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What Is a Great Parent

Matthew 18:1-6

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When my wife Lisa and I had our first child, it was a real interesting point in our lives with a lot going on. I was finishing seminary. Rachel, our daughter, came two weeks early. You can probably identify, if you have kids, there's just a lot going through your mind as you are thinking about and you are processing what it's going to be like to be a father or to be a mother.

But I remember on that day when Rachel came, it was not quite what we were expecting. We rushed to the hospital and all the things that go into having a child. Then finally came that moment that you've been anticipating but you just don't know what it's going to be like, when you're finally holding that little person in your arms for the very first time. You look into that little face and you recognize how precious they are. Maybe also you begin to think anew, "*Lord, I want to do this right.*" I just remember that sense of responsibility kind of falling on me and just recognizing "*there's a lot going on here and I want to do it right.*"

In a way, what I remember thinking about is "*I want to be a great dad*", not in an egotistical way, but "*I want to do right by her. I want to help her in walking in God's ways. I want to teach her in a way that really is going to help her in following her path with God, in recognizing that I only get one shot.*" There are no do-overs, are there? Maybe you can relate to that, the sense that we have been entrusted with these wonderful little lives, and the desire in our hearts is we just don't want to mess this up.

We want to be a great mom; we want to be a great dad; we want to be a great grandparent; a great aunt or a great uncle. We want what we do and what we say and what we communicate to our child to matter. That's a word that we're going to wrestle with this morning. What does that look like? What does it mean to be a great mom, to be a great dad, a great grandparent, a great aunt or a great uncle? And you get all of this in a mere 20 minutes.

There's a passage in the Bible I'd like you to turn to where Jesus addresses a similar question. It's found in Matthew 18.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. "And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me." (*NASB, Matthew 18:1-5)

This week Jesus is probably in Capernaum, kind of His home base for His ministry. The disciples come to Him with a question--a question that probably they've been discussing or wrestling with themselves: "*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*" I believe Jesus gives a three-part answer to that question.

I wish this morning we had time to really dig into all that Jesus is saying, because it's a fascinating passage. But I want to kind of give you the three points I think Jesus is making when He answers this question: "*Who is the greatest?*" The first thing He says is that you have to be converted and become like children. That word "converted" has the idea of turning; that I was walking in one direction and I turn and I go a new direction in my life. In fact, this verse, this reference sounds an awful lot like what Jesus said in John chapter 3, that you have to be converted and become like little children. Do you remember that discussion He had with Nicodemus in John 3, where Nicodemus is confused about what Jesus is saying as Jesus says, "*You must be reborn; you must be born again to be a part of the kingdom*"?

I think Jesus is saying that initial starting point of even to enter the kingdom of God, it's turning from the direction we're going with our life and turning to Jesus. I think He is talking about that point in time, that initial decision: *I'm choosing to trust Christ*. It's a decision that every person has to make on their own. Every child that was up here and dedicated will have to make that decision in their own life, a decision to turn to Christ with childlike faith.

But then He goes on, "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Jesus goes on and I believe it's a progression. It's not just an initial decision in turning; it's a continual walking and getting to know God and humbling ourselves, to recognize that He is God, that I am not, and recognizing that I am not in control.

I think that's one of the reasons why Jesus calls a child and places him before the disciples. What Jesus was illustrating with a child is that humble presence. You know, a child has great value, doesn't he or she? But a child doesn't bring a lot to the table in what they contribute. They have probably little achievement in their life. They don't have the ability to go out and get a job and earn a living. They're dependent on us. I think that's why it's a beautiful picture of us in relationship with God; that we are learning to trust Him. We are learning to depend on Him. We are learning to humbly walk with our God.

But then I think it progresses further as we continue to walk and as we continue to identify with God's value system. It's also developing a heart for others. Notice what He says, "And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me." Jesus is talking about developing a heart for the people around us. It's developing a heart for people such as are in Africa, who are dying of AIDS, as we see children orphaned, as we see children in great need. He's talking about that when we receive them, when we have a heart for others, we in fact have a heart for Jesus.

Donn Stoner likes to say a statement that I think really hits this. He talks about that we as people, we need to develop a sense of being on mission. That really helps capture what Jesus is saying, that we have to be on mission and we have to grow in a sense of caring for others, the people who are in great spiritual, physical need.

Now it's easy to apply that to our setting, the church. But I think we can also apply it to our little ones, to our children. What it means to be a great mom or a great dad, a great grandparent, a great aunt or an uncle, to have a great influence on a child's life, it's helping that child wrestle through these same things. It's helping a child grow in the sense of knowing that they need Christ, that they need Jesus, and helping that promise in making that decision to follow Jesus. And then helping them in that progression of learning to humbly walk with God, to recognize that He is God and I am not and learning that dependence on Him and trusting Him, and then helping a child learn to develop a passion for others, a passion for other people.

