

Raising Children Right

A Study of Matthew 18:1-14

Characteristic of Completeness: Family Living

Big Idea: Children are job one.

Related Scriptures: Deuteronomy 6:6-7; Proverbs 22:6;

Matthew 19:13-15; 20:20-28; Mark 10:13-16; Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21

Introduction:

- A. Last spring I attended a conference of the Grace Evangelical Society in Dallas, Texas. It's a conference where a bunch of different people present papers on various theological issues.

The first presentation I attended surprised me and challenged my thinking. It was a presentation on the importance of young children, based largely on a passage from Matthew 18.

The presentation surprised me because I thought I already knew how important little ones are. I thought I had that wired. But I didn't. I gained a fresh perspective that day—a fresh perspective on how Jesus really feels about children.

The presentation challenged me, too, because I got to thinking about my responsibility toward children. Frankly, at my stage of life it's easy to overlook them. My children are grown and married, and I don't yet have grandchildren.

Nevertheless, I still have a responsibility toward children, particularly those in our church family. As a community of believers we share a responsibility for raising and nurturing the children God has entrusted to our care, whether we happen to have young children of our own or not.

At the end of the presentation that day, I made a note to myself to study through Matthew 18, with an eye toward preaching on it. So, here I am.

- B. At Moon Valley our mission is to love God in a way that reaches another generation. Another generation certainly includes children. In fact, children represent the most reachable segment of our society. God is certainly not constrained by statistics or probabilities, but a recent study done by noted researcher George Barna indicates that children 5 to 12 years of age are about six times more likely to believe in Jesus for eternal life than those older.¹ Barna says, "Having devoted more than two decades of my life and all of my professional skills to studying and working with ministries of all

¹ George Barna, *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions: Why Children Should Be Your Church's #1 Priority*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003), 34.

types, I am now convinced that the greatest hope for the local church lies in raising godly children.”²

- C. Let me tell you what my sermon this morning is not.
1. My sermon is not an arm-twisting tactic to get you to work in our children’s ministry. I’m leaving that up to the Holy Spirit; that’s His turf.
 2. Nor is my sermon a guilt trip, designed to make you feel really lousy about something you’re not doing. Again, that’s not my turf.

I simply want you to consider with me what the Bible has to say and be open to the possibility that your perspective on children may not be big enough. Mine wasn’t.

- D. Our biblical text for the morning and the week is Matthew 18:1-14. Our ► Characteristic of Completeness is Family Living.

E. (Background)

1. Matthew ► 18:1 says,

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:1** At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

- a. The introductory phrase, ► “at that time” raises the question, when did all this happen? Well, the time is probably somewhere between April and June in AD 32, the fourth and final year of Christ’s earthly ministry.³ It is less than a year before His crucifixion.
- b. We are told that, ► “the disciples came to Jesus.” The “disciples” are probably the Twelve, but other followers are likely present.⁴ Indeed, later we find at least one child is also there.
- c. In the immediately preceding context, in Matthew 17:24, we find that the setting is a home in the town of Capernaum. This is Peter’s hometown⁵ and the home itself may in fact be Peter’s house.⁶

² Barna, 49.

³ Johnston M. Cheney and Stanley Ellisen, *Jesus Christ: The Greatest Life Ever Lived*, (n.p.: Paradise Publishing, 1999). 138, 145.

⁴ D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1985), 396.

⁵ Fausett’s Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Peter.”

⁶ Carson, 396.

- d. The disciples ask Jesus a question: ► “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” From parallel accounts of this same event in the gospels of Mark and Luke, we find that the disciples had been arguing among themselves about who would be the greatest in the coming kingdom they expected Jesus to establish in the future.⁷ So they are now appealing to Jesus to settle their argument.

So the context of this passage is the competitive environment of adults. The adults in this scene are busy trying to climb the ladder.

Things haven’t changed much. We adults are still very busy climbing ladders. Social ladders. Corporate ladders. Economic ladders. Success ladders. Educational ladders. Relative to others, we’d like to look a little better, feel a little better, perform a little better. Relative to others, we’d like to make a little more, to be respected a little more, to have a little more.

2. Back in our text, Jesus knows exactly what’s going on. And so Jesus gives an unexpected object lesson. Verse ► 2 says,

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:2** And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them

I would love to see the faces of the disciples at this point. There’s lots of testosterone in the room. The disciples have just been marking the furniture with their boastful bickering about who is the bigger man.

And Jesus brings in a boy. Or it could have been a girl; we don’t know. I like to imagine that it was a little girl; it would make the scene even more surprising. Jesus seems to like surprises.

