

Jesus' discourse on children, the greatest, and the least. Beautifully structured, beautifully taught.

Paragraph one: The Setup. The Humble are the Greatest.

Children are the greatest not because they are perfectly innocent (ever met a 2 year old?), or cute, but because they are needy. This is what humble means, not our adult-fake-humility that tries to make it a competition in how much of a martyr we can be, but the kind of humility that literally can't reach the top shelf, so they need help. Even more children are completely powerless against the unfair whims of the world: abusive parents, wars, diseases and so on. Children are those with the least influence and power – Jesus says *these* are the greatest.

Paragraph two: God's care for the least (and therefore, the greatest) shown by way of punishment.

You can tell how important a thing is by the reaction. Steal a bike: no national outrage or manhunt. Steal a child (one of these little ones), and, rightly, every phone gets a text and the manhunt begins. God's care for the least, the humblest, is great. And we know because the reaction is so severe – Millstone. Neck. Sea.

Theological note: Verse 6: "The little one's WHO BELIEVE IN ME." Does Jesus say the children, the littlest, can believe? Yes! And yet we think "you have to pass a test to be a real believer." Not at all. Faith is God's Work and His Gift. And the fact that the littlest, not even with fully developed reason, can and do believe should be a great comfort for anyone who has lost a small child, even before baptism, or knows someone with severe dementia or disability. Those types of people: so humble, so unfairly robbed of life – are the greatest of the Kingdom and certainly heirs of a Greater Life.

Paragraph three: An exhortation to heed the previous warning of punishment.

“Don’t touch that hot plate,” the waiter says at the restaurant, and we think “Well now I have to see...” So we have to get more serious: “Don’t touch that hot-electrical-wire or you will die and it will hurt the whole time.” This is serious, don’t play around with that warning! But it gets more serious: “It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet be thrown into the eternal fire.” How serious is Jesus in regards to the children and the littlest? Dead serious. Don’t play around with this warning.

Now, we aren’t walking around with no eyes, and no hands because of our sins, but you see the point: repent! or dare I say: HUMBLE YOURSELF! You have sinned with eyes and hand, so see your need, greater than that of a child’s, for a Savior to save you from these punishments.

Usually, it is about now the skeptics will say, “See Christianity is just fear based manipulation. Paul made up some place called ‘hell’ and Constantine worked it into a doctrine to control the masses by fear!” Oh wait, is this Constantine we are reading? Is it Paul? It’s *Jesus*. He does talk about this place: hell. Because it, along with death and suffering, are real and they are justice for our rebellious ways...

And right here, where we get scared and uncomfortable, “how can God be loving if hell is real?”
- well...look at the beauty of how Jesus constructs this discourse!

Paragraph four: See what Lengths our God goes to, so no one has to go to this punishment!

“Oh God if you cared, you’d do something about it!” And you think he hasn’t? How many mission trips have you gone on to seek and save the lost? And you are going to lecture him? How often have you risked your life to save another? And yet, Christ, comes into the brokenness and will give his all, so unfairly - he didn’t have to; didn’t deserve to - so that the children, the needy, the humble, might never carry the punishment for evil at all. He will take that himself.

Look at it: “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray does he not leave the ninety nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

You look at those perishing in the world and are sad... you think God isn't? Read him weep over Jerusalem who hates him. Yes, God cares more than you! And has done more than you about it. Giving his Own Child, that our children and those around the world might have life.

And we say out of one side of our mouth: “he’s omnipotent, of course he should do more than me, he should save everyone.” But then we turn on the news and see the horrors that people do and say out of the other side of our mouth, “That person is evil and needs punishment.” Which is it? Justice or Mercy? And for who? Justice for the people we don’t like, and mercy for us? ...

Last paragraph: How to treat the little ones you don’t like... and how to find refuge in a broken world.

Matthew 18 is a famous passage about how to deal with disagreement and, no, it is not “Go on facebook immediately” or “Go tell three coworkers.” It’s go talk to *them*, then bring some witnesses to try to convince them. And still if not, take it to the Church (“Does God’s Word have anything to say on this? Is it established teaching more than the opinion of one pastor?” And no, the Church is not just “unwelcoming” for holding up the Law of God). But if they still don’t listen, they are to be “to you as a gentile and a tax collector.” Which means they are the wandering one now, the lost. Which means we *hate* them? OR (We back up one paragraph) is this now someone who the Lord is going after and wills *not* that they should perish?

