

Humble Children

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[0 : 0 0] I would like to turn back to Matthew chapter 18. Today is not a deep exegetical sermon unpacking the deep truths of this passage. I am rather going to be simple and clear, I hope, and thematic. We are going to look at verse 4 of chapter 18, where Jesus uses the example of a little child and say, truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. We are reminded of the great counterintuitive nature of the message of Jesus Christ. He always did things that people did not expect.

He would take a little child who everyone else was saying, go away, the master is busy, he is far too important to deal with children. You will need to speak to the bouncers first or whatever it was. People generally, children were to be seen at best but not heard. Yet Jesus draws the child in, takes the children, sits them on his knee and uses them as an illustrator. Just as he did with so many other ordinary things, he used them as illustrations for deep spiritual truth, counter-cultural, revolutionary, radical in his teaching. Whenever we get to the place where we sit back and feel proud or feel that we know it all or feel that we are important or significant, Jesus needs to accept me because of who I am. I am doing Jesus a great favour to be in his kingdom. Then we need to listen and learn from what Jesus says about the gospel and about children and humility. There is a great oxymoron that we could use, the proud Christian. It should never happen, it should not be the case. We should never be people who are in our relationships, in our understanding of the gospel, in our theology, in our conversation, in the way we reach out to people. We should never be proud. There is simply no place for us as believers to say, look at me, or to say, compared to them, I am such and such. The gospel reminds us that narrow is the way into the kingdom, and that is because proud heads swell and simply cannot follow Jesus into the narrow way. There is a great humbling of ourselves coming to Christ. What I want to do is learn from children. It is a bit daft to do that today, because not all children are here. They have all been at the earlier service, they all got up early, three or four hours of worship before they came to church, came to the early service and they are now going back to fast for the rest of the day. For the rest of us, we can still imagine that the children are here, and you can think of children you know and learn from them as we go through this passage. We learn from the little children and think of what some of the other verses in scripture have to say about children and about using them as an illustration of living the Christian life. The first thing I would like to say is the importance of little children and the importance of learning from them. I want us to learn from them through the teaching of the New Testament very briefly this morning. We learn and recognise, apart from the humility of entering the kingdom of heaven and all that

Jesus says here, is the great sense that Jesus used the example of children because they have, intuitively within them, a great sense of belonging. There is this great sense in which children feel secure and safe in the family environment. Now Ben mentioned a little bit about that on Wednesday night when he was leading the prayer meeting and he talked about being afraid when he went to bed at night with the curtains open. Then when his parents didn't feel quite secure until his parents came into the bedroom and closed the curtains.

He couldn't do it but he knew they would come and close the curtains in from the moment he closed the curtains. Everything was safe and secure. That is just an illustration and a picture of the sense of belonging that children enjoy and know in the best of families. We know that in the world and even as we think of illustrations using children we recognise in this broken and sinful world that it is not always the case. But we recognise in a home of love and in a home of security. There is this great belonging and there is great sense in which this is their whole world. This is what is significant to them and the thoughts and the attitudes and the opinions of their parents are really the opinions

that matter. I am generally speaking about younger, smaller children as I think Jesus is mainly speaking about when he uses little children as an illustration. At that time when they first leave home, we are talking about raising funds today for camps, the first time they leave home and go to camp. They are homesick because their mum is not there, their dad is not there. It could be a terrible thing to be homesick to lose that sense of belonging, to lose that sense of security and to lose that sense of being part of that family which in many ways is the whole world and kids do not really know what is going on in the world and they do not know of a lot of the anguish that maybe their parents are going through because their parents shelter them from that. In the same way Romans 8.16 says the spirit testifies himself, testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. There is this great sense that we also know and understand the belonging that comes from accepting Jesus

