enough to trust Jesus when we're tempted to place all our trust in ourselves. Jesus is not suggesting that children are innocent or sinless. Even babies show subtle signs of selfishness, and toddlers who reach the "terrible twos" can make anyone believe in Original Sin. Jesus is urging us to be child-like, not childish.

Children understand that they depend on others. They instinctively know they are in need. Whether it's arithmetic or learning to tie a shoe, children humbly ask for instruction. They want their parents or teachers to instruct them and pass knowledge onto them. They know they cannot do it alone. This is why Jesus chose a child to place before His disciples. This is why something so small and fragile was an object lesson in humility. Be like children. Know you have needs that you cannot meet on your own. This keeps you focused on Kingdom living. We will never make it on our own. We need Jesus every day and in every way. To be great, we must become small.

Children respond to God's world with wonder...and then they grow up! Their education and accomplishments can become a barrier to faith. Adults tend to boast that they never rely on anyone; they are self-made. They make an idol out of self-reliance. Unless they humble themselves, they'll never come to Christ. There is no room for God in people who are full of themselves. Where would we be if Jesus hadn't saved us from our self-centred and self-destructive ways? Humility is our greatest friend and pride is our greatest enemy.

The serpent did not say to Adam and Eve: *"Be bad and disobey God."* He held out a promise: *"You'll be wise, you'll be like God."* We're all tempted to pride, which is the essence of sin. "We should begin every day "by acknowledging our dependence upon God, our need of God, and our confidence in God" (C.J. Mahaney).

### 3. Little Ones

Jesus uses hyperbole to make a dramatic point. Not only is it necessary to become a “little one” to enter the kingdom of heaven, but there is a dire warning for any who would lead “little ones” astray. Throughout Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus places a special burden on those who would be leaders in the community. Woe to those who, instead of embracing little ones, cause them to stumble, or lose their faith!

Unfortunately, one can find numerous examples of the damage done by church leaders to “little ones” in the community by their abuse of power. Damage is multiplied by attempts to cover up abuses and protect the image of the church. Many people have been driven away from the church by such actions. Adding insult to injury, churches are often judgmental toward those who “fall away,” or withdraw from church life.

Jesus states plainly that those in power who have caused the downfall of others will be held accountable. For those who would be leaders in the church, the warning is clear: extreme vigilance is necessary to guard against the possibility of leading little ones astray. Whatever might cause one’s own fall, or the stumbling of others in the community -- even if it is as important as a hand or foot or eye -- must be thrown away.

**V10** *“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”* God is working through his angels. Hebrews 1:14 reads, *“Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?”* And this angel doesn’t report to you or your church Council; but to the face of God. Since we all have strong points and weak points, it is easy to despise someone who is weak where I am strong. We should not do it!

Over the years I have heard Christian Leaders publicly criticizing, condemning and vilifying other Christians who have made mistakes, sinned, or are in doctrinal error. Not to mention how this happens in every Christian community! We need a fresh movement of gospel-centred humility. How can we, as we strive for personal holiness be more like Jesus and at the same time avoid becoming judgmental of others when they are weak? How do we avoid building a community just like the world?

So, this teaching of Jesus is now working on two levels. We should be like children giving our full trust to Jesus for our lives. We should also protect those who live with this kind of faith. The term “little ones,” now represents all those with childlike faith that follow our master. Children can be easily taken advantage of. This is also true with followers of Christ. We must not only be careful to keep Jesus first in our lives, but we must also protect others that do the same. It is good to know that if we get off track and begin to wander that Jesus will drop everything, and come to our rescue.

We must show this same love and determination for one another. Heaven forbid we take anyone’s eyes off Jesus for our own religious pursuits or vanity. We must be so careful with our own eyes, and responsible for where we influence the gaze of others.

Jesus says the joy of the Christian life isn’t found in keeping rules and expanding personal performance to a standard; in this life joy comes from finding the one lost sheep, and bringing him home. This is God’s great joy, and he invites us to share in it today.

Let's newly decide today, to be humble, and experience the joy of life living and loving as followers of Jesus. May it always be Jesus we look to and turn others toward!

**Prayer:**

Lord, where we wrong, make us willing to change; where are right, make us easy to live with. We confess our pride, but we are pursuing humility. Help us to be more serious about self-denial. Help us to see that our words matter; they show whether we're proud or humble. By putting people down, we build ourselves up and grieve Your Spirit. Our confidence is in You, not in self. We rest in Your grace, and pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.