

Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?

Matthew 18:1-4

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father
and our Lord Jesus Christ

Only a minority of the people in this world will ever reach the kingdom of heaven, but all of those who enter will receive the same amount of blessing. Each and every one of these people will be perfectly happy and contented and have everything they desire, they will have nothing, no nothing more to wish for. But although they are all alike in this respect, although they are all fully and equally blessed, still different individuals will have their own peculiarities. Eternal life for a Moses, a Paul, or a David will not be alike.

The Bible also teaches us that there will be different degrees for each person’s glory in heaven. This truth we learn from the following passage in Corinthians: **“The sun has one kind of splendor, the**

moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor. “ **I Corinthians 15:41** Furthermore, we read in Matthew: **Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” Matthew 19:28** From these and many other passages we learn that although those in heaven are all equally blessed and all equally happy, yet they are not equal in glory just as one star is different from another star in glory. But in heaven each and every person will be satisfied with their lot, and there will be no envy whatsoever.

Now on their journey through Galilee and coming to Capernaum, the disciples had disputed among themselves who among them should be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. They all wished to become the greatest and had no doubt whatever but that they would enter the kingdom of heaven just as they were.

By wishing to become the greatest in heaven, they showed that they were selfish and that they had little of that great virtue: Humility. For this reason Christ took the occasion to teach them, and us, a lesson. He called a little child and set that child in the midst of them and said: **“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 18:3** There was no doubt in the minds of the disciples but that they were fit for the heavenly

household. But, not so says Jesus: “... **unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**”

We too, if we wish to be saved, must be converted and become like children. And for this reason it is necessary for us to know what the words of Christ mean when he showed this example of humility. Let us therefore consider:

What is implied in being converted and to become as “little children”

We will see that it implies:

- I Unconditional faith in the Lord**
- II Humility**

I Unconditional faith in the Lord

“**He (Jesus) called a little child and had him stand among them.**” Here we are justified in asking: How old and how large was this child? Some of those who reject infant baptism claim that this text means grown people and not children. They say that the words: “*little children*” and “*these little ones*” designates converted adults who are like children in their hearts and minds. But that is attempting to put an utterly impossible meaning to the words of Christ. The Lord’s object was to rebuke the ambition of the disciples and to teach them humility. Should the Lord for this purpose have called a man with a full beard, as

the Jews were accustomed to wear, and station that man in the midst of the disciples? Should the Lord have pointed to a grown man saying: **“...whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”**? The very idea that Lord was teaching such an object lesson is simply absurd. Those that love their own preconceived opinions and then undertake to twist scripture in order to suit those opinions are being absurd and proud.

“He called a little child and had him stand among them.” He did not call a big man, neither did he call a child of twelve or fifteen years, for such a half-grown child we do not call a *“little child”*. We can only assume two cases without doing violence to the text - either Jesus called a woman and took this child from the mother’s arm, or he called a child of five or six summers; for the text does not simply say a child, it says **“He called a little child . . .”**

Having set this little child in the midst of the disciples, Jesus said to them: **“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** This was his answer to their question of who would be the greatest in his kingdom. The meaning which Christ intended to convey was something like this: *“You are ambitious of being the greatest in my kingdom, but I assure you, if you will not abandon these lofty thoughts, if you will not become small in your own estimation, unpretentious as a child - you cannot even enter my kingdom much less rule in it. In my kingdom the contrary rule dominates from that which is observed by earthly*

monarchs.” Christ’s own words state: **“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”**

In Christ’s kingdom the rule is this: The humblest is the greatest, the proudest the least. The proud, the ambitious, and the lofty minded will not be found in the kingdom of God at all. **“God opposes the proud but give grace to the humble.” James 4:6**

Teaching us true humility, the Lord pictures an important feature of conversion, what an individual must become, and what those who have become Christians must ever continue to practice. The Lord says: **“... unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** Those are great words, and the Lord strongly emphasizes them by introducing them with the solemn affirmation: **“... I tell you the truth...”** Every one who would be saved must become as a *“little child”*. Anyone who will not become as a *“little child”* will not be found in heaven. An individual might be as wise as Solomon or as good as Nicodemus, yet their wisdom and goodness will not help unless they are converted and become as *“little children”*.

But what does this require and what does it mean to become as a *“little child”*? Does it mean that we will become little children again? No, for that would be impossible and would be against God’s own order. Many people would indeed like to become a child again and to live life over, but it is appointed to live only once on the earth - the old cannot become young again.

Neither does the Lord say that we are to become childish. But instead we are to become “*as little children.*” Born again of the Spirit of God, we are to occupy a similar relationship towards our Father in heaven as little children have towards their earthly parents or guardians.

Little children are quick to believe whatever their parents, guardians or teachers tell them to believe. Yes they believe no matter how absurd it may seem. If a parent, guardian or teacher has said a thing, that settles the matter for the child and it must be believed. Children consider themselves as very ignorant, but the adults in their lives as perfect in learning and wisdom. Observe an infant not yet able to understand or speak, and you cannot help but see that it knows its mother or caregiver and has implicit confidence. Observe a child which is just beginning to understand and you will find that it implicitly believes what an adult says. If an adult tells a little child that the sun is larger than their house, the child cannot understand it. The child thinks that a house looks very much larger than the sun - but still believes an adult understands things better than their own eyesight provides. If an older authority has said something - then it must be so.

A little child is afraid to walk through a dark room alone, you cannot persuade it to do so. But if that child is carried on the arms of a trusted caregiver and can throw its arms around that person’s neck, the child will feel perfectly safe. The child then depends fully on its parent or caregiver and there is no doubt whatever in its mind but that there will be protection.