The cultural setting here is Jewish. Jesus is a Jew. The Twelve are Jews. Capernaum is a Jewish town. A number of scholars have argued that children were commonly considered to be of little importance in that culture of the first century.⁸ Outside of the Bible, there are no known ancient Jewish texts which hold up children as examples to follow.⁹

And so, what Jesus is about to say will stand the culture on its head; it will pierce the disciples in their heart; and it will put the children in their proper place of supreme importance.

⁷ Mark 9:33b-50; Luke 9:46-50.

⁸ W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2, (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1991, 1994), 759.

⁹ Davies and Allison, 759.

From what Jesus says, I glean ► five important points that tell us how to view, how to treat, and how to raise our children. These five points are not just for parents. They are for every believer. Jesus tells us how we are to view, to treat, and to raise children together as a community of believers. The points are not so much about techniques as they are about attitudes. The points build on one another. And each successive point gets more challenging.

I. The first point comes from ► Verse 3. Jesus says,

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:3** . . . “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

A. How is it that we are to ► become like children?

Later in our text, Jesus gives us a clue. In ► Verse 6, He tells us He has in mind, “little ones who believe in me.” So, I think Jesus is referring to the simplicity of a child’s faith in Jesus as the only requirement for entering the kingdom of heaven. We get to heaven by faith, not by the machismo of works.

B. That brings us to ► Point 1: See children as prototypes for faith. Jesus holds up the simplicity of a child’s faith as a model for us. He is saying that He is looking for simple, child-like faith, not the comparison and competition of ladder-climbing adults.

II. The ► second point comes from Verse 4. Jesus says,

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:4** “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

A. Here humility would include a disregard for social status¹⁰--a disregard for who would be the greatest, because children were regarded as having very little social status and no shot at being the greatest because of their lack of learning.

B. This brings us to ► Point 2: Recognize children as examples of greatness. Jesus operates on a totally different paradigm for greatness. Greatness is not about ladder-climbing. Greatness starts with humility, much like the humble state of a child.

III. Having exposed ladder-climbing as the wrong path to true greatness, Jesus ► now focuses on the value of children. It’s a logical progression because, while ladder-climbers will almost always say children are important, their behavior demonstrates the true priority of ladder-climbing in their lives. Children are overlooked. The third point comes from ► Verse 5. Jesus says,

¹⁰ Carson, 397.

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:5** “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me”

- A. The original Greek word for ► “receives” is multifaceted. It means to “welcome, put up with, tolerate, be receptive of, be open to, approve, accept.”¹¹
- B. And when Jesus says, ► “in my name,” He means something like, “as if the child were Me,” or “as if the child were mine.”¹²
- C. Put it all together and ► here’s the third point: Embrace every child as you would Jesus.

Jesus raises the bar way up on this one. It’s one thing to see children as prototypes of faith. That’s almost cute. It’s one thing to recognize children as examples of greatness, with humility and all. Sounds noble and yet safely theoretical.

But to embrace every child as you would Jesus is a different story. It would be a whole lot easier to swallow if Jesus said, “Whoever receives *children* in my name,” that way I could just embrace the faceless idea of children in general. But Jesus says, “Whoever receives ► one such child,” suggesting that I am to “welcome, put up with, tolerate, be receptive of, be open to, approve, accept” even that one most obnoxious child, as if that child were the child of Jesus Himself.

Now this doesn’t mean we are to tolerate unacceptable behavior. It doesn’t mean we never discipline a child. It does mean that we are to be patient, loving, and careful to value every child, even the most difficult one, as if he were the child of Jesus Himself.

- D. An example of this idea of receiving a child is provided in Mark 10, beginning in ► Verse 13. Jesus is teaching His disciples some important stuff, when they are interrupted by some people who are bringing children so that Jesus might minister to them. This is not an inappropriate interruption. These are needy children who are coming for help that only Jesus can give. Verse 13 says,

^{ESV} **Mark 10:13** And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them.

The disciples are irritated by the interruption of children and so the disciples rebuke them. In Greek that means something like, “Beat it you little twerps; can’t you see we’re busy here.”

¹¹ W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “δέχομαι,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

¹² Stuart K. Weber, “Matthew,” *The Holman New Testament Commentary*, Max Anders ed., Vol. 1, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 287.

It is not often that the Scriptures portray Jesus as angry, but He's gets angry here. He's angry at the disciples. Verse ► 14 says,

^{ESV} **Mark 10:14** But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant . . .

