Section 1 - As This Little Child!


From the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus and the Twelve traveled through Galilee until they arrived in Capernaum. As they were traveling, the Master and His disciples were thinking about different things. Jesus was sadly reflecting on His cross. The disciples were being vain, dreaming about the positions they would have in the coming kingdom. The differences in their spirits were revealed by the differences in their behavior. As they were going along, Jesus, for the second time, began to speak about His coming sufferings. He told His followers how the Son of Man would be betrayed and turned over to men who would kill Him. He told them how He would be raised again on the third day (Mt. 17:22-23; Mk. 9:30-32; Lk. 9:44-45). The Twelve, on the other hand, were arguing with one another as they walked along. They were fighting over who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Mk. 9:33). This strange and humiliating contrast between Jesus and His disciples was revealed over and over again in the Gospel history. The disciples had jealous and angry words with one another over their positions and status in the kingdom. Surprisingly, this came right after Jesus had given them new information about His passion, much like the comic follows the tragic in a dramatic presentation.

This ugly arguing was totally uncalled for and clearly demonstrated the need for the command that came from the voice from heaven: “Hear Him.” The disciples were not even close to obeying these words! They listened to Jesus, but only when He spoke about things with which they agreed. They were happy and listened when He assured them they would see the Son of Man come in His kingdom before long. But they were deaf to all He said about the suffering that had to precede the glory. After a brief moment of sorrow, they forgot the cross. Instead, they started dreaming about the crown. This might be compared to a child who forgets the death of a parent and returns to his play. The Twelve thought, “How great will we all be when the kingdom comes!” Then they made an easy transition. They moved from these empty dreams about the glory they would all share together to arguing over who would have the greatest position in heaven. Pride and jealousy are very close to each other. “Will we all have equal positions in the kingdom, or will one of us be higher than the others? Does the fact that You selected Peter, James, and John to see the transfiguration mean they will have a higher position in the kingdom?” The three disciples probably hoped it did. The other disciples hoped not.
And so the argument began. It meant nothing to them that they would all be great together. The question of all questions was: “Who would be the greatest?” This is a difficult question to resolve when pride and presumption fight on one side, and jealousy and envy on the other.

After they arrived at Capernaum, Jesus quickly alluded to this argument. He used it as an opportunity to deliver a memorable message on humility and other similar topics. His purpose was to shape their temperaments and their wills. This task that He was now undertaking was the most difficult and the most important that He had yet tackled in connection with the training of the Twelve. It was the most difficult because nothing is harder than to train the human will to be loyal and to subject itself to universal principles; to bring people to recognize the demands of the law of love in interpersonal relationships; to remove pride, ambition, self-righteousness, jealousy, and envy from the hearts of people - even from those who are good. People may have made great progress in the art of prayer, in Christian liberty, in Christian service, may have proved themselves faithful in times of temptation, and capable scholars in Christian doctrine, but were still defective in their temperaments: self-willed, self-seeking, focusing on their own glory, even when they are seeking to glorify God. It was the most important task Jesus had to address with the Twelve, for what good could these men do as ministers in the kingdom as long as their main concern was about their own place in it? Men who were full of ambition and who were jealous of one another could only fight among themselves. They would bring the cause they sought to represent into contempt and breed confusion and all kinds of evil works around them. It is no wonder, then, that Jesus, from this time on, wholeheartedly devoted Himself to the task of casting the devil of self-will out of His disciples. In its place, He imparted to them His own spirit of meekness, humility, and love. He knew how critical this was. He had to be successful in this effort to “salt” (this was Jesus’ strong way of putting it; Mk. 9:49; cf. Lev. 2:13) the future Apostles. The whole tone and substance of His words before us reveal the depth of His concern. There is something that is especially significant in the opening part of His message: He uses a child, who is present in the house, as an object lesson to instruct them. So, out of the mouth of an infant and nursing baby comes the praise of a humble mind. Jesus is sitting in the middle of these ambitious disciples with the little one in His arms. This child becomes His text. This One who is the greatest in the kingdom (namely, Jesus) proceeds to talk about truths that destroy the spirit of pride. These same truths are sweeter than honey for all renewed souls.

