

UNLESS YOU CHANGE
Matthew 18:1-5; 10

Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Billy Graham who has led thousands to Christ? Mother Teresa who once ministered to the poorest of the poor and the least of the brethren of Jesus? Pope Benedict who is the spiritual head of millions of Roman Catholics around the world?

The disciples had this constant debate among themselves when they didn't think Jesus was listening. Who is the greatest? John and Andrew said, "We were the first to follow Jesus." Peter said, "He calls me 'the Rock' and said He would build His church upon my faith." Peter, James and John said to the others, "We are the ones He takes aside to be with Him, the inner circle - we're greater than the rest of you." "No, I am on the Church Council, so I am the greatest in the kingdom." "No, I am the greatest because my great grandparents were charter members of this church." No, I am the greatest because I give the most money." "No, I am the greatest because I've been a member of this church since I was a child." "No, I am the greatest because I have done more work around this church building than anyone else." "No, I am the greatest because I am one of the pastors."

Our text in Matthew just starts out with what seems to be an innocent question for Jesus from the disciples, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" But we know from parallel passages in Mark 9 & Luke 9 that the disciples had been arguing about this. They wanted to know, "Who among us, your disciples, will be greater than the others." And of course, as usual, Jesus turns everything upside down. Matthew 18:2-3 says, ²He called a little child and had him stand among them. ³And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus said, "Unless you change..." If we don't change and become like little children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven! That's pretty serious! Unless we change? What needs to change about us? We must become child-like. Become child-like, not childish. Our childish qualities are the ones that need to change - like wanting to show superiority over others, have power over others so they'll listen to us - boss them around, selfishness, self-centeredness, cruelty, legalism - these are childish qualities.

Then what are the child-like qualities Jesus would want us to have: Humility, love, absolute faith, innocence, unbounded joy, unashamed affection, unquestioning trust. Here's how another person put it:

When I look at a patch of dandelions, I see a bunch of weeds that are going to take over my yard. Kids see flowers for Mom and blowing white fluff you can wish on. //When I look at an old drunk and he smiles at me, I see a smelly, dirty person who probably wants money, and I look away. Kids see someone smiling at them, and they smile back. // When I hear music I love, I know I can't carry a tune and don't have much rhythm, so I sit self-consciously and listen. Kids feel the beat and move to it. They sing out the words, and if they don't know them, they make

up their own. // When I feel wind on my face, I brace myself against it. I feel it messing up my hair and pulling me back when I walk. Kids close their eyes, spread their arms, and fly with it, until they fall to the ground laughing. // When I pray, I say "thee" and "thou" and "grant me this" and "give me that." Kids say "Hi, God! Thanks for my toys and my friends. Please keep the bad dreams away tonight. Sorry, I don't want to go to heaven yet. I would miss Mommy and Daddy." // When I see a mud puddle, I step around it. I see muddy shoes and clothes and dirty carpets. Kids sit in it. They see dams to build, rivers to cross, and worms to play with. // I wonder if we are given kids to teach or to learn from? No wonder God loves the little children!

Unless you change and become like a little child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Adrian Plass wrote this poem called, "Heaven's Playground."

Heavenly Playground

Oh God, I'm not anxious to snuff it,
but when the Grim Reaper reaps me,
I'll try to rely on
my vision of Zion,
I know how I want it to be.

As soon as you greet me in Heaven,
and ask what I'd like, I shall say,
"I just want a chance
for my spirit to dance,
I want to be able to play."

Tell the angels to build a soft playground,
designed and equipped just for me,
with a vertical slide
that's abnormally wide,
and oceans of green PVC.

There'll be reinforced netting to climb on,
and rubberized floors that will bend,
and no one can die,
so I needn't be shy
if I'm tempted to land on a friend!

I'm gonna go mad in the soft, squashy mangle,
and balmy with balls in the swamp,
colored and spherical,
I'll be hysterical!
I'll have a heavenly romp!

There'll be cushions and punch bags and tires

**in purple and yellow and red,
and a mushroomy thing
that will suddenly sing
if I kick it or sit on its head.**

**There'll be fountains of squash and ribina
to feed my continual thirst,
and none of that stuff
about "You've had enough,"
surely heavenly bladders won't burst.**

**I suppose I might be too tall for the entrance,
but Lord, chuck the rules in the bin.
If I am too large,
tell the angel in charge
to let me bow down and come in.**

Adrian Plass

You've heard what people say about someone who thinks too highly of themselves that they've got a big head? I think Jesus meant that if we thought too highly of ourselves, our head could never fit through the pearly gates.

Jesus seemed to always have children close by somewhere. They felt safe and comfortable around Him. What kind of an adult do children feel comfortable around? Someone who loves them unconditionally, who is friendly to them, interested in them, affectionate to them, firm with them, but loving. I'll give you an example – at VBS this week – the children would run up and hug their teachers and teachers' helpers, because they are so ready to express love toward those who love them.

Children should be safe around us. The crimes committed by trusted adults against children are among the worst a person can commit. (Even in the prisons, they are not safe from other prisoners and must be separated.) I cannot think of a worse betrayal of trust, and apparently neither could Jesus. In our church, we have something called "Safe Sanctuary" policies that we follow to protect our children. Jesus graphically describes what will happen to those who betray the little ones. In verse 6 Jesus says, "6But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." Children should feel welcome around us. As Christians we will recognize Jesus in them. Did you notice what Jesus said in v.5? "Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me." If we do not welcome the little child in church, then Jesus is not welcome here.

I have seen in some churches how children have not been welcome. They have been viewed as talkative, wiggly, and disruptive. It's true we need to teach our

children to behave in church so that others can focus on worshipping God, but sometimes we have done it in some unloving ways. A child gets restless and whispers too loud and I've seen some adults turn and frown and are incredibly rude themselves by saying to those nearby - "I wish some people knew how to make their children behave!" Instead of remembering what it was like as young parents themselves or finding some constructive, loving way to help these struggling parents. No wonder parents feel embarrassed and don't want to bring their child back to church. Those kinds of churches are dying - it's quiet in worship all right because no children are there.

When young parents were bringing their children to Jesus and the disciples tried to chase them away, Jesus became indignant with them. Mark 10:13-15 says

¹³People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

We are to seek the little lambs of His flock to bring them to their heavenly father. Eighty percent of those who accept Jesus as Savior do so before age 18. Most of what we do should be geared to welcome the little ones.

We reach them for Christ, because we want them to start out early on the right path for their lives and for their eternal life. They reach us for Christ, because we see the humble and trusting attitude we are to have. We see Jesus in them.

Unless you change, unless you repent, and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of God. It doesn't mean acting immaturely, but it certainly means changing our childish behavior we poorly disguise as acting like an adult. Change does not come easy - "How can a person become a child again - innocent again, humble, trusting, unconditionally loving?" With man it is impossible. With God, all things are possible. Let go of your childish ways. Be born anew. Humble yourself in the eyes of the Lord, bow down and then you may enter the kingdom of God.