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## ***Four Essential Attitudes for a Healthy Christian Community*** **An Attitude of Humility**

Matthew 18:1-6

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There's nothing quite like the birth of your first child. Now, I know some of you ladies are thinking, "Well, a lot you men know!" I'm talking about the experience together, as a team, because there's nothing quite like this journey from the moment you find out you are going to have a child, all the way through the ups and downs of the pregnancy, to that day when she starts to feel those labor pains. And you're not sure—is this it, or is this not it? Do we go to the hospital, do we not go to the hospital? You finally go into the hospital, and for the first time experience the delivery. And then there's this magical moment that can't really be put into words. Even though you know very clearly that what is in the womb of that mother is a child, it never fully sinks in until the child is born and you see that baby, and you realize this is a life—this is a person. That baby seems so vulnerable and so helpless. It is a moment of great celebration, but it is also a moment of great anxiety because you are thinking, "What do we do with this child? What kind of responsibility is this?" And there are some strange feelings that all come together at that moment.

Then there's the moment when you finally take that baby home, and it's the same thing: it's a celebration, but there is also quite a bit of anxiety. The baby seems so helpless and so vulnerable and you wonder, "Can we take care of this child?" And the responsibility all feels a little overwhelming. The first night that baby is put in the crib and makes the slightest sound, everybody is up checking on the baby, wondering: Is everything okay? Maybe we should stay up all night just to make sure everything is going to be okay. Then after the second child and the third child, that all starts to change. You know, by the third child, the baby is in there screaming, and you're saying, "I think it's your turn." "No, I think it's your turn." "Maybe let the baby scream for an hour, and if he is still screaming, we'll go in."

But through the process, the baby learns to walk and talk, and you go through all the developmental stages. You remember how it was when that first baby was little. Whenever its rattle fell on the floor you'd sterilize it three times, or else you just threw it away because it might be germ. By the third kid, they were drinking out of the dog's water dish and eating the chicken bone out of the garbage, and it all just tends to balance out.

You were convinced that your child was the most brilliant child who had ever lived. How many of you remember feeling absolutely convinced that your oldest child was strong-willed, and so you went out and bought Dr. Dobson's book on the strong-willed child? And eventually you figured out, well, they are *all* that way—that's just what a child is.

But through that process, as you go through the different stages, you understand immediately that this is a tremendous responsibility. In many ways, you, as a parent, choose to die to yourself in order to parent this child. It is a necessary part of the process. You also then begin to wrestle with the need to model "right living" before that child. Oftentimes God uses that as a time when we examine our own lives and say, "I need to make some changes. I need to live differently."

We also understand the need for creating a healthy environment, so you get into issues of protection and discipline and what is necessary at home in order to provide a good, healthy environment for growth. And then, because we are not perfect, you are going to get into issues of forgiveness and reconciliation that is a part of being a family. Well, of course, ultimately, the goal is for that infant to grow to maturity, and there is no greater thrill for a parent than to see a child really understand his or her calling from God and really to walk in God's ways.

That same process is true in the spiritual family. Jesus brings spiritual infants to us, as a family, and He gives us the responsibility to care for them and to raise them, that they might ultimately be presented complete in Christ. If we are going to be successful in our mission, if we are really going to present people complete, we must understand what is necessary to create a healthy environment—a healthy Christian community where these “infants” can be raised to maturity.

The process in the spiritual family is very much the same as in your family at home. There is a need, first, to just accept the responsibility and, in an attitude of humility, be willing to receive the responsibility for raising these children. Then we have to deal with issues of modeling and “right living” before these spiritual infants, that they might understand what the Christian life looks like lived out. We do have to deal with issues of protection and discipline in order to maintain a healthy environment for spiritual infants. And we do have to deal with issues of reconciliation and forgiveness.

We are going to talk in the following series about *four essential attitudes* that are necessary in order to create a healthy Christian community so that these spiritual infants can grow to maturity, thereby accomplishing our mission. These four attitudes are discussed by Jesus in Matthew 18, and that is what we will be using for our text. To fully understand what is happening in Matthew 18, I need to give you a little bit of background.

