

Matthew 18:1-9

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 April 2007

Preacher: Fergus MacDonald

- [0 : 0 0] We'll return back now for a few moments to the passage we read in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 18. And looking at the same verse of which I spoke to the children, verse 5, whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.
- It is said that during the Victorian era, children were supposed to be seen but not heard. Whether that was true or not, we can't be sure. But one thing I think we can believe is that for Jesus, children were important and that they should be both seen and heard in the church.
- And that the church of God is not simply an adult institution. It's an institution for all ages. The church is for children just as it is for adults.
- And it's important for us to recognize that. And one of the ways in which we do that is through the sacrament of baptism when young children or babies are baptized.
- [1 : 2 3] Now Jesus, as I said, had quite a bit to say about children. And in this passage which we read today, we have what we might call Jesus' teaching or Jesus' doctrine on children.
- And it's on the basis of what Jesus teaches here that we baptize infants, we baptize children. Although baptism is not mentioned in this passage, the principles which Jesus explains here are the principles which elsewhere in the Bible, baptism, family baptism is founded.
- And so I would like us for a few moments this morning in preparation for the service of baptism which is to take place today, to look at some aspects of what Jesus is saying here.
- Jesus says what he says about children when his disciples came to him and said, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God?
- They were ambitious and they wanted to be great in the sense of celebrity greatness. And in order to help them to understand that the kingdom of God is very different from worldly society where celebrities are important, Jesus takes a child, a little child, and he uses this child as an illustration of the kingdom of God.
- [3 : 0 5] And he said if you want to see a symbol of the kingdom of God, you don't look to a celebrity, whether a football star or a film star or even a great church leader, look at a child.
- A child who is small, a child who is vulnerable, a child who is weak, a child who is helpless. He said that is a symbol of those who belong to the kingdom of God.
- And he reminds us that in the kingdom of God, all of us are weak. All of us are helpless. All of us need his grace.
- And so Jesus takes a little child in contrast to one of the great stars, say, of our society today, someone like Madonna or some great sports person.
- And he says, don't look to them. They have a role to play, undoubtedly. But look to a child and see the kingdom of God symbolized, illustrated in a child.

[4 : 23] But then Jesus goes on to speak about children for their own sakes, not simply children as an example of greatness in the kingdom of God.

But he speaks of children for their own sake. And he obviously truly loved children.

And he is unique in the sense, I understand, among the great teachers and writers of antiquity. If children during the Victorian era were supposed to be seen or not heard, we don't know.

But certainly this was true of the ancient world, where children were very much, children and women took very much a second place. But Jesus brings his little child into the forefront.

And he, in other words, is turning upside down some of the values of the society in which he lived. And he's reminding us of the importance of children.

[5 : 33] And as he received that child, he reminds us that we also should receive children in his name. And today, that's precisely what we will do as a congregation.

we will receive two little children. And the people who are active in the sacrament of baptism are not simply the children and the immediate parents, but all of us.

All of us are involved in the act of baptism. Because as a congregation, we're receiving the children. And we're receiving them in the name of Christ.

And in a quite extraordinary way, Jesus says, when we receive them in his name, we receive him. He promises to meet with us. He promises to bless us. He promises to come with them into our midst.

Because children are at the center of the kingdom of God. But what does Jesus mean when he says, whoever receives one child in my name receives me?

[6 : 47] What does it mean to receive someone in the name of Jesus? When Jesus himself explains this to us in some other uses of this phrase, if we think of Mark's Gospel and verse 41, he tells us, whoever shall, whoever you give a cup of cold water to drink in my name, because you belong to Christ, shall not lose his reward.

And here Jesus is speaking about, he's using in my name as literally the equivalent of belonging to Christ. And when we receive someone in his name, we are affirming that there's a sense in which they belong to Christ.

Christ. And so, today, we receive, we will receive these two little children as children who belong to God in a special sense, through the faith of their parents.

Of course, all of us belong to God through creation. He is our creator, he is our sustainer, he has made us. And therefore, in that sense, all of us belong to him.

