

Lies of Little Gods: Those Useless Kids

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Matt 18:1-5

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. Matthew 18:1-5 (NRSV)

Let us pray: *God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Chris Rock, the comedian, likes to say things to just be controversial, just to annoy people. To get a good rise. And in 2017 he said something that did just that. It went viral, and that's how I saw it. I'd not watched his comedy special, but this was apparently in it. Now I'm just being the messenger here, so don't write me any notes. He said, "Only women, children, and dogs are loved unconditionally. A man is only loved under the condition that he provides something. My grandmother once said, 'A broke man is like a broke hand. Can't do nothing with it.'"

Now, here's what's interesting. As I share that with others, they are offended, just like I was. And here's why they're offended – there is no difference between men and women; both have the same demands on them and in fact, women have more some say. And they all have to produce. They have to produce somewhere. And I think to myself, "Yeah, you're right, but that's not the most offensive thing he said." The most offensive thing to me is that any human being is only of value or loved because of what they can produce. And here's the thing. The reason that didn't bother most people was because that's what our culture tells us. That we need to produce, that we need to be productive. We need to work hard. We need to contribute. That we shouldn't be freeloaders, we should carry our weight.

I want us to talk today about this idol of hard work. We've been talking about how we take things that may be good values, positive values, and make them the most important thing. That draws most of our attention, most of our energy, and most of our time. I love what Colin

Bagby said last week when he started this series. He said, “An idol is when you take a good thing and make it the main thing.” I want us to look at this Scripture. What does it mean to say we should be like little children? What does he mean by that? When Jesus says that. Does he mean we must be innocent like little children? Does he mean we must be joyful like little children? Does it mean we should be dependent like little children?

If you look before that ...so this begins chapter 18 of Matthew, but chapter 17 of Matthew begins with another conversation about children. Here’s what it says there. The Pharisees have come to him and said, “Should your disciples pay the temple tax.” But instead of answering them, he turns to Simon Peter and talks to him. He has this conversation. “What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?” When Peter said, “From others,” Jesus said to him, “Then the children are free.” (Matthew 17:25-26). They don’t have to contribute anything. Because they’re the king’s children, nothing is expected that they would pay. When he says we must be like little children, what he’s saying is there’s no way little children are in his culture useless. They didn’t bring anything to the table. They didn’t contribute anything. That’s how we come into the kingdom of God, as people who recognize that we’re loved just because we’re his children.

Now, there are always tensions, and as I said, this is when there’s a good thing; hard work is a good thing. And we make it the main thing. So, the Scripture teaches us that hard work is important. We should be hard-working people. God in the creation story makes the man he puts him in the garden to till it and to keep it. He creates a woman, and he says, “I will make a help mate for you.” This means a partner in your mission. In your contribution. We were made to work, to till the garden and to keep it.

There’s this passage in Ephesians. Paul says, “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10). We should be doing work; we should be accomplishing things for the kingdom. That’s a good thing. But sometimes, we make it the primary thing when really it’s a secondary outgrowth of the main thing. So, listen to the verse immediately before it. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do

good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:8-10). Meaning that anything you do is God’s doing it, not you. You can’t boast about it.

So yes, we are to be working people, but it is to grow out of this free gift that God has given us. It is this powerful picture. Not only does Scripture teach us that, but life teaches us that, doesn’t it? On the one hand, we are to work and be satisfied. But there’s this sense of satisfaction we have when we have completed a task when we’ve done something. I mean, when you mow the grass, and it’s all done, and the edges are all nice, and everything’s just right, and you stand back, and we say, “Yeah, that was good.” You do something, you accomplish something, you get something done, and you think, “Yeah, that’s a good thing. We’re satisfied.”

But on the other hand, well, let me tell you about Joe. I’ve changed his name and details to protect the guilty here. Joe worked most of his life for the same company. He had a couple of jobs early on, but then he went to work for a company, and he worked hard. And he was proud of being one of the hardest workers there. He was the workhorse, you know. And he didn’t really progress up the ladder a lot. And that was okay with him. He just liked the work. He got up in the morning and worked, went early and worked, stayed late and worked. When younger people would come into the business, they would be charismatic and get promoted, and they’d get ahead of him, and it didn’t really bother him. In fact, he was proud of them. He thought, “If my work has helped them advance, then that’s wonderful.” Then, one day, they came to him and said, “Here’s your retirement package. It’s time. We’ve got to make some decisions, and it’s time for you to step down.” So, he left. Then, six months later, he was in my office and said, “I’ve lost myself. I don’t know what I should be doing. Do you have something I can do? Can I do something around here that makes a difference?”

