

September 23-27, 2024 Edition

Following
The Year^(s) Of ^Jesus Part 142
Childlike Greatness Continued???

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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: Ok so we've been looking at what constitutes true greatness in the Kingdom Of God based on the words of Jesus in Matthew chapter 18 and Mark chapter 9. We've spent most of this week looking at what Jesus might have meant when He said that the greatest in the Kingdom are those who are humble like children. Today we're going to look at something else Jesus says about true greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven:

I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven. Matthew 18:3 (NLT)

I know we read that passage a few days ago but I never focused in on the concept of repentance as it relates to true greatness in Jesus' eyes. Turns out true greatness isn't just about how Jesus changes the way we view and relate to the little-ones/least-of-these/poor-in-spirit but it's also about how we view and relate to ourselves- specifically in how we deal with our own weaknesses, failures and shortcomings. And how should we view and relate to ourselves in our weaknesses? With quick repentance. But what exactly is repentance? That word gets tossed around a lot in churches but do we really have a firm grasp on what it is? I know for many years I did not. Repentance is an old English word that in its simplest definition (a definition not steeped in religious imagery) to repent simply means to turn around.

Most of us are familiar with the Turnagain arm of the Cook Inlet. Why is it called the Turnagain arm? Because when Captain Cook sailed into the Cook Inlet looking for a passage through the northern part of the Americas he first sailed up the Knik Inlet hoping he'd found the passage. But he hadn't- he had to turn around. But what he wrote in his diary was that when they realized they had reached a dead end they "repented". That's all it says. What did that mean? That they asked forgiveness from God for picking the wrong route? No. It simply meant they turned around and went the other way. When Jesus tells us to "repent of our sins" what exactly is He asking us to do? To turn around. To stop doing the things that are destroying us and our relationships. Repentance isn't just saying "I'm sorry"- it's saying "I'm sorry" and then turning around and walking away from whatever it was we had to repent over. What does the Turnagain arm have to do with all of this? Not much- it was just a way to introduce the idea of repentance. After Captain Cook tried the Knik Arm and had to repent he then sailed up the other arm of Cook Inlet and when he discovered it was also a dead end he had to "turnagain".

And it's this kind of repentance Jesus says embodies greatness in His Kingdom. Not covering over our sins. Not ignoring our sins. Not saying "I'm sorry" with no intention to change what I've been doing. None of those things are repentance. The greatest in the Kingdom will be those who not only let Jesus change the way we relate to others but also let Him tinker with how we view and relate to ourselves. And then He warns us of the consequences of not welcoming His little-ones (remember that's anyone that the world has deemed worthless) and living a life of unrepentance:

What sorrow awaits the world, because it tempts people to sin. Temptations are inevitable, but what sorrow awaits the person who does the tempting. So if your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It's better to enter eternal life

with only one hand or one foot than to be thrown into eternal fire with both of your hands and feet. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It's better to enter eternal life with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. Matthew 18:7-9 (NLT)

Those are some pretty vivid images aren't they? They are such vivid images that we can get caught up in the imagery and lose site of what He's really getting at here. I know I don't talk about hell a whole lot and there's a very good reason for that (at least it seems like a good reason to me). As a "teacher" in Jesus' Kingdom I am held more responsible for the things I teach than I am for the things I simply believe but can't prove. Anyone who decides to put on the teacher's cap in Jesus' Kingdom needs to understand how serious what we teach others is to Jesus:

Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly. James 3:1 (NLT)

Why would teachers be judged more strictly? Because there will always be someone that believes us when we claim that we speak for God. And this goes for all of us- whenever you or I starts telling someone why they're wrong and we're right we are putting on the hat of the teacher whether we realize it or not. I constantly see Christians "teaching" on social media claiming that they have the correct understanding of scripture and so everyone should listen to us and it usually makes me cringe. Oh dude (or dudette whichever the case may be)- you need to be careful what you're saying because James 3:1.

What does that have to do with hell? Well, we were talking about why I don't spend a lot of time talking about hell. Here's the reason- I'm not really sure exactly what to say about it. The modern church has decided that the Bible's teaching on hell is very straightforward and clear but when I look at all the passages that talk about hell I am left with a miasma of conflicting imagery. When we get done with this lesson on greatness in the kingdom I will do a lesson on hell to try to explain the issues and the confusing nature of any of Jesus' descriptions of things like hell, Heaven and the end times. I have a feeling when I do that some of you might end up thinking, I'm more confused than I was before I listened to that lesson. First of all that's a regular occurrence at Riverside. But to me it's symbolic of what happens when we sit down and try to map out exactly what hell is, where it is, who goes there and what happens to those who go there. Similar things happen when I try to map out heaven, the end times and many other teachings that Jesus speaks on but His words are confusing to us mere mortals. I would never say Jesus isn't clear- oh wait, actually that's exactly what I mean to say. He's often unclear. So what's are we supposed to do when we want firm answers that satisfy our curiosity but Jesus doesn't seem to be handing those out? We trust Him. We'll dig MUCH deeper into all of this soon. That may come next week or it may be the week after but tomorrow I'll give you a hint of what I mean when I talk about confusing imagery. But for today maybe you and I can spend some time reflecting on how often we "teach" others by stating emphatically what we believe the Bible teaches about certain subjects. I'm very careful to qualify the things I say about topics that the Bible is cryptic about so I don't come off as "teaching" about these

things but rather discussing different viewpoints and admitting my point of view is not the only point of view on the subject.

