

The Children of God  
Matthew 18:1-11

Woe unto the world because of offenses, especially offenses against the little ones. Who can doubt that Jesus' words apply to those who abuse children, especially those who buy and sell them for use as laborers, soldiers or even sex objects? As violence increases in foreign lands, more and more children are placed at risk of such human trafficking – even those who come to our shores as refugees.

But we Americans have blood on our own hands as well. Since 1973, our Federal courts have outlawed any state limitations on the practice of abortion. As a result, over 60 million American children have never had the chance to be born. We consider Hitler to be a monster for killing a tenth of that number in his gas chambers – so what does that make us?

But it isn't just the abortionists and child abusers who are causing problems for children these days. How many of us engage in behavior that leads to having children before getting married? How many marriages break down because of abuse or infidelity? How many parents lose themselves in drink or drugs? How many of us spend more time with our cellphones than we do with our kids?

And it is the children who suffer for each one of our selfish choices. We've known for years that children whose parents aren't married have a much higher risk of all sorts of social problems, from dropping out of school to using illicit drugs to premarital pregnancy. In fact, the biggest single predictor of poverty among children is not their ethnic group or the number of years of school their parents have finished, but whether or not their parents are married.

And we've known for years that children's cognitive development can be seriously affected by exposure to alcohol or drugs while they are in the womb – we call it having "Fetal Alcohol Syndrome." We call them "crack babies." And scientists now warn us that electronic stimulation at early ages can reduce children's attention spans and make it harder for them to think logically and critically about the information they receive – but how many parents use computer games as babysitters anyway?

So, what did Jesus say should happen to those who lead the little ones astray? He pointed to a millstone, a huge rock weighing hundreds of pounds and used in those days to crush kernels of grain into flour. And he said that taking a long walk off of a short pier with such a heavy stone tied around the neck was too good for those who through their selfishness condemn children to lives of fear and loneliness and poverty and misery.

So much is clear, if more than a bit chilling. But while many Mississippians may point with pride to our state's recent law outlawing the abortion of any baby more than 15 weeks past the point of conception, a law which will be examined by the United States Supreme Court this December, we shouldn't allow ourselves to become too smug. After all, we regularly contend with Arkansas for the dubious distinction of the state having the highest teen birth rate. So we shouldn't be shocked that our state also has the highest poverty rate in the country. Clearly, just passing laws that uphold traditional family structures is not enough to ensure that children not only survive but thrive.

And so we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus isn't really talking about power and politics in this passage – no, it's His disciples who had those sorts of things on their minds, jockeying as they were for prime positions in the court of the new kingdom they were expecting Jesus to establish at any moment. But such a pursuit of authority and influence meant that they couldn't be bothered with the needs of mere children. For in ancient times, when people were more concerned with survival than with sentiment, children were considered to be the least important members of society because they were the least productive.

So, what is Jesus' answer to those oh-so-worldly, oh-so-commonsensual disciples? Indeed, what is His answer to the modern folks who think of children as little more than a hindrance to worldly happiness or financial prosperity? Well, to Jesus, children were supremely important, much more important than our money or our convenience or our feelings. Indeed, Jesus went so far as to identify Himself with them, for what did He say? "Whoever receives one such child in My name receives me."

And so, if we want to follow Jesus, if we want to be like Jesus, we have to take Him seriously when He says that, far from neglecting or abusing children, we should welcome them, and seek their good, regardless of the expense or inconvenience they may cause at times.

But we can't stop there, for Jesus insists that we must actually seek to become like children. Now, that doesn't mean we should start folding our bulletins into paper planes and sailing them around the Sanctuary. But it also doesn't mean that we should idolize children the way many modern people do, coveting their innocence or purity, or even their enthusiasm or youthful vigor.