Christ and humbly falling at the foot of the cross, recognising our spiritual need and asking Jesus to redeem us and asking the Holy Spirit to come into our hearts and to enable us to be assured that we belong to Jesus Christ and that in him all is safe. I think this week that is a hugely significant thing for us. Nations rise and fall and the political environment is so unstable at the moment. It is a great thing and I do believe there are a lot of my friends and a lot of colleagues, not colleagues in the ministry but people I know who have been really hugely unsettled by what has happened this week. As it were, their whole world has been their expectation and the future hope they had for themselves and their children. They feel has been broken apart. I am not taking any sides and any referendum here but there is that sense of tremendous instability. It is a great reminder to us that these great nation states and these great leaders and great formulations of political power come and go and through the centuries there has been and yet we have in Jesus Christ a great sense of belonging. Let us not forget that and let us not fail to take that opportunity to testify to the solidity and the security and the belonging that we have in Jesus Christ.

[7 : 30] We belong to him. Even though we die yet we will live in him and nation states will rise and fall for better or worse but we must pray and seek that this will be for better. However, that will happen. Whatever the final decision would have been we look for it to be better for us and above all for it to be spiritually good. It is a great sense of belonging that we learn from children. There is also a great sense of innocence in children. I think that is part of what Jesus says here and what he says elsewhere. You know what? Kids take things that face value. There is an innocence about them. For me I love that because I can tell them lies and they believe me. It is as nice as a parent. It is great. You can tell kids all kinds of things if they do not behave as a monster behind the door and it is going to bite their head off if they do not go to bed. All these kinds of things we can tell them lots of things because they love us and because they believe us and because we are their parents. There is a great innocence there. There is a great transparency. Our children were very poor and probably remained to this day very poor at lying. When they lie we could see right through them. We knew exactly how they were lying. You are not telling the truth because there is a transparency very often when truth is valued in a home. There is generally not a cynicism about children. I know the world in which we live and I know the brokenness of the world and I know the sad thing that we often see younger and younger children at primary and primary level becoming less and less innocent and more and more cynical and more and more adult like. That is not right. That is not how God intended it. There is an innocence of childhood that is being lost I believe in the society in which we live. Interestingly in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul says, in regard to evil be infants. He wants us to use that understanding of infants of very young children who have that innocence and that naivety about them. He wants us to apply that spiritually to our lives and he wants you mature, holy, grown up Christians. When it comes to evil be like little children, be naive. We do not need to be worldly wise when it comes to evil. I need to know all these things so I can speak into them and I can understand them and realise what is going on. It is a good thing to be naive. It is a good thing to be innocent when it comes to evil. We do not need to seek it out. There is plenty of it. So in our Christian lives we listen to what Paul says and with regard to evil we are innocent. We are not to be attracted to sinful, evil behaviour. We are not to be hypocritical or too faced or cynical in our Christian lives or cynical about other Christians saying, well that is not what they really like. We are not to make judgments that are deeply cynical about the world in which we live and that those around us we are to have that sense and that degree of innocence and transparency. Jesus above all things hates hypocrisy, does not he? He speaks about it most. Looking like one thing publicly, acting like another thing in our own lives and in our own hearts. With regard to lust and greed and selfishness and all of these respectable sins that we can hide and that are not classified. We recognise them and see

them and in our lives we are to be winsome, we are to be ethical, we are to be morally upright. That is a reversal process that goes on. We learned in the second half of that verse in 1 Corinthians 14 that we are to be mature when it comes to learning.

But there is a reversal of our life when it comes to innocence and when it comes to morality and when it comes to ethical purity. We are to become more and more childlike, more and more pure and that for you, because it will be for me and is a daily battle. If you go into tomorrow thinking you do not need Jesus, thinking you do not need the Holy Spirit, thinking you do not need a miracle of grace to take you through that day, then I do not think you understand your own heart and I do not think you understand fully the gospel and I am sure none of us ultimately do recognise our own heart. So there is that great sense in which we are to learn innocence from them. I think also we are to have as we learn from children and become like little children an eagerness to learn. Kids generally speaking have a huge brain capacity. Coming to my age your brain is dying, very slow, you are not learning things, it takes ages to write sermons, more and more. But young I think between the ages of three and ten, the age when kids or people learn most, their brains are tremendous, they are like sponges and they are eager to learn and they are eager to mimic and follow and take example from others. They learn good and bad examples, because I say parents be very careful because your kids will learn good and bad examples from you and when you first see your kid do something that you are angry with that you recognise because you did it.