But Jesus is teaching us here, and the Bible teaches us generally, that the children of the people of God belong to God in an additional sense, through their parents.

[8 : 21] The promise that God gave to Abraham was not only given to him, but to his children. The promise that was given to the Philippian jailer, that he would be saved, was given not only to him, but to his household, or to his family.

They belong to God, in terms of the, not simply of creation, but the covenant of redemption, the covenant of God's grace.

And we believe this as an act of faith. And Paul tells the Corinthians that if we believe, then those who have family relationships with us are, he says, holy.

They are covered in some sense by our relationship to God. And that's what we honour, that's what we recognise when we baptise little children.

We're not saying that these little children are saved. We're not saying that these little children believe, maybe saved, but we don't know.

[9 : 26] What we are saying is that they belong to God, in a special sense, in virtue of the faith of their parents. Because the promise that God has given to their parents is a promise which embraces them as well as their parents.

And until they themselves come to an age of responsibility and accountability, they are covered by the faith of their parents.

And so therefore, the church grants them the outward sign of belonging to the visible church of God. An illustration of this, in a sense, in the Old Testament, when you remember Moses, when he was born in Egypt, and when he got to a stage as an infant, when his mother could no longer hide him from the Egyptians, that she staged a situation where the princess, Pharaoh's daughter, found him in the bulrushes and she adopted him into her family.

And so there's a sense in which Moses' mother gave Moses to the princess. And then the princess received him and said, he is my son.

she adopted him there and then. And then she gave him back to the mother to bring up, to nurse him. And in a sense, that's an illustration.

[11 : 05] It's not a part of the teaching and baptism, but it's an illustration that helps us to understand what baptism is. Parents bring their children to God.

They hand them over and they dedicate their children to God, but baptism is more than a dedication because God receives the child in baptism and the child is given back to the parents to bring up for him.

And there is a promise that their faith will cover that child and that that child will follow, hopefully, the faith of his or her parents.

Now, Jesus also says here that those who receive, when we receive a child in his name, that we welcome him, we receive him.

The promise of Jesus here is that he shall identify himself with the child. And perhaps also we have the idea that we might even see Christ in the child in some symbolic sense.

[12 : 23] When a child is baptised, we believe and we trust and we pray that that child will one day come to believe, will inherit and affirm the faith of his or her parents.

and in that sense we potentially see Christ in a child. And so baptism is not simply a badge of belonging, which it is, it's also a pledge of becoming.

It's a pledge of what God will do in the life of these little children. It's a pledge that God gives to us, a seal, of his covenant promise to all of us who are Christian parents.

And so we are to believe and we are to pray that children who are baptised, we are to pray that they may grow up, that they may not only be physically and mentally healthy, but that they may come to a spiritual growth, that they may come to a living faith themselves and discover new life in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this is the promise of which baptism is a seal. Now God's promises don't operate on the basis of a slot machine, a mechanical basis.

[13 : 52] There's nothing automatic or mechanical about them. There's an area of mystery which we cannot resolve and which we ought not to try to resolve.

And we sometimes find that children who are baptised do not grow up to believe. And we have to recognise that. And that children whose parents took their vows, took vows on their behalf, that are disappointed when their children do not affirm these vows for themselves, that can happen.

And so there's an element of mystery here. and we live in a sinful world, we live in an imperfect world. But what I think Jesus is teaching us here is that the ideal is, and that's what we're honouring today and that's what we're praying for, is that when we receive a child in the name of Christ we receive him.

And that he will be formed, he will be seen ultimately in the life of that child. And so God's promise is a promise to be believed, it is a promise to be claimed, it's a promise that all of us, not just parents, but all of us who belong to the congregation need to pray and to plead before God.

All of us have a God-given responsibility towards children, whether we're parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, or simply part of the congregation.

[15 : 27] Baptism reminds us that God's salvation is an act of grace. Baptism is received, it's a gift of the church, it's a gift of God, and it's a reminder that we're dealing here with God's grace.

