

St. Timothy Bible Study

Closing lecture, January 30, 2018

Matthew 18

Intro:

- The importance of first understanding the context of a biblical passage
- Here, the use of a child is a great example
- Problem: our understanding of children is much different now

Children in biblical times

- Basically, property
- Might think of them as a slave
- They had no rights – none
- Therefore:
 - o A child had zero status
 - o No one would listen to or care about anything that a child would say
 - “seen and not heard” would have been a fact, not a saying
 - o In terms of power, a child was at the low end and maybe at the very bottom

You can see why Jesus’ choice of a child would be so radical

- “Who’s greatest?” a child?
 - o Note the word “humble” in vs. 4. An adult would have to humble themselves to adopt the situation of a powerless, vulnerable child

Perhaps you can also see where Jesus’ choice isn’t as radical if we are only thinking of children today

But it is still possible to bring this forward – to apply this to 21st century America.

First, note the word “change” in vs. 3. “Unless you change and become...”

- Jesus is pointing out that the disciples are going in the wrong direction.
- “He was warning them that they were going in completely the wrong direction, away from the Kingdom of Heaven and not towards it. In life it is all a question of what a man is aiming at; if he is aiming at the fulfilment of personal ambition, the acquisition of personal power, the enjoyment of personal prestige, the exaltation of self, he is aiming at precisely the opposite of the Kingdom of Heaven; for to be a citizen of the Kingdom means the complete forgetting of self, the obliteration of self, the spending of a self in a life which aims at service and not at power. So long as a man considers his own self as the most important thing in the world, his back is turned to the Kingdom; if he wants ever to reach the Kingdom, he must turn around and face in the opposite direction (William Barclay, commentary on Matthew, vol. 2, pgs. 174-5).

How can we do this?

- Consider some general attributes of all young children throughout time

Dependence:

- By their nature children are dependent, completely dependent, on others

Trust

- That dependence leads to trust. The child trusts that their needs will be met
- Food, clothing, shelter, safe journeys

Simplicity of life: A child doesn't have much; doesn't know much

What's that look like in our lives?

- Disclaimer about the personal examples I use
 - o Not bragging; we can all think of ways where we fall short in this area. I want to offer a few positive examples.
 - o There are plenty of areas where I'm still not on board

Dependence & trust

- We say we are dependent on God but do we act that way?
 - o "Let go and let God"?
- There is a tension here
 - o Extremes of "it is all on me" and "I'm not doing anything"
 - Example: If I think it is all up to me then I may well "can't afford" to tithe
 - Example: dependence and planning for retirement
- Good personal test: Is there a difference between the way we handle things and the way our unconverted friends do? Do we show dependence and trust in God?
- Perhaps it comes down to attitude. Do I think that it all depends on me?
 - o Example / question: Do you accept offers of help?
 - Do we avoid it because we will feel indebted?
- Examples:
 - o Personal example: going to seminary – all the unknowns
 - o Irma
 - Difference between prudent planning and worry
 - Not worrying about the large pine trees around my house
 - I couldn't do anything about it
 - Not an issue of trusting that God would keep the trees up; rather that God would be with me regardless of what happened
 - o Worrying about the news
 - Being informed is good; worrying about things outside of your control isn't
 - Politically active? Yes
 - Worrying about acts of terror or N. Korea? No

- Simplicity of life
 - The amount of time our possessions take up
 - Cleaning; maintenance
 - Swing set; toaster
 - We worry about our stuff
 - It isn't that these things are bad, it is just that they can get in the way
 - Important: This plays out differently for different people
 - Example: cleaning out my kitchen and seeing cabinets containing only what I need

Conclusion

- Clearly this needs some thought
- I find that I need to work at this; constantly asking questions
 - Needed to ask myself why I turned down that offer of help before I got to the point where I could regularly accept
- It might help to remember that Jesus is a role model of this
 - We tend to think of God in terms of power – he has it, we don't; but this doesn't fit with what Jesus is telling us – this upside down view of the world
 - Instead we need to remember that God gave up power (Jesus humbled himself in the Incarnation)
- I only told you the "good stories." I've made some progress in this over the last few years.
 - I don't think seminary would have been possible if I hadn't made some progress with this in the years prior to my sense of call
 - I'm way more content now than before
 - I can't imagine going back