

THE DISCIPLES DIDN'T GET IT!

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

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Matthew 18:1–20

Matthew 18 begins with one of those teachable moments in which the disciples plant their feet firmly in their mouths and ask Jesus an interesting question. *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”* This question tells us that the disciples, just like Peter in last week’s sermon, just didn’t get it. They are still trying to figure out what position of authority, what rank they will have once Jesus He takes over command of the world.

Jesus’ teaching dispels this kind of thinking. *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.* Jesus didn’t choose one of the disciples, but a child. Here Jesus teaches that the one who is humble like a child is the greatest in the Kingdom.

As we continue through the rest of Matthew 18, Jesus expands on His teaching about children. *“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”* That is very serious business. The type of millstone that Jesus describes needs a donkey to turn it and it weighs more than a ton.

Jesus also said, *“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.*

Even as Jesus tells the story of searching for the one lost sheep out of one hundred, He tells us, *“So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”*

When Jesus talks of the little ones, He is of course, talking about those who are biologically young. Even so, we can apply what Jesus is saying to those who are young in the faith – no matter what their age.

God has always given a high priority to learning His word and teaching that Word to the next generation. *Deuteronomy 6:6-9 says: “These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.* Listen to Proverbs 22:6: *Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.* And of course Matthew 28:19-20: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*

What value did the early church place on teaching the things of God? In Acts 20, we have an example of a church service that lasted from sundown to daybreak. Of course the Apostle Paul was the preacher, but this never the less this indicates the hunger people had for the Word of God.

About 10 years ago, I heard a very excellent summary of the history of the Lutheran Church in the United States given by the now acting president of the Fort Wayne Seminary. One of the key points in that summary was the hunger Lutherans had for God’s Word. An example was a congregation had some members who spoke German and yet others who spoke English. In order to accommodate those two languages in their confirmation catechism classes, they had catechism for five mornings a week for those who were fluent in one language and five afternoons a week for those who were fluent in the other. Think about that – five half-days every week.

There was a time in this country when Lutheran Church services lasted for hours and the board of Elders rebuked their pastor if he preached for less than an hour. There was a time when people were that hungry for God's Word.

Much has changed since those days. In modern times, a child catechism class is typically one day a week. On the other hand, football practice, volleyball, track, baseball, or some other sport may be five times a week. As for catechism, it is hard to get attendance even once a week. Parents have actually told me that they can't get to church because they can't get their child to practice on time if they go to church first. Or that we need to switch the time for catechism because it interferes with sports or recreation. Today I see Bibles left unopened and dusty sitting high on a shelf. Rather than being the living Word of God the Bible becomes a place to write important dates like weddings and birthdays and confirmations but it's left unread by many. It's becomes nothing more than a spiritual trophy.

This is a problem throughout this nation. People claim to be Christians, but few attend a church service regularly and an even much smaller number attend Bible Class regularly. What are the results of starving the soul this way?

The Barna research group collects statistics on religious trends around the world. They say that about 2/3 of Americans now believe that Jesus sinned during His life here on earth. About 3/4 of Americans believe that Satan is not real. 3/4 of Americans believe that salvation depends to some degree on a person's own good works and not entirely on the grace of God.

David Kinnaman, who directed the study for the Barna group, indicated that "most Americans do not have strong and clear beliefs, largely because they do not possess a sound biblical worldview. That is, they lack a consistent and holistic understanding of their faith. Millions of Americans say they are personally committed to Jesus Christ, but they believe Jesus sinned while on earth. Many believers claim to trust what the Bible teaches, but they reject the notion of a real spiritual adversary or they feel that faith-sharing activities are optional. Millions feel personally committed to God, but they are renegotiating the definition of that deity.

Kinnaman says, and listen carefully: *"In fact, one reason why beliefs fluctuate is that most Americans' hold few if any convictions about their faith. For instance, even among those who disagree with orthodox views, many do so while hedging their bets. Most Americans have one foot in the biblical camp, and one foot outside it. They say they are committed, but to what? They are spiritually active, but to what end? The spiritual profile of American Christianity is not unlike a lukewarm church that the Bible warns about in the Book of Revelation."*

We too must confess that we are lukewarm. We do not study God's word as we should. We have not confessed our faith diligently to our children. We have not seen to it that we or our children or grandchildren get a daily dose of God's Word. Actions speak louder than words and with our actions we have taught our children that God gets our leftover time if any instead of the first fruits of our day. We have led Christ's little ones astray and deserve worse than drowning in the deepest sea with a millstone around our neck.

Between our poor confession and our non-existent example, is it any wonder that kids sometimes tell me that God is not all that important to them? Is it any wonder that recent generations search for a church based on the entertainment value of the music instead of the church's faithfulness to Jesus Christ? Is it any wonder that when our children get jobs in other towns, they don't even bother to become members of a local church? Is it any wonder that when children get confirmed and we often never hear from them again?

We all deserve eternal punishment for the way we have not passed our faith on to the next generation. What is to become of us?

Thanks be to God that Jesus invites us to become like little ones ourselves. Jesus does not let us drown with a millstone around our necks. Instead he invites us to trust in Him the way that little ones trust their beloved parents. He invites us to relax in Him and let Him take the millstone onto Himself. He reminds us to look at the cross and see not only the millstone that we each deserve, but also the punishment for all our other sins as

well. He invites us to see that He is the Christ who takes away our sin. Indeed, He is the Christ who takes away the sins of the world.

Jesus Christ comes to us as the one who suffered, died on the cross, and rose from the dead. He comes to us in His Word. He also comes to us in the sacrament as He Himself gives us of His own body and blood in and with the bread and wine. We are His little ones – we are His precious children.

He has so much to share with us. He has so many gifts that He longs to give to us while we still live here on this earth. Through His Word and Sacraments, He continues to offer these gifts to us – and to our children and our children's children. He is ever ready to care for His little ones – both the young and the old alike. The greatest care was giving His life for yours. For through Jesus life, His suffering, His death and His glorious resurrection the price has been paid in full for your sins. So that you can know beyond any doubt that all your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit, for Jesus sake and in Jesus name, Amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN.