

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 28th May 2017 – 11:00am
Dedication Service
“Children in the Family of God”
(Matthew 18:1-14)

Introduction

There is a lot of variation in the wider Christian Church as to what should be done whenever a baby is born into a church-going family. For example:

The Roman Catholic Church will want to get that child baptised as early as possible in case something happens to it, because they believe in baptismal regeneration. In other words, they believe that child is *‘born again’* when the priest performs the act of baptism, sprinkling a few drops of water on the head of that little child.

The Church of Ireland will say at the baptism of an infant, that the baby...
‘becomes a child of God and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven’.
In other words they believe that infant baptism does something for the child, that makes them part of God’s family, and ready for heaven one day.

The Presbyterian Church will also want to baptise a new-born baby, because they believe it brings the child of believing parents into the covenant family, and all the spiritual privileges that entails for the up-bringing & well-being of the child. Some of the grace that God gives to those believing parents spills over into the lives of their children. They become ‘children of the covenant.’

As Baptists, we don’t baptise babies. We reserve baptism for a later date. We call it believers’ baptism, not adult baptism. And we believe it is a step of obedience once someone has come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ themselves, at whatever age that happens. But it is believer’s baptism. We only baptise those who have personally believed in Jesus as their Saviour. Once they are born again of the Holy Spirit of God, then they can be baptised as a witness to the watching world of what has happened in their heart. We baptise by total immersion in water, because we believe that symbolises that someone has died to their sin, their past has been buried, and they rise up out of the water to walk in a new way of life. They are saying I’m trusting in the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ as my only hope of salvation. The youngest person I have baptised is a 10 yr old. The oldest, I think, was 75!

So what place do we give to babies, children and young people in our church? You might ask. Well our ministry to children and young people is very important to us here in Armagh Baptist Church. We believe that God has entrusted these children into our care, and we take our responsibilities very seriously in these matters. I’d like to explain that to you from Matthew ch.18 this morning...

Since Matthew ch.16 Jesus has been teaching us about **His Church**, and what it was going to be like, and what it would mean for us to be part of it.

In Matt.16:1-12 Jesus taught that His Church was not to be characterised by a **legalistic** attitude / nor by a **liberal** one. We were to keep the balance, in the middle, by simply trusting in Jesus, walking by faith, and seeking to follow His Will for our lives day by day.

In Matt.16:13-23 Peter’s Confession of Christ was the opportunity for Jesus to teach us that His Church would consist of all those individuals who not only recognise who Jesus is – The Messiah / The Christ, the Son of God - but who trust in Him personally as their Saviour, because he has died for them on the cross and risen again for them. In v.18 Jesus gives us that wonderful promise:
‘I will build my church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it!’

In Matt.16:24-28 Jesus then taught us that to be His followers / to be part of His Church would not be easy. It would involve taking up our cross daily and following Him. So it was going to be unpopular to follow Jesus. We will experience the reproach of the cross.

But in Matt.17 Jesus encouraged us that despite the difficulties now, there will be glory to come with Him one day in Heaven hereafter! He showed 3 of his disciples a glimpse of that glory as they witnessed the transfiguration.

Now as we come into ch.18 we come to a very important chapter on how we should view each other as **Citizens of Christ’s Kingdom**, as **Members of Christ’s Church**. He teaches us that we are **Children in God’s Family**.

(vs.1-4) is about how we **Become** the Children of God.

(vs.5-9) is about how we should **Develop** as Children of God.

(vs.10-14) is about looking after or **Shepherding** the Children of God.

We’re going to look at these three points this morning from vs.1-14.

1. How do we become Children of God? (vs.1-4)

Some people think they are already a child of God by virtue of the fact that they were baptised as an infant. But that’s not what the Bible teaches!

Look what Jesus says in v.3:

*“Unless you change [are **converted**], and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

Compare that to what Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:3...

“Unless a man is **born again**, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

So taking those verses together, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God (become one of God's people) unless you are “*born again*” (John 3:3).

- To be “born again” means to “be changed” it means to “be converted” (v.3).
- To be converted means you've got to come to Jesus Christ “like a little child” would (v.3).

