

Becoming Childlike (Matthew 18:1-6,10)

¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ² He called a little child and had him stand among them. ³ And he said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. ⁶ But 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.....¹⁰See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

1. What thoughts were behind the disciples’ question in verse 1? Why might Peter, James, or John have been the most likely candidates for “greatest in the kingdom”?
2. Why did Jesus use a little child as his object lesson?
 It would have been embarrassing for an adult to come and sit on Jesus’ lap.
 To teach an unforgettable lesson about true greatness in the kingdom.
 This child exemplified the virtue about which Jesus was teaching.
 No one else was around.
3. What childlike virtue is the Savior calling for? What does this Christian virtue lead people to recognize about themselves? On what alone will it lead them to depend? How is this virtue produced?
4. The smaller we become in our own estimation, the greater we become in the sight of God. Explain.
5. What words or phrases reveal that the Savior has a special place in his heart for little children? Share examples of how this differs from the world’s view of children that often looks down on these little ones.
6. How will genuine Christian humility show itself in one’s attitude toward children? service to children?
7. How might we cause one of the “little ones” (that is, children or anyone with a childlike faith) to sin?

8. What might “their angels” in verse 10 indicate about the relationship between little children and angels? What other details about God’s good angels are mentioned in the Bible?
9. The Greek word that Jesus used for “child” can refer to one as young as a newborn. Some people assert that newborns are incapable of believing and therefore should not be baptized. How would you respond?
10. Agree or disagree:
- Humility is a strange thing; when you think you’ve attained it, you most likely have not.
 - As a Christian matures, humility may decrease.
 - Humility is the most basic and essential Christian virtue.

Prayer: Lord, forgive my sinful pride and arrogance. Through the working of your Spirit, make me your humble child, trusting in Jesus alone for salvation and every good thing. Amen.

Helps: (1) The disciples’ thoughts were those of greatness and importance in Christ’s kingdom based, most likely, on their own works and achievements. The members of the inner circle would seem to have had an inside track on these positions because Jesus had granted them special privileges and experiences. (2) Jesus used a little child to teach a surprising yet unforgettable lesson about greatness because this child exemplified the most basic Christian virtue. (3) The Savior calls for humility, which recognizes one’s sinfulness and inability to save oneself and which depends solely on God’s mercy in Christ for forgiveness and salvation. The Holy Spirit produces this humility through law and gospel, leading us to repentance and to faith in Jesus. (4) Those who humbly repent of their sins and trust in Christ alone for salvation are God’s own children and will reign with Christ in the kingdom of heaven. (5) Jesus’ love for children is revealed throughout the lesson. Examples of the world’s view: children are a bother and a burden; unborn children are an inconvenience to be aborted; children may be neglected and molested; there’s little concern for a child’s spiritual welfare. (6) Humble Christians will welcome little children as they would welcome Christ, recognizing that children are precious gifts of God. They will serve children by providing for their physical needs and, above all, their spiritual needs, bringing them to Christ through Baptism and teaching them his saving Word. (7) We may lead “little ones” to sin by neglecting to have them baptized and failing to give them a Christian training, by setting a poor example, by causing them or leading them into sin, etc. (8) These words cannot be used to support the idea of a guardian angel being assigned to each child, yet little children are indeed the objects of the angels’ care and protection. The good angels are spirit beings, with ranks and names, who are very numerous and very powerful and who minister to God’s people. (9) Mental understanding and faith are two different things. In verse 6, Jesus refers to children as “little ones who believe in me.” By the power of the Spirit working in Baptism, even newborns can be brought to faith. (10) Humility is not a good work that earns God’s favor, nor is it something in which to take pride. Spirit-filled Christians do not strive to be humble; they simply are. As Christians mature, they may be tempted to take pride in their sanctified lives and service to the Lord, a sign of decreasing humility and a faith that is not maturing at all. Genuine humility that leads one to repentance and sorrow over one’s sins is essential if one is to plead for God’s mercy and receive the gospel of salvation.