

Children of the King

Matthew 18:1-5

Introduction

America's Great Sin: Last year I read David Blight's fascinating biography of Frederick Douglass. Douglass is a significant figure in American history but, imo, still criminally under-appreciated. He was an escaped slave (20 yrs slavery, 9 years fugitive), turned abolitionist, activist, author, and public speaker (most photographed and heard person of the 19th century; cf. Lincoln, Twain, etc.). What makes him powerful to me is his prowess as a theologian. His thought and language is steeped in Scripture. One of his most famous speeches is titled: "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July."¹ He explains his love and admiration for the founders of America. He uses words like pride, patriotism, and gratitude. But, the problem as he sees it, from his unique perspective as a former slave is that the ideals of justice, liberty, and prosperity have not been lived out. "The great sin and shame of America" (i.e., slavery) has "fettered liberty, trampled on the constitution, and disregarded the Bible." For the slave, a celebration of "freedom" is a sham, an injustice, and insult. Here's where it gets worse. As Douglass makes clear, the church in America *too often* was complicit. Too often, white *Christians* defended slavery, oppression, and racism *by the twisting of "Christian" doctrine*.

- This is the most glaring example in the last few centuries but there are numerous others, big and small, that we could discuss.

Failures of the Church: Oftentimes, the failure of the Church to model the values of the Kingdom of God has led to confusion and backlash. The people who claim the name of Christ too often contradict the gospel. Do you know the number of times I've talked to someone about why they don't believe in the gospel and they point to the behavior of the church?

- Unfortunately, it sometimes seems *more rare* to find a church that embodies the values of Jesus' kingdom than one that doesn't. "I do believe in Christianity, and my impression is that a system must be divine which has survived so much insane mismanagement" (G. K. Chesterton).

When I look around at the church, I'm worried that, at least in America, we've wasted so much time "chasing issues" that we've failed to make disciples that embody the values of the gospel (Hannah Anderson).

- As a youth pastor for many years, I find some people want to blame millennials and Gen Z for not loving God and [for] leaving the church. But what if the blame is their parents as much as it is on them? "The church is bleeding out the next generation, not because 'the culture' is so opposed to the church's fidelity to the truth, but just the reverse. The culture often does not reject us because they don't believe the church's doctrinal and moral teachings, but because they have evidence that the church doesn't believe its own doctrinal and moral teachings. They suspect that Jesus is just a means to an end—to some political agenda, to a market for selling merchandise, or for the predatory appetites of some maniacal narcissist" (Moore).

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/07/04/why-this-1852-frederick-douglass-speech-what-slave-is-fourth-july-should-be-taught-students-today/>

- “Many [people] resent church because their parents were good at church but not good at life. They struggle attending a place that consumed their parents’ time but never transformed their parents’ [private] lives” (Anonymous).

And the stats are sobering: Millennials and Gen Z are leaving the church at alarming rates (50-75% youth leave church after high school; 4% of Gen Z have a “biblical worldview”; Millennials 50/50 affiliated/nones).

Disciple vs. Christian: For many people, “Christian” is a sociological or political label. I’m a “Christian” because I’m not Muslim or Jewish. I’m a “Christian” because my family are Christians. Christian is someone who looks like Christ (cf. Acts 11). Too many people are “Christians” but not disciples.

- In reality, we’re all “disciples” (i.e., followers) of something or someone. The real question: who’s discipling us?

Who’s Discipling Who(m)?: Too often people are being disciplined by the surrounding culture. Their values and priorities are determined by celebrities, politicians, and the larger society.

- “I’ve seen a lot of people leave their church because it doesn’t match their political party. I’ve rarely seen anyone leave their political party because it doesn’t match their church” (Luke Norsworthy).
- I’ve seen plenty of people find a new job, relocate, and find a new church; rarely have I seen someone find a church then adjust their job and living situation to match.

We have a vision for people to find real, meaningful, gospel community at Redemption Heights. We want the local church to be the focal point of neighborhood transformation, biblical education, deep discipleship, and authentic relationship.

- But, for that to happen, **the church has to be in a position of credibility.** “A message of grace may attract people, but only a culture of grace will keep, sustain, and transform them” (Wilson).

Kingdom Values: We’ve made through 17 chapters of Matthew (e.g., promise fulfilled, ministry, Kingdom of God, message of Kingdom, identity of Jesus, etc.). Now we start to see what the Kingdom of God looks like among Jesus’ followers (new series).

