

September 16-20, 2024 Edition

Following
The Year^(s) Of[^] Jesus Part 141
Childlike Greatness???

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: The week we're going to be looking at one of the more curious things that Jesus teaches- the greatness of childlikeness. Notice I didn't say, "the greatness of a child". What's the difference? Well we'll get to that but all in due time. I know- you're probably feeling a tad impatient with me teasing the question without answering it and therein lies at least part of the answer. Kids are impatient. Is that what makes childlikeness the path to greatness in Jesus' Kingdom? Nope. What does then? Again, we'll get to that this week. But today we'll start out looking at what led Jesus to talk about the greatness of childlikeness"

After they arrived at Capernaum and settled in a house, Jesus asked his disciples, "What were you discussing out on the road?" But they didn't answer, because they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest." Mark 9:33-34 (NLT)

Why would you think the apostles didn't want to tell Jesus what they had been arguing about? Because this is their very favoritist (I know not a real word but we're talking about being childlike here so that seemed to be the best way to phrase that) argument. They get into this argument all the time. In fact this argument even broke out during the Last Supper. And every time they get into this argument Jesus stops everything and gathers them around and tries to explain to them (again) how wrong that whole argument is. Why is it wrong (one of my dad's favorite employees that we ever had at our pizza store was a guy named Dan who would say things like, "that's wrongness with a capital "R")? Because it has no basis in discussions that are had about the Kingdom of God. In fact, I wonder if the reason He so often uses childlikeness as the metaphor for greatness in His kingdom is because of how childish the argument the apostles are engaging in really is.

So what does Jesus do? He does what He always does when this argument rears its ugly head among the apostles- He tries to explain the difference between the way His Kingdom works as opposed to how the kingdoms of this world work. In fact in just a few more chapters the apostles will get into this argument (again) and Jesus will explain that concept very clearly. Basically what happens is, James and John come to Jesus and ask for the first two positions of power in any ancient kingdom. They ask that when Jesus comes into His kingdom that He would let one of them be seated at His right hand and the other seated at His left hand. The two greatest positions of favor and influence in any ancient kingdom. But when the other apostles find out what James and John have done trouble ensues:

When the ten other disciples heard what James and John had asked, they were indignant. But Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." Matthew 20:24-28 (NLT)

What's Jesus' teaching about greatness in His Kingdom? That it's the complete opposite of anything that any human has ever dreamt. As it turns out, Jesus' Kingdom is upside down,

backwards and topsy-turvy. Have you ever seen the movie Zoolander? If you have then I'm sure the scene with Will Ferrell is burned into your memory. When nobody else can see in Zoolander what he sees (and he believes his own perception to be the only way to look at the situation) he blurts out, "I feel like I'm taking crazy pills!" That's what often happens to our human minds when we try to comprehend the nature of greatness in Jesus' Kingdom. Tomorrow we'll look at the metaphor Jesus uses to try to help His disciples wrap their minds around this foreign idea but for today maybe spend some time reflecting on what it means that Jesus' Kingdom is upside down and the opposite of every kingdom ever seen on the face of the earth and what that means for how you should be living your life differently than other people.

Tuesday Reflection: Ok so we've learned that in response to the apostle's arguments about which one of them would be the "greatest" in the' Kingdom that Jesus tells them His Kingdom is the complete opposite of any earthly kingdom man could conceive of. He says that the first will be last and the last will be first. He says that the greatest in His Kingdom would be those with the hearts of a servant and that the ones with the hearts of a servant would be the greatest in His Kingdom. What exactly does that mean? What exactly does that look like. Well it turns out it looks like a child:

Jesus called a little child to him and put the child among them. Then he said, "I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven." Matthew 18:2-4 (NLT)

Nobody expected that. We'd be kind of surprised if someone said something like that today but we'd just figure it was a metaphor because we have a historically high regard for children in the west. But in Jesus' day children were nothing more than a commodity. They were insurance for the future. One day the children would help run the farm and eventually the children would care for their aged parents. Only about half of the children born in the ancient world actually survived to become adults so it was a numbers game for ancient people. You couldn't control which kids made it and which didn't so I sometimes wonder if they way they looked at kids was sort of a protection mechanism for the adults. Don't get too high a view of children and don't become too attached until they become adults so when half of them die before that you won't be quite so upset. Children were either seen as the future investments that they were or they were horribly abused and taken advantage of. The ancient world was a terrible place to be a child.

