

V. The Church lives because of this truth, and moves out into the world!

A. This revolutionizes the way we deal with one another in our congregation (1 John 4:10-11).

B. This truth sends us out with compassion, regarding the smallest, most vulnerable members of society as children to be cherished and worthy of the most care and protection. They are the greatest (Matthew 18:5, 25:40). This is very counter-cultural, but it is very Christian and very Lutheran.

Take some time now to discuss the implications of Jesus' "backwards understanding" of the "greatest" to the life issues. What does it say about those in a crisis pregnancy, abortion, embryonic stem cell research, those hurting because of a past abortion, and end-of-life issues?

Concluding Prayer:

Jesus, You have helped us understand that the greatest, most significant person is precisely the one who is in greatest need of care, nurture, and protection. May Your Spirit strengthen us to apply this to our lives together in this congregation. May Your Spirit embolden us to share this truth with compassion so that through our words and deeds others might come to understand and put into practice what it means to cherish the children. In Your holy name, Amen.

Cherish the Children: Jesus' Backwards Understanding of "Who is the Greatest"
(Matthew 18:1-10 ESV) written by Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs

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Cherish the Children: Jesus' Backwards Understanding of "Who is the Greatest?" (Matthew 18:1-10 ESV)

I. The biblical context - Read Matthew 18:10.

A. "These little ones" are important according to this verse. But who are they?

1. "One of these little ones who _____."
(18:6). These people are VERY important!

2. How does verse 5 enhance their importance?

B. So, is Jesus talking about literal children, or "children," or both? Let's see.

II. The source of Jesus' teaching (Matthew 18:1-4)

A. The disciples' approach and ask a question.

1. "Who is the _____?" (18:1) Most, if not all of the time, the disciples' questions reflect the fact that they don't quite get it. (See 18:21.)

2. What do you suppose they had in mind as the "greatest"?

B. Jesus has to change the subject before He can answer their question.

1. What is His object lesson? (18:2)

2. Instead of talking about being the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, He first talks about getting into the kingdom. In 18:3, what two things must the disciples do to enter the kingdom?

3. Now Jesus answers their question. Who is the greatest? (18:4)

C. The critical question we moderns must answer is, "What does it mean to become 'like children'?"

III. Children in the Ancient World

A. “Reading back” modern views.

One of the dangers of interpreting Scripture is to assume a modern view of a word or phrase. So, is our modern view of what it means to be “like a child” the same as it was for Jesus’ disciples?

B. The modern view of children.

1. Most of the time common sense prevails for us, and we know what children are.
2. But “the pedestal” is lurking! Complete this phrase: “Everything I ever needed to know I learned ____.”
3. For us, children can be positive role models of innocence, humility, and trust.
4. So, fill in the blank as moderns: “To be like a child is to be ____.”

C. Greco-Roman Views on Children.

1. Certainly there were ancient parents who loved their children. But, as one writer put it, children were essentially thought of as being “uninformed adults who lacked reason and thereby required training, which included beating.”
2. Roman custom also allowed for the grim practice of *expositio*—letting children who were “unacceptable” die by exposure or be found by others and raised as slaves.
3. In the Greco-Roman world then, children are not positive role models for adults to imitate.

D. View on Children in the Old Testament.

1. Children are a blessing . . . but read Psalm 127:3-5 for the answer why!
2. But generally, children are not used as positive role models in the Old Testament. Some examples: Ecclesiastes 10:16, Isaiah 3:1-4,

Isaiah 7:16, Isaiah 10:18-19, Proverbs 22:15, Proverbs 29:15.

E. Children as role models in the New Testament? Scarcely a trace of this is visible.

1. There is one positive: Be like new-born babies (1 Peter 2:2).
2. Don’t be immature like children (1 Corinthians 3:1; 13:11).
3. Don’t be like whining children (Matthew 11:16-17).

Conclusion: In Matthew’s Gospel as in the rest of the Bible, to be “like a child” is to be weak, in need of protection, unlearned, unable to fend for yourself, small, vulnerable—even when the child is the Son of God (Matthew 2)!

IV. What does Jesus mean, then, in Matthew 18:3-4?

A. He uses a literal child.

Remember, this child would NOT be regarded as a pattern for adult life. But He tells His disciples they must TURN, and be like this child. What is Jesus getting at? With Jesus, who receives the kingdom? (See Matthew 5:3.)

B. The definition of “greatest” is changed!

Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest—the most important—in the kingdom of heaven. Who, then, is that?

1. In the most important sense, we are all “children” equally needy (Romans 3:23).
2. It is also anyone struggling and in need. It is those “unpresentable,” the weakest, struggling member of your church (1 Corinthians 12: 20-26).
3. The Gospel is God’s upside-down way of doing things. (See Matthew 11:25-27.) This Gospel sets us apart from so many others. In God’s plan, the most important people are the least important people. God cherishes such children. For those who can give nothing, God gives Jesus, His everything.