

PDF version of the lesson notes.

I. Who's the Greatest

- Read Matthew 18:1–4:

(1) At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? (2) And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, (3) And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. (4) Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

A. The Question

- *Does the disciples' question seem strange? Isn't the answer obvious? After all, it's called the kingdom of heaven. Isn't God (the king or ruler of the kingdom) clearly the greatest in the Kingdom?*
- They certainly seem to be interested in their role, position, relative power, and importance in the church or Christian community. I don't read the question as eschatological. I think the disciples are concerned with the here and now or the near future. I think the context suggests that are interesting in who is or will be the most powerful in terms of the community. This makes me wonder if Jesus' prophecy of his coming death just a few verses earlier (Matt 17:22–23) spawned this question. Concerns over power and greatness would be pretty ironic response to news of Jesus' coming death, but also an understandable one.
- *Does Jesus tell them who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven in verses 2–3? Why might verses 2–3 be an important preface to the direct mention of greatness in verse 4?*
- The answer in verses 2 and 3 strikes me as a stunning rebuke. Questions of power and greatness are so contrary in terms of the concerns of a true discipleship that they reveal a lack of conversion and true discipleship. You cannot even be a member of the kingdom of heaven if you are concerned with worldly power and greatness even within the community.

B. Humble Children, Cocky Children

- *Verse 4 puzzles me a bit. I've never thought the children are particularly humble. At least my children don't seem particularly humble. In fact sometimes I think they are pretty cocky. What am I missing here? How are children humble? Of course, maybe this isn't a*

mystery to anyone else because all of your children are humble. Maybe, I just don't understand what it really means to be humble?

- Certainly, people suggest that children are teachable, and that such a quality is at the core of humility. I certainly don't disagree with this entirely. For example, sometimes my children do seem extremely teachable. On other hand, sometimes they seem like the antithesis. Willingness to listen and to be taught is I think a theme that shows up strongly in in the gospels in general and in the reading for today's lesson. Thus, I think it is worth entertaining and seriously considering the possibility that Jesus is emphasizing that aspect of humility when he invoke the humility of a child as an essential emulation for disciples.
- On the other hand, the question asked by the disciples seems like it should be a helpful backdrop for why children represent humility and what attribute of humility is being emphasized here. *In what way or ways might a little child represent the antithesis of what the disciples asked or how they acted?*
- I think The social status or standing of little children is an important aspect of their humility is this specific context. In my view, the humble status of the little child (i.e., their lack of power of really any kind) is at the core of this striking reversal of world's definition of greatness and kingdom's definition of greatness. However, I think they is a bit more to it than just status or the lack of status. "Unless the disciples exhibit a childlike indifference to greatness by the world's standard, they 'cannot' (the double negative of the Greek emphasizes this) expect to enter the 'kingdom of heaven.'" [1] I do think little children are fairly unconcerned with greatness as conventionally defined by world and implicitly defined by the disciples in verse 1.
- I really enjoyed the comments made in class about these verses. I thought the discussion was very high quality.

II. Little Ones and Stumbling Blocks

- Read Matthew 18:5–9:

(5) And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. (6) But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. (7) Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh! (8) Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. (9) And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.

A. Little Ones

- *In verses 5–6, the language shifts a little bit relative to the first four verses of the chapter. The Savior refers to "little ones" Is this still a reference to little children or is he referring to a different group?*
- The whole identifying phrase is "little ones which believe in me." I think this suggests that we are not talking about literal children, but disciples (those who believe in him) and "little ones" is a metaphorical description of their relationship with Jesus: his children, the children of Christ. If "little ones" referred to literal children, the phrase "which believe in me" seems unnecessary.
- The parable of the lost sheep is part of this discussion with the disciples. I think it strongly supports the metaphorical use of "little ones" and gives us some insight into how it is used. Read Matthew 18:10–14:

(10) Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven. (11) For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost. (12) How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? (13) And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. (14) Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.

