

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **Too Small to Ignore**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 18:1-9; 19:13-15

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Today we are returning to the Life of Christ. We started studying the book of Matthew back in 2006 and completed the first eight chapters in June of '07. We picked it up again from Thanksgiving to this past Easter, covering chapters 9-17. Today we start in chapter 18 and, Lord willing, we will finish this amazing book by Easter, with a few planned interruptions along the way. We will not preach every single passage, because we have already studied a few in an earlier series on the parables. But when we skip a passage we will let you know and make available the earlier sermon for your review.

During my study month in July I was invited by Judy Hollander to read a book entitled *Too Small to Ignore: Why the Least of These Matters Most*, written by Dr. Wess Stafford, the President and C.E.O. of Compassion International. Our whole staff is now reading the book together. Stafford focuses attention on ministry to children in a way that really opened my eyes. I was already thinking a lot about the topic because of our family services this summer. That turned out to be a wonderful experience for our church. I know it wasn't perfect. There were a few more distractions than usual, though as a whole the children behaved beautifully. The music was blended, so first service people had to put up with some second service music and vice versa. And we went overtime in all four services because we included children's sermons, children's music, some drama, and a number of ministry reports. But you are a forgiving congregation and most of you handled the change well. (By the way, we are taking a survey online and would love to have your observations about the family services. You can get the survey at the Welcome Center or online at [www.firstfreewichita.org](http://www.firstfreewichita.org)).

The joy of having children participate in the services really got me to thinking. Is it possible that we have made a mistake in segregating our congregation too much—into adult activities, youth activities, and children's activities? Frankly I'm not sure. Children are all different, and while some can thrive in a church service, others cannot handle it (or at least their parents cannot handle it). You know your children better than we do. But I do want you to know you are welcome to bring your children to worship anytime.

I want to speak today on two passages from Matthew—from chapter 18:1-9 and 19:13-14. Both focus on children.

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

*He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

*"And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.*

*"Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, 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. And if your eye causes you to sin, 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.*

*(19:13-15: Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them.*

*Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there).*

Perhaps you have glossed over these Scripture passages, seeing them as inspiring, but not that important theologically. I ask you, however, to consider the words of John MacArthur: "It is no exaggeration to say that this is the single greatest discourse our Lord ever gave on life among the redeemed people in His church."<sup>i</sup>

It seems to me two major challenges are presented to us by Jesus in these passages:

1. We must become like little children ourselves.
2. We must treat little children as Jesus treats them.

### **We must become like little children spiritually. (Matthew 18:1-4)**

**The disciples pose an inane question: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (1).** I call it inane, but it is probably worse than that. If you check a harmony of the Gospels you discover that this question resulted from an argument the Twelve had been having among themselves "as to which of them might be the greatest" (Luke 9:46; Mark 9:34). Amazingly, this argument erupted in spite of very recent teaching by Jesus on humility and servant leadership. In fact, it may have been earlier the same day that Jesus told them for the third time about His own impending suffering and death (see 17:22-23), but they were so caught up in their own desire for personal aggrandizement that they couldn't even process what Jesus was telling them.

Nor is this the last time they will struggle with the desire for power and prestige. When we get to chapter 20 we will find the mother of James and John asking a favor of Jesus: "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." The context makes it clear that the two brothers had put their mother up to it, and the other disciples express indignation with James and John (v. 24). Unfortunately the indignation seems to be over the fact that James and John got their request in before the rest of them!

**Jesus responds to this inane question with an unexpected answer: "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (2-4)** But before answering them Jesus calls a little child and has him stand among them. The Greek word for "child" signifies a very young child, perhaps a toddler. Jesus loved little children and they loved Him; it's not difficult at all to visualize this young child, running to Jesus and putting his arm around Jesus' leg as He teaches.

What Jesus says can be summarized very simply: Salvation requires childlikeness. When He speaks of entering the Kingdom He is not talking about going to heaven, at least not now; rather He is speaking of coming under the sovereign rule of God in one's daily life. Of course, the fact that one must enter the kingdom assumes he is born outside of it. Entering the Kingdom requires conversion: "Unless you change." The term means to make an about face, to go in the opposite direction, to repent. We must move from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's dear son. We who were once aliens must become

naturalized citizens though faith in Christ. All that is expressed in terms of converting to the status of little children! We're always telling little children, or at least teenagers to "grow up!" Jesus, on the other hand, is telling *us* to "become like a little child!" What does He mean?

**What is it about little children that makes them spiritually exemplary?** Let me first suggest what Jesus does not mean. He is not suggesting that we become innocent or sinless, for children are not sinless. They display their fallen nature early and often. Nor is He suggesting that we become *childish*—the disciples had that down pat—but rather *childlike*. He is suggesting that we need to share certain traits and characteristics that are almost universal among children—they are unassuming, trusting of others, dependent, unaffected, unpretentious, unambitious for grandeur and greatness, teachable, naive. I want to take just a few of these traits and expand briefly upon them.

