

# Pride, Sin, and Children – Matthew 18:1-9

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## Pride

I don't know about you, but sometimes I can be really competitive. Put me on a cricket field, in a footy match, or even a game of table-tennis and my competitive nature comes out. Some people do not like competition, and they try to make everyone winners, but competitiveness is not always a bad thing. Competitiveness can help us to strive for things and achieve results we never would have thought possible if we did not have a competitive streak in us. Take our Olympic athletes. They are going over to Tokyo, despite the threat of a world pandemic, in order to compete. Many of them are hoping to do their best, but I suspect that some of them are hoping to achieve greatness. The thought of being the greatest, the most important, the most significant person in whatever area of life we might be in can drive us. Receiving that kind of recognition from others can feed our pride and even our arrogance, and I think that is the big issue at the beginning of today's passage.

*Matthew 18:1* At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

In Mark's version of this story, we are told that they had been arguing about who was the greatest in the Kingdom of God. And in Luke's version of this story, we are told that they had been arguing about which one of them would be the greatest. Their concern was built upon their pride, their self-importance, and the bad side of their competitive nature came out. Each one of the disciples wanted to be thought of as the best, the most important, and therefore worthy of the greatest recognition and reward. Now, it is not wrong to be the greatest at something. It is not wrong to achieve greatness. It is not wrong for an Olympic athlete to win gold, or to break the world record, and be rated as the best that has ever lived in that event. But if we allow our greatness to fill us with pride and arrogance, then we can begin to think that we are better than we really are. We can begin to think that we are more important than other people. We can begin to think that we don't need anybody else, rather, they need us, or are there to make us look even better than we are. We can even begin to think that we do not need God, we do not need someone to save us, we are good people, and God would be lucky to have us. But that kind of pride is sinful.

## A Child Among Them

Jesus then did something to illustrate the kind of attitude a Christian person is meant to have. He called a little child over to him, a child who was big enough to walk across but small enough to be picked up in his arms.<sup>1</sup>

*Matthew 18:3-4* And he [Jesus] said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

The child was probably one of the disciple's children and would have been considered a follower of Jesus because the child's parents were followers of Jesus. But being a small child meant that the child would have been totally dependent on others. It could not feed itself, it could not make its own decisions, it was still learning from others, and was not big enough or old enough to achieve much on its own. You see, children are

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 9:36

not ready to take on great responsibilities. They are not capable of making fully informed decisions concerning the big things in life, let alone the little things. I mean, some small children would rather continue playing with a dirty nappy on than to have it changed. But that is not healthy for the child, and it's not pleasant for everybody else around as well. That is why parents need to sometimes make decisions which children don't like and change their nappy. The point is that there was no way that the child Jesus was holding could have been considered the greatest of Jesus' followers at that moment in time because the child was not old enough, or mature enough, to fully understand all that was happening, let alone be able to take on authority, responsibility, and even power, which the disciples would have to take on in the future.

## **The Faith of a Child**

Now, this does not mean that the child had no value or that the child could not be a follower of Jesus. Sometimes, when I hear people speak on these passages, they talk about how children were supposed to be seen but not heard, that children were of little value in that time, and that they had thought that children could not be genuine followers of Jesus. But that is not what we see in the Bible. We see that God cares for children, and that children should be raised as genuine believers and followers of God. This is what Moses told God's Old Testament people...

**Deuteronomy 6:4-9** *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. <sup>6</sup> These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. <sup>7</sup> Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup> Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup> Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.*

In other words, take every opportunity to introduce God, and his ways, to your children. Help them to know what it means to be a child of God. Raise them in such a way that they will love the LORD their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, not because it is a duty but because they know and love God. Jesus said a similar thing in the next chapter of Matthew...

**Matthew 19:13-14** *Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup> Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."*

Children may not be able to make all their own decisions, which is why we ought to be introducing our children to Jesus so that they can get to know him, be blessed by him, and grow up being genuine followers of him. So, if children are meant to be raised trusting in Jesus with us showing them the way, you can understand why Jesus was so concerned about protecting children's faith.

**Matthew 18:6-7** *"If anyone causes one of these little ones-- those who believe in me-- to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. <sup>7</sup> Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!"*

One of the most hideous things that has happened in churches is the abuse of children. I think that a lot of us would love to see a massive boulder hung around the necks of those predators and then thrown into the sea, much like what Jesus says in this passage. No child should suffer at the hands of others, and as a church, we need to continue to guard our children and protect them from those kind of people. But have a look at the kind of person Jesus was talking about in these verses. He was talking about a person who causes believing

children to stumble. Do you get as angry or upset about people who are leading our Christian children astray as Jesus does? You should! Because causing our children to stumble is a very serious thing.