Jesus had many followers, but about halfway through his public ministry, he pulled twelve of those followers out and made them a special group – disciples. We often refer to them as the apostles. These are men Jesus would pour his life into, and they would become the leaders of the New Testament Church. Now there is always a risk whenever we do that or whenever God does that. We are all very prone toward pride—that was the sin which caused Satan to be thrown out of heaven. That was the sin in the Garden of Eden, and that is the core of every sin we ever commit against God. It is ultimately a sin of pride—saying that we are going to do it our way, rather than God’s way.

Well, that is so prone within us that anytime something like that happens—where Jesus pulled his disciples out and said, “You’re going to be my special group”—there’s a tendency to start to let pride take over. You add to that the fact that Jesus was working great miracles, and He was doing great things through these men, such as healing the lame, giving sight to the blind, casting out demons. They were demonstrating tremendous power. It was the power that Jesus was displaying through them; but, in the process of that, people didn’t know what to make of them, and they were quite impressed by all of it. The disciples began to think that maybe they really were *something*.

Therefore, when we read through the Gospels, there is a common discussion that takes place among the disciples, and that is the discussion of “which one of us is the greatest in the Kingdom?” As a matter of fact, it occurs quite often. When they were talking about who was the greatest in the Kingdom, they were not thinking that it might be somebody *out there*. They

had narrowed it down to twelve, and they wanted to know, among the twelve, who was the greatest in the Kingdom.

For example, in John 13 Jesus gathers the disciples into the Upper Room. This is the last real discussion and meal they are going to have together before Jesus is to be arrested and crucified the next day, so it is a very important time. The text tells us that Jesus gathered the disciples together, and what was customary in that day is that someone would wash the others' feet because they would be quite dusty from the journey. The problem was that the disciples were arguing about who was greatest in the Kingdom, and not one of them was willing to disqualify himself by stooping to wash feet. So Jesus picked up the towel and filled a basin with water and began to wash their feet Himself. Now, you talk about sticking the dagger in and twisting it – that is what Jesus did. I'm sure they were convicted to the inner part of their soul as they realized, once again, they had blown it by focusing so much on who is greatest in the Kingdom.

Whenever our thoughts are on who is greatest in the Kingdom, it becomes a competition as we compare ourselves with one another. And, rather than creating an environment of compassion and love that is suitable for raising a spiritual infant, we create an environment of competition, which is the disaster for spiritual growth. Imagine what it would be like if a mother and father were constantly competing with one another in trying to raise that child. That would not be a healthy environment for growth. This idea of who is greatest in the Kingdom does not promote a healthy environment for spiritual growth, as well.

There is another occasion in Matthew 20 where the mother of James and John was along with them and you get the feeling that they were maybe prodding her to come along. But she went to Jesus and said, "Jesus, I was wondering if my two boys could maybe be the greatest in the Kingdom?" So that was a common theme they must have thought about often. In this particular incident (Matthew 18) we know from Mark's account (Mark 9) that Jesus and the disciples were walking from one place to another and apparently some had lagged behind and were discussing who was the greatest in the Kingdom. When they finally stopped and re-gathered, Jesus said to them, "Hey, men, what were you just talking about?" And Mark tells us nobody said a word because they had been discussing who was greatest in the Kingdom. Jesus knew what they had been talking about, and He said, "Men, when are you going to learn? If you want to be first in the Kingdom, you have to become a servant of all."

The disciples probably shook the cobwebs out of their heads and thought about that for a minute, but they still did not get it, which precipitated the question addressed here in Matthew 18. "Jesus, who, then, is the greatest in the Kingdom?" That launches Jesus into this discussion which we are going to talk about. Matthew 18:1: "At that time, the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who, then, is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?'" Jesus offers them an object lesson. He called a child to himself and sat the child before them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Pretty strong words. What does Jesus mean by converted? It is a word that means to change your mind or to change your thinking. And Jesus says, "Unless you change your thinking and think differently, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven." As a matter of fact, in the Greek it is a double negative, which means it actually reads "you shall never, no, never enter My Kingdom."

You see, what they were arguing about is who is going to be the star of the team; and what Jesus said is, "Men, until you change your thinking, you will never be the star of the team.

Not only will you not be first string, but you will not even make the team.” So those are pretty strong words.