What could Jesus have meant by that?

Well, as always it's important to get the context of what he was saying.

What prompted Jesus to use such expressions?

(i) **The childish behaviour of the disciples?**

(Read v.1. See also Matt.20:20-28).

Who would be “top-dog” in the Kingdom seems to have been an obsession with the disciples at this time. Their petty rivalry, their pushing for top position on both these occasions comes immediately after Jesus talks about His coming death and departure from them. Look at (17:22-23) and (20:17-19).

This just shows these disciples up as highly insensitive, uncaring and self-centred. All they were out for was to look after No.1!

How does Jesus handle this?

- * He rebukes their childish behaviour by using a child to teach them a lesson.
- * He wants them to stop their *childishness*, and have a *child-like attitude* instead!
- * To be childish and to have a child-like attitude are two completely different things!

(ii) **The child-like attitude they should have!**

Jesus rebukes their **childishness** by teaching them about being **child-like!**

These disciples were like children wanting “to play church” as a game.

Illustration: Like the children who wanted to have a prayer meeting one day.

One said to the other: ‘You pray, and I'll grunt!’

We've all done it. Someone stands at the front and does the preaching, the others are told to get up and sing. We've all seen our children playing church!

Jesus wanted these disciples to realise that they **were** the church, and very soon he would leave them to look after that church; and go back to heaven.

So it was time they took it more seriously!

Stop being childish. Start being child-like!

It's time they learned some important lessons about the church. Jesus teaches them first of all in vs.3-4 that to enter God's Kingdom, to become one of God's people they are going to need a child-like attitude of trust.

(iii) **How does someone become a Child of God?**

(i) By being converted: having your life turned around completely by God.

It involves turning from sin, and all you know to be wrong in your life at present.

It involves totally changed behaviour and attitudes.

(ii) By becoming like a little child – turning from sin and turning to God.

But turning to God in total dependence, in total trust.

Realise your great need of salvation.

Realise your inability to do anything for yourself for salvation.

Get rid of all your own ideas of self-importance and become as humble and totally dependent on God as a child would be towards its earthly father.

Illustrate: When my kids were younger, they would stand on the fourth or fifth step on the stairs, and just take a leap, and jump into my arms. They knew that I would catch them, because they trusted their dad. That's the kind of faith and trust we are talking about: child-like trust in a heavenly Father! leap into his arms!

(iii) In fact this humility according to Jesus is the only real evidence that you have ever entered the Kingdom – that you are in fact a Child of God!

The opposite of humility is pride, and if there's pride in your life, then where is the evidence that you really are a child of God in the first place?

Do you claim to have entered the Kingdom of God?

Do you claim to be a Child of God?

Do you claim to have been converted?

Do you claim to be trusting in God as your Heavenly Father, through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ?

If so, do you have this child-like characteristic of humility and total dependence on God?

Listen again to what Jesus says in vs.3-4. Are you such a Child of God?

2. **We need to develop as Children of God (vs.5-9)**

If getting saved, or being converted, or becoming a Christian, can be described as being ‘*born again*’ or as becoming a Child of God, then once we are converted we must be like ‘*new-born children or babies*’.

So like any child we need to grow up and develop.

Peter talked like this in 1 Peter 1:23-2:3.

But it would be unthinkable to put a new-born child out on its own in splendid isolation and expect it to grow up and develop into a mature, well-balanced adult, wouldn't it? - That would be ridiculous!

Illustrate: The Romans used to do that with their babies. Set them out on a hillside for a night, and if it was still living the next day, they'd bring it in and look after it. If it didn't survive, well, they said, *'It wasn't going to live anyway!'* What a callous way to deal with children. That's not how it should be!

We wouldn't do it with any of these little babies we've seen this morning: So why then, do so many Christians try to do it? They try to live their Christian lives all alone, trying to get by on their own. They think they don't need fellowship. They claim to be attracted to Jesus, but they don't seem to be too attracted to His Church!

