

We are in a series Jeff has entitled “Jesus and the Kingdom.” This is part 11, Matthew chapters 18-20. Jesus spends a large portion of the book of Matthew teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God. Although the term is never used in the OT, it was common enough among Jews of Jesus’ day. The rabbis talked about it. The nation in general, under the thumb of Rome, longed for it. It described a looking forward to the time when God would reassert himself on earth, bringing justice and peace and retribution and restoration, a time when God would set the world right. The Bible uses the term first in Matthew 3:2. (READ); and then he references the coming Messiah, who could have been in his audience.

Interestingly, after John baptizes him, Jesus takes up the identical message in Matthew 4:17, like a drumbeat; (READ) it has happened, we’ve been longing for it, now it has happened, it is starting now.

All through this book, “the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of Heaven, this is what it looks like, this is what it feels like, this is what the people in the kingdom act like...”

You are building on a kingdom this morning; so am I. Each of us goes about our days building some kingdom, maybe ours, maybe God’s, my natural tendency is to build mine...the challenge is to see the value of God’s Kingdom above our own.

As we begin this morning, it is important to note that the Gospels present a limited view of the life of Christ. They are not a minute by minute narrative. What else was Jesus good at, what else was he known for, what else was he interested in? We don’t know.

When the writers sat down to record this, their goal was not history. Their goal included history, but they had a very narrow, specific focus. Their goal was to recall the most important moments, the most influential teachings. They gathered the details about Jesus’ life that would present the most compelling evidence possible to the reader: this Jesus was the God-man, the Messiah.

In what is recorded of Jesus words, Jesus spends zero time on popular culture...instead he speaks to the core of the most important issues in my life. In these three chapters alone Jesus addresses how to be great in God’s eyes, the ultimate fate of a person who perpetrates evil, the enduring passion of a parent whose child is lost, how to push for forgiveness and restoration as the path to freedom and a path to God, divorce and marriage, the blessing and the curse of wealth, and God’s warm and affirming perspective on your spiritual life—whether it has been short or long. We cannot cover all of that this morning, so I have narrowed it down.

Would you listen as I read more radical Jesus theology from the book of Matthew?

READ: Matthew 18:1-7, 10-14; 19:13-15

At the beginning of chapter 18, a question comes from the disciples, READ V. 1) “Who is the greatest in this Kingdom you’ve been talking about.” I am not surprised by this question. This is so natural. We humans always boil things down to this: who’s the best?

I do not know what the disciples expected Jesus to say...they'd been listening to his teaching, they'd heard this long-running discussion about the Kingdom of Heaven...did they suspect it would be the religious leaders they grew up with, Elijah or Moses (who they had just seen), John the Baptist, Jesus (just off the transfiguration), or were they wondering if it was one of them. I'm suspicious because at the end of chapter 20 James and John's mother comes to Jesus and tries to finagle places of honor for her boys when we all get to heaven. Who is the greatest? The question hangs in the air... and Jesus, as is often the case, sets his ray gun to stun and answers with the last thing they might have expected, choice 18 out of a possible 18.

Jesus pulls a child into the group, we do not know the child's name, non-descript, ordinary, could have been boy or girl, and says, "Here."

This is not the answer they were expecting. Not only is Jesus championing another marginalized group in this society, but he is also challenging the disciples' world-view...

Jesus' point? To be sure, the greats in the kingdom of heaven are probably not who you think they are. It's not me...they're the humble, the unnoticed, the underappreciated, the ordinary, the lowly, the unexpected, the quiet faithful workers you never even knew were working...

This is encouraging stuff. I don't know whose expectations you've been trying to live up to, or how many different sets of expectations you've been juggling in your life...This should give us hope. Jesus talks like this all the time. Things are not what they appear.

The most notable among us will be the ones who serve. Whoever wants to keep his or her life needs to lose it. The religious are not necessarily the righteous. The widow who drops a penny in the offering in a spirit of sacrifice and worship gives more than all the deep pockets combined. The meek will be blessed. The first will be last. God loves the marginalized and the disenfranchised as much as he loves the competent and the confident. Long, loud pray-ers are frauds. The King of kings was born in a stable. The greatest in the kingdom of heaven will be the one you don't expect.

Why does Jesus do this? It's not just to be contrary. He's not picking any random, unexpected answer just to keep them off balance. I believe all these are examples of Jesus correcting the faulty way we see the world, reintroducing us to the way God's economy works. We live in a universe with dueling economies—a world economy and a God economy. The one I'm most natural in—the world economy—has been shaped by sin and death and selfishness over the millennia. Its long-running reign on earth has shaped the way we think. Wealth is the ultimate goal. Self-gratification is my prime objective. Men see women as sex objects. Women see men as beings to be manipulated. The bully is the one with the power. Culture is on a mission of materialism and one-upmanship—where the video must go viral, the portfolio must be impressive, the achievements must be blog-worthy. Manipulate and conquer. Much like that song in the musical "Annie Get Your Gun." Anything you can do I can do better. I can do anything better than you. No you can't. Yes I can. No you can't. Yes I can. No you can't. Yes I

can, yes I can! And even some of our most popular games have us beating one another bloody. That's the world economy.

Jesus bursts onto the scene and routinely says things we've never heard before. You can read it all through the Gospels. Counter-cultural. Counter-intuitive. The game board has been flipped and we don't even recognize the new game. Jesus never says "Blessed are the big donors." In addition to saying, "I can forgive your sins," Jesus also says, "Let me reintroduce you to the way God runs the world. Let me reintroduce you to the Kingdom of Heaven."

