

Focus Text

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” **(Matthew 18:1–6, ESV)**



Who’s the Greatest?

As Matthew 18 begins, the narrative takes a turn. At the end of chapter 17, Jesus had just referred to His disciples as His “sons,” a title that carried immense honor and hinted at their freedom and privileges in God’s kingdom. For a group of teenage disciples—likely around sixteen—this was an unbelievable affirmation. But quickly, their thoughts drift in a different direction. They start arguing among themselves over who is the most important, essentially asking, “If we’re sons of the King, who is the highest-ranking prince?”

Jesus sees straight through this pride and ambition. His mission is to prepare them for the coming cross and the trials they’ll soon face, not to encourage a pecking order. So He offers an unforgettable lesson. He calls a small child into their midst and explains that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the one who humbles themselves like this child.

In the first-century world, children were not celebrated for innocence or charm—they were the lowest in social standing, vulnerable, and often overlooked. Many didn’t survive to adulthood. To become like a child, then, meant relinquishing status and embracing dependence and humility. Jesus was teaching His disciples that greatness is measured not by position or power, but by a willingness to be lowly and trust entirely in God.

He follows this with a sobering warning: anyone who causes one of these “little ones” to stumble would be better off sinking to the depths of the Sea of Galilee with a massive millstone around their neck. Whether this refers to harming children or leading humble believers astray, the point is clear—God fiercely defends those who belong to Him. The path of humility may leave you open to vulnerability, but it also places you squarely under His care.

True greatness, Jesus reminds them—and us—is not about dominance or recognition. It is about belonging to Him, living with a heart set on humility, and trusting that God values those the world tends to overlook.

Application for This Week

This week, try a hands-on exercise to practice humility:

1. **Choose a small, ordinary task**—maybe cleaning up after others, holding a door, or helping someone without being asked.
2. **Do it quietly, without seeking credit or acknowledgment**—offer it as service to God.
3. **Pause at day’s end to reflect**—thank Jesus for welcoming you into His kingdom and for teaching that your worth comes from Him, not from status.

Ask yourself: How does embracing humility change my perspective on my daily life, my relationships, and what truly matters?

Additional Notes

Jesus’ teaching extends beyond mortality rates to encompass social status more broadly. Historical estimates suggest that approximately 30 percent of infants died at birth, another 30 percent by age 6, and 60 percent by age 16—circumstances that made first-century parents reluctant to place much value on childhood despite their care and love.^[1] However, the deeper issue Jesus addresses concerns social position rather than mortality alone.

In the first-century Mediterranean world, children were characterized not by innocence but by their lack of status and legal rights, and Jesus was speaking to the issue of status rather than teaching a lesson about being childlike.^[2] A child was socially equivalent to a slave and had to achieve adulthood before being considered a free person eligible to inherit the family estate.^[1] Children formed part of the world of the defenseless in Jewish first-century culture, considered incomplete beings and unimportant alongside the poor, women, and the sick.^[3]

Jesus’ point, then, involves a radical inversion of values. Becoming like children involves turning away from preoccupation with status concerns and self-promotion to care for others.^[4] The conditions of dependency, insignificance, and fragility associated with children according to cultural patterns of the time are what one must accept—accepting one’s condition of dependency, insignificance, and fragility before God is necessary to become part of the kingdom community.^[3] Rather than celebrating childhood innocence (a modern romanticization), Jesus teaches that whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven ([Matt 18:1–4](#))—a

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statement that redefines greatness entirely around vulnerability and powerlessness rather than achievement and status.”¹

“The scholarly debate you’ve identified reflects a genuine tension in how to interpret “little ones” in [Matthew 18:6](#). Rather than viewing these as competing interpretations, it’s more accurate to see them as overlapping perspectives that together illuminate Jesus’ meaning.

The phrase “little one” raises the question of whether Jesus continues discussing literal children, but the parenthetical phrase “one who believes in me” emphasizes that faith in Jesus is the defining characteristic^[1]. The “little ones” refers not only to literal children who desire to be near Jesus, but also to all who humble themselves like a child, believe in him, enter his reign, and bear his name^[2].

This dual reference isn’t accidental. A transition in metaphors from a child to the little ones occurs, with “little ones” appearing throughout Matthew’s Gospel^[3]. The term functions both literally and metaphorically—it encompasses actual children while simultaneously describing vulnerable believers of any age who embody childlike dependence and faith.

The severity of the warning reflects this expanded scope. To cause grave spiritual harm to young, vulnerable believers (or even seekers) invites the severest judgment^[2]. “Little ones” carries a metaphoric sense, reminding believers that their greatest challenge is the struggle not with evil, but with smallness and weakness—the inability to be what they should be in Christ, and the ease with which they are led astray^[4].

¹ [1] Thomas G. Long, [Matthew](#), ed. Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), [204](#).

[2] M. Eugene Boring, [Mark: A Commentary](#), ed. C. Clifton Black, John T. Carroll, and M. Eugene Boring, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), [281](#).

[3] Darío López Rodríguez, [The Liberating Mission of Jesus: The Message of the Gospel of Luke](#), ed. Paul Alexander and Jay Beaman, trans. Stefanie E. Israel and Richard E. Waldrop, Pentecostals, Peacemaking, and Social Justice Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), [6:92–93](#).

[4] Jeannine K. Brown, [Matthew](#), ed. Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2015), [212](#).

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Rather than choosing between literal children and new believers, Jesus addresses both simultaneously. The child in [Matthew 18:2](#) serves as a *model* of the spiritual posture required for kingdom membership, while “little ones” in verse 6 encompasses all who occupy that vulnerable position—whether chronologically young or spiritually young in faith. The warning’s intensity stems from the sacred responsibility to protect both groups from spiritual harm.”²

² [1] Cyndi Parker, [“Millstones in Capernaum,”](#) in *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels*, ed. Barry J. Beitzel and Kristopher A. Lyle, Lexham Geographic Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), [312](#).

[2] Don N. Howell Jr., [Servants of the Servant: A Biblical Theology of Leadership](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003), [191](#).

[3] David L. Turner, [Matthew](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), [437](#).

[4] James R. Edwards, [The Gospel according to Luke](#), ed. D. A. Carson, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2015), [476](#).