Jesus said we must be converted and become like a child. What are the attributes or the characteristics of a child that Jesus is wanting to identify? In the first century, a child had no status at all. The teachers had a list of people who had no status in the community, and on the list were the deaf, the dumb, the weak-minded, the blind, and children. Now, I understand that is not a very politically-correct list, but that was *their* list, and children were on that list. That is not to say that parents didn't love their children. I'm sure they loved them very much, but the children had no position and no status. They were totally dependent upon their parents, which was really the world of that child.

Now, that's not that hard to understand. If you come to church with a three year-old child and bring him or her out into the foyer, that child doesn't say, "I wonder if I'm the greatest three year-old in church today?" That is just not what they think about at all – it isn't in their mind. They aren't thinking, "I wonder if that kid's dad makes more money than my dad?" or "I wonder if that kid arrived here in an SUV—I had to come in a station wagon" or "I wonder if his clothes look better than my clothes?" Kids don't really enter into that. In fact, they are probably oblivious to that whole way of thinking. They just have this family relationship and they are totally dependent upon their relationship with Mom and Dad.

What Jesus is addressing with the disciples is really the same thing. He wants them to understand that this prideful attitude will keep you from the Kingdom, because "in order to enter My Kingdom, you have to die to yourself; you have to realize you are totally dependent on Me." It is only through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross – His shed blood – that you enter the Kingdom. Everyone enters the Kingdom the same way. Nobody performs better; nobody deserves it more. We all enter the same way, and that is an act of total humility and total dependence. God is saying, "Like a child, I want you to know that you enter totally dependent upon Me; and therefore, you just need to look to Me and seek to be obedient to whatever I ask you to do." It is not a competition—I am not to compare myself with everybody else. It's just me and my Heavenly Daddy, and I am to ask Him, "What do you want me to do?" The attitude Jesus is going after is an attitude of humility, and that is exactly what He says in verse 4: "Whoever, then, humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven."

Humility is a very difficult thing to measure in your own life, because about the time you've concluded that you are really humble, you probably are not anymore. How do I really know if I have this quality? Well, humility is not thinking low of yourself. It's not as if somebody comes along and says, "Boy, that was a really nice job you did on that song," and you say, "Oh, it's nothing – I'm just kind of a worm." Humility is not a pebble-kicking thing. That attitude is not humility, because what we are wanting back out of that statement is for someone to say, "Oh, no, you really *are* great!" That shows an attitude motivated by pride. Humility is really not thinking about ourselves at all, and that is what Jesus is saying. A child is dependent upon the parent, and he is really not thinking about a comparison with other children. Jesus says that we, as spiritual children, come on the basis of God's grace and we should just be thinking about God and our calling and our obedience. It isn't a competition with anybody else.

Well, that's easier said than done, because we live in a culture that makes it very difficult to remain humble. Let me see if I can illustrate that. Let us imagine that there is a

lady out in the hallway with a bucket collecting for the Red Cross. I decide I would like to give some money to the Red Cross, so I invite four volunteers to come up on stage. I would give one volunteer a dollar; another volunteer I would give five dollars and to another I would give ten dollars. But to the fourth volunteer I give one hundred dollars. Then I would say, “Now, I want all four of you to walk up the aisle out into the hallway, put the money that I just gave you in the bucket, come back, and be seated.” When those four people walk out of this auditorium, are you going to look at the hundred-dollar guy and say, “Man, he is so much greater than the one dollar guy”? No, you aren’t going to think that way at all. There is going to be no comparison because they didn’t perform or earn the money. They simply received a gift and, being obedient, they put it in the bucket, came back and sat down. There is nothing at all more impressive about the hundred-dollar guy than the one-dollar guy.

The problem is not going to be here in the auditorium because we have a proper perspective. We’re going to call it a “Kingdom perspective.” The problem is going to be out there in the foyer. Do you know what’s going to happen out there? The one-dollar person comes along and puts a dollar in the bucket, and the lady says, “Why, thank you very much.” The five-dollar person comes along and puts the five dollars in the bucket, and she says, “Thank *you* very much!” The ten-dollar person comes along, and she says, “Well, thank you *very, very* much!” But when the hundred-dollar person comes along, she says, “Oh, thank you *so* much—you are *so* generous! Fred, come over here and look at what this person put in the bucket!” And what she is saying is, “Man, you are great!” And when you hear that enough, you start to think, “Well, maybe I am. You know, maybe I am pretty generous... maybe that was pretty great.” You see, the problem is the perception out there begins to mess with our head, and pretty soon we start to think that maybe it’s true.

