

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Matthew 19:13-30

Sermon Title: "Becoming a Little Child, Part II" (A Journey through Matthew)

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We have heard the story before: the story of the rich young man. We know what's going to happen: the man is going to fail to give up all his riches to receive everlasting life. We know he's going to walk away dejected, and we know that Jesus will say that camels can march through the eyes of needles easier than rich people may enter heaven. But this familiar story doesn't begin when the rich young man shows up. The story really begins a few verses before this, in those verses that we might overlook and not realize how important they are to our familiar story.

We begin in Matthew 19:13, when Jesus receives children to his side. Little children are brought to him, so that he might lay hands on them. They aren't infants but not quite teenagers.¹ They are younger than 12-years-old, since they haven't had their Bar mitzvahs and Bat mitzvahs yet, which would make them into official adults. Jesus blesses these children. He prays for them. And then the disciples jump in and

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, cf. 694.

want to break up the party. The disciples think the children have wasted enough time with the Lord, so they start shooing them away.

Why is this? Did the disciples believe, as some people believe today, that children are better seen and not heard? Or, better yet, take the children to a separate room to play, while the adults do more important things. Did the disciples possibly believe that children are too young to be saved? We are getting closer to the truth. The disciples loved to limit Jesus' ministry throughout the Gospels. Contact "with Jesus is not for those too young to make a responsible decision upon his claims."² In other words, children cannot believe in Jesus like adult cans, right? Children cannot read the Bible and understand it. Children cannot worship God or serve God's kingdom effectively. So the disciples would try to steer Jesus clear of the young ones, who weren't worth the time to waste on.

Jesus replies, "Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them."³ You are not going to steer me away from these children, he says. What did Jesus say last Sunday about children? Just one chapter ago, in Matthew 18, Jesus told his disciples to become

² Ibid.

³ Matthew 19:14.

like little children. “Become as vulnerable as a child. Be as open to whatever the Father in heaven might present to you.” It seems as though the disciples forgot that lesson too quickly. We are all children of God. It is our task to become children of God every day, being instructed and coached and helped by God our Father day after day. God has much work to do in us, so we may grow, mature, and become complete.

Jesus welcomes all children of every age to come to him. Some of us adults might not understand the Bible or worship any better than a child. Some of us might read the Bible or serve others easier than a child. We are all welcome, nonetheless. We all may stand together and be blessed and receive a prayer from our Master and Savior. The kingdom of heaven is made up of these who are willing, even yearning, to receive all they can from God. Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them.”

And then the rich young man arrives. He is a mature adult, having experienced his Bar mitzvah years ago. He seems to be a mature follower of God, because he can rattle off the Ten Commandments. In fact, he claims to have followed the Commandments perfectly throughout his life. This is the guy you want as a member of your church, because he is such a

perfect Christian. You definitely want him on your team, when the church holds a Bible trivia night. He can answer all the questions by himself and win your team the grand prize. Of course, Jesus would welcome him to his side. Jesus would be more than eager to lay hands on him, blessing and praying for this fine, upright man.

But there is a problem, a major problem. The rich *young* man is not acting like a child. He has got the wrong idea of what it means to be a child of God.

“Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” the young man asks. His question betrays him: already we know this man is not acting like a child of God.⁴ He is asking what he must do to receive everlasting life. It is not as though he is asking what he may do to serve God’s kingdom. This is what somebody who is trying to become a child of God would ask. What may I do to help the poor? What may I do to help my neighbor or my friend? What may I do to let people know about the love of God? Children of God ask these questions. They know they could do something for God’s kingdom, because they have already received everlasting life as a free gift from God. Everlasting life is nothing we could ever earn. It is not like a bank account, in which we put more and

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 2*, cf. 236.

more money so that we finally have a nice stash of cash for retirement. We do not earn or accumulate everlasting life. God gives it to us through faith in Christ. People becoming like children know this, and glorify God in it.

But the *young* man wants to impress others. He wants to show he is somebody important enough to receive salvation. He rattles off all the Commandments that God has given to his people, and then he says rather flippantly, “What else do I lack?” Is there really anything else I have to do, since I have done it all?

Back in Matthew 18, the disciples asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”⁵ Do you remember that question from last Sunday? Do you remember what we said about that question? Who cares? Who is important, popular, good-looking, intelligent: Who cares? Our God will form us into the people he wants us to be. God will give us the talents and the brains and the blueprints to serve his kingdom, no matter where we may be. Children love to be molded by their Father. They come to him, so he may touch their hearts and minds, bless their lives for the road ahead, and pray for their present activities

⁵ Matthew 18:1.

and future possibilities. The child goes away knowing that he or she is under the watchful eye of the Lord, given all the privileges to serve God's kingdom. And there is so much we may do. It will never end. It will never be enough.