- “The most eloquent testimony to the reality of the resurrection is not an empty tomb or a well-orchestrated pageant on Easter Sunday but rather a group of people whose life together is so radically different, so completely changed from the way the world builds a community that there can be no explanation other than that something decisive has happened in history” (Willimon).

What kind of community are we going to be? What kind of value system do we have?

What kind of culture are we creating? Is it a gospel culture or just an inspirational version of morality? Is it a cruciform culture, or just a veneer of religion on the values of the world?

- We talk about being a *gospel* community. The message of Jesus, the values of the Jesus, the example of Jesus form the way we live and love each other and our neighborhood. There’s no coffee bar or neon lights that can accomplish that.
- The stakes are too high to be playing the “game” of church.

- The local church is not a cruise ship (e.g., rec director, activities, excursions). The local church is a battleship (e.g., spiritual battle). Everyone has a part to play. Are you going to **be served** or **serve**? We have to take the commands of our captain *seriously* (e.g., FOB Afghanistan).
- “In most churches, members see themselves as the mission of the church. But you are not the mission. You are the missionary” (Ted Kersh).

¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³ and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.”²

Q: What is my status in God’s Kingdom? (v. 1) (e.g., where do I rank?)

¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

Common Question: This is not an uncommon question. Immediately Jesus predicts his death for the last time, the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, asks Jesus to place her sons at his right and left hand in his coming kingdom (Matt 20:20-28). **She thinks she is securing them a coveted position of power and prestige.** But Jesus chastises her because she doesn’t know what she’s asking. Discipleship will lead to sharing in the suffering of Christ.

- This is the way the world thinks: what’s in it for me? I scratch your back, you scratch mine?
- Jesus used the illustration “sons of the King” previously (e.g., temple tax) and they seem to have picked up on that. But they are thinking of “sonship” primarily as an opportunity to enrich and empower themselves, they are failing to consider that their sonship to the King requires their submission and obedience (e.g., enlist in the military, get that bonus, get that uniform, people proud of you, maybe even work your way up the ranks, but they own you, you belong to Uncle Sam).

Life Together: God is not saving a *person* he’s saving a people. We need to take more seriously the corporate dimension of our salvation. “By grace you (2nd pl) have been saved” (Eph 2:5b): *ye, y’all, yous guys, yens.* The local church is a body (with many parts), a family (“the church is a family before it is an organization”). God has not made you for lone-ranger Christianity. It is a dangerous sign for a professing Christian to be disconnected from a local church, a Christian community (Lone Ranger Christianity fallacy). There is no such thing as a healthy Christian who isn’t connected to the local church.

² ¹ Ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ᾠρᾷ προσήλθον οἱ μαθηταὶ τῷ Ἰησοῦ λέγοντες, Τίς ἄρα μείζων ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν; ² καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος παιδίον ἔστησεν αὐτὸ ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν ³ καὶ εἶπεν, Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐὰν μὴ στραφῆτε καὶ γένησθε ὡς τὰ παιδία, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν. ⁴ ὃστις οὖν ταπεινώσει ἑαυτὸν ὡς τὸ παιδίον τοῦτο, οὕτως ἐστὶν ὁ μείζων ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν. ⁵ καὶ ὃς ἐὰν δέξῃται ἐν παιδίῳ τοιοῦτο ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματί μου, ἐμὲ δέχεται.

- I would submit that you don't deeply love the Word of God and the people of God (the actual people) if you don't worship joyfully and consistently with the local church when she gathers, if you don't pray for the burdens and needs of the other Christians at your church, if you don't seek opportunities to use your gifts to encourage and fulfill the ministries of the church.
- It's hard to say you love Christ if you hate or ignore his bride.

That makes this whole discipleship scenario tricky (e.g. 2nd person plural). It's quite a wake-up call to realize that following Christ means dealing with the foibles of other believers. It's all fun and games to read the latest Bible study, or memorize Bible verse, to learn Christian theology until you have to *actually* bear with the other believers, care about their problems, forgive them when they offend you, support them in need.

- There is no perfect church. If you find the perfect church, don't join it because you'll mess it up. "The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community" (Bonhoeffer).

Going from loving the idea of church to loving the *actual people* in my church. You are a gift to be received and stewarded, not a problem to be solved (I confess I sometimes have to remind myself of this, but by God's grace I'm growing).