God deals with us not as we deserve, God deals with us according to his mercy, God deals with us according to his love. God and so although we may say that baptism is a badge of belonging, it is not a medal.

There are differences in a badge and a medal. A badge indicates that you belong. A medal is a reward. A medal is something that an athlete gets if he or she comes first, second, or third in a race.

a medal is something that those who reach the cup final, the team reach the cup final receive. It's a reward. Now, baptism is not a reward.

Baptism is a gift. We do not deserve God's salvation. It is of God's grace and God's mercy that he's reaching out to us.

[16 : 46] And we are being reminded of that. Baptism is a gift. Just a salvation is a gift. And today we celebrate God's gift. We celebrate God's grace.

God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life. Now, very briefly, I would like to underline three important facts about our responsibilities today.

All of us have responsibilities when each time we participate or celebrate the sacrament of baptism. First of all, it sets the highest standards.

Here we have the teaching of Jesus. Let me remind you on this issue. Jesus tells us that he himself took these children.

Mark tells us he took this child into his arms. he received this child. And Jesus is our example.

[17 : 54] Jesus is our standard here. And he is the one against whom we need to measure our own lives. And so, Jesus tells us in verse 10, see that you do not look down on one of these little ones.

For I tell you that the angels in heaven always see the face of my father in heaven. In other words, Jesus is saying that children are so important to him and to God that even the angels are involved.

And children are at the center of what God is doing in the world. And so, Jesus is reminding us here that this is not a sort of optional extra in the life of the church.

Children are at the very center of God's purpose for the church. And Jesus goes on in verses 12 and 13 to tell the parable of the lost sheep.

And this parable illustrates God's love and care for children. And he's concerned lest any of the children might be lost. Just as the shepherd goes to look for the sheep that is lost.

[19 : 08] So he's encouraging us to go to all lengths to help those who may have gone astray, to help those who may have lost their way.

So we need to ask ourselves this morning whether we are as concerned for children as Jesus is, as God is. Do we have that concern for the next generation?

So it's easy for us to think, well, my generation is what counts. But Jesus is reminding us here that really we need to be concerned for children, we need to be concerned for the next and the subsequent generations.

I think the second point that we learn here is that today the teaching of Jesus really is quite severe. It not only sets the highest standards but it threatens the severest sanctions.

There's a lot of talk in the media today about sanctions against Iran and I think all of us know what sanctions are. Sanctions are in the form of some kind of punishment, some kind of deterrent.

[20 : 27] and Jesus speaks very bluntly here. Jesus doesn't put sugar in the pill. He tells us the score.

He tells us what it is. He tells us as it is. And he makes very clear here that children matter so much to him that our responsibility that we will be held accountable for our responsibility.

responsibility. The opposite of receiving little children in the name of Christ and bringing them up for him is to cause them to stumble and to fall away and to go astray so that they do not believe in God and do not live for him.

Now this can sometimes happen despite the earnest and prayerful example of Christian parents. we live in a fallen world and tations are unavoidable.

But if this happens because of our neglect, because of our lack of concern for the spiritual well-being of children, then Jesus is saying we will be held accountable.

[21 : 47] And this is something that is terribly serious, absolutely deadly serious, as Jesus says. He uses two illustrations here to reinforce the point. He says this is one of the worst of all things we could do to anybody.

It's so terrible as to be worthy of a terrible fate. And he brings out these two powerful illustrations or metaphors of death by drowning.

in verse 6. For a Jew, and Jesus was a Jew, and he lived in a Jewish culture, for a Jew to be drowned far out to sea was the symbol of utter destruction.

And Jesus speaks about a millstone, not just any ordinary millstone that were used in the kitchens of the ancient world, but the giant millstones that were hauled by donkeys.

And he says that he speaks about such a millstone being tied to our necks and being thrown into the depths of the sea. He speaks about death by burning.

[22 : 55] He speaks about the fire of hell. The word he uses for hell here is the word Gehenna, which became a symbol of hell, because Gehenna was the rubbish dump of Jerusalem.

