

Intro

In a sense the Christian life is all about our responses. We're constantly responding to competing voices.

Like voices sounding the alarm about Climate Change. We might heed the warnings, advocate policies, and vote for candidates that act against climate change. We might reject the warnings and scoff at climate change. Maybe other voices are in our head? We may ignore the matter judging climate change irrelevant to our life. We may question the warnings, investigate the scientific evidence, and consider what Scripture has to say about caring for God's creation.

I don't say this to express an opinion, but simply to illustrate how we respond to messages in our culture.

Advertisements tempt us to purchase a product. We might respond that would improve my life. Or I've gotta have it. Or why would anyone want that?

Ultimately all our responses in life reflect a response to God. Do we care what God has to say about today's issues? Do we care about the things God cares about? When public opinion clashes with God's word, will we stand with God? Do we allow God's word to shape our attitude toward possessions? Do we give God room to shape our passions?

Let's look to Matthew 18 as we consider our responses to God and our world.

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Point 1: A kingdom entered through humility (18:1-4)

FCF: placing ourselves above God and his word

Occasion

The disciples were disputing greatness in the kingdom (Mark 9:34), so they questioned Jesus: *"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven"* (18:1)?

Illustration

Jesus calls over a child to make a spiritual illustration. *"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"* (18:3).

Important saying

Truly = pay attention, I'm going to say something important. We enter the kingdom in this life, and the life to come. The kingdom is already-not yet. Through faith we enter the realm of God's saving reign, we experience forgiveness and newness of life. In the future, God's people will enter the new heavens and new earth. Kingdom entry requires turning and becoming like children.

Becoming like children

Turning describes repentance = changing our stance towards God, in this case becoming like a child. Being forgiven of our sins requires becoming like a child.

- 1) A child is dependent...without their parents protecting them and providing for them they're in grave danger...a child isn't self-sufficient...they don't think they can care for themselves
- 2) A child is trusting...they trust their parent will continue to meet their needs... they trust what their parents teaches them...a child isn't suspicious or skeptical of their parent...this may come later but a child doesn't start out this way
- 3) A child is a learner...brings their questions to their parents...they're aware there's much they don't know...a child doesn't think they know everything
- 4) A child is submissive...they follow their parents' lead...a child knows they're not in charge

Humility

A child's situation illustrate the humility necessary for saving faith. Jesus answers their question: *"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven"* (18:4). As a child humbly engages their world, Jesus' disciples respond to God with humility. True greatness doesn't consist of elevated position. True greatness consists of a humble attitude towards God.

- 1) Dependent on God for any spiritual good (John 15:5) = looking to God for divine enablement to grow spiritually, for provision
- 2) Trusting God to keep his promises, trusting everything God says in the Bible is right and true, trusting God is good, sovereign, and wise, trusting God's watchful care, trusting God for provision
- 3) Learning from God = bringing our questions to God, confessing our ignorance, and prayerfully meditating on Scripture to learn how we ought to live
- 4) Submitting to God = recognizing Jesus is Lord and we are not, submitting our thoughts, convictions, and opinions to the Bible...obeying the God of Scripture because we trust him

Faith = responding to God like a little child relates to a parent. We trust God and his word. We trust God is good. The cross is our proof. And because of that trust, we turn from our sins. Turn from rebellion to trust. This is humility.

Seasoned saints

Responding to God like a child isn't something we do once and move on from. It's something we do every day as a believer. We begin the Christian life in faith and repentance, and we live the Christian life in faith and repentance. The 75 year old with chronic pain or cancer desperately needs to cling to God like a child clings to a parent.

The kingdom is entered by humbly responding to God.

Point 2: A kingdom opposed by competing voices (18:5-6)

FCF: giving in to voices that oppose God

Little ones identified

"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me," – 18:5

Who is the child in question here? The next phrase gives the answer:

"but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin," – 18:6

The children here aren't all children in general. These children are "these little ones who believe in me." The literal child illustrated spiritual children. From here on out children = all who believe, whether child or adult.

