The Chosen: Jesus Loves the Little Children S1E3 Memory Verse: Luke 18:17

September 24th, 2023 Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:1-5

**SLIDE 1 - TITLE**

 Well so far in “The Chosen” miniseries, we have seen a lot of historical context, a lot of character development, but not much of Jesus himself. He has only appeared at the very ending of these episodes so far, but today, in episode three, we come to focus on Jesus through the eyes of children. I think the producers made a brilliant decision by holding off on fully introducing Jesus and then doing so by way of kids. Presumably kids are innocent, they are not jaded, they want to go out and play by the river, use their imaginations, and have fun adventures. And there is a ubiquitous nature to childhood. What I mean is that children everywhere, despite culture and era, share largely the same outlook: Life is here to enjoy. Let’s go have fun! There is a sense of wonder and simplicity that all children have and that all adults seem to eventually lose.

**SLIDE 2 - CHILDREN**

 But if children all share in this common outlook, cultures certainly do not. Kids are treated very differently in different parts of the world. For us, children are considered the future. We need to invest in them, educate them for the sake of a better tomorrow. We encourage kids to dream big and give them free reign to determine their next steps and to make decisions about their lives. We are also very conscious about safety. We live with what I call “safety obsession.” Products that promote safety for babies alone is a 132 billion dollar industry. We spend a lot of money trying to keep our kids safe. Overall though, our culture is inconsistent about children. We place immense value on them, if they are wanted. We protect them at any cost once they are here. But the idea of children as a singular idea is not necessarily a welcome one. More and more couples are choosing not to have kids at all. The birth-rate in our country is already at a record low and continues to decrease. We also deal with the consequences of abortion, a highly politicized procedure that, nonetheless ends the lives of over 900,000 children a year. So the value of children in our culture is circumstantial. Do we value children? It depends.

 For Jewish folks in the time of Christ, children were first and foremost, a gift from God. They were received as such and valued as such. This also means that the future life of the child is seen through the lens of the past. A child born into a Jewish family is also a child sovereignly chosen by God and obligated to live within the parameters that that identity demands. The future of that child is firmly rooted in the past, the ancient stories that have shaped the people of God. Glimpses of this shine out in this episode. When Jesus asks the kids to recite the Shema, they can all do so with no problem. They share the same stories of Samson and Elisha. They all know what happened to their ancestors who toiled away as slaves in Egypt. The history of God’s work in this world is continued on in the life of a new child. A Jewish child does not get to grow to define who he or she is, they have already been defined.

 Some of us might find that to be stifling and a horrible disservice to a child, but receiving an already defined identity could very well be a priceless gift, an enduring mercy, one less thing to have to worry about. Being born into an established identity, could be the very thing that gives life meaning.

**SLIDE 3 – JESUS AND CHILDREN**

 So the kids Jesus meets up with in this episode are valued and considered gifts from God himself, but that does not mean they have any clout. Children had no role or function, they were completely powerless. They could not really perform manual labor, they could not contribute politically, they were not held in any high esteem. They had to be taught everything and therefore could not contribute anything. Children were certainly considered to be second-class. They were helplessly dependent. And I really want you to focus on that phrase. What does it mean to be helplessly dependent? Keep that in mind as we go.

**SLIDE 4: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”**

 This episode is wonderfully imaginative and expands on the view we know Jesus had of children. In Matthew 18 Jesus is asked a straightforward question by one of his disciples: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Now, a good answer would be Elijah, maybe Abraham would be in the running. A great answer would be Moses, or maybe Isaiah or some other prophet of the past who faithfully lived out God’s word. I don’t think we can understand the way minds were blown when, in answer to the question of greatness, Jesus spies a little child, calls him over and presents him as exhibit A. Jesus says, “I assure you that if you don’t turn your lives around and become like this little child, you will definitely not enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who humble themselves like this little child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

**SLIDE 5: “I assure you that if you don’t turn your lives around and become like this little child, you will definitely not enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who humble themselves like this little child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”**

On other words, “This powerless, helpless child, this picture of pathetic humility, this is your gold standard of aspiration. This is what you need to shoot for.” I can bet whoever asked the question was sorry they bothered. Such an answer was so counterintuitive, backwards. It was the kind of answer that left many more questions.

 Luke’s gospel reports the same sentiments. In Luke 18:15-17 we READ:

**SLIDE 6: Luke 18:15-17 People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. 16 But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 17 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”**

We cannot deny that, from the mouth of Jesus himself, there is a deep connection between childlikeness and heaven. We are to welcome in God’s kingdom just as a child would.

 But I think, based on this teaching of Jesus, we can see some of the interactions portrayed in this episode as very plausible. Jesus’ acceptance of the presence of children is instructive. Throughout these scenes, I was imagining myself interacting with these kids. I could imagine pacifying them for a short time but eventually I would send them off so I could get some work done or have a minute of peace and quiet. “Okay, okay, I put in my time, now go on home.”

 Have you ever bounced a little kid on your knee? The best way to do it, if they are old enough, is to grab set them on your knee, tightly grab the back of their shirt and, as you bounce, lean them off to one side or the other. This gives them the thrill of feeling like they are going to fall and yet knowing they are held fast by their t-shirt. Inevitably, the kid will laugh and then they will turn to you and say ……AGAIN! So you do it again, and again, and okay kid go somewhere else. I think Jesus has a better perspective…I think he is willing to spend time with us for as long as we would like. It is interesting to note that Jesus never actually sends the kids away…they decide it getting too late, or maybe they have something else to do….the point is that Jesus was at their disposal, he was on their time.