- My job is *not* to make you into "the image that seems good to me" (i.e., my own image) but to help you be conformed to the image of Christ.
- "You" are the only you that God has made. He has a place for you in his body. We exist to help each other grow into Christlikeness.
- This also means that, if you aren't actively involved in the body of Christ, you are depriving her of her true potential and health. "We are members of a body, not only when we choose to be, but in our whole existence. Every member serves the whole body, either to its health or to its detriment" (Bonhoeffer).

Terrible Question: The point is, the disciples ask a **terrible question**. For the believer there is no pursuit of status or rank in God's kingdom.

- What's my rank? We should just be **glad we're invited in**. "For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Ps 84:10). Cf. the hell question (e.g., Why does God send people to hell)? He doesn't send us to hell, we're all heading there and he offers us salvation. What am I owed? Nothing. It's like someone who receives a heart transplant and asking when they can run a marathon.

Our status as children of God determines our acceptance in the Kingdom, teaches us the value system of the Kingdom, and invite us to welcome all who would come to him.

1. To Be a Citizen of the Kingdom, You Must Be a Child of the King (vv. 2-3)

² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³ and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Vivid Illustration: ² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them. Calls an *actual* child to him, to give them a vivid illustration (another reason I know I'm not like Jesus because I do use "living illustrations" e.g., children, sheep, camels, livestock, etc.). Becoming a child is the central metaphor of this entire section.

- Something about being a child strikingly illustrates the model of true discipleship and community that Jesus is trying to teach. What would we use as a model for true discipleship? Professor? Pastor? Missionary?

Status: The disciples are concerned about their *rank* in the God's Kingdom. They want power, authority, and status (and presumably all the rights and privileges thereof).

- **I don't want a pastor who wants authority** (cf. president). Authority and leadership are good (submit to leaders). But the kind of leaders who are good are humble leaders who love.

What is the status of children?

- "In the honor culture of the first century, children were considered as equal to slaves in status. Therefore, by placing a child before his disciples as the 'greatest' in the Kingdom of heaven, Jesus subverted the social standards of identity and worth. His disciples had to change the way they saw themselves and 'become like little children'" (Reeves).
- I'm not here to argue with you about how kids should be treated (the Bible is countercultural). I'm here to explain how kids *were* viewed (e.g., no one cut their PBJ in fours; no one asked their opinion; no one included them in the vote for household decisions, etc.). Kids (here) have no rights, or status, or authority. They are dependent on and obedient to their parents.

To "humble" yourself like a child is to understand and accept your status as a child (not to imitate childish behavior). *I don't know if you've met any children but they're not really "humble" in attitude. They're humble in *position*. We are supposed to be like God's children not be childish.

- "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways" (1 Cor 13:11).
- Even children are supposed to "grow up." I'm still my parents' child (position) but I'm a grown up (behavior/attitude).

Jesus is calling all of us to pursue the status of little children.

Getting In: You cannot get into God's Kingdom unless you follow God's path.

- Your own goodness is not enough to get into his kingdom: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20).
- Your words aren't enough: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 7:21).
- Your wealth can't buy you a spot: "And Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God'" (Matt 19:23-24).

Born Again: ³ and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. You and I don’t make it into God’s kingdom based on our good behavior, good intentions, knowledge, wealth, or talent; we don’t make it in because of our family, heritage, or nationality. The only way to enter the kingdom is to become a child of the King.

- This requires a fundamental change of identity, allegiance, and values (e.g., turn and become). This is the essence of *repentance* (turn from sin and self and trust Christ only).

It’s not unlike what Jesus tells Nicodemus the Pharisee in John 3: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’” (Jn 3:3-7).

- “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17).
- This is not something we accomplish on our own. Jesus isn’t a tool on your journey to self-improvement; he’s not a genie ready to grant you a few wishes; he’s not a mascot meant to justify your lifestyle.
 - “Too often and for too long American ‘Christianity’ has been a political agenda in search of a gospel useful enough to accommodate it.”
- God of the universe, demands complete allegiance, etc. It’s a radical change. “When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die” (Bonhoeffer). Die to yourself, your dreams, and your allegiances and find life, joy, meaning, and purpose in *Christ alone*. I would submit that *one* “reason we see so little repentance in the world is that the world sees so little repentance in the church” (Ray Ortlund). We see a lot of people claiming the name of Christ but living for themselves rather than him.
 - Jesus here is calling the disciples to a radically new way of living. “To abandon human thoughts of personal status and to not only accept but even seek a place at the bottom of the pecking order” (France).

Child of the King: Such a radical reorientation is only possible when you are adopted by the King of kings. The question becomes: **are you a child of the King?**

- You can’t belong to yourself and to God.
- You can’t find your identity and value in the things of the world and the things of God at the same time.

Who do you belong to?

2. As a Child of the King, You Must Live By the Values of His Kingdom (v. 4)

⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Different Value System: Their concern with status is not compatible with the values of the kingdom. Compared to the values of the world, the Kingdom operates by a different standard.

- Upside-down values of the KoG (compared to the world). E.g., last=first; love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you; turn the other cheek; leave the 99; etc.

Downward Path: Jesus is calling us to embrace the downward path of discipleship. In his Kingdom we seek the lowly position. **Phil 2** (one of my favorite passages) says that the strength of the church is in its unity, that unity is not generic but deeply rooted in the gospel. But the means to gospel unity is humility (e.g., considering others as more important, seeking the good of others). How can we develop humility? It can only be accomplished by having the mind of Christ (i.e., union with Christ). The goal is not to find or discover yourself, but follow Christ and be made like him. We are most like Christ when we are serving, forgiving, and sacrificing.

Leaders in the Kingdom: Greatest in the kingdom of heaven "I am convinced that top-down structures of leadership are unquestionably more efficient. Efficient in doing almost everything other than equipping, which is the primary task of leadership" (Black). We're not trying to build an organization or launch a movement; we're trying to *plant* a church (planting requires patience, nurture, and careful attention to the seed). I care way less about efficiency than I do about longevity.

- Who are the great leaders in God's Kingdom? Those who are the most humble. Humility is the indispensable requirement of Christian maturity.
- Being a child of the King means my value is tied to my being in *his* family. Being his son or daughter makes me valuable so I don't have to seek validation elsewhere.
 - I do not have to find identity in my work, relationships, talents, etc. As a result, I can submit all of those things to his Lordship. So my work becomes an avenue for bringing *him* glory (not myself). My relationships become an opportunity to proclaim *his* message (not my own).
- Some people see humility as weakness. It isn't weak. Being a narcissistic bully is weak. It takes true knowledge of who you are to be strong enough to humble yourself. It takes real confidence and surety to choose to lower yourself for the good of others.

True greatness is never achieved through self-assurance; bluster and swagger don't deliver real confidence (maybe arrogance). But arrogance only produces pain and shame.

- And *false* humility doesn't work either. You can't aim for greatness by trying to be humble. If you fake humility to achieve greatness it isn't *real* humility.

Humility is the gospel way.

3. As a Child of the King, We Must Welcome Those Who God Welcomes (v. 5)

⁵ "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me."

One Such Child: Whoever receives one such child What kind of people do we welcome into the church? The church has done a great job of making grace dirt cheap for the kinds of people Jesus rebuked and unbelievably expensive for the kinds of people he lifted up.

- There are no spiritual giants in God's church, only desperate sinners who have been saved by grace. "Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread" (D. T. Niles).

We are called to **be** children dependent on God who **receive** *anyone* who would come dependent on God (i.e., such=anyone like this).

Who's Important?: There are no great ones in the KoH except Jesus.

- "A portrait of the church emerges as a place where status-consciousness has no place. The focus is on the relationship and mutual responsibility of all members of the community. Jesus gives to the least important person a significance out of all proportion to their human standing. The last is indeed first" (France).
- "My brothers [and sisters], show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors" (Jas 2:1-4, 8-9).

Conclusion

We have a society that "knows the price of everything but the value of nothing." We're drowning in information yet starved for wisdom. We aim to get all we can and can all we get, yet we're miserable. I want our little congregation to exemplify the messy and beautiful power of God's amazing grace. I want people to come here and see a **different value system**.

- I want you to be disciplined and encouraged by the actual people in your church (not having to turn to celebrity preachers or social media), but real flesh-and-blood people.
- I want our relationships to be characterized by humility, love, and forgiveness.
- I want our hearts to think of others before ourselves.
- I want everyone who meets us, who comes to a gathering, who attends a Bible study to say "there's something different about them" and the difference is *the gospel*.

Are you a child of the King?

Are you pursuing the humble path?

Are you welcoming all who would come to Jesus?