Warning

Jesus issues a warning because his children are precious to him:

"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." – 18:6

Millstone = a large stone used to grind grain. Having a heavy stone tied to your neck while being dropped into the sea meant certain death. Execution by drowning is better than causing a believer to sin.

Audience warned

Jesus issues a warning to his disciples. He says, "Beware of leading my people astray!" You might think this odd. Why would Jesus direct this warning at his followers?

This is what we see in the NT: letters addressed to those considered to be believers, but the biblical author holds out the possibility that some who profess faith are actually unbelieving. In Jesus' case, Judas. Some who never knew Jesus thought they knew him (Matt 7:21-23). How can we be sure we're saved? Am I presently trusting Christ? Is there credible evidence that Jesus has changed my heart?

On the other hand, true believers can lead fellow believers astray. For example, Paul warned the Romans to be cautious in what they ate and drank (Rom 14:20-21). Drinking wine is permissible, but our drinking wine in front of some believers might cause them to copy us and violate their conscience (doing something that isn't wrong is wrong if you think it's wrong = deliberate disobedience). Drinking wine may also suggest that getting drunk isn't sin (drunkenness = legally impaired to drive). For those who used to party, my drinking may communicate you're free to get drunk again.

18:7 also suggests that destructive forces in the world are in view. A woe issued against the world = the world is the threat. In Jesus' day the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees were destructive. Jesus previously said, "*Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees*" (Matt 16:6).

Am I a stumbling block?

Am I a stumbling block? Does my conduct encourage believers to violate their conscience? Does my conduct encourage believers to break God's commands? Worse yet, do I defiantly break God's commands, encouraging other to follow?

Older children, you have greater responsibility! The example you set gives younger siblings an example to follow. Does your conduct encourage younger siblings to respond to God in childlike trust? Does your conduct encourage younger siblings to defy God's commands?

Beware of competing voices!

Beware of competing voices! In Jesus' day it was the Pharisees and Sadducees. For the Pharisees it was external religion. Follow our manmade rules and you're good with God. Matters of the heart aren't critical.

The Sadducees rejected basic biblical doctrines like resurrection of the dead, immortality of the soul, rewards and punishment after death, the existence of the spirit world, and God's interference with human affairs (= providence).

Sadducees

The Sadducees sound a lot like our culture. They did away with what they found unreasonable. They rejected much of God's revealed truth in the Bible. The same goes on today. Beware of voices that call out:

- 1) You can be whatever you want
- 2) You can do whatever you want

There's no moral foundation. No accountability. No place for truth. No place for the demands of the Lord God almighty. Jesus says respond to God with humility, not autonomy.

Pharisees

The Pharisees illustrate our day too. Manmade standards of righteousness separated from faith and repentance abound. In my generation the world pursued wealth (greed is good), fame, and nothing but a good time. Today the world finds purpose in giving back or paying it forward. Advertisers call out, buy our product because we clean beaches, we use recycled products, we donate meals, we support cancer research, we aid disaster victims. There's nothing wrong with these things, but the message remains, "righteousness is achieved by keeping manmade standards." You can be righteous apart from Christ. You can create your own standards for righteousness. You can cleanse your conscience through your own conduct.

Grandparents, this is the world of your grandchildren. We need compelling answers.

- 1) Empathize with the fallen condition they experience
- 2) Show them the reason for this fallen condition
- 3) Point them to Christ who undoes the fall
- 4) Point them to a hope outside their fallen selves

Jesus' compelling answer in context is the threat of hell.

The kingdom is opposed by competing voices.

Point 3: A kingdom opposed by temptations (18:7-9)

FCF: giving in to temptations that oppose God

Woe

"Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!" – 18:7

Woes pronounce judgment. The world, that evil framework that says God and his ways are irrelevant to human flourishing, odd, or even downright reprehensible, will come to an end.

