

# Christ's Teaching Regarding Little Children

*Text: Matthew 18:1-20; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 27*

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Let us read Matthew 18:1–20. This portion of God's Word, rich and sobering, deals with Christ's regard for little children and includes vital teaching on humility, faith, offences, discipline, and the church. Alongside it, we consider Lord's Day 27 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, especially Question and Answer 74, which declares: "Are infants also to be baptized? Yes; for since they, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them no less than to the adult, they must therefore by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church, and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers, as was done in the old covenant or testament by circumcision, instead of which baptism is instituted in the new covenant."

The great truth in this sermon is Christ's teaching regarding little children. Many Baptists reject Old Testament testimony regarding believers and their seed—texts like Genesis 17, Psalm 105, and Isaiah 59. But we will satisfy their request for "New Testament only" proof and demonstrate from Matthew 18 alone what Jesus teaches about little children—those of believers in the covenant of grace.

## The Meaning of Little Children

We must first understand what Scripture means by "little children." Matthew 18 does not merely refer to "children" in general, but more specifically to "little children"—the Greek uses a diminutive form. Verses 2–5 use the word four times. Verses 6, 10, and 14 use "little ones," a different Greek term meaning micro—tiny, young ones.

In verse 2, Jesus calls a little child to Himself and sets him in the midst of the disciples. The child is old enough to understand the call and walk to Christ, but young enough to be lifted up and set down in their midst. He's likely about 2–5 years old. The word for "little children" in Matthew 19:13, the very next chapter, is the same. The parallel passage in Luke 18:15 uses the word "infants"—*brephos*. Thus, "little children" is a broad term including infants.

The next question is: *whose* children? Matthew 18 does not speak about all children indiscriminately. It does not refer to the children of unbelievers. These are children of *believers*, Christ's disciples, those following Jesus—*covenant* children. Many falsely claim that Jesus loves and died for *all* little children. This is the heresy of Pelagianism, embraced by many Baptists and liberal theologians. It leads to the unbiblical view that all children dying before an arbitrary "age of accountability" go to heaven.

But the Word of God contradicts this. "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" (Rom. 9:13). God hated Esau from eternity, in the womb, and throughout his life. I Corinthians 7:14 declares the children of believers "holy," and the children of unbelievers "unclean." The catechism says children of believers "must... be distinguished from the children of unbelievers." Reformed doctrine rejects sentimentalism and insists on divine revelation as the standard.

### **The Privileges of Little Children**

Matthew 18 lists the privileges of little children—not merely children, but little children of believers, true covenant seed. First, they are in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus sets a little child in their midst and says, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven... the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (vv. 3-4). The child exemplifies kingdom citizenship, which means *he possesses it*. Jesus didn't set him forth as a mere picture but as a *participant* in the Kingdom. To be in the kingdom means Jesus is your King—therefore, also your Prophet and Priest. You are ruled by His Word and Spirit and obey Him as a willing subject.

Second, verse 10 teaches that the angels of these little ones "do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven." These children have not just a guardian angel, but *many*. At least one is always in heaven, beholding the face of the Father.

Third, they are united to Jesus Christ. Verse 5: "Whoso shall receive one such little child in my name *receiveth me*." That means Christ dwells in them. The child belongs to Him.

Fourth, they are Christ's sheep. Verse 12-14: "If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray... he rejoiceth more of that sheep... Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that *one of these little ones* should perish." These are young sheep—lambs. Christ is their Shepherd.

Fifth, these little children are the objects of God's saving will: "It is *not* the will of your Father which is in heaven that *one of these little ones* should perish" (v. 14). Some twist this verse to support the well-meant offer and a failed desire of God. But Jesus speaks not of a hypothetical will, but the *effective* will of the sovereign God. These are elect children, and *not one of them perishes*. The Son of Man comes and saves every last one of them (v. 11).

Sixth, there is terrible punishment for those who cause them to stumble. Verse 6: "Whoso shall offend one of these little ones... it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned." Christ will judge those who corrupt children with lies about gender, evolution, or false religion. Teachers, broadcasters, activists—anyone who leads covenant children into sin—will face divine justice.

Seventh, they have the gift of faith. Verse 6 speaks of "these little ones *which believe in me*." Not "which might believe" someday, but "*which believe*" already. This destroys Baptist theology. These children believe *now*. They have the Spirit and faith implanted in infancy, just like John the Baptist in the womb, or Timothy who from a child knew the Scriptures.

Eighth, they possess humility. Verse 4: "Whosoever shall *humble* himself as this little child, the same is greatest." The little child obeyed when called by Jesus. He came, let Jesus set him in their midst, and quietly submitted.

We do not see these truths unless we're taught of God. The privileges of covenant children are real. This is not sentimentalism; it is sound, biblical doctrine.

## **The Blessing of Little Children**

We now turn to the next chapter, Matthew 19:13–15, and the parallel passages in Mark 10 and Luke 18. These "little children" (same word as in Matthew 18) are brought to Jesus.

He takes them in His arms, fulfilling Isaiah 40, where the Good Shepherd gathers the lambs. He lays His hands on them and *blesses* them. Matthew 19:13 says "he prayed," and verse 15 says "he departed thence," having blessed them. Jesus does not merely wish them well; as the King of the kingdom of heaven, His blessing is *effectual*. "Of such is the kingdom of heaven" (v. 14). These children are in the kingdom and receive its blessings.

And what are those blessings? They are the blessings of *salvation*: forgiveness of sins, regeneration, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. The blessings of the kingdom are the blessings of baptism. Acts 8:12 proves this: “When they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God... they were baptized.” Baptism signifies kingdom blessings.

This brings us full circle to Lord’s Day 27. The catechism asks: “Is then the external baptism with water the washing away of sin itself? Not at all; for the blood of Jesus Christ only, and the Holy Ghost, cleanse us from all sin” (Q&A 72).

“Why then doth the Holy Ghost call baptism ‘the washing of regeneration,’ and ‘the washing away of sins’? God speaks thus not without great cause... especially that by this divine pledge and sign He may assure us that we are spiritually cleansed from our sins, as really as we are externally washed with water” (Q&A 73).

And Question 74 again: “Are infants also to be baptized? Yes; for since they as well as the adult are included in the covenant and church of God... they must therefore by baptism... be admitted into the Christian church and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers.”

These truths are not optional. They are the voice of our Shepherd, speaking in Matthew 18 and 19. Christ sets a child in the midst and says, “This child is Mine, in My Kingdom, indwelt by My Spirit, kept by My angels, redeemed by My blood, and loved with My Father’s everlasting love.”

*Our Father in heaven, help us to understand and feed upon the Word of God, that its power comes to us and to our children. Lighten us, Lord, with the illumination of the Spirit, and transform and change our wills—dead, perverse, and twisted though they are—so that we will the good and are willing citizens of the kingdom of heaven, more and more. Amen.*