I thought to myself, “His whole identity was built into what he was able to accomplish – his hard work. That was who he thought he was.” So, we gave him some things to do – to scratch the itch a little bit. But it didn’t address the basic problem in that that’s what he thought he was.

Life teaches us that in another way. What is it Shakespeare says, “All the world’s a stage and the men and women merely players. We have our exits and entrances.” And when we’re born, we’re completely dependent, of no value, no use – that’s the way I want to say it – at all. All we can do is be taken care of. And then we go through our lives, and at various times,

we're able to make a real impact, and at other times, what is it they say in what Wesley taught us in the Wesleyan covenant/prayer? "Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee." So, at various times, we can make a difference, and at other times, maybe we aren't making a big difference around us. And then we get to the end of our lives, and for some of us, for sure, we get to a point where we can't really take care of ourselves anymore. And someone has to take care of us. And we think to ourselves, "Oh, no, don't let that ever happen to me! I'd rather be run over by a truck, God, than have someone have to take care of me. Just don't let someone have to change my diapers, please, God!"

What does that say about where we think our value is? We are God's children at both ends of our lives and in the middle. Right, there is this idol of being able to produce something to contribute something that we somehow think is the most important thing if we're really going to matter. Friends, we matter to God. Period. Full stop. No "if we..." There's no "if" on the end of that. We matter to God because ...you guys sang it; I couldn't believe it. We are God's children.

Okay, so what is that idol? Here's the shape of the idol I want to just share what it might look like for you. For some people, the shape of the idol is a list – *the list*. You have the list, and the list must be paid attention to. The list, like I'm on Outlook, and the list is all red because it's all overdue. It's all red. Some of you have a handwritten list. Some of you have a list for your groceries.

On the way out of the 9:45 service, he told me I could use his name. Jason Knecht came and said, "Throughout the first part of the service, I was doing my list." And he showed it to me on the phone. And I said, "That'll teach you, won't it?" Some of you have been doing your lists. Look around and see those around you. If you can't ... if what determines if you had a good day or not is whether you got things checked off the list, then maybe the list has become an idol for you.

Yesterday, Dee and I worked outside most of the day. At the end of the day, my wife said, "We had a pretty productive day. This was a good day." And I said, "We worked all day long! Does that make it a good day?" We did stuff outside—all day long.

So, there is that, and if that becomes their definition of a good day, then maybe the list is an idol. If you can't sit with the people you love and have a conversation without thinking about "Oh, wait – I've got these things to do..." If you can't have dinner or watch TV at night

without checking your phone to see if a work email came in that you'll need to deal with then maybe the list has become an idol.

Here's a second say it might look for you – ambition. To be ambitious. I think ambition is a good thing. I'm ambitious; my children, I hope, are ambitious; I want them to marry ambitious people. Ambition is a good thing. It's wanting to achieve your potential and not waste your gifts. That's all a good thing. Then Paul writes in Philippians, one of the most powerful sections of Scripture: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:3-4). Don't do anything because you want to get ahead. If, in fact, you feel like you need shaper elbows if you're going to make it, then maybe ambition has become an idol for you. It feels like someone stabbed you in the gut because you didn't get the promotion then maybe ambition has become an idol for you.

I know of pastors—United Methodist pastors—who go to a church and think of how that church might be a stepping stone for another church they can go to. That might happen for them. But if that's their mental picture, then maybe ambition has become an idol.

Sometimes, it looks like self-reliance. The idol looks like self-reliance. Like don't we love a good bootstraps story? You know, I walked uphill both ways to school in the snow in south Texas. Every day. And I did this on my own. Nobody gave me a break. I did this on my own. I had to work hard, no privilege for me, man. I was the guy who did it on my own. Isn't it interesting how we love that story of people who just did it out of sheer hard work?

I heard Will Smith interviewed – you know the actor, Will Smith. He was asked why he thought he had become so successful. Here was his answer, "The only thing I see that is distinctly different about me is that I'm not afraid to die on a treadmill. I will not be outworked. Period." I thought to myself, "Do you know how many actors just work so hard and never get where you got?" Do you ever think to yourself, "Did somebody give you a break? Somebody give you that opportunity? Did someone help you and give you a lift up?"

No, we don't want anyone to feel a sense of entitlement. Of course, we want people to feel like they can work hard. But you are not self-reliant.

