

St Michael and All Angels

Matthew 18:1 – 11

Rev Joseph Highley

(transcribed from his sermon on Sunday, October 2nd, 2022)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Kids, there will be a children's message shortly, so get ready, but I suppose, first, we should have our regular sermon. Our text this morning is from Matthew, chapter 18 and we're talking about children. That's what Jesus seems to want to talk about, talking about children.

You think of children and you think, oh, so cute. I already did this about sin with kids the other week and held up Mia, like Lion King and Simba. I won't put her through that again. Talking about kids, you know, they're so faithful, they're so trusting. Let's read our first part of this passage here again and see what Jesus is saying for us to be like.

Chapter 18 verse one. "At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Man, it's just right there. You just have to have faith like a little child. Have faith like a little child and you're good. In fact, you're the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. That sounds like the message right there. I don't even really know that I need to preach anymore. I think that's just it right there.

Some of you might be a little happy with that, so I'll reward you and say, let's do a children's message. Come on down. Let's just have a children's message. Seriously, right now. Kids, come on. There will be candy. There will be candy. Now that doesn't mean that you can come as not a child. If you're an adult, you can't come just for the candy. So children, come on down. We're going to have a children's message. Because I'm not really sure, honestly, that the adults were listening to me anyway.

[Pastor Highley and the children are seated at the front of the church]

There is a quiz before you get candy and you have to pass the quiz. Okay? So I have some questions I need to ask you.

Here's the first question. When you go home at night, how do you get your dinner? How do you get it? You pray and then the dinner's just? POW! There? You have very powerful prayers. Your parents? Wonderful! How else do the rest of you get your food? You make it? Do you make it? Your mom and grandma make it? Is it yummy? Oh, good.

All right. All of you are looking so beautiful today. Where did you get your clothes? In the laundry? In the laundry. Where'd you get your clothes from? Where? From God. Oh, that's the nice holy answer to say, since we're in a church. From God. Anybody else? Where'd you get your clothes from? Your parents? Where'd you get your clothes? From the store? Just The Store? Just go www.thestore.com. Type in "I want clothes," and it's just there. I have to try that. Where'd you get your clothes from? Walmart. Good old Wally. Where'd you get your clothes? The Store. I have to visit The Store place. From Targe? It's French. Targe or Target as some people say.

What about your toys? Where'd you get your toys from? From the toy aisle? That's my favorite aisle. Where'd you get your toys from? From the Dollar General? They've got my favorite bouncy balls in there. I love their bouncy balls. They bounced so high. Where else did you guys get your toys? Where'd you get your toys from? You got your toys from Christmas. Who gave your toys at Christmas? LeBron James?!! LeBron James gave you toys at Christmas? He can probably give some pretty nice toys. What do you think? Where'd you get your toys from? From Minnie Mouse?

Now, some of you had some very wise answers. Our food and our clothes and our toys all come from somebody else, don't they? Either our parents buying them or our grandparents buying them. We don't actually, probably, buy a lot of stuff ourselves, do we?

Every once in a while you might get some money to save up. Where do you get that money from? From working. Where's your job at? At your mom and dad's house? So your employer's, your mom and dad? Okay. Yeah. We're starting to see a theme here; that we get all this stuff from our mom and dad. Then we did have a really brilliant answer that ultimately all that stuff comes from God, doesn't it?

We have to depend on God for the very fact that we're alive, for the fact that we have parents and grandparents and friends that give us clothes, that give us food, that give us toys, that give us all the good things we have. And my final question, who gives you suckers at children's messages? I do! Pray with me, okay?

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us all things. Help us to always thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen. All right, Miss Shelby is going to get some suckers and you guys can grab those as you go back to your seats. I guess I might want to revisit the message that I had previously preached to the rest of you.

I might want to update based on the market research that I've just done. You can have one sucker. I didn't think that the pews were sticky enough, and I also thought that in addition to these squirrels, we might want to invite other critters in here.

Make sure you ask your parents before you eat them, unless you already have, in which case, enjoy. All right, Miss Shelby's got the rest. Whew! Giving out candy is exhausting.

So I guess I want to amend what we were talking about. Maybe the sermon isn't so short and sweet. There are three questions that I guess I would like to answer for this sermon.

The first question is – what is a child? What is a child? The second, what does God think of children? And the third, what does God do for children?

What is a child? A child is a little person. They're there among us. They're young. What is a child in our reading? I think that's what we really need to look at. What is a child in Matthew chapter 18? What is a child – that Jesus would put one in the middle of this debate over who's the greatest in heaven? This is a pretty arrogant debate by the disciples. They're all hoping he's going to pick one of them. Jesus puts a child there in the middle of him. Why does he put a child there? Is it because they're so faithful and trusting? I would submit a child can be trusting and have faith. That's the phrase that we most often get associated with this passage. You have to have faith like a little child and that's how you get into heaven.

Yet, if I'm being honest, children aren't always very faithful and trusting. Are they? I mean, I try getting my son to trust me to take a sliver of a bite of a piece of chicken. To trust me that it won't actually kill him. And he won't. Most of the time. I try and get my two year old to trust me that if she just waits until we get home, she can eat the sucker. Yet, she doesn't believe me. She doesn't have faith I'm going to come through with that sucker when we get home. I would also submit that much of what we associate with trust from little children is really just them being gullible. I mean, children will trust anyone. That's why we have to tell our kids don't talk to strangers, because if they do, they might start trusting the stranger and do whatever the stranger tells them, which isn't really trust. Whenever you're willing to just trust anyone that's not trust in anything. If you're willing to trust a stranger as much as you're willing to trust me because you're gullible, well, then you don't really trust me. I was going to do a thing for the children's message where I gave them instructions that they had to stay up here after their parents started calling for them to come back, and that they wouldn't be allowed to have the sucker unless they stayed despite their parents calling them. But I didn't want to undermine your parental authority like that. You're welcome. But I think it would've worked. I think they would've obeyed me over you to get that sucker.

