

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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UNLESS YOU BECOME LIKE CHILDREN

Matthew 18:1-4

The Lord Jesus, in His teaching, used the example of a child as a model of true discipleship. Most Christians know this passage in Matthew 18 where Jesus instructed His disciples to 'become like children.' Let's read it from v. 1 to v. 4.

Matthew 18:1. At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

2 And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them,

3 and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

4 Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Worldly ambition

Thinking of their own advancement, the disciples asked, *Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?* This question followed closely a prediction that Jesus would die. The Lord said that He was going to be delivered into the hands of men and they will kill Him, but He will rise again on the third day (Matthew 16:21). Convinced that Jesus was the Messiah but not understanding how He could literally rise again, the minds of the disciples were focused exclusively on the idea that somehow He was about to set up the Messianic kingdom. Though Jesus had recently declared it impossible to follow Him except in self-renunciation (Matthew 16:24), here they were looking forward to becoming chiefs of state in His kingdom and they wished to know who should have the highest office.

But the Lord Jesus said, 'You are going in the wrong direction. You are thinking in terms of earthly glory, in terms of power, fame, wealth, honor, position. I am going in the opposite direction. I am going to an earthly death and humiliation.'

Greatness in the view of men differs much from greatness in the sight of God. The disciples could not see that Jesus came, not to glorify Himself, but to humble Himself. Because that was the only way salvation could be accomplished. This self-humbling is called the 'narrow road' in the Sermon on the Mount.

The first last and the last first

The disciples' question gave Jesus an opportunity to teach them something completely unexpected. He reverses their perspective of greatness by this paradox: If you want to be the greatest,

you have to be the least. *Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

I think that the best word we can use to describe Jesus' teaching is the word 'revolutionary'. His teaching is revolutionary. In this world, we often apply the word 'revolution' to something that is really not much of a revolution. The outward form may change, but the essence remains the same. And we call that a revolution.

Here the Lord Jesus says that to attain something in the kingdom of God, you don't subject other people to you. You must subject yourself to others and become the least. Everything is reversed. You ascend by willingly going down.

How do we go down? Jesus uses the example of a child. *Whoever ... humbles himself as this child.* You humble yourself like this child. This is not to say that children are always in the habit of humbling themselves. That is not the point. I don't think that many people would regard humility as characteristic of children. The point is that we, who are already grown up, we turn back and become children again. To go back from adulthood to childhood, to lower yourself down to the level of a child when you have already become mature, that is humbling oneself. So the point is not that children are humble. The point is that spiritual greatness requires humility, which is defined here by a radical change of orientation in a person's life.

You see why I said that Jesus' teaching is revolutionary. It goes against all our human inclinations, against all the ambitions we had since our childhood. As a child, we always wanted to grow up. And now that we are grown up, we are told to *become like children* (v. 3).

The humility of Christ

I would like you to notice that the notion of humility, of self-abnegation, of going down rather than going up, was already there in the previous section, in Matthew 17:24-27. Let's read it and see in what way it is related to the theme of self-humbling.

Matthew 17:24. When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the half-shekel tax went up to Peter and said, "Does not your teacher pay the tax?"

25 He said, "Yes." And when he came home, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their sons or from others?"

26 And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free.

27 However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook, and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel; take that and give it to them for me and for yourself."

This tax was not the Roman tax, but the temple tax of half a shekel paid by the Jews for the public sacrifices and the upkeep of their temple. Payment could be made in person at the Passover festival in Jerusalem, but collections were also made in many other places. The 'collectors' here were probably the temple commissioners who went through Palestine annually.

These collectors came to Peter and asked him, 'Does your Master pay the tax?' Peter said, 'Yes, He pays the tax.' Nothing tells us that he was hesitant in his response. Perhaps he knew from previous years that it was Jesus' practice to pay the temple tax. Otherwise I doubt that Peter would have answered a question concerning his Master based on assumptions.

Jesus used this situation to ask Peter a question. He said, 'Tell Me, Peter, from whom the kings of this world collect taxes? Do they collect taxes from their own children? Or do they collect taxes from strangers, i.e., those who are not their sons and daughters?'

Well, the answer is obvious. The kings of the earth do not collect taxes from their family members because to do so would be to tax themselves. To tax their children is like giving them money with one hand, and taking it back with the other. Clearly, they don't do that. They tax other people, not their own household.

Peter, of course, knew that.

'In that case,' the Lord said, 'the children are free. Taxes are not required of them.'

But who is the ruler of the temple? No human could claim that title. The reference must be to God. God owns the temple. What about the 'sons' who are exempt to pay the temple tax? The obvious reference in context is to Jesus Himself, whose payment of tax was the subject of the question. But the plural indicates that the disciples, the children of the kingdom, also share in this privilege. They are free from the burden of the temple tax.

Notice now Jesus' attitude. Although the children are not obligated to pay taxes to their Father, yet Jesus is willing to pay it. He did not want people to think that He despised the temple and its service, and thus provoke needless opposition.

We are back to this matter of humbling oneself. Jesus did not say to the tax collectors, 'Do you know who I am? Do you know that My Father owns the temple? And you are asking Me to pay half a shekel?' Rather, he said to Peter, 'Though I am the Son, and Son in the sense that is higher than any of you could be called sons of God, yet I will pay the tax. And you will also pay the tax.' Here we see the great humility of Christ. Though He was the Son of God, He humbled Himself to this level where He was willing to stand with all the others who are taxable and be taxed along with them.