Friends, the people who get God's attention will surprise you, and Jesus illustrates this by calling a child and standing that child in front of the disciples. I love children. I work with children. I have three children. What is it about children that makes them the perfect illustration for Jesus' point?

In the book of Matthew, Jesus has referred to children a lot, but this is the first time we see him interacting with children. The other Gospel accounts make it clear that Jesus loved children.

Heaven is for Real...Colton Burpo

Jesus really loves children...

He was not a parent. And on your worst days you might wonder if that could have been part of the reason. For those of you who are parents...

Children are hard, aren't they? You calculate what percentage of your time gets spent on your kids, what percentage of your wealth, your emotional energy. Kids are hard. This knowledge is universal...Mark Twain said "When a boy turns thirteen, seal him in a barrel and feed him through a knothole. When he turns 16, plug up the hole."

So what is it about children that makes them the perfect illustration for Jesus' point about the kingdom of heaven?

Then and now, children are willingly dependent, more than anyone else. I guarantee you your 18 year old will not come snuggle on your lap, but your 4-year-old will. As a child, until they learn otherwise, children naturally think, "My mom's got this. My dad's got this."

Jesus looks at the disciples and says, "You want to know something about the kingdom of heaven? If you can't humble yourself like this child, make yourself willingly dependent, you won't even get into the Kingdom of Heaven, let alone be the greatest in it. Unless I make a fundamental change from my arrogance to willing dependence, I don't have a chance with God. My problem is pride. That is my number one wrestling match..."

When God says, "You've got a sin problem," I say, "I'm not so bad. I get my paper into the recycle bin better than Jeff Kennedy." When God says, "You need a Savior," I say, "I'm not doing that bad. You'd be surprised how much good I do."

People in the kingdom of heaven are people who can say, “I’ve got nothin’. I will abandon whatever else I am depending on to make peace with God and I will embrace my total and willing dependence on Jesus Christ.

Children do this better than any of us. They can’t cling to a job. They can’t cling to a spouse. They can’t cling to an income. They can’t cling to a house. They can’t cling to alcohol. They can’t cling to post-secondary degrees. They can’t cling to a charity they started. They are naturals at willing dependence.

We adults are stumped. But Jesus fleshes it out us in Luke 18. I’m going to start reading in verse 9. READ Luke 18:9—14

There it is again—God’s economy. Look what follows this parable...Jesus and children...Rich young ruler. Same time-frame as Matthew 18-20.

So what is it about children? 1. They are willingly dependent. 2. Then as now, they are believers.

Children are believers. You have to train children to be skeptical. They are born with an extraordinary faith. You can teach a child anything and they will believe it. When it was time for Seth to be born, doctor scratched the top of his head; when Seth was two or three, in the retelling, he somehow got the idea that the doctor had cut his head off and...sewed it back on, I guess. He believed it.

When I was young my parents would outright lie to me. All the vitamins are in the crust of the bread. Eat it. If you crack your knuckles you won’t be able to get your wedding ring on. Coffee will stunt your growth. We call kids gullible, but it’s really the result of a powerful faith.

Think about how easily kids enter a belief system—whether it’s make-believe, magic/fantasy, Santa Claus, tooth fairy...All in... This is how Jesus says you approach the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is about simple, uncluttered faith.

Because here’s the truth: To be part of this kingdom, we are asked to accept things that many people find simply unbelievable—a Jesus whose mother was a virgin, who in life could perform mind-bending miracles at will, who in his death appeased his Father’s anger at all of mankind’s sin, who can offer me forgiveness even though we’re almost two thousand years distant from that substitutionary death. Who, after death, was resurrected on an Easter morning. It takes faith, no question about it. Can you do it? Children can.

I did not say blind faith. Check out Matthew 21—these kids are all in, they’re believers. There’s a ruckus in the temple...Kids going crazy. But theirs is not a blind faith. These kids had undoubtedly seen Jesus in action—the miracles, the healings, some of them probably had family members who had been freed from demonic oppression, maybe some of them had eaten the food Jesus miraculously divided and handed out. So the faith was based on something concrete.

In the same way, ours is not a blind faith. These are not fairy tales. There is a history and place, born out by archeology, towns with names, kingdoms we can excavate, people who have been found in the historical record outside the Bible.

And it's not that we don't routinely believe things that are hard to accept. For example, that the earth is spinning at 1000 miles per hour, right now. It's hard to believe isn't it? I don't feel anything. In addition, this planet is careening through space 66,000 miles per hour in its orbit around the sun. Unbelievable. But it's true. A child would believe that just by hearing a teacher tell him so.

The other reason I hold it is not blind faith is because you *can* break a child's faith. But when they decide to trust, they are all in. Jesus is saying something important here. Children are the perfect illustration for how to approach the kingdom of heaven. They know how to be completely dependent. And they are believers.

1. Are you part of the kingdom of heaven? Do you have the strength to abandon whatever it is you have been depending on and put your faith in Christ? Can you mimic the prayer of faith we read about in Luke 18, Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner?
2. How high on your priority list does the kingdom of heaven rank?
3. How would your words and actions change if you started building God's kingdom instead of your own?

Two Fridays ago I spent nine hours in Rexburg, Idaho, being a parent chaperone...What do I do now...in Rexburg...for nine hours...when I wouldn't otherwise have been here? I should build God's kingdom. My words and my actions should build the kingdom. If I'm cueing up for nine days of vacation and I wonder what should I do with all this down-time? Top of the list, my words and my actions should build the kingdom. If I have a spare nine minutes before I take the kids to basketball practice and I jump on the internet, what should I do there? My words and my actions should build the kingdom. Maybe I have nine years before I retire, the kids are safely out of the house and on their ways, what should I do? The challenge is to see the value of God's Kingdom above my own.