And they are quick to mimic and they are quick to example and they are quick to learn and yet that is a great thing that we are to mimic in our own lives as believers. 1 Peter 1 14 says and he uses strong language here as obedient children, obedient children to Jesus, he says don't conform with the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance, he wants us to learn. But also from Matthew 11 he says take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. So you come to worship and part of that experience of worship is learning, it is learning from God's word, it is coming to church and saying right ok we are going to open scripture, we are going to hear God's word being explained, we believe the Holy Spirit uses that, the Holy Spirit knows the weak that I have come from, the Holy Spirit knows my heart as I have come in, the Holy Spirit wants to teach me from His word and I am willing to learn. So a preacher's jobs made really easy if you come with that attitude, if you come saying what is God going to say from His word, because remember I have to say that too, it is not like you are coming saying, what about Derek has got to say new and exciting or corny or tough, it is that we are all under the word and we all come and if we are not taught by it first ourselves very unlikely we will be able to teach and bring that to others. But that makes the preacher's job tremendously easy, if you come with a heart that will draw out the truth, because you know there is a sense in the spirit works, he will draw out the truth from the preacher in a great way that makes it a lot easier to preach, but if you come and say ok I am going to give the preacher a mark of a tent today and I dare him to make me interested, he is really going to have to work hard to get my attention because I am bored and I have got lots in my mind and I want him to come with a sahadah baked sermon, he is going to have to really impress me with new knowledge and new insight and things I have not learned before. That generally, and I can say these things because I have been there, I do that and it is easy to do isn't it? And I am not saying love me, love me, I am thick, but what

I am saying is that there is a sense in which you must draw out the truth with a humility, we must be humbly under the word and we must listen for what God is saying with an eagerness to learn so that we can maybe come at the end of the service or go home, maybe 20 minutes or half an hour or an hour after the service is sayable. I wonder if he did that today, how many of you remember the passage we read from or would be able to say, man God really knows what is in my heart today, he absolutely knows what I needed to hear or he spoke very powerfully in something in the singing or in the prayer or in the call to worship that Derek could not possibly know anything about it. So there is a revisit the word, revisit the preaching and apply it to digest that truth, allow it to go because generally what happens after church is we all talk together which is great and which is completely natural and it would be unnatural to do anything else. But in so doing don't let the seed that sown becomes sown on hard ground, go back at some point in the day and take the word and apply it and let it nurture and let it grow and let it be stimulated in your mind and let it progress through the word of God. So an eagerness to learn, but also that great sense of being under discipline, children whether they would verbalise it or not, they recognise instinctively and intuitively that they are under discipline, they will ask if they are a right good children for permission, I remember the day when