Notice also the extent to which He has humbled Himself. He who was the Son of God, by whom all things were created, did not have half a shekel to pay the temple tax. The half shekel was roughly the equivalent of two days' wages. Jesus didn't have that money. Most likely, the treasurer (Judas) was not present at the time. He was the one who carried the bag in which the disciples put their money together (John 12:6; 13:29). In his absence, there was no money to pay the tax with.

This is the reason why He had to ask Peter to catch a fish. The money for the tax would be found in the fish's mouth. He said to Peter, 'Go and catch a fish. In the first fish that you bring up, you will find in its mouth a shekel. Take it and use it to pay My tax and yours.'

The instruction of Jesus to Peter is quite puzzling. It seems that He did something He normally does not do, i.e., He performed a miracle for His own convenience. Jesus could have said to Peter, 'Catch a few fish and sell them in the market place. And give that money to the tax collectors.' That could have worked too. The tax would have been paid. But think about it. If He had done that, it would have altered the principle that because He is God's Son, He was free of the tax.

Jesus' action should be understood in this way. Since the sons are free, the Father will pay the tax. God will provide that coin in the mouth of the fish to pay it. The primary function of the miracle is therefore to provide a sign to underline the truth of Jesus' point that the children of God do not themselves have to pay the tax. And He made His point without causing any offence.

So here we see the proof of Jesus' divinity. He knew that the first fish that came up would have a coin in its mouth. That truly is remarkable. And yet, the Son of God humbled Himself to the place where He did not even have the money to pay the temple tax.

You shall not enter the kingdom

Then, after all this, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is going to be the greatest in the kingdom?' They obviously did not understand the humility of Christ. They did not understand the kingdom of God.

You know, I wonder if Jesus was tempted to say in His heart at that moment, 'You, guys, are totally hopeless. You are so dull spiritually! I think I am going to dismiss you. Just go home. I have been trying to teach you all this time the values of the kingdom by word and by example. And now you ask Me, 'Who will be the greatest?'

But observe His response. He called a child and said, 'Let me tell you something about being great. Look at this child here. The greatest in the kingdom of God is the person who humbles himself like this child. And not only that, if you don't humble yourself as this child, you will not even enter the kingdom.' *Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, **you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.***

Forget about greatness. Seek to get in. Not only are childlike people the greatest in the kingdom; only childlike people get into the kingdom. Thus what seems to be at first a piece of valuable moral advice (i.e. being humble), Jesus now makes it a matter of life or death, being in the kingdom or out of it.

This solemn warning uses the same language about 'entering into the kingdom' that appeared previously in Matthew.

*Matthew 5:20. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never **enter the kingdom** of heaven.*

*Matthew 7:21. Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall **enter the kingdom** of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*

The use of that expression here in Matthew 18:3 is surprising because Jesus was speaking to the disciples and we assume that the disciples were already within God's kingship, as opposed to those depicted in Matthew 5:20 and 7:21 who are in danger of never being in the kingdom. Was Jesus then suggesting that their position as disciples remained uncertain?

Well, the least we can say is that their concern for status is incompatible with God's values, and that true discipleship requires the eradication of this human tendency. There is no room for complacency, even for those who are in the faith. But it seems to me that by the word 'turn', *unless you turn*, Jesus was saying something more: If they continue to pursue the path of secular greatness, if they do not change direction, there is a real possibility that they will never get into the kingdom. They were on the broad road which leads to destruction and they had to turn themselves completely. They had to head in a new direction by taking the narrow road, by becoming like children.

Becoming like children

Now, what does it mean to 'become as a child'? Let's go back to that sentence in v. 3. 'Unless you turn and become.' The first thing we need to do in order to enter the kingdom of God is to turn, turn from the direction we are going. It implies a complete change of attitude. The word 'turn' is related to the idea of repentance. It is actually equivalent to repent. So 'to turn' has to do with our attitude towards sin. There must be a change in our attitude with regard to evil. We must turn away from sin.

This is what Paul means in 1 Corinthians 14:20. He says, *In evil be babes*. Little children do not understand the intricate ways of evil. In that sense, they are innocent and harmless. So Paul says to the Corinthians, 'Where evil is concerned, have a childlike attitude. Be free from malice as babes are.' Therefore to become a child means that you have turned your back on evil. You don't understand evil and you don't want to understand evil.

'Unless you turn and become like children.' Now look at the word 'become'. Being a Christian is to be some kind of a person. It is not just to do something. It is not just to believe in certain things. It is to be a kind of person who is described here as a child. So here is my second point. To become a child means that God has to do something in our life. Because by nature, we are not children anymore. To become something other than what we are involves a fundamental transformation.

The parallel to this is found in John 3:3-5. Jesus said, 'You must be born again in order to see the kingdom of God.' Nicodemus could not understand that statement. 'How can it be? Does that mean that I should go into my mother's womb and be born again?' Not at all. It has to be an act of God. God has to transform you and I. The question that Nicodemus asked is the same question that we have in Matthew 18. How can I be a little child when I am already grown up? It is impossible except by God's power. God has to do this work of transformation. So first, we have to turn. But just the turning is not enough. We need the life that comes from God. This transforming power is what is meant by 'regeneration' in the Bible.

And finally, the third thing about becoming a child is that we must be willing to be without status in this world. A child was a person of no importance in the Jewish society. He had no place in the hierarchy of authority and decision making. He was not taken seriously except as a responsibility, one to look after, not one to be looked up to. And Jesus said, 'You need to become as little children, unconcerned for social status and, in fact, be socially insignificant. That is a very difficult thing for any of us. We all want to be respected. We all want people to look up to us. But Jesus calls us to be a social nonentity, a nobody in this world, like a child.'