

Title: They are Precious in His Sight

Text: Matthew 18.1-14

Theme: Children are a portrait of the Kingdom.

Series/Occasion: VBS Sunday – July 29.2007

Prop Stmt.

- There are an estimated 496,000 children in slavery in Bangladesh.
- In Pakistan it is estimated that there are 7.5 million child bonded laborers who do the stitching work on one 1/4 of the 35 million soccer balls, that nation produces and exports.
- Up to 10,000 children between ages 6 and 14 are enslaved in brothels in Sri Lanka.

Cambodia and India are especially notorious for child trafficking. In India, though technically it is outlawed, many girls who are part of the Dalits caste are sold to the goddess Yellama as shrine prostitutes. It is their position in life, in some cases, like their mothers and grandmothers before them. In India it takes up to 15 years for girls held in prostitution via debt-bondage to purchase their freedom. By that time they can be so full of disease that they are left basically to live and die alone in their physical, emotional and spiritual despair. Several years ago I was in India and was struck with the fact that looking into the eyes of these children was at times like looking into the eyes of a cow. There was no fire, and no flash, only a dull, lifeless stare that seemed to be open and yet saw nothing. Trafficking in children is so common it hardly merits attention any more. In Sudan, thousands of children have been abducted by Muslims for slave positions of prostitution, begging, fetching water and hundreds of other labor intensive tasks. Though we swore that the ethnic cleansing in Ruwanda that slaughtered thousands of people would never happen again, the world has essentially yawned at the overwhelming destruction of life that is taking place today.

It is tempting to read the Bible and think that “back in those days” children were often neglected or exploited, and they were. But the stories of our day are no different. Children in poverty or abuse are promised a better life by someone who appears to care about them. They are taken to another city, sometimes another country and they are sold. They learn through starvation and beatings to do what they are told. Their lives are taken away from them. Children are eager to learn, eager to believe and eager to please. It makes them so easy to hurt. Nray (not her real name) is one of thousands in Cambodia. Her dad beat her mother, so her mother divorced. Her mom remarried and it was no better, so she divorced again. Their poverty made them vulnerable. A lady promised Nray that she would help her get an education and be able to get out on her own and have a better life. Nray believed her. The lady sold her to a man who locked her up in a brothel, where she was beaten and starved if she did not do what she was told, or if customers complained. Nray was 12. Many are younger, much younger. How you take care of those who trust you, or how you care for those who are unable to take care of themselves tells you a lot about whether or not you understand what it means to be part of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Do you think of Cambodia, Pakistan, and India, as far away places that are not enlightened like us? Or do you realize that while our abuse of children

may not be seen in dirty, diseased brothels, we use sterile clinics and abort these children before they can ever be born?

When Christ came to this earth, he did a great deal of teaching. The central theme of his teaching was His Kingdom. But life under King Jesus and with the people of His Kingdom is so radically different than anything this world has even known since Genesis 2. That is Matthew's theme and he organizes his gospel into three parts to reflect it. The first part of this first gospel is an introduction to the earthly ministry of Christ and begins with the earthly lineage of Christ as it is traced from Abraham to David to Joseph. Attention in these opening chapters is drawn to the events that surround the set-up for his ministry, including the ministry of John the Baptist whose own preaching was about the nearness of the kingdom.

The second part of this first gospel starts with Matthew 4.17. "From that time on Jesus began to" are the words that Matthew uses to show us his division. And, "from that time on (as the verse says) Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" This second section includes 3 main discourses of Christ; 5-7, where he preaches about the kingdom, 10, where he is preparing his disciples to go and preach about the kingdom and 13, where he began to speak in parables because the Jewish leaders had publicly rejected the king and the kingdom. This rejection reflected not only a change in his manner of teaching, but set the stage for the final section of Matthew's gospel, which starts in 16.21 with the words, "From that time on Jesus began to". And what he began to do with his disciples is explain to him that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die. The king is going to humble himself and die, but on the third day he will be raised to life. If anyone is going to follow the king and be part of his kingdom, "he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" Jesus says. Humility was the opening of his first discourse where he taught, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." It was a continual theme of his ministry, and now He would be the ultimate illustration of it. The King was going to die for his Kingdom. To follow this King demands humility because this Kingdom is not like any Kingdom you have ever seen. That is a very difficult truth to grasp. In our little kingdoms, whether that be a government, or your business and job or your home, we are so used to using positions of authority to intimidate, to oppress, to get our way, and order people around. We hear of a kingdom and we think of power, honor, riches, fame and servants. And that is exactly what the disciples thought as well.