- This parable is worth commenting on much more extensively, but for now let's focus on how this parable helps us understand the use of the phrase, "little ones." The parable is sandwiched in between discussion of the "little ones" and clearly links the sheep with the "little ones. Thus it seems likely that the sheep in general and/or the lost sheep particularly represents the "little ones" in the parable. *Does the parable help us understand the "little ones" designation?*
- The metaphor of the Shepherd and his the flock pretty clearly connects the "little ones" as members of the Christian community: followers or disciples of Jesus. They are the "little ones" or children of Christ (the disciples who are childlike).[2] I am not exactly sure what to do with the Joseph Smith Translation of verse 11 (footnote c of verse 11 in the LDS edition of the King James Bible) which seems most likely to connect little ones with literal little children. However, it is hard to know Joseph Smith's intent here. Even Robert J. Matthews has indicated that the JST isn't always or maybe even mostly about restoring lost original text. The JST certainly contains doctrinal harmonization separate from restoration. Thus, Joseph Smith may have just wanted to make clear the doctrine that children are without sin and do not need to repent because it is a restored doctrine of the restoration. In my view this is the most likely explanation for the specific change of verse 11. I think this is particularly likely given there is a high probability that verse 11 itself is a later scribal addition and not original to the text. On the other hand, the lack of the need for repentance could refer to the current pure state of these disciples; they have just been

born again or become like a little child.

- *Could "little ones" have particular reference to the weak or new members of the community (those most likely to lose their way)?*
- Well, certainly "little ones" conjures up an image of weakness or fragility which would be consistent with the idea. However, I am inclined to think that is not the particular focus of the designation here; that it is emphasizing the nature of our relationship with Christ in the kingdom. I also, think that Matthew 10:40–42 is a useful reference here. It really concretely connects the title of "little ones" with the disciples and gives us some additional context for its usage:

(40) He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me. (41) He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. (42) And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.

- *Does Matt 10:40–42 suggest that the title, "little one", is connected with specific activities? Do you think there is an overlap between Matthew 18:5 and these verses in addition to the use of the phrase, "little ones?"*
- Both talk about receiving the disciples or little ones. The context in Matt 10:40–42 is clearly connected to missionary work. *Do you think that is what verse 5 is referring missionary work or something else?*

B. Stumbling

- *Assuming I am correct with my identification of the "little ones" as members of the Christian community (disciples of Christ), does this change or affect your understanding of the command to not offend the little ones? What about if the context is offending disciples engaged in missionary work?*
- The Greek word (Skandalon), translated in the King James Bible as offend, "means an obstacle which could cause a fall (Lev. 19: 14) or a fundamental difficulty for belief (Gal.5: 11)."[3] Thus modern translations of the Bible tend to translate Skandalon in verse 6 as "stumbling block" or even as "to cause to sin." For example, the NRSV of verse 6 reads as follows:

(6) "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea."
- *Does using the phrase "stumbling block" change how you understand the verse and why*

this "offense" is so bad? Does it give you insight into why the language of the Savior is so strong here in terms of his condemnation? Does it help us understand the nature of the offense if this refers to causing disciples engaged in missionary work to stumble?

- I think it certainly makes it unlikely that Jesus is referring to a personal offense (e.g., insulting a person). It seems more likely to refer to enticing someone to sin. *Do you think it could have reference to causing, destroying, or weakening the faith of a disciple or fellow believer?*
- I really enjoyed the comments made in class about these verses too. The comments in class were much better than anything I wrote in this section.

III. The Parable of the Lost Sheep

- Let's return to the parable of the lost sheep, but this time let's think about its message. Read Matthew 18:10–14:

(10) Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven. **(11)** For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost. **(12)** How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? **(13)** And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. **(14)** Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.

- Most scholars believe that verse 11 is not original to the text. The best New Testament manuscripts do not contain verse 11. It is very likely a later scribal addition.