There is a story told about a ship far out on the ocean. A fearful storm arose and the waves became as large as rolling mountains. Each wave threatened to bury the ship in the deep ocean. The crew had given up all hope of rescue. Their minds were depressed and they were just waiting for the end to come. Only one - a little boy, the son of the captain, was still cheerful and glad. One of the sailors noticed that this little boy was still laughing and in his usual good humor. He went up to the boy and asked how he could be so cheerful when he knew that in a few moments they could all be buried in the sea. The little boy looked at him with a face that showed a picture of surprise and said: *“Why there is no danger, father is steering the ship.”*

My dear Christian friends, in these things we should be as children. If only we older people could believe with the simplicity of faith that little children have, it would be far better with us. Oh that we could believe what our heavenly Father tells us, believe it even if we cannot always understand it, believe it even if it may seem ever so unreasonable to us, and in this way be as little children. Oh, that we could look upon ourselves as knowing nothing and look to our Heavenly Father for all wisdom, like little children. Oh that we could have full confidence in our Heavenly Father, fearing nothing as long as we know that he is ruling everything, as long as we know that he is steering our life boat through the ocean of time.

To be a little child in regard to our faith is something we can learn. We are to become like *“little children”* - believe and never question the words of our Heavenly Father. We should learn to believe and never

question the word of our Father in heaven. Yes, believe it whether we understand it or not.

The Holy Ghost says: **“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven.” Acts 2:38** We should stand on these words and never doubt that baptism works the forgiveness of sins - even though we cannot understand how this works. The words of Samuel when he was a young child should also be alive in our hearts: **“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” I Samuel 3:9**

But we must not forget that every comparison has its limits - for we are not like little children in everything. A child is easily deceived, and apt to believe anything that anyone says. We are not to be easily deceived so that we accept just any human teaching. Paul exhorts the Ephesians in this way: **“Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.” Ephesians 4:14** Our hearts are not to be so unstable as to be carried away with every kind of teaching. True preachers will instruct their people to only receive as divine truth that which brings the words of our Heavenly Father in context and continuity with the entire Bible. Divine truth given by the word of God should not be distorted and twisted as a wax nose - easily pulled out of shape. When anyone quotes scripture, we must examine carefully what is being said and compare scripture with scripture. In this way we may

be ready to answer corrupters of the scripture as the Lord rebuked Satan by saying: **“It is written ...” Matthew 4:7**

We should act in agreement with the words of the apostle: **“... stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.” I Corinthians 14:20** We are to understand and know that the Bible is the word of our Heavenly Father and is infallible.

Therefore what people (even the wisest and best) say - we should receive as truth only when it is established by the words of our Heavenly Father given to us in the Bible. We should keep in mind the warning of John: **“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the anti-Christ, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.” I John 4:1-3** We should accept the words of our Heavenly Father with the simple faith of a child and yet never fail to test those words and make sure of their source and context.

II Humility

Our text does not only teach us that we should be *“little children”* in the manner that I have just set forth to you - but it also teaches us that we should be like *“little children”* and be humble. A little child is not

pretentious or vain and proud. A child does not think too much of itself. What a vast difference between little children who do not have a desire for great places and no plan to raise themselves in this world above others. What a great difference in our text between the little child and the apostles who wished to become **“the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”!** Children are humble and are not affected by pride and ambition. After all it was pride that threw the angels that had sinned out from heaven. Pride can also keep us out of heaven if we cannot give it up.

Because pride is so dangerous, Christ warned the disciples: **“... unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** Yes, even the disciples had to be warned that they should not commit this great sin. They needed to take to heart the truth which is set forth in Hebrews were we read: **“Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.”** **Hebrews 4:1** And when they, the disciples of Christ, listen and learn from this warning - then we should listen and learn from it as well. How many of us are there who dare deny that they are not affected by the great sin of pride? Do we not wish to overshadow our neighbors in learning, in business and in our social life? Oh let us take our Lord’s warning to heart: **“... unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

We should look to our Heavenly Father for support and be confident that He will give us what we need. Trust in him and you will

not suffer want. Let us remember the words of God which says: **“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”** Matthew 6: 25-27

As a child we trust in our Heavenly Father. We should not cherish care and worry, but rather we should: **“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”** I Peter 5:7 Anxiety about food, clothing and shelter should not be in our hearts. Our trust should be that our Father will make the necessary provisions for his children.

If God should punish us, afflicting us in body or soul, property or reputation - we should remember that he is dealing with us as a true father with his beloved children. And if we cannot see our way through, if evil foreboding about the future oppresses our heart, we should question our fears with this answer: Our Heavenly Father knows the future and he will save us. He has promised: **“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord’s unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.”** Psalm 32:8-10 The Lord will guide us with his eyes, for they are bright and

watchful and will neither slumber nor sleep. **“But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.” Psalm 33:18** God’s keen eyes detect every danger and can warn against every byroad, every spy and enemy. Oh that we could trust in our Heavenly Father half as well as a *“little child”*.

Shouldn’t our hearts be filled with fear and trembling when we read this text? Don’t we experience every day that we are not as humble as little children and that we do not trust in God as we should. We dare not be excluded from the kingdom of God for this reason.

If we tried to be perfect *“little children”* there could be no hope for us, for the Lord clearly says: **“... unless you change and become like little children ...”** We are in the process of becoming as a *“little child”* and moving more and more in this process and in this direction. The Apostle Paul describes the process in this way: **“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”**
Philippians 3:12-14

Day by day we should become more like children and believe in God’s word. We should trust in our Heavenly Father with undiminished

faith. We should resign ourselves to the Lord and always be ready to say: **“You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.” Psalm 74:24**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be world without end. Amen All of our petitions we will include in our Lord and Saviors’ own prayer saying:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” Matthew 6:9-13

“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” Matthew 6:14-15