**SLIDE 7: Jesus and Children Fish**

 In one exchange, the little girl puts into words the longing of faithful hearts, “Can we be around today?” No plans, no agenda, no constraints…just a desire to be in his presence, a longing to be with Jesus. He replies, “I suppose, but I have some work to do. You might have to help.” Jesus, here, involves them in his tasks. He makes it very clear that he has work to do, but he is also very clear, that they can participate in that work if they would like. Here is this group of kids, helplessly dependent in their society, being invited to participate in Jesus’ work. They can contribute and be involved, not because they actually have any skills to offer but simply because they are willing. All Jesus needs is willing. Do we have a childlike willingness? Throughout his time with the kids, Jesus cannot help but teach them, talk with them, get to know them.

At one point Jesu is asked what his favorite food is… This is an insertion by the producers, there is not account of this conversation, but what a perfectly childish question! It’s the sort of thing you would ask the new kid on the playground. What would have been Jesus’ favorite food? I think his answer, bread, is dead on. Jesus later calls himself the bread of life, and we as modern believers, still partake of his body and blood with grape juice and none other than the standard everyday, basic staple: bread. As he spends time with them, Jesus has the kids reciting the Shema, he teaches them the Lord’s prayer, he tells them amazing stories from the Old Testament, and he gives them a preview. The kids keep asking him who he is and what he is doing. They want to know why he has come. A little girl asks “I still don’t understand, what is your reason for being here?” And in the movie, Jesus seems to finally give in and he shares with these children his mission. It’s the same mission we read about in Luke chapter 4. Just after Jesus has faced Satan in the wilderness, he has overcome temptation and has demonstrated his commitment to the power of God’s word, Jesus enters into Galilee. READ Luke 4:14-21

**SLIDE 8: Luke 4:14-21**

 So let us make no mistake about what is happening in this passage. Jesus claims, for himself, to be the Lord’s anointed, or chosen one who will proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. The phrase would have been understood as the year of Jubilee, which was supposed to occur every fifty years and involved the restoration of freedom for slaves and land for those who had to sell it off. And this reality will happen through good news being preached, prisoners released, blind people healed and the oppressed being liberated. And, according to this hometown boy, that pivotal passage of scripture had just been fulfilled. At first, people seemed to be impressed by Jesus. But, just as Jesus admits to the children, many will not like him. And soon, after Jesus highlights some stories from the Old Testament that showcase God reaching out and helping non-Jewish people, they fly into a rage and, as a mob, they try to grab Jesus and throw him over a cliff!

 Jesus will always be stirring up trouble, maybe this constitutes his special bond with children; they are both troublemakers. But instead of general mischief or childish mistakes, the trouble Jesus brings is hazardous to the status quo. Jesus means to establish the kingdom of God, accepted by humble children who are helplessly dependent and rejected by adults who have become set in their ways and self-sufficient, adults who want to defend the status quo, who would rather things remain as they are. Now of course, at the time, a Jewish man or woman would have loved to see society change. They would love nothing more than to have the Roman powers that ruled brought asunder and for the Jews to receive their full and promised inheritance. They wanted the world to change, and yet were fine with maintaining the current state of their hearts. The adults could just not comprehend what Jesus was up to. What does it mean when Jesus says in John 18:36 says, “My kingdom is not of this world”? That does not sound like a very strong denunciation of Rome. That does not sound like the words of a mighty and powerful Messiah warrior. He should be saying, “The capital of my kingdom is Jerusalem. From Zion I will rule! All my enemies will be defeated before me!”

**SLIDE 11: John 18:36 says, “My kingdom is not of this world”?**

 But Jesus understands what is in store for him. He knows that the wisdom of God, the very wisdom he embodies, is foolishness to men. That they ways of God, the very Way he embodies, is not known to men. He knows not everyone will appreciate his words or commend his ways. But with these children, there is a trust. They have not yet cast the Messiah in a military role. They have not yet experienced the prick of Roman threat, they have not yet surrounded themselves with defenses of self-sufficiency. Children are and were powerless. Helplessly dependent and as such, they can see more clearly the one on whom they do, in fact, depend. It is to this role that we are called; to be like children.

 And one more word about helplessness. In the very first scene of this episode, we see Jesus laboring to start a fire. It looked just like a scene from the reality show Alone. He is grunting and sweating and finally gets the friction hot enough to ignite the dry stubble and start a campfire. Jesus is basically pictured as a hobo, a nomad, a stranger camping out on the edges of town. He says as much in Matthew 8:20, that the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. But as he struggles to get fire, I can’t help but wonder, why not just snap your fingers? Why not conjure flames from your very will Jesus? Why not simply speak, “Let there be light?” But in this opening scene, we see Jesus, the Son of God, helplessly dependent, and complete and udder child in the presence of his Heavenly Father. Yes, he is God, yes, he can command all the power of creation itself to accomplish his will, yet, like a child Jesus is humble. He did not see divine power as something to be grasped or used for his own convenience, but gave it up so that the Father’s will might be accomplished, and the Father willed for his eternal son to become human, a helplessly dependent human.

 Jesus was in fact, the most human of all humans. He demonstrated the full potential that humans could achieve: not in building tall skyscrapers, or sending others to the moon or in ruling of a prosperous nation, or inventing efficient technologies. The full potential of humanity is to live as children, helplessly dependent on our Heavenly Father. I encourage you to live into the identity into which you were born, that is, as a child of God. Amen.