This is the only time in the Bible that the word “indignant” is associated with Jesus. Verse 14 continues,

^{ESV} **Mark 10:14** . . . and [Jesus] said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ►¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”¹⁶ And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

The point is, we are to embrace every child as we would Jesus.

- E. I'd like to make ► a suggestion for application at this point. If you are in one of the many Life Groups here at Moon Valley, think about what your Life Group can do to help raise kids right.
1. That might involve planning a Life Group meeting centered on the children represented in your group. Maybe it could be just a social time where the kids could have some fun and get to know the adults in the Life Group. Maybe it could include a lesson helping them to apply the Bible to their lives.
 2. Or maybe your Life Group could adopt a certain part of children's ministry here on campus. Maybe your group could be responsible for simply cleaning up a particular room. Maybe you could team teach a particular class. Contact our ► Director of Children's Ministry, Gina Orr to explore the possibilities.
- IV. The ► fourth point comes from the text, beginning in Verse 6.
- A. Jesus says,

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:6** “but 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.”

1. The ► “little ones” are described as those “who believe.” So, it appears that Jesus is talking primarily about children within the Christian community, and that includes the children at Moon Valley.
2. The idea of ► causing a child to sin is expressed by a single Greek verb: *skawn-doll-ID-zo*. It means to entice or to tempt or to entrap someone to do wrong. It could be translated, ► “entrap.” And the wrong that a child might

commit from the entrapment can include doing something immoral, or falling away from Jesus, or accepting false teachings.¹³

3. To entrap doesn't absolve child of responsibility for sin, but the person who entraps is also held responsible and faces grave consequences.
4. The phrase, ► “great millstone” is literally the millstone of a donkey. It describes a millstone so big that it cannot be turned by a person; it must be turned by a donkey.

Here is a ► photo of a millstone from ancient Capernaum.¹⁴ A donkey would be harnessed to the large stone on top and would walk around the base, pulling the stone over harvested grain to grind it.

Jesus says we'd be better off swimming in the ocean with a millstone necklace than to entrap a child. Millstones make lousy swimwear.

5. So, ► Point 4 is very clear: Do not entrap children.
6. But this raises an important question: How can we entrap children? What do we do that provides a bad example for kids? What do we do that can actually encourage them to do something immoral, or to fall away from Jesus, or to accept false teachings?

A sobering reality is that, if we as parents and partners in ministry are not proactively discipling our own children in the Christian faith, if we are not teaching them how to apply the Bible to their lives, if we are not modeling what it means to be a devoted follower of Jesus Christ, in effect, we are surrendering them to our culture—a culture that certainly does encourage them to do something immoral, to fall away from Jesus, and to accept false teachings.

What do your children see in you? Do they see harmony and loving sacrifice in your marriage? Do they see integrity and respect for authority in your work? Do they see that you have compassion for other people? Do they see you reading and applying the Bible to your life? Do you talk about what God is doing in your life? Is Jesus your passion? Have they come to expect outbursts of anger as the norm? Are you doing whatever it takes to protect your kids from porn? What is the prevailing curriculum of your home? The children are watching and taking mental notes.

Do not entrap children.

¹³ BDAG, s.v. “σκανδαλίζω.”

¹⁴ Available at <http://www.ntimages.com/Israel/Capernaum/Millstone.jpg>; Internet; accessed 1 August 2006.

B. Jesus expands on the point in ► Verse 7, saying,

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:7** “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!”

1. This is a rather confusing verse. At first it seems like it doesn’t belong here, or maybe Jesus is changing subjects. But He’s not changing subjects. The word, ► “temptations” is simply the noun form of our Greek word, *skawn-doll-ID-zo* that appeared first in Verse 6. Instead of “temptations,” it could be translated, ► “entrapments.” In fact, translating it, “entrapments” makes the contextual connections clearer.
2. The clause, “For it is necessary that temptations come” is difficult to translate and understand.¹⁵ Perhaps Jesus simply means that entrapments are inevitable, but those who entrap children are nonetheless going to be held responsible.

C. Then Jesus commands a radical, whatever-it-takes approach to avoiding the sin of entrapping children in ► Verses 8-9. He says,

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:8** And 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 crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. ►⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

1. The phrase, ► “causes you to sin” comes once again from the Greek word, *skawn-doll-ID-zo*.
2. There is something interesting going on here that you can’t see in English. Up to Verse 8, Jesus has been addressing His hearers as a group using plural verbs and pronouns. For example, back in Verse 2 when Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you,” the “you” is plural. After Verse 9, He also uses the plural.