When we come into the Kingdom, we all come into the Kingdom the same way—we all come in on level ground. And what happens is, as we look to our Heavenly Daddy to be obedient, He simply says, “This is *your* assignment: I’d like you to obey.” To another he says, “This is *your* assignment: I’d like you to obey,” and to another He says, “This is *your* assignment: I’d like you to obey.” And ultimately, it’s not about us. It’s not about our performance. It’s not about greater or lesser – it is simply being obedient to our assignment. The problem is that some of those assignments are behind the scenes; and some of those assignments don’t get noticed very much; and some of those assignments are up here in the lights. And what starts to happen is that people in the lights begin to get a little too much attention, and start to say, “Hmm...” And you start to hear those voices. I get this all the time. I may be out with a pastor friend of mine, and he pastors a church of 30 people, and somehow the discussion gets around to the topic of: “How many people are in *your* church? Oh, 30 people? That’s very nice, Pastor.” “How many people in *your* church?” “Wow!” And then you hear, “You’re great! You are great!” And if you hear that enough, you start to think, “Well, you know...maybe so.”

But all of a sudden, you start to lose Kingdom perspective, and you start to think, “I wonder who is greatest in the Kingdom.” It becomes a competition, and those people who have those kinds of gifts start to become like those disciples, and they start to think among themselves, “I wonder who is greatest in the Kingdom.” Now it is no longer an environment of compassion; it is an environment of competition. And at the other end of that are those people who no longer think highly of their calling, and that is just as much a sin. They are thinking, “What I’m called to is really no big deal—it really doesn’t matter.” And suddenly we have this very negative perspective in the Kingdom. That is why it is so hard to maintain this attitude of humility, where we really understand our calling and our need to be obedient to create the

environment God has called us to in order to raise “spiritual infants.” Look at what He says in verse 5: “And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me.”

So the first thing He is dealing with is our own humility – our understanding of how we entered into the Kingdom of God, and our responsibility before God to be obedient to our calling. But now He is saying that once that environment has been established, then you are ready to receive one of these spiritual infants that He is going to place in your midst in order to grow them to maturity in Christ. The word *receive* is an interesting word. It means not just to tolerate – not just to put up with. When the doctor handed you your first child, did you think, “Oh, this is the kid I have to tolerate ... this is the kid I’m going to have to put up with.” No, the word *receive* means to reach out and to embrace—to take into yourself. In a sense, you are taking ownership and saying, “This is my child, and I’m going to love this child. I’m going to sacrifice and I’m going to raise this child.” That is the meaning of this word—received.

Jesus is saying that when we become people of humility, then we are ready to receive the spiritual infants He puts in our spiritual family. As a matter of fact, He uses pretty strong terminology. He says, “When you receive them, you are receiving Me.” The opposite would then be true: “When you reject them, then you are rejecting Me.”

Now I love kids, but I have to admit that sometimes they can try my patience {not necessarily my own kids, of course, because they are so perfect} – but other people’s children. But the reality is that the child is a child—they are not mature. They don’t always know how to act. They don’t always know what to say. Sometimes they need their nose wiped; sometimes they need a diaper changed; sometimes they are irritating; sometimes they are disobedient, and that’s just part of the life of raising a child. We are trying to get them to maturity.

I happen to be married to a “screaming-child magnet.” We have just concluded, together as a couple, that somehow Patti has become a screaming-child magnet, so wherever we go, we always have a screaming child next to us. We can go to the nicest restaurant to eat, and you can guarantee that there will be a screaming, food-throwing, fit-throwing child right next to us throughout our meal. We have just come to expect that.

A couple years ago, Patti and I went to a beautiful performance at the Lied Center around Christmas time. We had great seats, about six rows from the front, right in the middle. We were sitting there waiting for the performance to begin, and we could hear “it” coming up the aisle. Here came a lady with a screaming kid. There was no reason for her to even look at her ticket stub, because I could just stand up and say, “I’m sure your seat is right here by us.” And it was!