## Stumbling

So, what does it mean for children to “stumble”? It does not sound that bad, nowhere near as bad as a child molester, and yet Jesus gave a very strong warning against such people. Why? What is the big issue here? The big issue is the end result. The reason why we despise child molesters is because the child will be affected for life. Molested children struggle to deal with affection, security, relationships, and even love for the rest of their lives. That is why it is so important that we protect our children from predators. The end result of people causing children to stumble in their trust in Jesus is an eternity outside of God’s Kingdom, outside of God’s family, outside of heaven, which means that they face an eternity condemned to hell. You see, the word translated as *stumble* really points to the idea of a person’s downfall.<sup>2</sup> They stumble into a trap which brings about their demise. Some translations, like the older NIV and the ESV, use the word *sin* instead of *stumble*, because sin leads to death and hell. And to stop trusting in Jesus for salvation means that eternal death and hell is what awaits the child who has been led astray by the person who caused those children to stumble. Children are so impressionable, and we need to make sure we protect them from anything, or anyone, who may want to undermine their trust in Jesus. Now, that may be from false teaching from within the church, but it is also being mindful of all the other influences we allow into our children’s lives. Children are exposed to all kinds of information and world views which oppose Jesus on the TV, in music, the internet, among their social groups, and a myriad of other places. Now, we cannot protect our children from all these influences, we cannot put them in a bubble so that they never come across them, but we can help them recognise the stumbling blocks and traps that the world has put in place for our children.

It reminds me of an old Jungle Doctor story where Tembo the Elephant shows everyone the trap which the hunter had put in place. The animals were supposed to recognise the trap, to avoid it and so avoid it’s dangers. But Dik-Dik the antelope would not listen and fell into the trap. We need to teach our children how the world is seeking to trap them. That way, our children will have the ability to work out the difference between what the world says is good and right, and what God says is good and right. The world may try to quietly and subtly convert our children, but we can give them a frame work to help them notice what the world’s agenda is. But this can only happen if we do what God told his Old Testament people to do; to take every opportunity to help our children love God and to relate to him well. But if we are to do this, then we not only need to protect our children, we need to learn how to protect ourselves.

## Drastic Measures

*Matthew 18:8-9* If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. <sup>9</sup> And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

I wonder, what do you think it would look like if we all took our sinfulness seriously? Should we expect people turning up to church with a few less limbs? Maybe a missing hand, a missing tongue, or a missing eye

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<sup>2</sup> The Greek word is *σκανδαλίζω* or *skandalizo*. You can see how we get the word scandal and scandalize though its meaning is a bit different to the way we use it today.

or two? We could literally become the blind leading the blind if we were to follow Jesus' words in literal way. So, what did Jesus mean when he told people to cut off their hands and feet, to pluck out their eyes, if those things caused them to sin?

I think it means that if we really are repentant people, then we would be spending time examining the things that tempt us, that trap us into sinfulness. Like Tembo the Elephant examining the hunter's trap, we should be examining our hearts to see what traps us. We should also be examining the ways in which the world is trying to trap us. Sometimes we need to do some fact checking, to see if a group or organisation that we think is worth supporting is really doing what we think they are doing. Sometimes we need to look at the methods they use to try and make us think in the world's ways rather than God's ways. By understanding their methods, we can work out ways of counteracting them.

But we also have to be ready to take drastic action to avoid traps and temptations in our own lives. Take the issue of pornography. We might not pluck our eye out after looking at pornography, but we might get rid of the internet altogether if we recognise the kind of trap it is for us. You see, it is better to enter heaven with no internet access than to be thrown into the fires of hell. It sounds kind of weird, but it is worth taking drastic actions for the sake of our eternity. I remember seeing a guy who was not a Christian talk about the lengths he went to destroy the trap that pornography had become for him. He had put physical barriers over his modem, he made sure that he did not have access to his internet's passwords, and that only his friends could access and change those passwords. He had placed software protections on his Wi-Fi and data access, he had filtering software on every device, and he had accountability software and accountability partners whom he would check in with every week. This was a non-Christian taking drastic action to rid himself of the problem of pornography. How much more should we be willing to recognise, and take drastic action, to avoid the traps of theft, rumours, lying, gambling, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, sexual promiscuity and sinfulness, and a whole range of other things which will destroy our relationship with God and with others. As adults, we need to learn how to recognise those traps, to recognise what the world is trying to do, so that we can protect ourselves and our children from those traps. Now, I am not saying that we can do this without God's help, or that we can save ourselves from all sin, but I am saying that we need to be active in our faith. If we are truly repentant, then we need to be asking God to make us wise to the ways of the world so that we can teach our children how to recognise the ways in which the world is trying to lure them away from Jesus.

## **Pride**

One of the biggest lures at the moment is pride. The world says that pride is a good thing, but pride can be deceiving. Pride is all about putting yourself first, like the disciples wanting the prestige and honour of being the greatest in the Kingdom. They argued about it, putting themselves forward and possibly putting others down. But the disciples did not understand the values of the Kingdom at that point in time. Instead of clamouring over each other trying to get to the top, then needed to understand the importance of humility. Yes, there are times when we may hold important positions, but we must always remember the importance of having humility, of having a child like faith, of being servant hearted. Beware the lure of pride. It can be a stumbling block for many.