

“Become Like Children” (St. Matthew 18:1-4)

For Your Life in Christ the Week of the Twelfth Sunday after
Pentecost, September 4th, 2011
Saint Paul’s Lutheran Church of Irvine, CA (LC-MS)
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Introduction: Sinful Ambition & the Idolatry of Pride

- A. Satan attacked Adam in the Garden; he attacked Christ in the wilderness, and here in Matthew 18, he went after the apostles.
- B. One theologian wrote, “Thus early was the devil of pride raising his ugly head in their midst (Kretzmann 97).”
- C. Notice the prideful concern of the apostles:

Matthew 18:1: *“At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’”*

Matthew 20:20-21: *“Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. ²¹And he said to her, ‘What do you want?’ She said to him, ‘Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.’”*

Luke 22:24: *“A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.”*

- D. It is sobering to think that to this day even ministers can be driven by selfish ambition. Notice these words from St. Paul:

Philippians 1:17a: *“The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely...” = that is, they present the Gospel to gather a following for themselves.*

- E. The apostles misinterpreted prior events: In Mark 5:37, Jesus did not have all of the apostles go with him to raise up Jairus’s daughter, but only Peter, James, and John; at the transfiguration of our Lord (e.g. Matthew 17:1) Christ

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led only Peter, James, and John up the mountain; and perhaps most disturbingly to some of them, the Lord had said to Peter that he was blessed in Matthew 16:17 and at Matthew 16:19 Christ said Peter would be given the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and *then right before the beginning of today’s Gospel, Jesus seemingly honors Peter above all of them through the miracle of the fish with the shekel in its mouth given to Peter so that Peter could pay the tax both for Peter and for Jesus.*

- F. “Now wait just a minute here! What is going on! Why is so-and-so getting all the good stuff? **What about me?!**” It is easy for us to get worried and upset about our position or lack thereof. We -- like the original apostles -- enter a mindset “fraught with danger because of envy, jealousy, pride, and hatred (Lenski, 679).” “They were headed in the wrong direction with their selfish ambition...The strong double negative [spoken by Christ = “unless you turn...you will never”] **means that [if they remain in selfish ambition] they will otherwise not get into the kingdom of heaven at all, let alone have big places in it (Robertson 146).**”

Part I: Pride and Ambition and the Thirst for Success:

- A. Timothy Keller in his book *Counterfeit Gods* quotes Helen Rubin in the magazine *Fast Company*:

“Of all the subjects we obsess about...success is the one we lie about the most – that success and its cousin money will make us secure, that success and its cousin power will make us important, that success and its cousin fame will make us happy. It’s time to tell the truth: Why are our generation’s smartest, most talented, most successful people flirting with disaster in record numbers? People are using all their means to get money, power, and glory – and then self-destructing. Maybe they didn’t want it in the first place! Or didn’t like what they saw when they finally achieved it (92).”

- B. **In sin, we are preoccupied with success and power.**

Part II: But The Lord Has Not Called Us To “Success” (the World’s Definition), but to Faithfulness and Faith Is Kept in HUMILITY

- A. F.F. Bruce says that to humble oneself “is the most difficult thing in the world.” We just don’t want to!
- B. So Christ cuts to the chase: ***to turn and to become a child are one and the same act*** (Lenski 680).

Matthew 18:3: “[Jesus said] Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

- C. So proper repentance and the experience of true conversion = is to “become like children.”
- D. What is a child like? Jesus illustrated. Now Matthew 18:4 has Christ presenting a child which is the image of innocence and an example of humility (Jerome), but the parallel passage to Matthew 18:4 is Mark 9:36. The illustration is even more powerful here:

Mark 9:36: “And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms...”

- E. This is the picture of a little, helpless child. ***This is the way Jesus is calling us to be!***
 - 1. It is as if Jesus said to the apostles: “Does this little child look like he’s full of worldly power, status, and might?!”
 - 2. Turn back to/revert to the simplicity of a child.
 - 3. Rest in Jesus’ arms & be completely dependent on Him!
 - 4. So Luther says, “Oh, do not think to be great but to be little.”
 - 5. To humble yourself in this way means to make yourself low, make no claims, insist on no rights, come with no demands, but bow lowly and humbly under the Lord’s will and Word, yield completely to him. True humility does not hanker after greatness (Lenski 683).

Part III: This Is What We Are Supposed To Be, But Only the Lord Can Give Us This Child-Like Status

- A. This Gospel reading goes on in verses 7-9 to describe what we are to do with our prideful sin as it impacts our body: cut off your hand or foot (v 8), tear out your eye (v 9) if these cause you to sin.
- B. These are metaphors describing ***repentance*** which is a gift from God. Notice who does the real work here:

Jeremiah 31:18: “I have heard Ephraim grieving, ‘You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untrained calf; bring me back that I may be restored, for you are the Lord my God.’”

- C. Now answer these questions based on that Scripture:
 - 1. How is discipline achieved? Answer: God provided it.
 - 2. How are we brought back? Answer: God restores.

Conclusion: We Need Christ to Save us in HIS Humility

- A. The real answer to “Who Is The Greatest?” is Jesus Christ.
- B. And no one ever humbled themselves more than He!

Philippians 2:8: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

- C. For you Jesus “cut off” His hands and feet when He permitted the Roman spikes that were 5 to 7 inches long to be run through His hands and feet.
- D. God “tore out” His eyes as He looked away from His Son as He accepted His taking YOUR sin and accepted His Son’s payment for YOUR sin.
- E. The Lord became exactly as that little child when He as God took on flesh and then was born of Mary as an infant child.
- F. The King of Kings and Lord of Lord became as NOTHING, emptying Himself so that you would be saved by humility, HIS humility.
- G. In Christ, in His Word, and in His Sacrament, you know this humility of Christ, it leads you to confess your pride every day and to confess your Savior whose humility is yours so that to God you ARE His child covered by Christ!