The young man betrays himself by asking how he can earn everlasting life. He betrays himself by saying he has done it all and nothing else apparently needs to be done, and then he betrays himself by not receiving the chance to become a child of God. "If you want to be perfect," Jesus say, "if you really want what my Father can grant, then you must sell everything you have. Sell it all, and give the proceeds to the poor." The rich young man hears this, and knowing that he is so wealthy, he leaves sorrowful because he cannot do what Jesus wants him to do. He has his chance to become like a little child – take the infant-like steps – but he walks away in great strides from it.

This is when we read Jesus' reply about rich men never entering God's kingdom and camels being able to walk through the eyes of needles; and then we point the finger at the man and say, "Aha, got you! It is because you are so rich that you will never be face-to-face with God. You, Donald Trump with your crazy hair and billions of dollars; you, multimillion dollar

baseball player with all the times you visit the clubs and all your steroid use; you, rap star with your gold-plated teeth and tear-drop tattoos and \$100 bills fanned out in your right hand; you will never see the kingdom of heaven. You will burn for all the riches you have, just like the young rich man in Matthew 19.”

Before we get too carried away and find a gallows to hang this young man from, we need to see what the story is telling *us*. We have “riches” in our lives that are distracting us from God. We have things that we, too, cannot give up easily, and they may be keeping us from being the people God wants us to be. There is something keeping us from becoming little children.

Last Sunday Jesus said, “If you have anything that causes you to sin, cut it off, pluck it out, throw it away.”⁶ For this young man, it was all of his possessions. They all had to go away in order for him to begin to think about becoming a little child. Once the riches were gone (if he actually did sell them off), then he would have to understand that there is so much more to do for God and God’s kingdom.

What do we need to get rid of? Smartphones. Huge distraction. Tweeting and texting. How many people get into unnecessary car accidents from all the texting done? How much time do we spend doing this

⁶ Cf. Matthew 18:8-9.

(moving our thumbs) than doing this (speaking one-on-one with others)? Internet games. Internet usage. We're just talking about technology, but we could start talking about the clothes we wear, or the things we own in our garages, the flashy things we impress our friends with... The list could go on.

I once knew a pastor who gave up watching political TV. He was absorbed with what political pundits were saying on the TV and on the radio. With every minute he listened, he became more negative about Washington DC and his state government and even his own church government. He found himself being more critical of the Session with whom he served, and they got into more arguments than needed. His sermons were full of references to what certain political parties weren't doing, and how evil they were acting, and people were turned off by it all. He knew it had to stop, so he gave up listening to political TV and radio for the season of Lent. After a week, he saw the difference within himself. He was less stressed, less negative. He was quick to give helpful advice, and slow to criticize others. A great weight had been lifted from his shoulder, he had told me, and he could view the world with the eyes of God once more.

That's what Jesus wanted the young man to do:

put on different eyes. Pluck out those old selfish eyes, and see the world as God does. Every child of God should have a fresh pair of eyes.

At the end of our reading today, Peter is concerned. He has seen the blessing of the children, he has seen a young man sent away for his unwillingness to become a little child, and now he and the disciples stand with Jesus, wondering what will happen next. “We have left all for you, Jesus,” he says. We have denied our wishes and wants for your wishes and wants. “What happens now?”⁷

Jesus assures them that becoming little children doesn't lead to a dead-end road. Thrones of glory await these men. Twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. That is no simple task. These men who used to be fishermen, tax collectors, political zealots, and just common people will share in the duty of watching over God's people, along with Jesus Christ who sits on the high throne of glory as our Savior and Lord. That is a huge reward for becoming a little child.

Yet, that is their reward, which is different from ours. We are handed rewards in the end, too. Jesus makes us sound like brave adventures like Abraham and Sarah were, willingly leaving behind home and kin

⁷ Matthew 19:27.

to follow Christ.⁸ We who are willing to put aside our comforts and comfort zones, we who are willing to open ourselves to every possibility that God shows us, we who are willing to dare to serve God's wonderful kingdom: a reward stands at the end.

The reward is already being handed out. Right now we are in that process of becoming little children. We have divine fellowship with our Father and Creator. We receive so much instruction, so much compassion, so much encouragement already. We have received so much more than we can ever give up, but we still make room in our lives to receive more and more from God.⁹

We have made ourselves last, humble, before God, like little children. God will make us first. And the first thing we will see is God's smiling face and open arms to welcome us in.

⁸ Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2*, cf. 719.

⁹ Barclay, *Matthew: Volume 2*, cf. 243.