But here in Verses 8 and 9, Jesus uses the singular. I suspect it is to create a healthy tension and to invite very personal application. Perhaps Jesus singles out individuals in His audience as He speaks to lend gravity to what He is saying. I can imagine Jesus, looking at Peter directly as He says, “if your hand

¹⁵ Part of the problem is that the Greek word translated, “necessary” can also mean “calamity.” Every English translation that I can find takes it to mean something like “necessary.” If I take the word to mean “calamity,” Verse 7 could be translated this way: “Woe to the world because of the entrapments, for calamity comes from the entrapments, yet woe to the person through whom the entrapment comes.” This is grammatically possible and makes good sense to me, but no Bible version I can find translates it this way. So perhaps I am missing something.

or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.” And then maybe He turns to John and says, “And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.”

That would have gotten my attention! Jesus seems to use every communication technique to bring home the gravity of Point 4: Do not entrap children.

V. The ► fifth point begins in Verse 10.

A. Jesus says,

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:10** “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. . . .”

1. At first blush, this does not seem all that challenging because “despise” seems like an awfully strong word. Generally, when we use the term “despise” in English, we’re using it as a synonym for strong emotional words like, “hate,” or “loathe,” or “detest.” I don’t imagine there are many here who hate children in this way.
2. But the Greek word translated, ► “despise” need not be as emotionally charged. The Greek word *ka-ta-fro-NEH-o* means, “to look down on someone with contempt or aversion, with implication that one considers the object of little value”¹⁶

Let me give you an illustration of what the Greek word means. If you are walking down a busy sidewalk and you happen to see an old, dirty penny lying in the gutter by itself, do you go out of your way to pick it up? If you don’t pick it up, you “*ka-ta-fro-NEH-o*” it, or you despise it. You see, “despising” need not have any hateful emotions attached to it. It can simply be a choice to consider something not valuable enough for your time and attention.

3. Jesus is saying, “Don’t overlook the children. Don’t treat them lightly. Don’t take them for granted. Don’t blow them off. Don’t treat them like pennies.” On the contrary, we are to make children a top priority. And that is ► the fifth and final point: Make children a top priority.

B. Jesus shows just how valuable every child is.

1. Notice here in Verse 10 that Jesus does not say, “do not despise *children*.” He says, “do not despise ► *one* of these little ones.” Not one.

¹⁶ BDAG, s.v. “καταφρονέω.”

Throughout our entire text, Jesus takes pains to point out children as individuals. In Verse 2, He calls to Himself *one* child. In Verse 4, He says, “*this* child.” In Verse 5, He says, “*one* such child.” In Verse 6, He says “*one* of these little ones.” The implication is that every single child matters; every child is important.

2. In the last part of ► Verse 10, Jesus says that children are so important that the Father has assigned them angels. He says,

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:10** “. . . For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.”

The picture is of angels as agents of God taking care of children. The angels “always see the face” of the Father; that is, they are constantly attentive to God’s disposition toward every child. Each child is that important.

3. (Verse 11 is not in some of the oldest manuscripts, and is therefore excluded by some English translations, including the *English Standard Version* that I’m using for this sermon. The *New King James Version* renders Verse 11 this way: “For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.”)

4. In ► Verses 12-14, Jesus tells a concluding story, further illustrating the importance of every child. He says,

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:12** What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ►¹³ And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.¹⁴ So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

The point is every child is important to God.¹⁷ There are no “pennies.”

The word, ► “perish” may sound like Jesus is talking about death, or maybe even salvation from hell, be here it simply means to be lost or ruined. The Shepherd does not want any of His little lambs to be led astray by corrupting influences.

¹⁷ Some of the verbs in Verses 12-14 are in the passive voice, such that “has gone astray” could be translated “has been led astray;” “the one that went astray” could be translated “the one that was led astray;” and “never went astray” could be translated “were not led astray.” This seems to fit the context in which adults are being warned against leading children astray because every child is valuable.

Conclusion:

Well, ► we've covered all the principles. But it's going to be tough to remember all these. Let me boil it down to one big idea. Here ► it is: Children are job one.

I chose these words carefully to convey a double meaning. It conveys the importance of all children. And it conveys the importance of one child. It makes our job both big and little. It's big in that we've been entrusted with raising the next generation among us. It's little in that you can start, you can do your part, you can make a difference by relating to just one child. One.

Is there one child you can encourage? Is there one child you can embrace? Is there one child you can talk to over a root beer float? Is there one child you can nourish? Is there one child you could pray for? Is there one child you can tutor? Is there one child to whom you could write a note?

Of course, there is. Children are job one.