Temptations

Temptation is necessary given the fallen state of affairs in our world. Those who tempt God's people will suffer wrath, unless they repent.

Temptation requires radical measures. Jesus isn't literal here. Cutting off your foot or hand, tearing out your eye = metaphors for doing whatever it takes to eliminate sin from your life.

Illustration

For me it was removing fraternity life from the throne and placing Jesus there. Choosing Jesus over partying life. What is it for you? What temptations keep you from humbly trusting Christ?

Hell

Jesus holds out the possibility some of his followers will wind up in hell. A place of eternal conscious torment. A punishment reflective of God's character (God's just!) and demanded by God's character. A severe punishment because of the severity of the offense: rebellion against the infinitely holy God. In Matthew, the picture is a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Weeping as at a loved one's funeral. Gnashing of teeth as in grinding one's teeth because of pain or suffering. A place to be avoided at all costs. Hell proves God isn't indifferent to evil. No crime will go unpunished. Every act of rape or kidnapping or murder or identity theft or verbal abuse or racism will be dealt with by God. All sins will be paid for. For the believer Christ suffered their punishment on the cross. For the unbeliever, their punishment is suffered in hell.

Jesus says fight temptations. Do whatever it takes to avoid hell. Give up whatever stands in the way of following Jesus! Take sin seriously! Not casually.

Temptations are inevitable

We can't escape temptation altogether. Some think spirituality is hiding away. Like monks in the monastery. Living in seclusion so what's outside won't come in. Like sin is some sort of germ or virus to fear. I've been guilty of this. Sometimes it's wisdom to escape, sometimes we cut things out for our spiritual health (corrupting friendships, internet – porn or compulsive shopping, alcoholic beverages, etc.) But retreat isn't enough. Because Jesus says be salt and light in your world.

We need to do battle! Because temptations exist. Because sin is inside us. We have to battle our own desires.

Temptations block kingdom entry.

Point 4: A kingdom that pursues its people (18:10-14)

FCF: indifference to the moral failure of God's people

Angels

Now Jesus issues a command: *"See that you do not despise one of these little ones"* (18:10). Then a reason: *"For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven"* (18:10).

Jesus appeals to angelic activity to ground our concern for fellow believers. Angels look out for Jesus' little ones, so shouldn't we look out for each other. In some way angels represent God's children in God's presence (*see the face of my Father*).

Jesus continues his argument:

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. – 18:12-13

The owner will go out to find one sheep gone astray. And when he finds it he will rejoice. Jesus concludes: "So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (18:14). God doesn't will for any of his little ones who believe in him to perish. Because of God's will, we must pursue those among us who go astray.

Rounding up the strays

Kingdom citizens pursue believers gone astray. And we rejoice when little ones return to the fold. How might we do this?

- 1) Know everyone among us
- 2) Keep note of who hasn't been attending
- 3) Pray for them
- 4) Make a phone call (if you're daring, an unexpected visit)
- 5) Urge them to come back
- 6) Rejoice if they do
- 7) Keep praying and maintain contact if they don't

We're of a kingdom that pursues its people.

Non-Christians

- The right way to relate to God is like a little child relates to a parent (dependent, trusting, learning, submitting).
- You're either listening to God or competing voices. Who are you listening to?
- Sin is something to fight, not enjoy. The wages of sin is death.
- The Father delights to rescue sinners. Mercy is available today. Christ's death is infinitely worthy to cover your rebellion, your guilt.
- Jesus won't turn away anyone who comes to him humbly.

Conclusion

A kingdom entered through humility. Relate to God like a little child to a parent.

A kingdom opposed by competing voices. Don't be a competing voice. Reject competing voices.

A kingdom opposed by temptations. Don't be a temptation. Do whatever it takes to defeat temptations.

A kingdom that pursues its people. Round up the strays.