Tuesday Reflection: I promised to talk a bit about the confusing nature of Jesus' (and other Bible writers) statements about this place called hell. I was always told that hell is a place of total darkness. Why would I be taught that? Because that's one of the images that Jesus uses to describe this place called hell. But you know what? Jesus also says hell is a place where the "flame never dies". How can both of those things be true at the same time? A place of total darkness with a flame that never goes out. How could it be dark if the flame is always lit? There are so many more confusing images that Jesus uses and I'm not saying He's wrong about hell. I'm saying there must be more to it than we've always thought.

That's an incredibly circuitous way to get back to these incredibly disturbing images Jesus gives us of this place He calls "hell". If we cause a little-one to stumble and sin we should do whatever is necessary to make sure it doesn't keep happening. Jesus gets all hyperbolic saying if your arm causes you to sin then you should cut it off. And if your eye causes you to sin you should pluck it out. Is He really advising that we should cut off limbs and pluck out eyes? I don't think so- I think He's trying to get us to understand how seriously God takes this whole thing. Jesus doesn't expect us to be perfect. He expects us to flub up over and over again. That's unavoidable as human beings. What makes someone "great" in the Kingdom of Heaven is not moral perfection and flawless observance of some arbitrary religious observances- true greatness in Jesus's Kingdom is marked by a willingness to see my weaknesses as they truly are to let that understanding drive us back into the arms of God through repentance. And what would that look like? Yes, we would say, "I'm sorry Lord" but we would also turn-around (knowing we might find ourselves right back in this same place someday) and walk away from the things that caused us to stumble in the first place. Failure Jesus can work with. An unwillingness to let Him change us He cannot.

You can see this at work in the life of the apostle Peter. He denies that he knows Jesus three times on the night before the crucifixion. It crushed him when he realized what he had done. How does someone come back from that? By simple repentance. Because after the resurrection there's a story at the end of the gospel of John where Jesus is having breakfast with the apostles up near the Sea of Galilee and after they ate Jesus gives Peter (who as far as we know hasn't said one word to Jesus during the entire meal which if you know Peter that's not typical behavior for him) a chance to repent:

When they finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." A third time he said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" Peter said, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you!" He said to him, "Feed my sheep. John 21:5-17 (NLT)

Why do you think Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him 3 times? Could it possibly have something to do with Peter's denial of Jesus 3 times just a few days before this fateful breakfast on the beach? I think so. Peter had put himself in a sort of self imposed "hell" on earth and Jesus is leading him out. Kindly but firmly. What would have happened to Peter without a willingness to "repent"? History would have been much different without Peter's willingness to repent and Jesus' willingness to forgive.

And so we see yet another very strange definition or sign of what constitutes greatness in Jesus' kingdom. So different from the world's definition of greatness but the big question all of us must answer is, which definition will last for eternity and which definition will fade away like a vapor in the wind? If we want to live lives of greatness in Jesus' eyes we need to adopt His definition of greatness and repentance is one of the signs of greatness. So what's next for you? Have something you need to turn around and walk away from? I know it's scary- I'm right there with you. But I also believe with all of my heart it is completely worth it.

Wednesday Reflection: Today we finish up with our reflections on what constitutes greatness in Jesus' Kingdom. We've seen that greatness in His Kingdom is upside down, it's childlike, welcoming and repentant. These are all metaphors Jesus uses to try to describe a very important concept- Christlikeness. All of these metaphors describe the personality of Jesus (with the possible exception of repentant but if you recall the thing that leads to repentance is a willingness to not ignore the inconsistencies of our lives so that we can be people of integrity and Jesus is nothing if not a person of integrity) and are His way of trying to help us mere mortals understand what the citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven are like. But ultimately it all boils down to one umbrella concept- the citizens of the Kingdom Of Heaven will have behaviors that emulate Jesus. Hence Christlikeness.

Really this passage we've been looking at all week is just one more way that Jesus is trying to teach His apostles the concept of humility. What is humility? It's being willing to embrace an upside down Kingdom and fit ourselves into it rather than demanding that this Kingdom change to suit us. It is embracing the parts of childlikeness that define humility without also embracing the childish nature of kids. It's welcoming and accepting those who seem to us to be unacceptable. And it's being willing to repent and turn around when we find that we've missed the mark.