Then, a fascinating event took place in chapter 17. Jesus took Peter, James and John with him "up a high mountain by themselves" (v.1). There, they saw an unveiling of the true nature of Christ as His glory was put on display in appearance and as Moses and Elijah met with Christ and discussed the impending events that were going to take place in Jerusalem. For Peter, James and John it was an incredible experience, but one that Christ forbid them to speak about until after his resurrection. Jesus, kept telling them about the fact that he was going to suffer and die and be resurrected. It was not only necessary in order for our sins to be paid for, but in laying down His life, Christ was showing that in His kingdom, leaders humble themselves to serve those who are under their care. True humility leads to exaltation. Christ humbled himself and died and rose again to life and ascended back to glory. That is the pattern. But, the disciples still did not get it. In fact,

as Christ took them to Capernaum, the disciples were arguing among themselves as to who was the greatest in the kingdom. Did Peter, James and John use the gag order from Christ as an opportunity to provoke the others? Eventually, the argument became so out of hand they asked Christ about it. Actually, according to Mark's account, it was Christ who initiated the conversation and then they ended up asking Christ. Christ brought it up because this is a huge issue to him because it is a huge issue in His kingdom. His answer to this question is the basis for the 4th discourse of Christ. Somewhere near Christ and his disciples was a little boy. Christ takes this little boy and has him stand among them and then Christ says, "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." In the beginning of this fourth discourse we are given four reasons why children are so precious in His sight. And it all has to do with His kingdom. Children are precious to Christ because:

1. **Children illustrate what it means to become a member of the Kingdom.** (1-4)

"I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Christ used this expression "I tell you the truth" to indicate that he was about to say something exceedingly solemn.

A. **To be part of the kingdom demands that you experience a change.**

Look at the word "change." In order to be part of the kingdom of Christ, you have to be changed. We are not qualified to be citizens of his kingdom because of our natural birth. We can only be qualified to be citizens of his kingdom through a supernatural birth. The word for change has the idea of "turning away." Leon Morris uses the word conversion.¹ Following the way of the King demands that you turn away from the way of this world's way of thinking and living. Christ is not saying that all children are part of His kingdom. He is using this child as an illustration of a profound truth. These men were proud, stubborn, self-centered and worried about gaining positions of power for the advancement of their own names. Jesus pulls an unnamed, heretofore unnoticed little boy out of the crowd and says, unless you change and become like this boy, you will never be part of my kingdom. These disciples were already arguing about which of them was the MVP and Jesus was saying, unless you change, you won't even be on the team.

B. **This change involves humbling yourself.**

Becoming like a little child does not mean that we are supposed to imitate their tempers, defiance and immaturity. Christ is speaking of the fact that children are so utterly dependent upon others to provide care for them and are often ready to trust. In the eyes of the world, children are insignificant and unimportant. So, to enter the kingdom you must become insignificant in your eyes, like children are insignificant in the eyes of the world. You must be willing to be a nobody, like children are a nobody to this world.

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC, Eerdmans, 1992, p. 459.

You must be willing to lose yourself, to deny yourself, and to be poor in spirit. But, this change is not something that you can bring upon yourself. God must bring this change within you. That is part of what is involved in repenting of your sin and turning to trust in Christ as the only One who can save you. Humility is demanded of all who call upon Christ, because you must acknowledge that you cannot save yourself. This humility of heart that makes you aware of your total need of Christ breeds a humility of life.

Let me ask you a few questions:

- How do you respond when someone else gets credit for a job you did?
- How do you respond when your suggestions are not appreciated or followed?
- How do you respond when someone questions your actions or motives?
- How do you respond when your expectations are not followed?

2. **The way you treat children reveals your view of the King.** (5)

This is a huge issue. In the world we are taught that you should welcome those who can do something for you. Be nice to those who can help you out in life. You know, it is the “Be nice to your kids because they will pick out your nursing home someday” sort of thinking. But here Jesus puts a little boy who means nothing to these disciples, who has no status, no power, and no influence and Jesus says, the way you treat those who are vulnerable and cannot help you out, is something that I take personally.

Some of you go to school where there are kids who do not fit in. They can’t sing, they can’t dance, they can’t make the team or fit into anything but the losers bracket. No one wants to sit with them or have them for a lab partner. How do you treat them? Better yet, how do you defend them when others pick on them? Do you see how crucial of an issue this is? If you do not take stand up and defend them, if you are not willing to be abused along with them, then your own heart is being revealed to you. You are attacking the king. True members of the kingdom looks out for those the king looks out for. If you are not welcoming those the King welcomes then you need to go back to point 1 and get on your knees before God and deal with the fact that you may never have truly experienced the change necessary to become a follower of Christ and part of his kingdom. This people in this world’s kingdoms mock and abuse those whom they consider to be vulnerable. If that is how you view and treat the vulnerable, then Christ is saying, you are part of this world’s kingdom and you need a change.