**1. Humility.** In verse 4 Jesus says, "whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Children often behave selfishly, and occasionally they can even be obnoxious. But one term you almost never hear applied to children is "prideful." A small child makes no claims to worthiness or greatness. That is a trait that must be learned from parents who dote on a child, and usually the trait does not appear until the teen years. Humility is, of course, a quality everywhere praised and urged upon us in Scripture, modeled preeminently by Jesus Christ.

**2. Dependence.** A child cannot meet his own needs and has no resources to even stay alive. No creature in the animal kingdom begins life more vulnerable or more in need of constant protection and nurture than the newborn child. Recently we saw a doe give birth to a fawn on the lawn forty feet from our cabin in Arkansas. The mother licked it a few times, and then in less than five minutes after birth it was up walking, and within ten minutes it was off into the woods climbing steep hills. The same can be said of almost every species. But the human child, destined to be the smartest of all the animals (and the only one with an eternal soul), is helpless at birth. Stafford writes, "The child passes through several long years of vulnerability, needing absolutely everything. Food, protection, hygiene, sanitation, warmth, and shelter must be provided."<sup>ii</sup>

What was God thinking? Well, I can't tell you all the reasons why He did it this way, but I think one of the reasons was to teach us a spiritual lesson: we are spiritually vulnerable, totally dependent upon Him for our sustenance and survival, now and for eternity.

**3. Trust.** A child simply submits to the care of his parents and others who love him, relying on them for all he or she needs. When fear of the dark seizes a child, he relaxes instantly when his father comes into the room. The intense feelings of abandonment a child senses when separated from his mother (say in a grocery store) is resolved immediately when he spots her. No one else can be a substitute for this trust a child has in his or her parent. Such trust is instructive of the complete faith God calls us to place in His Son.

These traits are virtually universal characteristics of childhood which are helpful, even essential to our entrance into Jesus' kingdom. We must be humble, dependent, and trustful of our heavenly Father. But Jesus quickly turns our attention from the importance of becoming like little children to how we treat little children.

## **We must treat children as He treats them. (18:5-9; 19:13-15)**

**1. We must welcome little children.** Jesus always did. They were special to Him, and He to them. In 18:5 Jesus says clearly, “Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.” Who of us here wouldn’t fall all over ourselves to welcome Jesus if we knew He was coming to one of our services, or to our home? Well, we can do just that, every day, simply by welcoming little children in His name.

How do we fulfill this responsibility? Well, we welcome them by providing for their spiritual nurture. If you owned a business and 75% of your profit came from one particular line of products, how would you allocate your resources, your R&D, and your sales force? Toward that line of products, wouldn’t you? The fact is that the vast majority of converts in a church are produced through its children’s ministry and youth ministry, but in few churches does the budget reflect that. Wess Stafford notes that it is a rare church that spends even 15% of its budget on children’s ministry. I believe First Free is ahead of the curve on this. I am so pleased with the wonderful new space we have provided for Children’s Ministry, and the wonderful staff we have, and the amazing group of volunteers. Our children’s programs—from S.S. to Junior Worship to AWANA to Friday Friends to camp ministry, etc.,—are certainly taking us in the right direction.

We also welcome children when we include them in our worship. The very best thing about our family services in July and August was the fact that children were included in every service—not just in the room but up front leading worship and listening to children’s sermons. We were communicating to them that they are important.

We welcome the children when we learn their names and speak encouragement to them. Nothing does my heart more good than to have a little child come up and say, “Hello, Pastor Mike,” and give me a big hug. By the same token, nothing does them more good than for an adult to know their names and take the time to engage them. Stafford writes, “A life can be launched with as little as a single phrase, an uplifting word, or an act of kindness. The spirit of a little child is a lot like wet cement. When a child is young, it takes little effort to make an impression that can last a lifetime.” All we have to do is to think back to our own childhood and remember the parent or teacher or coach or neighbor who was exceptionally kind to us and launched us on the pathway to adulthood. Unfortunately, by the same token, many can remember an adult who almost destroyed them through neglect or criticism or something worse.

We have talked about how to welcome little children who are in our church. But may I suggest that we also have a responsibility to welcome little children who are not here at First Free and whom we may never meet. The welfare of children worldwide is in a state of crisis of almost unimaginable proportions. Malnutrition causes more than 55 percent of the child deaths in our world. This is all the more tragic when we realize that the earth produces more than enough food for everyone to have all they need. God has done His part, but we have not done ours in the stewardship of it to see that the food gets to the end of the line, to the poorest and neediest—the children.

