

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 18:1 - 18:5 (Part 1)



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discourse, Steve Gregg delves into the first half of Matthew 18:1-5, where Jesus' disciples reveal their pride and self-importance by asking Him to teach them how to pray. Gregg compares this to their eagerness to see Jesus become the king of Israel and how this would entail a hierarchy with some disciples holding higher rank than others. He also notes that the idea of Peter being celibate is not supported by the Bible and that the word "converted" has taken on a different meaning in modern Christian jargon.

### Transcript

Let's turn today to the 18th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. It says, at that time, verse 1, says, At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called a little child to him, set him in the midst of them, and said, Assuredly I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

And whoever receives one little child like this 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 if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses, for offenses will come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes.

And if your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you.

It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire. Now, here we have the disciples exhibiting their own carnal egotism, their pride, their one-upmanship, their rivalry. Now these men were not saints in the sense that we think of men who have overcome their baser instincts and live seamlessly, godly, humble, spiritual lives.

These were men who still were very much the men that Jesus had found them to be. They were not yet what we would call regenerated, I believe, because I believe that the rebirth or the regeneration that they later experienced was as a result of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. I take this to be so, especially from what Peter said in 1 Peter 1, 3, where it says, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

So it sounds like he is saying that we've been begotten again or born again as a result of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Well at this time Jesus had not yet risen from the dead and because of that we're dealing with men who are probably unregenerate but religious. Now by religious I need to clarify, I don't mean religious in the sense that they were locked into some kind of ritualistic religion, but rather they were men of religious sentiments.

They cared about the things of God. They certainly cared about Jesus. They wanted to be godly.

They asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, for example. And yet they were men with their natural man, the inward fallen state, really unregenerate, unchanged. And therefore they were just like other men in terms of looking out for themselves.

You see Jesus on one occasion said, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. This goes against human nature. And the only way you can really deny yourself in the sense that Jesus calls upon you to do is if you have a rebirth, you have a new nature that comes in.

As it says in 2 Peter 1 that we become partakers of the divine nature and it is this divine nature that is able to do and to be what Jesus requires us to do and to be. But prior to this, men in their fallen nature, they might know what is right to do, but they could not possibly really do it with consistency. And therefore the disciples, although they wanted to be godly, they were still very much dominated by their carnal, their worldly inclinations.

And one of those inclinations is to make sure you look out for yourself. Now in a movement like that of Jesus, Jesus at times commanded the loyalty of great masses of people. And Jesus was regarded by his disciples to be the Messiah.

And there were many people out there that followed Jesus around who were probably willing to call him the Messiah as well, so long as he would be the kind of Messiah they wanted. And therefore there were times when thousands of people followed Jesus. We have record of one time when he fed the multitudes that were following him and there were as many as 5,000 men plus women and children.

We've got thousands and thousands of people there. And the disciples realized that Jesus was riding the crest of a wave of great popularity that could result, and they believed would result, in his becoming the king, which is what the Messiah was to become, the king of Israel. Now they realized, I mean they could look around and put two and two together, they realized that they were closest to him of all people.

He had chosen those twelve to spend time with him, to be trained specially. Clearly he was giving them responsibilities that would lead to their positions of leadership and so forth in his movement. And that being so, they pretty much expected to become very important people in the kingdom that they hoped he might establish.

Now Jesus did establish a kingdom. There should be no question about that among those who are believers. But the kingdom he established was not a kingdom of a political sort.

It wasn't a sort of kingdom that imposes rule upon others who are not willing to be ruled but are forced to it. The kingdom that Jesus established was a kingdom of voluntary submission. A kingdom where his rule is announced and the conscience of all men is appealed to to repent and to surrender and to put their faith in him and to follow him as king.

But where he was not going to be raising the sword or establishing an army or anything like that to impose his rule on people. The disciples didn't quite understand that yet, I think, and they were anticipating that Jesus was going to be a king like other kings. And that would mean that they would be in a they stood in a very good position to become important political men.

And there was more than one occasion that we read of them speculating as to who would have the highest political position in his kingdom. Remember, James and John once came to Jesus and said, you know, can we sit at your right hand and your left hand in your kingdom? They misunderstood entirely and Jesus answered them on that occasion that they have to be the servants of all if they want to be great men in his kingdom. Now here the disciples are thinking along similar lines as that.

Still concerned about, you know, making sure that they get their prestige that they get the honor that's due them for the sacrifices they've made to be a part of Jesus' movement and they come to Jesus saying, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Now, of course, there would be no dispute among them that Jesus was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, but they probably were thinking, well, of course, apart from you among ourselves which of us is the greatest? In other words, they're asking Jesus to start assigning ranks among his disciples. Every king in his cabinet or in the hierarchy of his officials has some that are higher in rank than others. You know, he's got a prime minister it may be, and that prime minister may be higher than some of the governors in his kingdom or something, and the disciples were getting curious about this.