Humility was not viewed as a positive virtue in the first century. It was considered to be a weakness (I mean come on- what kind of crazy upside down kingdom encourages its citizens to embrace humility? That would never work in this world...) and the two most things most commonly referred to as "humble" in the first century were work animals and slaves. Jesus is the first leader in human history to encourage humility. He was the first leader to be considered to be humble. And that was so important to the earliest Christians that they sang about it at their gatherings (ok singing is a stretch- what they did back then was more like a Gregorian chant than the 4 part harmonies we're familiar with). Throughout the New Testament there are several ancient Christian hymns that the writers slipped into their writings. You'll find one in the first chapter of John (In the

beginning was the Word. The Word was with God and the Word was God...), one in the first chapter of Colossians (Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation...), one in the second chapter of Ephesians (For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us...), one in 1 Timothy chapter three (Christ was revealed in a human body and vindicated by the Spirit. He was seen by angels and announced to the nations. He was believed in throughout the world and taken to heaven in glory...), one in Hebrews chapter one (Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son...) and one in Philippians chapter two- let's read that entire hymn together, shall we?

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

These early Christian hymns give us a window into what the earliest Christians believed about Jesus. Did you notice all the hymns we have are focused squarely on Jesus? And what do you see in that hymn recorded in Philippians chapter 2? I don't know about you but what I see is a description or definition of what humility looks like. This is what you and I are being called into. A life of humility. Doesn't look terribly appetizing, does it? But we do need to remember a few things. First off when we are told to become like Jesus (which is literally what the word "discipleship" means) there are some aspects of His life that are not ours to emulate. For instance, while Jesus was the Savior of the world, you and I are not. That's not in our job descriptions and believe me when I say, there's nothing in our resumes that suggests we'd be capable of such a thing. Jesus sacrifices Himself for the redemption of the world and while we are called to be servants and to lead a life of self-sacrifice we are not being told to become sacrificial lambs.

Tomorrow we'll look at what humility does mean for each of us and what Jesus is asking of us (and what He's not asking of us). But for today maybe we should spend some time reflecting on this early Christian hymn so we can better understand Who Jesus is and what He's asking of each one of us.

Thursday Reflection: If we're not careful we'll start to believe that the way to become like Jesus is to completely ignore our own wants, needs and desires and to focus solely on God and others to the exclusion of caring for ourselves. But is that what Jesus

did? Nope. He regularly did whatever He needed to do to make sure He was living up to the "greatest commands". What are the greatest commands? They are Jesus' answer to a question posed to Him by a religious expert:

One of them, an expert in religious law, tried to trap him with this question: "Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?" Jesus replied, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments."

Matthew 22:35-40 (NLT)

If we ever start to think that being like Jesus means completely ignoring our own needs and emptying ourselves in the service of others we have missed the boat. Yes He tells us to love God and to love others but how are we to love others? As we love ourselves. What does that even mean? Well it's not a narcissistic, selfish love- it's a self-care love. We are to take really good care of ourselves so that we have the time, energy and wherewithal to love God and to love others. You can't love God or others without taking good care of yourself. Jesus did that while He was on this earth. He was constantly taking His disciples away to quiet lonely places so they could rest and recover. There were times when God interrupted His plans to rest (and Jesus was always receptive to God interrupting His plans for self care) but immediately after those interruptions Jesus would then go ahead and do what He had been planning to do and rest.

So we shouldn't look at that hymn in Philippians chapter 2 and deduce that being like Jesus means completely ignoring my own needs. Yes Jesus did that on the cross in order to save humanity but we are not humanity's saviors. We do need to be ready to go through sacrifices for God but we have to be careful not to swing to far to one extreme or the other of the self-care vs self-sacrifice continuum. So taking that aspect of Jesus' life out of the equation what does that hymn say to you about what it means to be Christlike?

Humility. That's the concept this whole hymn revolves around. Truly it's the concept that our entire lives need to be revolving around. It's one of the most difficult Bible concepts to wrap our brains around because there is no good English definition for the Greek word for humility. So then how do we learn what humility is? You watch Jesus. Then you take a look at your own life and ask God to show you the way. To help you understand Biblical humility and more than just understanding, you ask Him to give you the strength to emulate Jesus' humility in your own life. Stop for just a second and imagine what that might look like in your own life. If you're anything like me you're thinking, "I'm still confused. I'm not sure what it would look like".