It was the Valley of Hinnom, where the people had, in the previous generation, in the 8th century, sacrificed their children in the fire, offered their children as a sacrifice to the pagan god Moloch.

And when Josiah the king had a reformation, that place was condemned, it was cursed. And in the later centuries it became the refuse dump of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, and it became a giant incinerator.

It became a symbol, a picture, a metaphor of divine judgment. Now Jesus is using these two most powerful figures from his own culture to make clear to his disciples and to his hearers that God takes children very, very seriously.

And all of us have a great responsibility, serious responsibility, whether we're parents or whether we're simply relatives or members of the congregation. We have a responsibility and one day we will be held accountable for how we have fulfilled that responsibility.

[24 : 20] And so are we aware of this great solemnity? But then Jesus also says here that his teaching demands the greatest sacrifice.

It sets the highest standards, it threatens the severest sanctions, but it also demands the greatest sacrifice. We see this in verses 8 and 9.

If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into eternal fire.

If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the fire of hell. And so what Jesus is saying here is that we need to be ruthless.

In order to get our priorities right concerning children, we need to be ruthless. We need to be, if necessary, take drastic action.

[25 : 26] Because this is so important to him, it is so important to God. Both for the sake of our children and both for our own sake, we must be ruthless in sacrificing everything which would prevent us fulfilling our responsibility towards children over which God has placed us.

And so Jesus is telling us that as people are prepared to sacrifice a hand or a foot or an eye in order to avoid the spread of a deadly disease in their body, so must we be ready to sacrifice and give up anything that might hinder our children's spiritual development.

Anything that might become a stumbling block to children is going to be and so Jesus is here presenting us with his own teaching on children.

And it is on the basis of that teaching that, as I've said, that we today will receive two little children into the church. They, through baptism, are being dedicated to the Lord.

But there's more than dedication. There is the promise that God has given to us. And baptism, in a sense, is a seal of that promise. Martin Luther, the great reformer and translator of the Bible, in his life faced many adversities, many difficulties.

[26 : 56] His life was often at risk. And he used to say to himself, again and again, when he was under stress, when he was faced with problems and with difficulties and when death seemed to be around the corner, he would say in his prayers, I am baptized.

God has put his seal upon me. God has promised never to leave me and never to forsake me. And he saw that promise being symbolized, embedded in the service of baptism.

And so baptism is a seal. It's not just a dedication. It's God's promise. It's God's seal to us.

And although God's promise does not operate in the mechanical way, it does not operate mechanistically, there's an element of mystery and spirituality here which we cannot fathom.

Yet nevertheless, that promise is real and that promise is true. And we are being asked today to believe that promise. And those of us who have been baptized, have been challenged to live as Martin Luther lived and say, I am living as a baptized person.

[28 : 11] I am living as someone who belongs to God. This is my calling. This is my destiny. God is calling us to live for him and to put him first.

And to be prepared to put the kingdom of God, his kingship in our lives at the very center of what we do, above everything else. That that might become our great priority. And my prayer is that there may be someone here today who might come to the point of submitting their lives to God and saying, I want to do it your way.

The week before last I was at a conference in Texas and remember one of the speakers there who was doing the devotions telling us about a teenage or perhaps a slightly older son of his who had wandered away from the faith of his fathers.

And the son came to him one day and he said, I've been doing it my way. Now I want to do it God's way. And God is challenging all of us to come to that point.

To give up doing it our way. And from now on to do it God's way. And as these little children are baptized today, may that be the response of all of us.

[29 : 43] God, I want to do it from now on. I want to do it your way. Let's bow our heads in prayer. Our Heavenly Father, we come before you to thank you for this element of teaching in the Gospels which reminds us of Jesus' love and concern for children.

We pray our Heavenly Father that you will remind us of that and help us to share that concern. And we pray that you will help us to put your kingdom first.

That your kingship, your lordship, might be our supreme priority. That we may do things from now on. your way rather than our way.

We ask this in the name of Jesus and for his sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

.