I don’t care if you prayed the apple tree prayer, if there are bananas on your tree, your still a banana tree, you ain’t an apple tree.

3. **Your influence on children of faith is an eternally serious matter.** (6-10)

Christ now uses the occasion of speaking about children, to focus on those children who believe in Him. He has in mind not just children, but all those who follow Him. Using a child as an illustration clearly means that they are part of his intended subject, and yet

this child represented all those who believed, particularly those who were vulnerable and very trusting of others.

A. Children can believe in Christ. (6)

There have been people who in their zeal to communicate the gospel have reduced it to a prayer that is prayed. Therefore, if a person (often little kids) can be coaxed into praying this prayer, then we can say, “Hey, look this child is now a Christian.” We want to be careful not to coerce a child into doing something that a) they do not understand or b) is being done to please someone else. However, those concerns should never stop us from communicating the gospel to children, because children can believe in Christ. We should recognize that time will tell if their belief is authentic.

B. Children who believe can be led into sin.

All that Christ is doing in these verses (6-10) is expanding on the point He made in verse 5. But, now He is pointing out how serious of a matter this is. These children are precious in His sight. If you offend these children, if you cause them to sin, you are going to face their King. “Causing one of these little ones to sin” has the idea of entrapping a child into going down a path that child does not fully understand. Know this, that if you play upon the believability of that child and use that for your own self-centered purposes, you are going to face the King. This is the King eternal. This is the King all-powerful. His mercy and grace to the humble is infinite and His wrath toward those who attack His own is absolutely terrifying. What Jesus said in v.6 is that certain death by drowning is better than to cause a child of faith to sin. **(pic)**

Some people like to see if they can get another Christian to sin. That way, they do not feel so guilty about their own actions. If I can get you down to my level, then, you are no better than me, and that makes me, not so bad. Rather than thinking that you have just given yourself some measure of comfort, you ought to be absolutely terrified.

He then goes on to warn of the serious nature of causing people to sin. Woe is a word of anguish, and warning and it sounds like it means. It is a word that is said from the gut and sounds basically the same in English as it does in the original language of the NT because it is one of those universal type expressions that transcends cultures. Christ acknowledges that we live in a sin-curse world, where people are going to cause others to sin. That is not a surprise. But the presence of sin never removes a person’s responsibility for it. That is very obvious. And Christ goes on to tell us how serious you must take your influence on children of faith. And here is the line of thought.

Hell, is an eternal place of torment and should be avoided at all costs. No measure taken to avoid hell is too extreme. Looking down on these little ones and causing these children of faith to sin reveals that you are not a follower of the King. People who have humbled themselves and become part of His kingdom do not despise the weak, the vulnerable, and the needy. That is the warning of verse 10. To “look down” means to

despise. He repeats his use of “little ones” which is why I think he is making the same point about the seriousness of this matter.

4. **The Father cares intensely about every child who believes in Christ.** (12-14)

These last three verses in our text paint an incredible picture of our Heavenly Father. He cares about the little ones who are straying and are vulnerable to being hurt, so He goes after them. These verses are very convicting to me. I don't like it when people mess up because that messes life up and makes things more difficult. “Why can't you just straighten up and fly right – huh?” Statements like that just drip with arrogance, but they are sure intimidating. When a sheep goes astray, oh, how easy and self-righteous it is to let them find out the hard way, and make them come crawling back to the fold, where we stand with arms crossed, eyebrows crunched and the “I told you so” look all over our faces. But the heavenly Father, leaves the ninety and nine, and goes looking, and brings the one who has lost his way back and is so happy about it. He is not upset that his schedule was interrupted, or that he was inconvenienced. He is just happy that this little one is now safe.

By the way, sometimes people will say, I can't think of God as Father, because my earthly dad was so mean and abusive. Hold the phone. Don't define God by earthly standards. God is the standard. There are some earthly fathers who are very sinful and some earthly mothers as well. But, God is not only great, God is good. And this good God uses His greatness to ensure the eternal safety of every one of His children (14).

Concl.

Children need Christ. Parents need Christ.

Children need parents who know Christ in order to point them to Christ. (To come to Christ demands that we humble ourselves and trust only in what He has done for us through his death on the cross.)

Christ has raised up true churches as the means to help parents and kids get it.