That's ok. You don't have to have all the answers. The one question that you do need to answer is, am I willing to let Jesus show me what a life of humility is supposed to look like in my own unique life? If you've made that decision then Jesus will handle the rest as long as you're willing to walk in His footsteps. He'll show you what it means to be humble and in so doing He will show you what it looks like to live a life of greatness. Ultimately humility comes down to one very important thing- a willingness and desire to become like

Him. So I'll leave you with this scripture to ponder today as you also ponder what humility would look like in your own life:

Become more and more in every way like Christ. Ephesians 4:15 (TLB)

Friday Reflection: The following is from Max Lucado's book, In The Grip Of Grace, that I share in these reflections about once a year. Especially in light of our discussion of humility and being careful about what we "teach" as the ultimate and only understanding on certain subjects. How should we view others who claim to follow Jesus but have different ideas about what that looks like and what that means? Here's a fantastic allegory to help frame our reflections for today.

Life Aboard The Fellow-Ship:

God has enlisted us in his navy and placed us on his ship. The boat has one purpose—to carry us safely to the other shore.

This is no cruise ship; it's a battleship. We aren't called to a life of leisure; we are called to a life of service. Each of us has a different task. Some, concerned with those who are drowning, are snatching people from the water. Others are occupied with the enemy, so they man the cannons of prayer and worship. Still others devote themselves to the crew, feeding and training the crew members.

Though different, we are the same. Each can tell of a personal encounter with the captain, for each has received a personal call. He found us among the shanties of the seaport and invited us to follow him. Our faith was born at the sight of his fondness, and so we went.

We each followed him across the gangplank of his grace onto the same boat. There is one captain and one destination. Though the battle is fierce, the boat is safe, for our captain is God. The ship will not sink. For that, there is no concern.

There is concern, however, regarding the disharmony of the crew. When we first boarded we assumed the crew was made up of others like us. But as we've wandered these decks, we've encountered curious converts with curious appearances. Some wear uniforms we've never seen, sporting styles we've never witnessed. "Why do you look the way you do?" we ask them. "Funny," they reply. "We were about to ask the same of you."

The variety of dress is not nearly as disturbing as the plethora of opinions. There is a group, for example, who clusters every morning for serious study. They promote rigid discipline and somber expressions. "Serving the captain is serious business," they explain. It's no coincidence that they tend to congregate around the stern.

There is another regiment deeply devoted to prayer. Not only do they believe in prayer, they believe in prayer by kneeling. For that reason you always know where to locate them; they are at the bow of the ship.

And then there are a few who staunchly believe real wine should be used in the Lord's Supper. You'll find them on the port side.

Still another group has positioned themselves near the engine. They spend hours examining the nuts and bolts of the boat. They've been known to go below deck and not come up for

days. They are occasionally criticized by those who linger on the top deck, feeling the wind in their hair and the sun on their face. "It's not what you learn," those topside argue. "It's what you feel that matters. And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

Some think once you're on the boat, you can't get off. Others say you'd be foolish to go overboard, but the choice is yours.

Some believe you volunteer for service; others believe you were destined for the service before the ship was even built.

Some predict a storm of great tribulation will strike before we dock; others say it won't hit until we are safely ashore.

There are those who speak to the captain in a personal language. There are those who think such languages are extinct.

There are those who think the officers should wear robes, there are those who think there should be no officers at all, and there are those who think we are all officers and should all wear robes. And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

And then there is the issue of the weekly meeting at which the captain is thanked and his words are read. All agree on its importance, but few agree on its nature. Some want it loud, others quiet. Some want ritual, others spontaneity. Some want to celebrate so they can meditate; others meditate so they can celebrate. Some want a meeting for those who've gone overboard. Others want to reach those overboard but without going overboard and neglecting those on board. And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

The consequence is a rocky boat. There is trouble on deck. Fights have broken out. Sailors have refused to speak to each other. There have even been times when one group refused to acknowledge the presence of others on the ship. Most tragically, some adrift at sea have chosen not to board the boat because of the quarreling of the sailors.

"What do we do?" we'd like to ask the captain. "How can there be harmony on the ship?" We don't have to go far to find the answer.

On the last night of his life Jesus prayed a prayer that stands as a citadel for all Christians:

I pray for these followers, but I am also praying for all those who will believe in me because of their teaching. Father, I pray that they can be one. As you are in me and I am in you, I pray that they can also be one in us. Then the world will believe that you sent me. (John 17:20)

How precious are these words. Jesus, knowing the end is near, prays one final time for his followers. Striking, isn't it, that he prayed not for their success, their safety, or their happiness. He prayed for their unity. He prayed that they would love each other.

As he prayed for them, he also prayed for "those who will believe because of their teaching." That means us! In his last prayer Jesus prayed that you and I (and every other believer on the planet) be one.

Prayer: Father, forgive me for the times I've clustered with those who are like me while being suspicious of those who aren't. Show me how to live in unity with others who follow You. In Jesus' Name, amen.