

Children of the Kingdom

Matthew 17:24-18:14

Matthew's Gospel has five discourses given by Jesus that each conclude "when Jesus finished speaking": the Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5-7), the Missionary Discourse (ch. 10), the Discourse on Parables, the Discourse on the Church (ch. 18), and the Final Discourse (chs. 23-26). In chapter 18 He teaches about life in the church—how we ought to act, think, serve, challenge, and forgive. Right away children are a dominant topic. Jesus teaches us how to treat, imitate, lead, and restore our children—critical truth for the church.

Rights & Responsibilities

Following Jesus' prediction of His death, the disciples come back to Capernaum and the temple tax man shows up to collect. He asks Peter if his teacher pays the *didrachma* and he responds yes (v. 24). When he comes inside Jesus asks him from whom the kings of the earth collect taxes, from sons or strangers (v. 25). "From strangers", Peter says, to which Jesus says the sons are free but rather than give offense by not paying, He sends Peter to catch a fish and pay with the money he'll find inside (vv. 26-27). This temple tax originated from the Mosaic law and later was used to maintain the temple (Ex. 30:11-16; 2 Kgs. 12:4; 2 Chron. 24:5-7). Some parties objected to paying it, so the question set Jesus up to be on one side or the other. He says a king doesn't tax his children, and who is the king of the temple? God is, and therefore His sons don't pay. Jesus has already referred to the temple His Father's house (Lk. 2:49; Jn. 2:16) and said He is greater than the temple (Matt. 12:6). So while He and the disciples are "sons" and under no obligation to pay the tax, He doesn't want to cause others to stumble (*skandalizo*) at this point. He will cause people stumble over other issues but is happy to pay not be slandered as a tax cheat. The means of paying this tax seems to anticipate the Gentiles bringing their wealth to the Lord as Isaiah prophesied (Is. 60:5). Gentiles are represented by the sea, as Israel is by the land, and after His resurrection Jesus will draw all nations to Himself which will really scandalize the unbelieving Jews. As children of the King, we have many rights which need to be weighed with our responsibilities. Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should. Should you not pay a tax or get a vax? It depends. Paul fights fiercely against the Judaizers and will not allow Titus to be circumcised (Gal. 2:3), but then he'll have Timothy circumcised in his mission to the Jews (Acts. 16:1-5).

Greatness in the Kingdom

Speaking of being sons of God and exempt from this tax that all the other Israelites have to pay, the disciples ask Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (18:1). Rather than begin an affirmation session of the disciples, He calls a little child, sets him in the midst of them, and says: "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (vv. 3-4). Not only are children not to be ignored or looked down upon, you have to become like one or you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is not being sentimental about children. Scripture teaches that folly is bound up in the heart of a child, that we are born dead in sins and trespasses, and in our fallen nature we are objects of God's just wrath (Prov. 22:15; Eph. 2:3-5). But the children of believing parents are also marked as holy (1 Cor. 7:14). When God gave Abraham the covenant sign of circumcision, He said: "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you"

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(Gen. 17:7). Abraham did not respond, “We’ll see about that”, nor did he think he would have a sinless son. He actually fell on his face laughing, wondering how a child would be born to a hundred-year-old man and ninety-nine-year-old woman. God agreed it’s hilarious and said his name would be Isaac, which means laughter (Gen. 17:17-19). Paul teaches that Abraham didn’t doubt but was “fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore ‘it was accounted to him for righteousness” (Rom. 4:21-22). Abraham believed God would give him a son in this hilarious way and *that God would be Isaac’s God*, which is why he circumcised him. We are told to imitate the faith of little covenant kids who have been told the truth about God and believe it. This goes not only for entering the kingdom of heaven, but humbling ourselves like them in order to be great in the kingdom (v. 4). Little children are not self-important (tantrums aside) and don’t spend a lot of time thinking about themselves. Their faith in God is simple, solid, and a great encouragement and example. We distinguish between *childlike* faith and *childish* faith (1 Cor. 13:11; 14:20). The application to parents is obvious, but it’s bigger: “Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me” (v. 5). The church receives children into membership, at the Lord’s Supper, and in the vital work of congregational worship. We are not child-centered, but Christ-centered, so everyone comes to Him.

Stumbling Stones

It would be better, Jesus says, to hang a millstone around your neck and drown in the depth of the sea than to cause a little one who believes in Him to sin (v. 6). The word translated “sin” is *skandalizo*, same as in 17:27. He says offenses (*skandalon*) are going to come, but woe to those they come by (v. 7). People are going to make it difficult to believe in Christ, but let it not be you. You should rather cast off a hand, foot, or eye and live than keep all you “need” and be cast into hell (vv. 8-9). Jesus used the same surgical language in the Sermon on the Mount about dealing with adultery in the heart (5:27-30). Don’t compromise with sin, but pluck it out, root and all. When scandals happen in the church, for example, and the pastor runs away with the secretary, we know it began with countless compromises with sin. This causes people both to leave and slander Christ. In your home cut off at the root the sins that lead you and others away from Christ. Teach confession of sin, seek forgiveness, and let your children see you confessing your sins as much as they were public. Don’t let the sun go down on your anger. Honor their faith instead of discouraging it.

Leave the 99

Jesus came to save the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 10:6). We must not despise little ones because their angels always see the face of Jesus’ Father in heaven (v. 10). A shepherd leaves the ninety-nine and goes to the mountains to seek the one straying, and if he finds it he rejoices more than over the ninety-nine that didn’t leave (vv. 12-13). God seeks us out when we are lost and sends us out to find others (cf. Lk. 15:10). It’s not His will that any of these little ones should perish (v. 14).