I like the writings of A.J. Jacobs. He did a book that lots of people read called *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow The Bible as Literally as Possible* which was a funny book. It was about ...he decided for one year he was going to follow every

rule in Scripture. Every single one. What he wore, what he ate, where he sat, what he said. All of those things and it was really just funny because what became clear was that you can't follow every rule. It's just not ... it just can't be done. And he experienced that, especially in the culture we're in. Well, he has another book that I found really interesting. It's called *Thanks a Thousand: A Gratitude Journey*. Like, "Thanks a million," but it's *Thanks a Thousand*. And here's what he did. You have to have a good gimmick to write a book, so his deal was he wanted to thank everyone who had a contribution to make to his morning cup of coffee. So, he started with his barista. Went to say thanks to his barista. He was going to travel and say "thank you" to all these people. He said "thank you" to his barista and said "thank you" to the barista. He found out who manufactured the coffee cup that his coffee was in. So, he went to say "Thank you" to the manufacturer of the coffee cup. He found out who invented the little plastic lid that has a little bump in it with the hole so you can drink coffee and not burn yourself. He found out who invented that, and he went and said, "Thank you so much for inventing the little lid that goes on my coffee." He traveled to where they grew the coffee beans and said "Thank you" to the workers working in the field. And to the guy that owned the corporation. He looked at the coffee grinders and he looked at the people who make the coffee grinder. All of those things. If you think about it, how many people contribute to something as simple as your morning cup of coffee.

We are not self-reliant. And isn't it a wonderful thing? instead of thinking I listed myself up by my bootstraps, we say I can't believe how many people helped to lift me up. And get me to where I am. So, we make an idol out of that self-reliance.

Sometimes, we make an idol out of just doing good things and being good people. I'm going to make a difference in the world around me. I'm going to accomplish things for Jesus. If I'm good enough, maybe I'll be worthy of that sacrifice he made for me on the cross, if I can just do more.

I'm sure you all have seen the movie "Saving Private Ryan" – if you haven't, you might want to close your ears. There's a spoiler here. But Private Ryan - his brothers are all killed so the president decides that he needs to be brought out of battle. And Captain Miller, played by Tom Hanks, is leading the squad sort of reluctantly to go save Private Ryan. And in the midst of it Captain Miller gets killed. And Private Ryan is standing next to him. James Ryan. And as he's dying, Captain Miller says, "Earn this. Earn it." It's a powerful image. And at the end of

the movie Private Ryan comes to Captain Miller's grave and says, "I hope I did enough. I did the best I could. I hope it was enough."

Friends, there's nothing we can do to earn what God has already done for us. We don't have to do that because we're approved because we're God's children. So, how do we make this shift? How do we move to that place where it's not about what we can accomplish and how good we can be? I think for me it's about focusing instead - this is one of my temptations, my idols, so I've tried to focus on being instead of doing. For example, over the years, at various times in my life, I've had part of a devotional lighted a candle, and I look at the candle and think that candle accomplishes what it accomplishes by being what it is. If that candle gets carried into the next room, it's going to light up that room, but all it does is decide this is what I am, I'm going to be a candle. And we're called on to be that light. And wherever God puts us will be who we are. But we don't have to set out to light up more rooms, but who knows where God will take us?

Here's another opportunity. Sometimes my prayer life becomes kind of a task to do. Something to check off the list. I don't know if that's true of you. I've got a prayer journal and that helps, but still, I've got it done. Then someone said that what you need to do is put Jesus - imagine Jesus in a chair across from you and just have a conversation with him about your life. So, I've tried that, but I find myself just talking about all the problems that I need to address. I ask, "Can you give me help?" or "How can I fix this?" or "Show me how to do that?" And that doesn't necessarily do it.

So, a friend said, "Try this." This was the same friend who suggested the other. He said, "Instead of sitting apart from Jesus, sit beside Jesus on the couch. And sidle up next to him as a grandchild sidles up to his grandmother. And feel his arm around you. And just lean into him in love. And feel his love for you." Not because of anything you've done or accomplished but because you're his beloved child, and he loves you like a grandmother. Just know that no matter what you do, nothing can make you less loved, for we're God's children. And he loves us.

Gracious God, we know you do call us to work to contribute to give of ourselves but remind us God somehow that that comes second. That that grows out of your love for us. That we love only because you first loved us. So God, let us receive that Gospel, that good news, of your love for us. In the name of Christ. Amen.