Now in this case, Patti had put me between herself and the child as sort of a buffer. This kid was so small that he couldn’t even hold the spring-loaded seat down. Why he was here at this “hoity-toity” expensive event at the Lied Center, I don’t know, but he was clueless to the stage. He turned around and faced the back direction, crawled all over, cried and fussed and carried on. When he got tired of crawling on his mom, he started crawling on me. If I wasn’t so Spirit-filled, I probably would have said something. But it was just one of those moments. And finally at halftime, they left and went home. (I understand it’s not technically halftime—it’s intermission.)

That is just the way it seems to go with us as a couple, but, in reality, that’s the way kids are. They can fuss and they can scream, and they sometimes can be very irritating. But you

know what? That is the way spiritual babies are, too. Spiritual babies really don't know how to talk and they don't know how to act. They don't know what they are supposed to do. And sometimes they come with all kinds of baggage and habits that make them somewhat irritating. They fuss, and they whine, and they go through a growth process. Sometimes that is a very difficult thing, and they require a lot of patience. As a matter of fact, some of those things can last for a long time, and it is necessary to be patient with them to raise them to spiritual maturity.

But do you want to know something? There was a time when you came into the Kingdom just that very same way. You came into the Kingdom as a spiritual infant, and you had a spiritually-runny nose, and you needed your diaper changed. You were fussy and whiny and immature, and you didn't know how to talk or how to act. And somebody reached out with love, and they received you and raised you to the point where you could understand what it means to have a relationship with God. Jesus is saying that we all enter the Kingdom that way. When we understand that and remember how we entered the Kingdom, we are ready to receive others that way.

Becky Pippert tells a wonderful, true story about something that happened in a church in the Pacific Northwest years ago. It was a very stately, very traditional, very straight-laced church, but they decided they wanted to have a ministry into the college campus that was right across the street. So they put out a bunch of flyers and invited people to come to church. And, lo and behold, a college student by the name of Bill took them up on their offer. Bill was a hippie. He had just trusted Christ as Savior and he saw the sign and thought, "Hey, I'll go to church!" Bill had long, wild hair, a T-shirt, bell-bottom jeans, and no shoes. Bill didn't think about dressing any differently when he entered the church service.

They were already in the middle of the service when Bill began to walk down the aisle, looking for a place to sit, but there was no place. He was starting to make a little bit of a commotion trying to find a seat and you could feel the tension as the people began to wonder who he was and what he was doing in their church. Finally, Bill got clear up to the front and still there were no seats. He didn't know what to do, so he simply crossed his legs and plopped down on the carpet, right at the front of the aisle.

Well, by that time you could have cut the tension with a knife. The pastor completely stopped, and everything was at a standstill. As Becky Pippert tells the story, there is an elderly, very elegant, well-dressed, very proper, older deacon in the back who suddenly stands up. He walks with a limp. He has a cane, and you can hear his hard shoes and his cane clicking as he begins to walk down the aisle. Everybody in the congregation is thinking to themselves, "You cannot blame this elderly deacon for what he is about to do—how could he possibly understand how a situation like that could happen in his church?" So they have already made up their mind what is going to happen, and everybody just waits for the moment. And he works his way up to the front, but when he gets to the front, the most unexpected thing happens. He takes his cane and he sets it on the ground. He crosses his legs, and with much effort and pain, he sits down, cross-legged, right next to Bill – so that Bill wouldn't have to sit there by himself. And there he remained the entire service.

You see, those people are great in the Kingdom. Somehow that elderly man never forgot how he had entered the Kingdom. At one time he had entered the Kingdom as a spiritual infant, and he needed love and care and attention.

When I pastored in Broken Bow, I always knew that if somebody walked through the doors of our church – no matter how they looked; no matter how they were dressed; no matter how they smelled – it really didn't matter. There were always certain families in the church that I could count on who would accept them, who would receive them, and who would love them. I think of Willard and Eleanor, Clifford and Darlene, Bob and Bonnie, Tom and Bonnie. These were people who I knew would be there, and by the end of that morning they would have invited them out for lunch and said to them, basically, "You can be part of our family."