kids used to have to leave the table after a meal, do any kids do that today, I am not sure our kids certainly don't, but it was a nice thing. Can I leave the table, I should really ask hands up if you all did that, maybe you didn't. But it is just a mark of recognising being under discipline, we were talking with the kids today about being obedient to your parents and we got some great examples of obeying and of disobeying and of what it means to be under their parents and all that went with that and yet there is that recognition within them that they know they are under discipline. If any of your parents or have been small children, which you all have, then you will remember possibly the day when you did something wrong and you hid in the cupboard because you didn't want to be found out, you knew you had done something wrong, it was just like Adam and Eve in the garden, they hid from God, it is an utterly natural reaction and we do it, we hide, we hide from God and we hide from our parents when we have done something wrong. But as obedient children, verse Peter 1, 14, do not conform to the evil that disaster you had when you lived in ignorance, so there is a sense that we recognise, as the children recognise in the Lord, under the Lord, that we are under discipline, loving, good, protective, perfect, sovereign, blessed discipline. A great thing, the parameters that we so badly need are given to us by the Lord because He loves us, because they are parameters that are painted in His blood, they are parameters that are given to us because of His work on the cross that allow us to follow Him and serve Him and love Him because of who He is. And we recognise, if we know our own hearts, that we need His discipline, that we need His guidance because our hearts move towards unbelief and they move towards disobedience because of their remaining sin and as Hebrews 12, 5, my son, my child, do not make light of the Lord's discipline and don't lose heart when the Lord rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those He loves. Are we mature enough in our faith to recognise the Lord's discipline? Or do we find that when things go wrong for us or when we feel that God has been mean to us, we are just angry with Him, that we can't discern the difference between discipline, loving discipline and kind of vindictive wrath? But we choose the latter because it is easier to rebel against it, rather than humbly like little children recognising God knows best. And there will be things He will do for us and do with us in our lives to draw us back to Himself. And any parent here will know as their children grow older, the heartache of being a parent, the heartache of trying to draw our children away from things that are wrong. And we are powerless to do so in many cases and often. And maybe as children you are aware of having rebellion against your parents in tremendously hurtful and brutal ways. And yet Jesus and our Father in heaven will deal with us perfectly and will draw us to Himself. And if we stick our fingers up at Him and rebel as believers, He will not leave us. He will draw us back to Himself with cords of love, but it may be in ways that will break us and break our pride. Because

[21 : 07] He knows pride is disastrous and is cancerous for us. So we are under discipline. I think also kids, and just a couple of things before we close, kids also are those who don't pretend, I don't think, to have all the answers. Kids, as I said, they are learning all the time and they are quite open about not knowing, generally speaking, unless they are know-alls.

But generally speaking kids will ask, when they don't know, they are willing to learn, they don't pretend to have all the answers. And they will easily bewilder and easily confused. Why? Why is this? Why should that happen? And they want to know more and more. And I think we do agree to service as parents to our children, if we think we have all the answers for them. We do agree to service to one another as Christians, if we think we have all the answers as Christians, and certainly as ministers, as leaders in the church. We do agree to service if we somehow have to have such a stiff upper lip and such an infinite knowledge of everything that we can't admit to not knowing all the answers. I like the attitude of the Father who comes to Jesus with his ill son and says, Lord I believe, help me overcome my unbelief. I don't know why this is happening. I don't know why he is like this. I don't know why he isn't being healed. And I don't know why I don't believe, but Lord help me. That's a great prayer. That's a great prayer for children, but it's a great prayer for grown-ups too, Lord. I believe, but please help my unbelief. Help me in my lack of knowledge. Help me in my lack of answers. And grant me the peace and serenity to know that you know even when I can't. And lastly and briefly in this, I think we learn from children who Christ examples us of their humility and the rest of the New Testament gives us different examples. I think there's a great sense in which children are often a great example to us in their playful, loving attitude. It's great to watch kids play in a garden.

It's great to watch them even say, for example, when someone in the family is bereaved, it's brilliant to have a child there. Because children keep things really on an even queue. And children will cry, but then they'll go out and play in the swings in the midst of a deep bereavement.

Because there's an innocence and a kind of happiness about them that allows them to work through these things. And this is completely by the way, but in grief, don't shelter your children and their kids from grief. Don't make them think it isn't happening. Let them be part of it. Let them see mourning and grieving. Take them to a funeral of a friend or a family member. It's important that they see these things. They deal with it much better often than adults do. And so don't shade them from that part of that side of life. But also learn from their laughter and their joy. You probably never laughed as much as you laughed when you were a child. And you probably never laugh as much as when you're with children.