So who would we be then to cause one of those little ones to sin or to wish them ill? Not that we approve of their behavior – the whole last paragraph says you should NOT approve of that but stand against it and unless they HUMBLE themselves, heed the Lord’s warning and Word, and drop their contestation, they may receive the justice they deserve for their evil.

But God will sort that out, won’t he? In the meantime, maybe we can pray for their repentance and try to let the hatred go.

And while we imperfectly muddle our way through these aspects of least/greatest and justice/mercy, our Lord has a Word for us in the end of this paragraph: to gather together in the Lord’s name around his word and teaching, in prayer, and with his promised presence.

He says you, collective, believers (there is more than just the 12 here he is teaching, we know that because he found a child around him somewhere!) You, the Church, can Bind and Loose – that is: Speak His Word of Law and Gospel. He says to agree and ask – that is to be united in His Teaching and to Pray. He says to celebrate Christ’s presence in our midst, even if it’s just a few who gather together.

And all of that kind of sounds like Church doesn’t it? *This* is what God has given us in the midst of a world of conflict, hatred, and deserved punishment. That we, confessing our humility and need, might have our sins loosed from us and lashed to Christ’s cross where they die and never come back. And to gather and rejoice in that Risen Savior who is here with us! By his omnipotence, by his promise on the altar... Will he forgive, seek after, and defend us needy sinners who gather here? Yes, he has promised it. Thanks be to God!

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Last paragraph: How to treat the little ones you don't like... and how to find refuge in a broken world.

It all flows together, it begins with some people wanting to be the greatest, and ends with The Greatest, Jesus, humbling himself to death to forgive and be with needy sinners like us.

In between there is a lot packed in. I offer a few pastoral observations, bear with me:

First, In these verses there is great hope for the defenseless as we see children dying around the world, as we see mothers heartbroken by miscarriage and stillbirth, as we have court cases about strangled children in the news, and propositions about abortion our ballots – take heart! “In heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.” And the Father’s saving arm is strong to “reveal to the little infants (Matthew 11).”

But I have to be clear, because we can go some weird places here: “If Jesus can save aborted babies then maybe it isn’t so bad.” I ask: Is death our Savior? Is death a Means of Grace we have been given by God? *By no means!* Death is not ours to wield in our homes and families! We have been given the Gospel, to forgive that woman who had an abortion she has regretted for years. We have the means to help other women in Crisis. We have the waters of baptism to bring our children to as our Lord commands us in the Great Commission. This is what we have been given to use, may we use it faithfully.

And if this is getting close to “political talk” now? I ask: Is Paul’s excurses in Romans 13 political? Or does God’s Word have something to say about Christians living in society? And on

the topic of children... Let alone the biology which is clear human life is present, but (this is a pulpit, right?) what of God's Word? Who knits us together in the womb (Psalm 139), whose Spirit makes John, in the womb, leap for joy (Luke 1), and many other verses.

And what are these conversations like this but to, as our Lord said, to use Law and Gospel as we navigate this mess of a world, not because we are better than others, but precisely because we are not and we need God's Word for guidance and grace.

Which is why, when we gather, as we have done today, we confess. Confess our need, our humility that, like a child who can't reach the top shelf but needs help, we can't reach up to God to bring him down, we can't climb to him or avoid the death and tragedy in this life, much less overcome it. We can't even master ourselves and our thoughts or tongues or actions. We confess.

And when we have done that well and sincerely, rejoice, our Lord *does* have mercy. And when we have done it poorly, and there is insincerity in your heart, doubt in your mind, fear that "maybe I've disqualified myself and I don't want to give up my prideful conveniences or grudges..." confess that too! To need help to have sincerity is to be a little child, one who needs help! And rejoice that your Lord sees you as the greatest and it is not his will that you, even (or especially) when struggling, it is not his will that you should perish.

Our God has a strong arm. Strong to save children all over, yes I think we will be shocked to see how many he has saved throughout time and the world, he is strong to save – strong to save even sinners like us. When you doubt that: See the Cross – the lengths he would go to save, to take the suffering himself – see the Cross where the Justice and Mercy of God meet. See the Cross for untold numbers of children the world over, see the cross for you. Amen.