I don't know if that's the reason or not but in our world children are considered valuable just based on who they are. But in the ancient world children weren't seen as terribly valuable and nobody would use them as an analogy for greatness. But Jesus does. In fact if you've ever had the thought that "children are so important and valuable to our society and my life" then you got that from Jesus whether you know it or not. You may be thinking, "but I heard that from another source that isn't religious". And that does happen but that other source (again whether they knew it or not) got that idea from Jesus. In fact there's a book that was published in 2005 by a guy named O. M. Bakke that is entitled, When Children Became People. He traces the attitudes of world cultures toward children

from the most ancient of times right up to today. What he learned was that the shift towards viewing children as people (not even necessarily valuable- just the view that kids are people too) had its roots in Christianity. People started looking at the way the world was dealing with kids and thought, you know Jesus seemed to think kids were valuable. And He said things like this:

Anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes not only me but also my Father who sent me. Mark 9:36-37 (NLT)

So followers of Jesus started looking at what children in this world needed and things like orphanages and schools were created. I know that the history of schools and orphanages are filled with horrific stories of abuse and even violence but those things didn't happen because Jesus suggested that is the best way to handle kids. In fact we're going to see tomorrow the warnings that Jesus gives about those who abuse and take advantage of children in this world. But it's undeniable that the most beautiful things that have happened to children in this world over the last 2,000 years only occurred because of Jesus' attitude towards kids.

And at Riverside Community Church this is one of our highest values. When I got the job here at Riverside to become the next pastor I had only been working at this church for about 6 months. The preacher I followed didn't plan on leaving but circumstances led him away from Alaska MUCH sooner than any of us thought was possible. So when I suddenly found myself to be the pastor here I really didn't have a clue what I was doing. So I invited anyone that was interested in the future direction of the church to join me on Wednesday nights to figure out what God was asking us to do here at Riverside. I mean, He obviously must have unique plans for us if He chose me to be the pastor here.

We met for months reading in the Bible about what a church is supposed to be about and we came up with all kinds of ways we believed God was asking us to be "different". One of those was in our attitude and approach to the children of this church(which necessarily led to a new attitude and approach towards the adults who would bring these challenging little bundles of joy through our doors many of whom were rougher than the challenging kids they brought to us). We recognized that there were lots of churches trying to reach the exact same people and these other churches were all better organized and efficient at it than we could ever hope to be. So God gave us a target audience (so to speak) that nobody else was trying to reach- families with kids who needed the love of Jesus more than anyone else but who asked for that love in the most annoying and irritating way imaginable.

It hasn't been easy. There are a lot of people who come to check out what we're doing who can't deal with the barely controlled chaos that Riverside can be. They learned first hand what we mean when we say that if you don't like organized religion you should give us a shot because we're the poster-church for disorganized religion. I recognize that our decision to welcome families that are rough as a cobb costs us some potential members who are more comfortable with the way church is typically done in 21st century modern churchianity but I realize now that was unavoidable. Really when you think about it, Riverside is mainly for the church-weary (those who have been burned by churches

sometimes because their kids are wild as pigs [one of my brother in law, Jeff Martin's favorite sayings]) and the church-wary (those who have never really been in a church but they've heard enough horror stories they probably would never step foot in a church on purpose). Those are mainly who Riverside reaches but there is one more demographic of people that seem to be drawn to what we're doing here- the mature followers of Jesus who also feel called to be a safe haven for the church-weary and the church-wary. These people could fit in and feel at home at any church in the area. But they choose to make Riverside their family because they believe in the mission of this church.

I'll admit it- it's not the easiest way to do church. We know it's not the only way to do church. It's just the way we believe God has asked us to do church "different" (another way He asks us to do church different is by not adding the "ly" to the end of "different" because while it may be more grammatically correct that way it loses some of its meaning and pizzazz when you write it out correct(ly). I need to stop tying for today but maybe you and I should spend some time reflecting on what childlike greatness looks like and what it means when it comes to my living my life and what it means when it comes to how I look at and react to the kids all around me.

Wednesday Reflection: So far this week we've been reflecting on what it might mean that Jesus' Kingdom is upside down, backwards and topsy-turvy. We started looking at one analogy Jesus uses to try to explain ways in which the Kingdom of God is different than any earthly kingdom and the first one He lands on is childlikeness. We kind of kicked around what that might mean but let's delve further into this murky and confusing metaphor.