[24 : 30] And you know, uncontrollable, stupid, irrational laughter. It's great for the body, great for the soul. You're laughing at nothing in particular, but maybe a silly face or a silly noise. And children are great at that. And it's important for us to recognise Romans 8 21, the great freedom into which we have been called as children of God, freedom to not carry the weight of the world on our shoulders, but to be able to laugh sometimes and dance and rejoice. And Paul, he speaks to the believers and connoisseurs as a fair exchange for second Corinthians 6 13. I speak to you as my children open wide your hearts also. And he sensed he could see this this child parent relationship, one of an open heartedness and a joyfulness as well and a loving giving of yourself. You know, we Paul often speaks with giving of himself. I didn't just give you my my my teaching, I gave you myself my heart, my life.

And we seek to give that love and learn from the love of children. And you know how it is how quickly a child in your company, maybe a bit cautious at first, and then you bring a toy out. Or today, for example, I had the bonanza, I had all the sweets. And as I could give these sweets out and the kids would come around me and they would love me and I was great father Derek and give them all the sweets. And they all love you because, you know, quickly they get over that fear and they will open up. And how lovely it is to be able to hug a child that you just met. And then quickly they can open their arms to accept you because of that innocence. And yet that willingness to give of their hearts and how sad it is when we see children who are so broken in their lives, so broken in their family circumstances, so broken by experience that they are afraid of people and they are afraid to open their hearts. They're afraid to speak. They're afraid to laugh and be joyful. So I believe we learn as children of Jesus of the Lord God and a brother to Jesus Christ and as children, spiritual children of God, that we learn from our own children and learn as children of God to be loving to one another and joyful. Joy is a huge part of the Christian testimony. It's not a great testimony to your unbelieving friends if you're constantly miserable. Well, why would they be attracted to that? There's plenty of misery generally anyway. And we say, well, my joy is really deep down. Yeah, we'll show it. Sometimes it's not a sin to show the joy. We know we've got peace in our hearts and we know we've got joy with Jesus. But let's actually show it now. And again, as children do, and not be so suppressed as people that we can't show our Christian joy. I'm not talking about being slapped.

I often say that from here. It's not about being slapped, but it's having a deep-seated real reflective testimonial of joy in our lives because whatever happens in the football or whatever happens in politics or whatever happens with our jobs or whatever happens with our bank account, God loves us. He loves us so much that he sent his son to deal with the separation between ourselves and him that would have kept us from him forever and eternal hell. And he has done that and we are in him, his children. And we have great reason to share our hearts, share our love and share our joy. So Christianity is a paradox. We grow up by growing down, by becoming like children. But of course, within that, in regard to evil, be innocent, but in your thinking, be adults. So my concluding word there is from 1 Corinthians 14-20, in regard to evil, be innocent, be an infant, but in your thinking, be adults. In other words, mature and grow up. As we are encouraged, we have to grow up in our faith. We are to become mature in Christ. We are to bear fruit. We are to show who we are and who we serve. And we will become that way when we are humble and follow many of the New Testament injunctions to mimic children. So let's bow our heads and pray for that. Lord God, help us, we pray. Teach us to learn from the children. We can learn from them so much. We see them around about us. If we are parents, then we are constantly on a learning curve about being parents, but also about being Christians. And we learn so much from our children. And may we humbly be

your children. And may we know how much we have still to learn from our Father. May we rejoice that our Heavenly Father is infinitely greater than even the most loving and glorious of earthly parents, many of whom we will testify to having today. And many of us will have the memory of having had that then. But even where that hasn't been the case, where children will have, and maybe grown-ups now will have bad memories of their own earthly parents and the experiences they went through, may we know that our Heavenly Father is infinitely greater, is infinitely perfect, is glorious in His goodness, has nothing but our absolute blessing at heart in Christ, who has presently given us life to the full, and who promises us in the new heavens and the new earth an outstanding family environment of covenantal grace and goodness and fullness and in excitement and joy and laughter and exploration and wholeness and fullness that we simply can't even imagine or understand. But we believe by faith in the land promise, in the promise of the new heavens and the new earth, within world well righteousness. And help us to live in this world of instability and of change, to live with that security and with that belonging and with that hope, for we ask it. In Jesus' name, amen.