**The First Lesson He Taught**

This is the first lesson He taught: To be great in the kingdom - to gain admission into it at all - it is necessary to become like a little child. “Unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 18:3-4). The character trait of the child which the Lord used as a special point of comparison is its unpretentiousness. Early childhood does not
know anything about distinctions in rank and position. These are the offspring of human pride, the prizes that are coveted by human ambition. A king’s child will play with the child of a beggar and not think anything about it. This same child unconsciously affirms how insignificant things are which adults argue over, compared with the things they all agree on. What children are naturally, Jesus requires His disciples to be voluntarily and deliberately. They are not to be pretentious and ambitious, like the grown children of the world. Rather, they are to be meek and humble. They are to disregard rank and all distinctions among people. They are not to think about their place in the kingdom. Instead, they are to yield themselves in all simplicity to the service of the King. In this sense, the greatest One in the kingdom, the King Himself, was the humblest of men. Jesus did not know anything of humility in the form of self-deprecation or self-humiliation that comes as a result of sin, because there was no defect or fault in His character. But He was the perfect example of the humility which consists in forgetting self. We cannot say that He thought little of Himself, but we can say that He did not think of Himself at all. He thought only of the Father’s glory and of man’s good. Personal exaltation had no place in His motives. He pulled away with holy abhorrence from all who were influenced by such motives. There was no character that was more detestable in His eyes than that of the Pharisees. Their religion was a theatrical extravaganza, always assuming there would be spectators watching them. They loved the most important rooms at feasts and the primary seats in the synagogues. And they loved to be called “Rabbi, Rabbi” by the people. Contrast this with Jesus. He did not desire, nor did He receive, honor from men. He did not come to be served, but to serve. He, the greatest, humbled Himself in order to become the least - to be a child born in a stable and laid in a manger; to be a man of sorrows, not held in high esteem by the world; yes, and to be nailed to a cross. With this most wonderful self-humiliation, He showed His divine greatness.

The higher we rise in the kingdom, the more we will be like Jesus in His humbling of Himself. Being childlike, as He demonstrated, is an inevitable characteristic of those who are growing spiritually. The absence of this trait is the mark of moral immaturity. The little person, even when he has good intentions, is always thinking about consequences, always scheming. He is forever thinking about himself, his honor, dignity, reputation - even when he says he is doing good. He is always planning to glorify God in a way that will glorify himself at the same time. Though he is frequently above the love of personal gain, he is never without the feeling of self-importance. The great ones in the kingdom, however, throw themselves with abandon into the work to which they are called. They do not have the time, nor the inclination, to ask about the place they will obtain in this world or the next. They leave consequences to the great Governor and Lord. Forgetting about their own interest, they give their whole hearts to the work they have been called to do and are content to do a small job or a large one - whatever God tells them to do. They only want Him to be glorified.
This is the true road to a high place in the eternal kingdom. It should be observed that Jesus did not totally dismiss the question about who would be the greatest in the kingdom by negating the existence of distinctions there. He did not say on this occasion, nor on any other: “It is useless to ask who is the greatest in the kingdom; there is no such thing as a distinction between the greatest and the least there.” On the contrary, it is implied here. And Jesus asserts at other times that there is such a thing. According to the teaching of Christ, the eternal commonwealth has no place for jealous radicalism which demands that all be equal. There are levels of distinction there as well as in the kingdoms of this world. The difference between the divine kingdom and all others lies in the principles about how promotions are granted. Here, the proud and ambitious attain the positions of honor. There, the honors are given to the humble and to the ones who forget themselves. The ones on earth who were willing to be the least in humble love will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

The Second Lesson He Taught

The next lesson Jesus taught His disciples was the responsibility that they had to receive the little ones. He did not mean children only, in the literal sense. He meant all that a child represents - the weak, the insignificant, the helpless. First, the child whom He held in His arms served as a type of those who are humble in spirit. Next, he represented those who have humble positions and very little influence or importance. So Jesus presented the child to the disciples, in the literal sense, as an object for them to imitate. This little one, then, was commended to them as an object that needed to be treated well. They were to receive the little ones graciously and lovingly. They were to be careful not to offend them by being harsh, heartless, or demeaning. Jesus would receive every kindness done to them, as if it had been done to Him.

This transition of thought - from being like a child to receiving childhood and all that it represents, including its weaknesses - was perfectly natural. There is a close relationship between the selfish struggle to be great and actively treating the little ones well. Harshness and contemptuousness are vices that cannot be separated from an ambitious spirit. An ambitious man is not necessarily cruel in his disposition nor capable of entertaining heartless plans. When the demon that possesses him is quiet, the idea of hurting a child, or anything that a child represents, may seem to be revolting. He might resent being accused of any such plan. It would even be an insult to him if you suggested that he harbored it in his heart. “Is your servant a dog?” an indignant Hazael asked Elisha. His question came after the prophet described to him what he would do in the future. He told him he would set the strongholds of Israel on fire, kill their young men with the sword, dash their children to the ground, and rip up their pregnant women. When Elisha said these things, Hazael expressed sincere horror over these crimes. Yet, he was guilty of them all. The prophet had correctly sized up his character. And in the light of what he could see, he predicted his future career of ghastly wickedness. He saw that he was ambitious. The rest fol-
lowed as a matter of course. Hazael would first put the king of Syria, his master, to death after inquiring about his recovery. Then, once he was on the throne, the same ambition that made him a murderer would move him to plan other conquests. In doing so, he would perpetrate all kinds of torture.