A. Angels

- *What is verse 10 about? What do you think the phrase, "in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven?" Is this describing a "guardian angel" theology for the followers of Christ (the children or little ones of Christ)?*
- It might be, but I am not so sure that is the best explanation of the passage. I really like what Donald Hagner says about this verse (emphasis in original):[4]

A more general idea is in view, namely, that angels represent the "little ones" before the throne of God. The point here is not to speculate on the *ad hoc* role of angels in aiding disciples of Jesus but rather to simply emphasize the importance of the latter to God. If the very angels of God's presence are concerned with the "little ones," how much more then should also fellow Christians be for another. They are to be received and

esteemed; special care must further be taken not to cause them to stumble.

B. The Parable

- *Why do you think Jesus told this parable? What did he want us to learn from it particularly given the backdrop of the first 9 verses of this discourse?*
- *Do you think the "lost sheep" metaphor used in the verse is the same as it is used in Matthew 10:5–7?*

(5) These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: (6) But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (7) And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand.

- It certainly seems similar but it also seems like there is a real difference in terms of usage. In Matthew 18, the sheep are the "little ones" (disciples of Christ) and the lost sheep is a disciple that has lost his/her way or has stumbled because other Christians put a stumbling block in his/her path. In Matthew 10:5–7 the lost sheep do not have the gospel.
- *What isn't the security of the 99 sheep mentioned?*

IV. Martha and Mary

- Read Luke 10:38–42:

(38) Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. (39) And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. (40) But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. (41) And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: (42) But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.

- *Do you view Martha sympathetically? Hospitality is a very important principle during this time. In fact, the honor and reputation of a woman in this time period and location were determined by her ability to manage her household.[5] In the historical context, it is Mary's actions that are very strange: she was acting like a Man.[6] How could Martha have reasonably been expected not to be engaged in these necessary aspects of hospitality?*
- The NRSV translates verse 40–41 as the following:

(40) But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and

asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." (41) But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;"

- *In what sense was Martha distracted?*
- *What point is Jesus and Luke trying to drive home to the reader? How do you think this applies to us? Is the setting too specialized and specific to be generalized into something useful.*

V. The Good Samaritan

We didn't cover the parable of the good Samaritan today, but there was a good article in the February Ensign by John Welch about the parable. Actually, I should clarify a bit. The article is a highly allegorical interpretation of the parable. It draws heavily on 2nd and 3rd century interpretations of the parable which are all highly allegorical. I was somewhat familiar with these highly allegorical interpretations before reading the article. I am in general *not* a huge fan of highly allegorical interpretations of the parables of Jesus. I am just not convinced it is very likely that they come close to original intent most of the time (I guess I am not post-modern enough). Still, I think it was a good article and definitely worth reading if you haven't already. I think most of you will enjoy it and find it spiritually moving. The reference and link is below:

1. Welch, John W., 2007, [The Good Samaritan: Forgotten Symbols](#), *Ensign*, February, 40–47.
2. Welch, John W., 1999, [The Good Samaritan: A Type and Shadow of the Plan of Salvation](#), *Brigham Young University Studies*, 1999, 51–115. Welch's Ensign article referenced in item 1 is a condensed version of this article. In my view, this article is the better of the two, but it is also much longer.

Endnotes

1. Hagner, Donald A., 1988, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14–28*, Nelson Reference and Electronic, 517.
2. The idea that "little ones" as used in Matthew 18 is a title that does not refer to literal little children but instead is a metaphorical reference to disciples of Christ seems to be fairly uncommon in Mormon discourse. However, it is not unheard of; For example, S. Kent Brown, C. Wilfred Griggs, and Thomas W. Mackay in a 1975 Ensign article note that the "little" in "little ones" does not refer to age in Matthew 18 (see Brown, S. Kent, C. Wilfred Griggs, and Thomas W. Mackay, 1975, Footnotes to the Gospels, *Ensign*, March, 34).
3. Browning, W. R. F., 1996, *A Dictionary of the Bible*, Oxford University Press, "Stumbling Block."

4. Hagner, Donald A., 1988, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14–28*, Nelson Reference and Electronic, 527.
5. Malina, Bruce J., and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, 2003, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press, 273.
6. Malina, Bruce J., and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, 2003, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press, 273.