Jesus hadn't really spoken very clearly on some of these issues. He had once told them that they, twelve, would someday sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel, and no doubt that appealed to them well enough, but he had really very rarely talked to them about the future setup of the authoritative role that they would have in his kingdom, and I'm sure that that was on their minds quite a bit. They had left their former vocations in order to be part of his movement, and part of their vision of their destiny in this movement was that they were going to be great men, and they wondered, of course, as natural men might naturally be expected to wonder among ourselves, which of us is going to have the highest rank? Which of us is going to be the greatest in this kingdom? Now Jesus called a little child to him and set him in the midst of them.

Now, this little child apparently was standing nearby. One has the impression that Jesus was alone with his disciples in the house on this occasion. This was not an interaction that took place with the multitudes about, and therefore the child was probably a child of that household.

Since Jesus spent most of his time in Capernaum in the house of Peter, it is a very good chance that this was one of Peter's children. That child was standing by there. Now, it could have been the child of one of the other disciples or a neighbor child, but without any other information, we probably would be safest to assume it was one of the children of Peter's own household, which would be one of his children.

Remember, the Bible does not teach that Peter was celibate. It does not teach that Peter was other than a family man. The Roman Catholic Church, of course, has taught that Peter was the first of the popes.

And not only the popes, but also the bishops and the priests in Roman Catholicism are required to be unmarried and celibate. But this tradition obviously arose sometime later than the time of Christ because, first of all, I do not believe that Peter was the first pope, but if he was, he was certainly different from successive popes in that he had a wife and he had children. We read of Peter's wife more than once in the New Testament.

There was an occasion early in the ministry of Jesus that Jesus came over to Peter's house after having cast a demon out in a synagogue out of a man, and Peter's mother-in-law, or his wife's mother, was sick and Jesus healed her of a fever. So we know of Peter having a wife on that occasion, and then much later in 1 Corinthians 9, the Apostle Paul makes reference to Peter having a wife that traveled around with him in the ministry. So Peter was a married man, and that he would have children seems likely enough.

That they were in the house of Peter when this occurred is likely, and therefore that the child was one of Peter's own children, again, seems likely. It's not important for us to identify the child, but it is interesting to consider this because there is a real possibility that Peter was one of the ones who was asking, you know, who is the greatest? And if

one of his own children was brought before the circle of the disciples as an example of who's the greatest, it would be very instructive to a father to see that his own child is honored in the sight of Jesus, possibly above himself, that is, above the child's father. Now Jesus took this child and set him in the midst of them, brought special attention to the child, focused their attention there, and he said, Assuredly I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now the word converted here has taken on in subsequent Christian jargon, the special meaning of becoming a Christian, being converted. We talk of somebody getting saved or getting converted or accepting Christ. We use these terms kind of in our jargon as interchangeable and therefore when we see Jesus saying, unless you are converted, we usually think that means whatever it is that our cultural image of conversion is, and by that I mean many of us would, for example, think of conversion takes place when you're at a church when a sermon has been preached, an altar call has been given, every eye has been closed, every head bowed, a hand has been raised at the request of the preacher and then he's told them to come forward and say a sinner's prayer and so forth, and that's what we call in many evangelical circles, we call that being converted.

But we need to recognize that Jesus didn't have any of those cultural affectations. Jesus never did that every eye closed, every head bowed kind of thing, never even gave an altar call to our knowledge, nor did the apostles, as far as we know, in the book of Acts. This is a rather modern methodology of getting people to express their faith in Christ, but that's what we call conversion.

And many of us can say, well, I was converted on such and such a date, because we remember the day that we heard that invitation and went forward and said the sinner's prayer. In fact, this is so much common among us that many preachers will say, I think without any warrant, they will say that if you can't remember the day that you were converted, you weren't. If you can't remember the day that you got saved, you didn't, because they assume that getting saved is something that is done with a certain amount of unusual origamoral attending.

I mean, you certainly would remember if you walked down in an aisle and were led in a sinner's prayer, or if you were not. But it's not necessarily that kind of conversion that Jesus is referring to. At least, the word converted, as he's using it, is not necessarily having the specialized meaning that it does in our usage in evangelical circles.

We said, unless you are converted, we have to remember the word converted is a simple, basic word that's a synonym for being changed. We use the word conversion for other things besides religious conversion. If you convert something from 110 to 120 volt or something, or if you convert a room from a bedroom into a bathroom, or whatever, the word convert simply means to change something, or to change.

So, when Jesus said, unless you are converted, he was not necessarily, at least in the minds of his disciples, and probably in his own mind, he wasn't thinking of all the trappings that we assigned to that word. He was simply saying, unless you are changed, you need to change. Now, of course, I should make this very clear that it is, that basic change that is required does occur at the point of rebirth.

And all those evangelical customs that I've mentioned may very well be the setting in which this conversion or this change takes place. But one reason I'm making all these disclaimers about it is because some people would say they were converted, although they were never changed. Some people go through the motions of going down the aisle when an altar call is given and saying the sinner's prayer and walking out with a card that says, I'm now saved, and an assurance given to them by the counselor, and yet there's never any change in their life.