It has been a wonderful experience to be here in Lincoln, and I have to say we have many of those families here. God has blessed this church with many of you who understand that, and you do that diligently. You have not forgotten how you entered the Kingdom; and because you have maintained that spirit of humility, you reach out your arms to those spiritual babies in our midst. Sometimes they try our patience, and sometimes they have a lot of baggage, and sometimes they can be kind of irritating—just like you were when you came in. But we must continue to cultivate that spirit more and more. That is absolutely essential to accomplishing our mission.

Jesus is very serious about this topic. Look at what He says in verse 6: "But whoever causes one of these little ones {*meaning these new believers – these spiritual infants*} who believe in me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea." Those are pretty strong words. The word Jesus uses here for a stumbling block is a word that means a roadblock. It means that Jesus sets this spiritual infant in this spiritual family, and this infant begins down the path that Jesus intended. But because someone has forgotten how they entered the Kingdom, and because pride has replaced humility and now they have a spirit of judgmentalism instead of a spirit of grace, they basically block the growth of this new believer. They get off track and go a different direction, and Jesus says, "You know, I'd rather you put a millstone, a giant grinding stone, around your neck and drown in the sea, than do that to one of my children." Jesus takes his spiritual babies very seriously, and He is saying, "If I receive them, I expect you to receive them."

There's a poem by Ruth Caulkin that I think about often. Listen to what she says:

You know, Lord, how I serve you with great emotional fervor in the limelight.  
You know how eagerly I speak for You at a women's club.  
You know how I effervesce when I promote a fellowship group.  
You know my genuine enthusiasm at a Bible study.

But how would I react, I wonder, if you pointed to a basin of water,  
You asked me to wash the callused feet of a bent and wrinkled old woman,  
day after day, month after month,  
in a room where nobody saw and nobody knew.

That's humility.

I can tell you that humility doesn't happen under these lights. It happens in those moments when nobody is watching and nobody sees. I knew a woman like that in Broken Bow. This woman had as good of leadership skills as anyone I have known. She was a dynamic leader; and because of that, she spent much time "under the lights." People understood her giftedness, and she was put in positions where she very easily could have believed she was great in the Kingdom. Her name was Bonnie. But there was another side to Bonnie. We had a guy in our church, JD, who was in his mid 50's. He had never been married and lacked some social skills,

but he was just as faithful as clockwork in coming to church. Nobody really knew the conditions JD was living in, until he got sick one time. Bonnie went to see how he was doing and she was appalled at the filth in his house. She called me and I went over. You can't even imagine it. The sheets were brown because they hadn't been washed in years. The toilet bowl was so crusted shut that there was only a tiny hole; everything else was so hard that you couldn't chip it with a hammer and a chisel. The bathtub was four or five inches thick of stuff and the only place you could see any white porcelain was right under the faucet where the water dripped. The entire house was this way and it was appalling.

So Bonnie gathered a bunch of people, and they took off to clean his house. They threw out the sheets and the towels. They couldn't even clean the toilet, so they had to take it off and put a new one in. They cleaned the tub. They made the whole house look as clean and neat as it could possibly look, and you have never seen such a beautiful smile as JD had – he just glowed. He glowed, not just because he was getting a clean house, but because he was being loved. People were showing they loved him and cared about him, and they accepted him as he was. But, you know, that story went on, and most people didn't know this. After that initial cleaning, every week Bonnie would go to his house. She would change the bed linens. She would wash his towels and his clothes. She would do his dishes and would clean the whole house. Every week, very quietly, Bonnie would take care of JD's house.

Those are the people who are great in the Kingdom—those people who understand how they entered the Kingdom and, in humility, receive others with the same love and compassion that they received.

In the great, old hymn, *Softly and Tenderly, Jesus is Calling*, the main thrust of the hymn is for sinners to come home to Jesus. When these sinners come home to Jesus, He places them in a spiritual home. So, in a sense, when we are singing, “softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling,” it is not just for that sinner to come home to Jesus. It is calling for that sinner to come home to his spiritual family. He will be loved. He will be accepted. He will be received, because there was a time in our lives when that is what we all needed.