Crimes of ambition, and the sorrows that have filled the earth because of them, are common. Aware of this fact, Jesus, who could see the trouble that had already happened and the trouble still to come from those who crave positions and power, said, “Woe to the world because of offenses!” Woe indeed! But not only to those who suffer wrongs. The greater woe is reserved for those who commit the wrongs. So Jesus taught His disciples, adding, “But woe to that man by whom the offense comes!” He did not leave the people who heard Him in the dark as to the kind of doom the offender would face. In words that came from His lips like a flame of righteous indignation at the very thought of the wrongs that were inflicted on the weak and helpless, He said, “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Mt. 18:6). “It would be better for him” - or, it suits him; it is what he deserves. It is implied (not explicitly stated) that it is what he will get when divine revenge prevails. The millstone is not just a figure of speech. It is an appropriate symbol for the ultimate destruction of the proud. The one who rises to the highest position, regardless of the injuries he may inflict on little ones, will be cast down. He will not just sink to the earth, but to the lowest depths of the ocean, to the very abyss of hell. A heavy weight of curses hanging on his neck will cause him to sink, and they will keep him down. He will rise no more. “They sank like lead in the mighty waters!” (Ex. 15:10, ESV).

This is the awful doom of selfish ambition. It would be wise for the proud to be afraid and to anticipate God’s judgment by judging themselves. Jesus counseled His disciples to do this. He repeated a stern warning He had spoken once before in the Sermon on the Mount. It had to do with cutting off a member of the body that had offended the whole (Mt. 18:8-9; see also Mt. 5:29-30). At first, that saying seems irrelevant to what is happening here, because the subject matter at hand is about offenses against others, not offenses against one’s self. But its relevancy becomes evident when we consider that all offenses committed against a brother are offenses against ourselves. This is the very point Christ wants to impress on His disciples. He wants them to understand that it is in their best interest that everything be done to avoid offending the little ones. The great Teacher says in effect, “Rather than harm one of these, by using your hand, foot, eye, or tongue, you had better consider self-mutilation instead. For the one who sins against even the least in the kingdom, sins also against his own soul.”
A Third Lesson

Jesus taught the disciples one more thing while He held the child in His arms: Those who injured or despised little ones were entirely out of harmony with the mind of heaven. He said, “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones.” Then He proceeded to enforce the warning by lifting the curtain and showing them a brief glimpse of the very celestial kingdom in which they were all longing to have prominence. “Look, there! See those angels standing before the throne of God? These are ministering spirits to the little ones! And look, here I am, the Son of God. I have come all the way from heaven to save them! And look - look how the face of the Father in heaven smiles on the angels and on Me because we take such loving interest in them!” (Mt. 18:10-14). What an eloquent argument! What a powerful appeal! The general drift is this: “The inhabitants of heaven are loving and humble. You are selfish and proud. What hope can you muster for gaining admission into heaven, where the spirit is so different from the one that moves you? Are you not ashamed of yourselves when you witness this glaring contrast between the humility of the angelic beings and the pride and pretensions of mere men? From now until the day you die, get rid of empty, ambitious thoughts. Let the meek and gentle spirit of heaven have possession of your hearts.”

In this beautiful picture of heaven, one thing is especially worth mentioning: Jesus makes reference to His work as the Savior of the lost. He turns it into an argument which was designed to enforce care for the little ones (Mt. 18:11). The argument is not irrelevant. It is an argument à fortiori (“used to express a conclusion for which there is stronger evidence than for one previously accepted; with stronger reason, even more conclusively, even more so;” Oxford English Dictionary). If the Son of Man provided care for the lost, the humble, and for those who were morally bankrupt, how much more will He care for those who are simply little! It takes a greater effort for love to seek the salvation of the wicked than to give it to the weak. He, who did one, will certainly not fail to do the other. By referring to His love as the Savior of those who are sinful, as presented in the parable of the good shepherd going after the straying sheep, Jesus further helped his disciples focus on the greatest example of humility. His love demonstrates not only that there was no pride of greatness in the Son of Man, but also no pride of holiness. He could not only lower Himself for people who were humble but could even become the brother of those who were vile. He was one with them in sympathy and situation in life, that they might become one with Him in privilege and character. Once more, by making reference to His own love as the Savior, Jesus pointed out to His disciples the real source of His love which cared for the weak and did not hate the little. No one who appreciated His love, in the right way, could deliberately offend or heartlessly condemn any brother who had a place in the heart of the Savior - no matter how insignificant the person was. The love of the Son of Man, in the eyes of all true disciples, surrounds the meanest and the vilest in the human race with a halo of sacredness.