When God saves us, He puts us into a family – His Family – The Church. The whole church world-wide is the family of God, but each local church should be a local expression of the family of God. Look what Jesus says in v.5. New children of God (by that he meant new converts) are to be received by the local church family as if they were receiving Christ Himself! Though they might be weak, frail, unlearned in the Scriptures, still very rough around the edges, the local church should receive them, if there is evidence of conversion and faith: if there is humility, dependence on God, and a willingness to learn.

(i) To really develop as Children of God, we need to be part of the local family of God – So are you a member of a local church family? A Bible believing, Gospel preaching church, made up of believers in Christ?

(ii) But then comes a warning for us in vs.6-7. We are warned as members of the church family to be careful that we don't cause these new brothers and sisters in Christ to stumble / or to fall into sin! (the word is: *scandalizomai*)

“causing to sin” (v.6) = “offenses” (v.7) = stumbling blocks!

Could it be for those of us who have been on the Christian pathway for longer than others, that we might be stumbling blocks to new believers coming into the church, by our attitudes and behaviour?

By our lack of humility, our lack of total dependence on God, our coldness of heart, arguing over minor issues, lack of prayer, or spiritual zeal? Obviously in vs.6-7 Jesus regards this as a very serious matter indeed!

According to vs.8-9 we could cause ourselves or someone else to stumble by not checking our **hand**, our **foot**, or our **eye!** (What does that mean?)

What you do, Where you go, What you watch.

Maybe we need to check our behaviour in these areas, and so protect ourselves and our brothers and sisters in Christ from stumbling. Set them a good example; not a bad one.

So to develop as Christians, we need fellowship, and we need to help each other to grow stronger, and not to cause one another to stumble into sin.

3. We need to Shepherd the Children of God (vs.10-14)

The illustration Jesus uses here in vs.12-14 is that of the Shepherd and the Sheep, and so we need to shepherd each other, to pastor each other, to care about, to look out for, to look after each other, in God's family.

If, as we've learned in this passage, that God's Church is made up of His children at all stages of spiritual development – mature, and immature, the strong and the weak, then just like any human family, at times in the church family there will be those who might wander of, or drift, or go astray - those who are not progressing so well. What are we to do?

(v.10) *'See that you do not look down on one of these little ones.'* - Why?

(i) Because in Heaven God has angels whose task it is to look after each child of God – including those who are passing through difficult times. God doesn't despise them, nor do his angels, so neither should we!

(ii) Jesus himself doesn't despise them... (vs.12-13).

If he has 100 sheep, he senses when one is missing. He leaves the 99 and he goes out to the mountains to look for that one wayward straying sheep, until he finds it. He'll not give up until he does. Neither should we!

Remember the wayward sheep today, could be any one of us tomorrow!

Would you want to be forgotten about, or would you want somebody to come after you and help to bring you back?

When Jesus finds the lost sheep – He rejoices! (v.13)

There's joy in being able to restore a straying sheep, just as much joy as there was in Heaven, the day that person first came to know the Lord! (See Luke 15:7).

So Jesus himself doesn't despise them...

(iii) And neither does our Father in Heaven himself (v.14)

He doesn't despise one of His wayward children.

He is not willing that one of His little ones should perish or be lost.

So if we claim God as our Father, then we should also have His attitude towards lost sheep, and towards those who have wandered away.

- Those who need to be saved in the first place; and
- Those who need to be restored to the Lord again.

Conclusion

So this morning, we've seen what it means to be a **Child in God's family**:

1. We enter God's Family by conversion, by being born again.

It takes humility to see our need. And it means coming to God in total dependence and child-like trust – that's what saving faith is all about!

2. As new-born spiritual babies, we need to grow-up and develop,

in the context of a local church, building each other up, not being stumbling blocks to bring each other down.

3. And the greatest joy in the family is to see a wanderer come home!

And our Heavenly Father rejoices when that happens too!

Let's be encouraged by this passage as we head into the summer together. Let's remember that anyone can become a new-born child in God's Family. Let's remember new converts will need time to grow in their new-found faith. Let's remember that our Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. So let's pray on for their salvation.

May that be an encouragement for us to pray for these little ones that early in life they will indeed come to know Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord. Amen.