No, because Jesus was speaking to an audience that tended to look down on children because of their physical weakness, He was making the point that we should think of ourselves as being just as weak and helpless. He was saying that we should humble ourselves before God, recognizing our absolute dependence on Him, in the same way that children depend completely on their parents. What Jesus is therefore saying is that the path to greatness doesn't run through the corridors of influence in Washington or Jackson. No, true greatness, true Christlikeness comes through an honest admission of our inability and our need – it comes from being the children of God.

And such complete humility is in fact a key part of the conversion process Jesus mentions in verse 3, isn't it? For before we can acknowledge Jesus to be our Savior, don't we have to confess that we are nothing more than helpless sinners who cannot save ourselves? And before we can bow before Jesus as our Lord, don't we have to admit that He is more powerful than we are, and that He does in fact have absolute authority over every aspect of our lives? Don't we have to come before our Heavenly Father in the same sort of weakness and dependence that children demonstrate to their earthly parents?

But what if, like those power-hungry, self-important disciples, we try to follow Jesus without first becoming like children, without first humbling ourselves in this way? What if we imagine that the Christian faith is not about dying to ourselves and living for the good of others, but instead just about putting on a good show for the public, congratulating ourselves on our political positions and condemning others for what we consider to be their socially unacceptable behavior – even while we tolerate or even cultivate our own sinful habits in private? What if we deny the need for total devotion to the glory of God and instead reduce Christian discipleship to occasional attendance on divine worship, while remaining preoccupied with what we want or how we feel?

Can we doubt that such mere lip-service to Christ would in fact be the worst stumbling block we could place before our children? In fact, could we blame them for abandoning the Christian faith altogether, as more and more of those who have grown up in the Church are doing each day? After all, why should they devote their lives to Jesus if our half-hearted and self-focused example convinces them that such hypocrisy is the central component of His worship?

No, the sad and scary truth is that the millstone Jesus mentions in verse 6 isn't just for the abortionists or the peddlers of perversion. No, any of us can cause the same sort of offense to the little ones just by the way we live our lives – claiming to worship Jesus while only worshipping ourselves.

So, how can we protect the children? How can we become true children of God ourselves? In verses 8 and 9, Jesus recommends the most extreme of measures. "If your hand or your foot causes you

to stumble, cut it off. If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out.” You can’t get much more radical than that.

But should we take Jesus’ words at face value? For think about it: is it really possible for our hands or feet to cause us to stumble into sin? Isn’t it more likely that our minds and emotions are directing our hands to do things we shouldn’t do and our feet to go places they shouldn’t go? In the same way, is it really our eyes that cause us to sin? Isn’t it actually our sinful minds that turn our eyes toward things that we shouldn’t see, or our sinful hearts that allow them to linger in places they don’t belong?

No, it’s much more likely the case that Jesus is advocating something much more difficult, much more radical than physical self-mutilation. Instead of cutting off parts of our bodies, He is actually urging us to reject anything – any object, any habit, any relationship – that keeps us or others from drawing closer to God, no matter how precious those things might be to us. And given Jesus’ shocking words, nothing could possibly be off-limits – for if He could direct us to get rid of the parts of our bodies, how much more should we be willing to put aside drugs or drink, sex or success, power or pleasure, comfort or contentment or anything else that we consider to be essential for our own happiness or fulfillment?

But is Jesus really calling us to such radical self-denial, to such absolute self-sacrifice? Well remember – even though Jesus’ hands and feet never led Him into sin, He allowed them to be nailed to the cross. And remember: Jesus didn’t just give up His eyes – He gave up His life. Jesus completely humbled Himself before God and man. Jesus placed Himself completely in His Father’s hands, abandoning Himself completely to the Father’s will. That’s the way that Jesus proved Himself truly to be a child of God.

And that’s the kind of humility Jesus says is necessary for any of us who desire to enter the kingdom of heaven. That’s the kind of humility that is necessary for any of us to live lives of integrity, the kind of humility that, far from scandalizing those who see the way we live, will attract others to follow Jesus. For it is only by living in such complete and humble dependence on Christ, it is only by living with such absolute focus on the glory of God and the good of others that we will truly be able to show Christ to our children – and to the rest of the world as well.