I know the problem seems overwhelming and the obstacles insurmountable. But all it takes is political will. When 3000 innocent American lives (innocent in the sense that they were noncombatants and had done nothing to deserve such treatment) were snuffed out in the World Trade Center, our government rightly mobilized to establish a Homeland Security Department and then went after the bad guys in

Afghanistan and Iraq to the tune of a combined cost approaching a trillion dollars.

Leaving aside the debate as to whether all this was done efficiently or wisely, most of us would not question the motives of those who voted to spend these funds. But do you realize that every single day more than 3000 children in our country lose their lives through abortion, and these are *absolutely* innocent lives. And do you realize that worldwide ten times that many—30,000 children under five—are taken from us every single day through starvation, war, and neglect?

What can we do? Well, we can continue to speak out against abortion and vote against it. Progress has been made, though not nearly enough. We can volunteer at ministries like Pregnancy Crisis center or Choices Clinic. We can sponsor a child or two or three through legitimate organizations like Compassion International. We can promote adoption. I was so pleased a week ago to hear Rick Warren ask both Presidential candidates to commit to a war for adoption similar to President Bush's war against AIDS.

We can make a difference in behalf of children. We must welcome little children, here or far away, as Jesus would. But there is a second responsibility we have besides welcoming the children.

**2. We must avoid causing little children to sin** (in fact, we must avoid causing anyone to sin, but Jesus will get to that in a moment). I was watching a program on TV not too long ago that showed a mother teaching her little child (maybe 4 or 5) to steal from a department store. The mother would distract the clerk, and then the child would sneak behind the counter and steal the clerk's purse out of the cabinet. It was all caught on tape. Incredible! If someone wants to be a thief, that's a personal decision—they can take their chances and pay the consequences. But to train a little child to be a thief before their conscience is even fully awake is a travesty!

I saw a You Tube video not long ago of a little child letting loose with a string of four letter words, while his parents and siblings laughed their heads off, thinking it was so cute. They had taught him the words.

There is nothing in the world that makes me more angry than to hear about the sexual abuse of a little child—by a stranger, a family member, or especially a priest or clergyman. But do you realize that most perverts were themselves the victims of perverts? That doesn't excuse their behavior at all, but it should cause us to think about Jesus' statement here in verse 7: "Woe to the world because of the things that *cause* people to sin!" God's judgment falls not only on the sinner but also on the one who causes the sinner to sin, and even on the culture that allows that kind of behavior to be treated as normal.

I doubt if anyone here is training their child to be a thief, or teaching him curse words for the fun of it, or abusing a child. But there are other more subtle ways we can cause children to sin. For example, Ephesians warns fathers, "Do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." Exasperated children do things and say things that are sinful, but the fathers who exasperate them share in the guilt.

What about the greed or materialism or spiritual apathy that some children regularly learn from watching their parents' lifestyle? When they grow up that way, who is responsible? How many little children are sent to Sunday School by their parents, who use the church as a babysitter so they can go to brunch, thereby communicating that church is only for children. Not surprisingly, many of them follow in their parents' footsteps when they are old enough to be on their own. Can we not cause little children to

stumble by showing favoritism, by unrealistic expectations, by overprotectiveness or overpermissiveness?

Please note that Jesus is speaking of some specific children—the ones who “believe in me.” It is the little children whose faith has been ignited that He has particularly in mind—the ones who have started out on a journey of trust in Him and who are still naive in their understanding and tender in their consciences. We must be especially careful to protect these and nurture them.

And listen to the gravity of the warning Jesus attaches to those who sin against such children, or causes them to sin: “It would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” Now that is a pretty gruesome death, quick but terrifying! Imagine the pressure building as you are dragged under by that 2,000 pound weight, further and further under the water, arms flailing, lungs exploding! Can you hear Jesus add, “Can I make it any clearer to you that little children matter to me!?”

Now before moving on to a third way we must treat children, I must draw your attention to the fact that the rebuke He offers extends even further. Look at verse 7: “Woe to the world because of the things that cause *people* to sin!” It’s not just little children we must guard but adults as well. People are going to be tempted to sin, says, Jesus, but we must not be the instruments of temptation! And then to drive the point home Jesus employs an almost unbelievable word picture:

*“If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, 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. And if your eye causes you to sin, 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.”*

Please don’t think Jesus is teaching mutilation of the body here. That is a concept completely foreign to the Scriptures. This is a figure of speech. However, by calling it that we are not seeking to weaken the impact. The point He is trying to communicate is that great danger requires drastic measures. A person should do whatever is necessary, no matter how difficult or painful it might be, to keep from causing others to sin. Nothing is worth having or keeping if it is gained by sin or leads to sin, in ourselves or others.