They live in sin as much as before, they live for themselves as much as before, they don't have any passion for God any more than they did before, they don't have a hunger for His Word any more than before, and one would be very hard pressed to find any sense in which they have changed. In fact, arguably, they haven't. They haven't changed.

They've gone through a religious ritual of responding to an altar call, but they have not changed. And it needs to be understood that if a person has not changed, they have not been converted. Because the word converted means change.

And we have often been satisfied with too little from people. Maybe we're just so eager to chalk up statistics of how many people have gotten converted through our ministries, but we are so quick to say that someone has saved you because they've done some nominal confession of interest in the things of God, or said a prayer that someone fed to them line by line to repeat after them, and there may be no real religious spiritual inward change at all. The real mark of conversion is that a person is different afterwards than he was before.

He's changed. He's converted from one thing to another. And it's very harmful, it seems to me, to assume that conversion has taken place when there is no change, because it has not, according to Scripture.

There was never a person in the Bible who was converted but didn't change, because it would be an oxymoron to suggest that. Conversion and change are the same thing. So Jesus says to his disciples, you need to change.

He says unless you are changed and become as little children, he says, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Now, what he's saying is that you are not currently in the state that will get you into the kingdom of heaven. Now, not everything had to change, of course.

They had made some changes. They had left one vocation for another. They had given up their fishing and their tax collecting, those kinds of things, in order to be trained by Jesus in religious work.

A lot of things had changed. They had changed their opinions of, you know, before they knew Jesus, they didn't know he was the Messiah. Now they believe that.

That was a good change. But there was another area where they clearly needed to change, and it was this. They were still concerned about who was the greatest.

Now, little children, if you go to the youngest possible age imaginable, where they are self-conscious at all, are not contemplating whether one is greater than the other. Now, of course, children don't have to get very old before they begin to think in those terms. They do begin to compare each other with themselves with each other.

But the very small toddlers, they're not self-conscious of how they compare with others and how great they are compared to others. The very youngest children are aware of only one thing, and that is that they have everything to learn. They have all things, in all respects, they're dependent on others.

They know that when they're hungry, they need mommy to give them food. They know that when they have to go to the bathroom, they need someone to help them do that. Everything they do, they need help with.

When they need to go get up on the chair, someone has to lift them up on the chair. They're so small and helpless. And in that, they are not afraid to ask for help.

They are not afraid to acknowledge their own inadequacy. In that sense, they are humble. Now, as I said, it doesn't take children very long.

They don't have to live very long before they cease to be very humble, even though they may have as much grounds to be humble as before. Pride is a wicked thing that arises in the heart of man at an early age. But little tiny children, they haven't learned to be proud yet.

They haven't learned to be pretentious yet. They know that they don't know things, and so they ask a lot of questions. And they believe what they're told by their parents.

They're not afraid to ask for help. They're not afraid to say, I can't do this. I'm not big enough.

I'm not strong enough. And they are certainly not making any protestations about being great. You know, I'm greater than someone else.

Jesus said, this is where you need to change. You have this pride thing happening. You have this human thing happening.

This rivalry, this comparison of yourself with others. That has got to change. And unless it does change, you won't enter the kingdom of God.

You have to change in such a way that you become as little children. And, of course, there's many things about children that aren't like us. And Jesus is not saying that we need to become in all points like children.

He doesn't want us to become naïve. He doesn't want us to become gullible. He doesn't want us to become literally helpless, as little children are.

He doesn't want us to become childish or ignorant. It's not those ways that we're to be children. The Apostle Paul said in one place that we should not be children in understanding.

This is in 1 Corinthians 12 or 14. He said, it was actually chapter 14. He says, do not be children in understanding.

He said, in malice be children, but in understanding be men. There are some ways in which we should be like children, some ways we should not. But the way in which Jesus is saying his children must, his disciples must become like children is in this matter of self-image.

The whole world around us is continually telling us we need to improve our self-image. Jesus is saying you need to actually reduce your self-image. A little child is much more conscious of what he needs from others than he is of what he can contribute.

He's not aware that he is great. He's aware that his parents are great. And his parents are strong and big and wise and smart.

He is not. This humility is what is lacking in people as they grow older. And it's what needs to be recovered because a person will never really come to God on the correct terms of recognizing their need unless they come to this attitude of being like children.

We need, if we're going to come into the kingdom of heaven at all, to reach the point where we do not see ourselves as having much to contribute. That we have nothing to be congratulated for. We have nothing to set us above another person.

If anything, we're the lowest of people. And the more we genuinely believe this, the more likely we are to genuinely receive the grace of God and to recognize our need for mercy and depend upon God day by day as a little child does upon a father. And this is what must be done.

Jesus said unless you have this occur, unless you have this particular change take place, you won't enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. In other words, the one who thinks



himself least is the one who unbeknownst to himself is the greatest.

We'll say more about this passage next time.