You know, one of the best ways I think we do that in teaching a child is really by what we're modeling, by what we are doing in our own lives. It's always interesting to me to talk to people that don't seem to get the connection, that it just doesn't work to say to my child, "*Don't cheat; always tell the truth.*" These things are important. And then we turn around and cheat on our taxes or we're dishonest about a transaction. Which one do we think more aptly teaches what we're trying to get our child to understand - the words or our actions?

I think anybody that interacts with children at all understands what I'm modeling, my actions speak much louder than words. So we need to be about modeling this for our kids, that they would understand this is the kingdom's value system; this is God's value system. This is what Jesus would have them understand, what makes a great person in the kingdom.

But it's interesting what Jesus then goes on to say. Imagine with me for just a second that it's *your* child with Jesus, that it's your child that Jesus has brought amongst the disciples; that it's your child that Jesus is using as an example of the kingdom value system. Jesus words even make more sense to us of how important this is. Look at verse 6:

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."

Jesus says, "*If anyone causes one of these little ones to stumble....*" That word *stumble* is interesting. If you have an NIV, I believe it says **if you cause one to sin**. That's an unfortunate translation of the word. That word is where we get our English word "to scandalize." It really has the idea to trip up somebody. It has the idea that we place something in their path that trips them up and they fall.

What Jesus is connecting and giving us a caution to is: God cares about these little ones and He doesn't want anything to trip them up that would damage or cause them not to believe in Jesus, to turn to unbelief. Now in certain contexts I think that's easy to understand.

You can think of a college professor who has the new freshman students in his class, who in his heart has set out that he's going to challenge and try to shake the faith of the new students. So you have a college student that comes into that setting and they're feeling their way; they're getting hit with a lot of things. All of a sudden this person that they look up to, this professor, starts to hammer on Christianity. It's easy to see where this verse applies to them, that they're purposely putting a stumbling block in that young person's life. But could a stumbling block be more subtle than that? Could it even be something that we don't even realize in how we're living, that we're communicating a different value system than what Jesus is talking about?

You know one of the things that I observe, and I observe this in my own life and I observe it in others' lives, it's this pull to parent the way the world says to parent: that my job is to make my child happy; my job is to get my child all the things that they want. Yet that's not God's value system. My job is to help my child process what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Sometimes I think the baggage in our own lives that we bring into this new relationship can be a *tripping up of our child*. Now let me give you an example. One of the things that I think we have to help a child process and understand is what it means to have a great faith relationship with Jesus Christ, that I don't come by own merit, that God values me and loves me just as I am.

We can make the mistake of conveying a different value system, one that is we reward and encourage achievement over anything else. Let me ask you, this is maybe how it plays out. Are you okay if your child tries their best and they get C's? Or are you not happy until they get A's? See, what is being communicated there? I understand and I know that I want my child to do their best, and I'm sure you share that. But I can go too far and be imbalanced: that I care more about the achievement than anything else and that I'm driving my kids to always achieve more and more and more if they're going to receive my love. They need to know that I love them regardless, as God loves me.

Why I think it can be a tripping point is because I've met people who are now adults who want nothing to do with God, want nothing to do with Christianity, because they've given up: *I don't want to jump through those hoops anymore. I don't want to try to please this angry God--just like I don't want to have to please a parent anymore that just demanded more and more and more*. What lies at the heart of it is similar to wanting the new car and the fantastic home, because it makes us feel like we've achieved something. This value we pass on and we force this insecurity on to our kids; that they have to achieve in order to make us look good.

Believe me, I understand nobody's perfect. I make lots and lots of mistakes. I am growing to understand that my job, if I want to be a great dad, I need to help my kids learn God's value system and to do that with all the grace and the love that He gives me.

I would encourage you this morning if it is in your heart and I believe that most of us want to be a great mom, a great dad, a great grandparent, or a great aunt or an uncle, or in any way we have a relationship with a child, we want to do it in a great way, that we key in on helping that child understand what a relationship with God looks like, that we help them in growing to walk humbly with their God. We model and we help them understand that God has a heart for others and wants to see others come to know Him. We recognize God's value system and we need to teach that system to our kids.

You know, we've been having this great series on heaven, but sometimes I still think we think we are going to get to heaven and the question that Jesus is going to ask us is: *Did you get the kids to soccer practice on time? Did you get them involved in a lot of stuff?* I don't think that's what He's going to ask us. I think what He's going to ask us, as people that have an influence in a child's life, is: *Did you teach and communicate and live out My value system before that child?*

Let's pray together:

Father, I just confess before You and all the people here present that I mess up a lot, that I don't always do this right, and the stuff in my life sometimes peeks through. So Father, I pray for the strength and the insight and the wisdom to communicate and to share and model a different value system than the world's to my own children. I pray for every person here, that they would be empowered to do the same, that we would wrestle through it, as people with influence in children's lives, our own value system, our own things that we're communicating, and that the passion of our lives would be to see that precious life, that precious young life that we have influenced, to grow in an incredible knowledge of You and to see modeled before them a relationship with You. So we lift everybody in this room that has this influence on a child's life, that we would exalt You to Your praise and Your glory through how we influence a child's life, in Your Son's name, Amen.