**3. We must not hinder little children from coming to Jesus.** In chapter 19 we read these words: “Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them.” Now put yourself in the apostles’ shoes. They are in the middle of a political campaign! Their candidate is gaining ground and might soon be crowned king, and they expect to become His cabinet members. A few hope they will be named V.P. They can’t afford for him to become exhausted and to look haggard. They can’t have him carry his own luggage or get swamped with email. Yes, kissing babies is helpful, but there must be a limit to these photo-ops. So they rebuke the parents who are troubling Jesus by bringing their children to Him.

But in turn Jesus rebukes them: “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them.” Mark tells us that Jesus was indignant, angry. Only three times in the NT do we read that Jesus got angry—at the religious leaders who dared Him to heal a man with the withered hand in Mark 3:5, at the religious leaders who sold animals and changed money in the temple (Matthew 21), and at His disciples here when they hindered the children from coming to Him. The implication is that children will come to Jesus if we don’t hinder them. And I think that is so true. Children are attracted to Jesus (unless adults tamper with

them and cause them to be skeptical).<sup>iii</sup>

There are many things I could say today about how we can hinder children from coming to Jesus, but I am going to choose just one, which will probably get me in hot water with some of you. Not too long ago *U.S. News & World Report* ran an eight-page cover story on what's gone wrong with kids' sports. It described how, on top of normal Little League baseball and Pop Warner football teams, a whole second level of turbocharged sports called travel teams are now demanding even more of kids. As a result, a disturbing percentage of talented young athletes burn out and stop playing their sport altogether. "Young people simply were not made to be the fulfillment machines of adult wishes. They need time to breathe, to imagine, to wonder, and simply to relax."<sup>iv</sup> They also need to be in Sunday School and church (which *U.S. News* did not mention), but today many of those sports teams view Sunday morning as prime time for games.

We must not hinder little children from coming to Jesus either overtly or by neglecting to tell them the Good News and lead them into intimate relationship with Christ.

**Conclusion:** Late one evening D. L. Moody, the leading American evangelist of the nineteenth century, arrived home from speaking at a meeting. Emma, his wife, was already asleep. As her exhausted husband climbed into bed, she awoke, rolled over and murmured, "So how did it go tonight?" "Great," he replied, "we had two and a half converts." His wife lay silently for a moment pondering this response, then finally smiled, "That's sweet," she replied. "How old was the child?" "No, no, no," Moody answered. "It was two children and one adult! The children have their whole lives in front of them. The adult's life is already half gone."<sup>v</sup>

I personally doubt if God counts conversions in halves. The Scriptures tell us that there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents, (Luke 15:10), which I interpret to mean *any* sinner who repents. But from the human viewpoint, how much greater the potential in a young life that hasn't been scarred by sin and has years ahead to serve God than in a person who converts on his deathbed or somewhere in between.

Friends, the Evil One recognizes the value and effectiveness of targeting youth. The Nazis had their Hitler Youth bands. The Chinese Communists had their Red Guards. The radical Muslims have their madrash schools where they teach their children to hate and to kill the infidels. When missiological research consistently indicates that 2/3 of all those who give their lives to Christ do so before the age of eighteen, can we afford not to make ministry to children and youth the focal point of our ministry?

I want to close with something that some of you may consider controversial, and I want you to know that Judy Hollander didn't ask me to say it: I want to challenge us here at First Free to consciously and unapologetically make ministry to children the highest priority of our church. And in the process let us consciously and unapologetically imitate the children in respect to humility, dependence, and trust.

Let me close with just a word about the most important children in the world—the ones God has given to you. The words of Wess Stafford, President of Compassion International, that won him my heart were not his appeals for adoption or for feeding the hungry children around the world. It was when he wrote the following:

*When all is said and done and I stand before my Lord, I am sure he will value more what I*

*have done in faithfulness to my two children than the ministry to millions of children in poverty. I don't know what you are doing in the workplace or what impact on the world you are making, but if you have children entrusted to you, I am dead certain the same is true of you. They are precious, deserving of our time, attention, and serious commitment—not someday, but today. . . .*

*Someday when you are the one yearning for time with them, those energetic toddlers will be grownups in the corridors of power, with busy calendars and guardian secretaries. By then you may find that you are the marginalized element of society, without voice or power.*

*It cannot wait until tomorrow. Today is the moment to shape children's spirits, character, and values. . . .*<sup>vi</sup>

Let's pray.

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i. John MacArthur, *Matthew 16-23*, 94.

ii. Wess Stafford, *Too Small to Ignore*, 16.

iii. Sometimes I think we draw the wrong conclusions from the statistics to the effect that 2/3 of all the people who come to faith in Christ do so before age 18. Some are tempted to think, "Sure, children are so naive and pliable that most of them will accept whatever religion their parents believe without even questioning it." But the fact is that even when children who do not come from Christian homes are allowed to hear the story of Jesus, a large percentage of them respond positively. I doubt seriously if that could be said of the founder of any other world religion.

iv. Stafford, 80.

v. Stafford, 1.

vi. Stafford, 34, 52.