What does it mean to "become like a child"? Jesus talks about the humility of a child but are children humble in all ways? Is He really telling us to become exactly like little children in every aspect of their behavior? Nope. He can't possibly mean that because we all know that some aspects of childlikeness involves childishness. He's not asking us to become childish. In fact that's what the apostles have been demonstrating- the childishness of children with none of the humility of children. They've been arguing about which one of them was the greatest (behind Jesus of course). I know that kids to develop that way of looking at the world fairly early but most of us don't have that setting when we're toddlers- and that's the word Jesus uses for "little child" in this passage.

So we're not to emulate every aspect of childlikeness. Then what aspects does He want me to emulate. One area we could all use some work in is the area of welcoming. Jesus' Kingdom was different from all other kingdoms of the earth in how welcoming He was towards outsiders. Towards the very same people that the religious leaders of Israel (and as a result the rest of ancient Israel) saw as scum. These people were told that when the Kingdom of God arrived they need not apply. That they had gone to far for even God Himself to be able to save them. Jesus had a term for these people. When He was teaching them about what the Kingdom truly looked like He said this:

And anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me. But if you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for

you to have a large millstone tied around your neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea. Matthew 18:5-6 (NLT)

I don't know about you but I always thought that the "little ones" that Jesus refers to was just another way of describing a little child. That "little ones" and "little child" were synonyms. And while little children would have been considered "little ones", not all "little ones" were children. I know that was a confusing line. Go ahead and spend as much tie as you need to think about that and we'll wait for you until you're done.

Ok so let's get on with it. Who exactly was Jesus referring to when He talked about "little ones"? Turns out it's anyone with no power, influence or control. And His entire ministry was based on His mission to seek and save these kinds of people. When His ministry began Matthew tells us who made up the mobs that were flocking to see Him:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Matthew 4:23-24 (NLT)

These are not the upper crust of first century Jewish society. These are the dregs of humanity (as far as the rest of the world is concerned). These are the people that the world referred to as the scum-of-the-earth but who Jesus renamed when He was beginning His Sermon On The Mount:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Matthew 5:3-5 (NLT)

What does it mean to be poor-in-spirit? Growing up I was told it was something we should be trying to achieve in our own lives but what Jesus meant when He spoke about the poor-in-spirit was the outcasts. The losers (in the eyes of the world), the rejects, the dregs of humanity. What does Jesus say about these people in His famous introduction to the Sermon On The Mount? That they are blessed. Does that mean they're lucky? Not really. It simply means that if you happen to find yourself in that poor-in-spirit category it doesn't mean that God hates you. In fact Jesus says those people are blessed. In other words, even if you are poor-in-spirit and you've been told all of your life that God has rejected you, don't you believe it. Because the Kingdom of Heaven is also for you! Jesus' Kingdom doesn't discriminate based on any of the things the world discriminates against.

Nobody had ever told these people that they were invited much less blessed. Being childlike means at least this much- that we relate to the poor-in-spirit of this world the way He did. Who are the poor-in-spirit of our modern world. The list would go on and on but probably a good thing for each of us to reflect on- who are the poor-in-spirit and how have I been treating them and even thinking about them? And Jesus doesn't just tell us to do something that He Himself was not willing to do. From His choice about who would be His apostles to who He associated with on a regular basis Jesus practiced what He preached:

Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. But when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?" When Jesus heard this, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor- sick people do... For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners." Matthew 9:10-14 (NLT)

The religious leaders didn't like it. Some modern religious leaders still don't. But they're not in our jurisdiction- we may not be able to fix all the ills of this world but we can do our best to emulate Jesus in our own small sphere of influence. So how about it? How are you going about emulating Jesus in this particular area? If you attend Riverside I believe you're doing something world changing just by showing up and smiling at the least-of-these that Jesus brings through our doors. But maybe we should both spend some time reflecting on what it might mean for each of us personally to welcome the-least-of-these in the same way Jesus welcomed us when we were in that same category (whether we knew it or not).

Thursday Reflection: Jesus' teachings have changed the world in more profound ways than anyone else who has ever lived. Ever hear of the virtue of humility? That's Jesus. Before He came to this earth humility was never considered a virtue.

Never.

Humility was always about control- namely control over the the humble one. It was a word that was used of slaves and horses. How "humble" a slave or horse was described how well they followed orders and did what they were told without thinking about their own best interests. This world worked (and it still does today) much like a pecking order. Ever had chickens? The pecking order is real! Every chicken gets pecked except the top banana. As the pecking order descends chickens are pecked at by every chicken above it. And it's not good for the chickens. Farmers spend a ton of energy and money trying to stop their chickens from getting pecked to death. So does God (with His children rather than His chickens).

But it's human nature. It's the way the world works, right? Well, yeah. But not Jesus' world. The number one argument His disciples would enter into over and over was where was everyone on the pecking order. It wasn't phrased in exactly that way but that's what they were asking. And every time He noticed Jesus would stop everything and try to teach them about the upside down nature of His Kingdom:

You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many. Matthew 20:25-28 (NLT)

But Jesus, surely that will never work. That's not how humans are wired. They need a boss-servant structure or nothing will ever get done. It was such a tough lesson to teach His disciples He even had to stop what He was doing during the Last Supper and try to teach them again because they were arguing about it again! It's the reason He washed their feet at the Last Supper:

Do you understand what I was doing? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, because that's what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you. I tell you the truth, slaves are not greater than their master. Nor is the messenger more important than the one who sends the message. Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them. John 13:12-17 (NLT)

What a strange, surreal experience it must have been following Jesus around. He lived the most "humble" life ever lived but His statements about Himself were the most outrageous claims ever made. Think about it, He claimed to be the bread of life, the light of the world, the way the truth and the life, the resurrection and the life. Oh yeah, and He claimed to be God Himself. Even here after doing the most humble act anyone had ever seen (God washing the feet of His disciples) Jesus then says, "you call me Lord and Teacher and you're exactly right- that's what I am..." How strange all of that must have seemed.

But it's what Jesus pushes over and over. It has to be placed in the top tier of what a life following Jesus looks like. I once said it was the most important virtue a Christian could possess and immediately my brain said, "what about love?" Ok, yeah, so love and humility are the two most important... "what about faith?". Ok... love, faith and humility... "what about hope?"

The point is humility is pretty important. And Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, had it. How do I know? We'll start diving into the story of Joseph tomorrow but for today maybe spend some time thinking about what you think humility is (and what it isn't) and what is the opposite of humility?

Friday Reflection: I'd like to finish our week looking at humility by looking at the life of Joseph- the earthly father of Jesus. I never gave him much thought growing up and it turns out I'm not the only one. He doesn't have a lot of lines in the Christmas story. And by the time Jesus grows up and begins His ministry, Joseph's story is over. What happened to him? We don't know. It seems obvious that he must die in between Jesus' 12th birthday and his 30th birthday but he's never mentioned in the Bible again. And so often his part in the Christmas story is relegated to the shadows. I mean, even in Nativity sets you'll often find that Joseph has been mixed up with the shepherds and you'll find a shepherd at the manger with Mary and Joseph standing out in the cold trying to catch a glimpse of the Christ child.

But Joseph's part in the Christmas story is far from inconsequential. And the character we see in Joseph's part of the story is mind boggling when we actually sit down and focus on it. And this year for the first time I've begun to notice how Joseph's part in the story is

kind of a coping-model when it comes to living out the kind of life Jesus invites us all to. What's a coping model? Well it's a model of someone who isn't perfect at something but shows how to progress at that thing. Psychologists talk about the mastery model (which in the Bible would only be demonstrated by Jesus) and they talk about the coping model (someone who's doing a pretty good job of working-it-out. They don't mention a warning model but if there was such a thing I think my life would qualify. At least a lot of it would. I'm trying to cope but make lots of spectacular mistakes that leave my wife just kind of shaking her head (and smiling but she'd never admit to that).

And Joseph's life is also a foreshadow (or even a rear-shadow) of the teachings found in the Sermon On The Mount where Jesus talks an awful lot about warning models:

Don't do as the hypocrites do... Matthew 6:2 (NLT)

He uses that phrase several times when talking about how-not-to-do something. He also gives us this advice:

Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged. Matthew 7:1-2 (NLT)

What's He getting at? Well, we'll look at that this week as we look at the life of Joseph- a guy who had strong convictions but didn't let those convictions get in the way of what was even more important. What's more important than my convictions, you ask? We'll look to Joseph to illuminate that but for today maybe spend some time thinking about what Jesus means when He say "don't judge."