In the context of our reading of Matthew 18, I don't think Jesus is talking anything about the faith or trust of a child. Children in those days were viewed as far, far lower than we view them today, and we don't always view children extremely highly today. Children did not have any rights in those societies. Adults could basically do whatever they wanted with children and it was fair game. You could leave a child out to just die on the side of the road and there was no crime committed in the Roman world. The Jewish people held a higher standard that children are to be valued and a treasure. They're a treasure from God but they're still viewed as being pretty

ignorant, having no sense of reason. Maybe they were onto something there. Children weren't being held up as some sort of ideal to strive for.

This was a shock statement by Jesus because of the way they viewed children. They were weak. They had no logic or reasoning. They were dependent. They were less valuable than an adult. That's exactly what Jesus is going for here. When Jesus says, humble yourselves like a child, he isn't saying have a child like faith. He isn't saying humble yourself the way that a child is humble. Have you ever seen a child be humble? Sure, plenty of times. I've also seen my two year old tell me something that she is completely incapable of doing. "No! I do it all by self!" Doesn't sound very humble to me. It sounds like you have an inflated sense of yourself. Don't humble yourselves like a child humbles itself. Humble yourself like a child, has been humbled simply by the state of what it is. Completely, totally, wholly dependent on its parents. That's really what stands out among the view of the ancients, in the context of our reading for children. Is that they were completely, totally dependent on other people for their survival. You and I are totally, wholly, completely dependent on God, whether we want to admit it or not, that's fine. We still are. It's best that we accept that fact and live it as a reality. Whether those kids understood it or not up here, they relied on you as parents for their clothes, their food, their toys, everything. That is the message of this sermon, that God loves us as his children and we should rely on him as such.

Which brings me to answering this next question that I want to answer this morning. What does God think of "children?" What does God think of "children?" You'll notice I have children in quotation marks. What does God think of "children?" Because in God's eyes we are all children. Might as well own up to it. None of us are dependent or wise or self supporting in God's sight, not one of us.

So while children in the society at the time of Jesus viewed as lower beings, Jesus raised them up as valuable and loved by God. God raises you up as being wholly dependent on him and he says you are valuable. Not because we're suddenly better than what we are by nature, we're still poor, miserable sinners after all. God loves us in spite of this helplessness, in spite of our own sin, in spite of all we have done to destroy and mar our relationship with him. God loves us so much.

Which brings me to answering our last question for the day. What does God do for us as these children that he loves? God, the Father, has a Son and only begotten Son. An only Son of the Father. What does the Father do with that Son? He gives him over into death on a cross. He gives him up for you, his children. Let's not forget who the children are. That's us. Those who are completely wholly dependent on God. Those who have sinned and rebelled against God.

We are just like the little children that are up here earlier, depending on their parents, for everything. We depend on God for everything and yet we don't appreciate it. We sin. We rebel.

We turn against God, the one who provides all. Would you be willing to give up one of your children for someone else?

What if your child – as perfect as my children may be, they're not perfect – what if your child was perfect in every way? The one and only perfect child that there has ever been, completely obedient to his father? Yet that's the one that God gave up into death for you. That's what he does for you, his children.

He loves you so much. He didn't withhold his own son. Jesus humbled himself. He took on our flesh, became man, lived and was crucified, and died and was buried. He did not stay dead. He rose again and gives you the forgiveness of sins. That is what God does for you. He loves you. He gives you a savior. He forgives you your sins. When Jesus, 40 days later, ascended into heaven, he poured out his Holy Spirit on you, his people. God continues to show his love for you in this way, that he fills you with his Holy Spirit through his Word. He has not abandoned you as his children. He will not abandon you. He is with you right now in this very place and wherever you go. God wants your dependence.

God wants you to look to Him alone for the source of all things. He loves you so much he would rather a giant millstone be hung around the neck of someone and have them tossed into the depths of the sea than to see one of you led astray, one of you that depends on him led astray. He watches over you constantly.

This reading from Matthew chapter 18 first seems a little odd given that it's St. Michael in all Angels Day, but then we get to the end of this section, verse 10. "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven, their angels always see the face of my father who is in heaven."

God orders his angels concerning you. The angels of those who are weak, humbled, wholly dependent. Those children have angels in heaven that constantly have the attention of God guarding you, protecting you, watching over you. We're often so blind to the spiritual warfare that goes on around us yet God commands his angels in those matters.

Sure, God commands his angels to protect us from physical harm. You know, a near aversion of a car crash or protecting us from harm in some miraculous way. Yet more often what we don't see is God protecting us from the spiritual warfare around us. Protecting us from the attacks of the evil one, the temptation to sin, the temptation to be led away from God.

This is what the evil one, the devil, wants, is to teach you not to rely on God for all things. To teach you to rely on yourself. Do you know what the word angel in the Bible means? Means messenger. A messenger of God. Yes, they share God's word in the Bible with those they meet. They bring God's good news to those they meet in the Bible.

They bring God's news of love in Jesus Christ to you. They are messengers of God's love in their service to you, to guard and to protect you. As messengers that means that really the chief of them all is Jesus. Jesus, himself, isn't an angel specifically. He's fully God and fully man yet he is in charge of the angels. He orders them at his command. Jesus is also the ultimate messenger of good news. He's the true and fullest message of God here on earth. That God showed his love for you, his dependent children, by dying on the cross and rising again. Trust in this messenger. Trust in this Jesus. Be humbled and look to him for all things. Be like a child, wholly and completely dependent on its parents for all things. Look to God for all things and he provides.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Now, may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds, in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.