

# Children of God's Kingdom

Thomas Robinson, *The Suffering & Glory of Life in Jesus 5*, July 27, 2014

## **Matthew 17:24 – 18:8**

**17:**<sup>24</sup> When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?"

<sup>25</sup> He said, "Yes."

And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from outsiders?"

<sup>26</sup> And when he said, "From outsiders," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free.

<sup>27</sup> However, not to give offense (*skandal-*) to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a stater (= 4 drachmas). Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself."

**18:**<sup>1</sup> At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

<sup>2</sup> And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them <sup>3</sup> and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>5</sup> Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, <sup>6</sup> but whoever puts a stumbling block (*skandal-*) before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

<sup>7</sup> Woe to the world for stumbling blocks (*skandal-*)! For it is necessary that stumbling blocks (*skandal-*) come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block (*skandal-*) comes!

<sup>8</sup> And if your hand or your foot is a stumbling block (*skandal-*) for you, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire."

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## **Matthew 5:29-30 Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount**

<sup>29</sup> "If your right eye is a stumbling block (*skandal-*) for you, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into gehenna. <sup>30</sup> And if your right hand is a stumbling block (*skandal-*) for you, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into gehenna."

## **Matthew 11:4-6 Jesus responds to the question of John the Baptist, "Are you the one...?"**

<sup>4</sup> And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. <sup>6</sup> And blessed is the one who is not caused to stumble (*skandal-*) in me."

## **Matthew 13:57 The Response of People in Nazareth to Jesus**

<sup>57</sup> And they took offense (*skandal-*) at him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household."

## **Matthew 16:17, 23 Jesus blesses and rebukes Simon Peter**

<sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." ...

<sup>23</sup> But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block (*skandal-*) to me. For you are not thinking the things of God, but the things of man."

## Climbing over Stumbling Blocks to the Temple

We begin with what looks to be one of the strangest little stories in the Gospel. Mt has been dealing with big issues: Jesus as the Messiah; the suffering of the Messiah, the disciples' failure to understand, Jesus' transfiguration, Jesus in relation to Moses and Elijah, John the Baptist as Elijah, Jesus challenging the disciples to have faith even as a mustard seed.

A fish with a coin in its mouth? What is this? A magic trick? A joke? Something serious? The "two-drachma" (half-shekel) tax was paid by all Jewish men every year to support the temple. Brought in revenue from the diaspora, kept the temple thriving. Very practical.

Jesus is about to travel south toward Jerusalem (19:1) and a major confrontation with the temple authorities. Jesus' question shows that in the common language of taxation, the system of the temple authorities had turned all Jews into outsiders in relation to God's worship, rather than God's "first-born son" set free by God in the Exodus (Ex. 4:22), the son embodied in the Messiah. The temple was a well-oiled machine with elite priests, but not God's presence.

But Jesus knew that people were looking for offenses (*skandalon*) in him, things to misinterpret, misunderstand. "He's against the Temple because he's stingy, he doesn't want to pay the tax." It's a serious/joking response. Catch a fish. Let it pay the tax. Stay free for the confrontation.

## Look at this Child. What do you see?

Then came one of those moments that must have driven his disciples crazy. They ask a serious question. They want guidance to thrive in God's kingdom, how to do their best, be the best.

Jesus calls a child. "Unless you turn and become like children" you don't get to start. "Whoever humbles himself like this child..." Simple. Straightforward. Utterly baffling. What do I do? Receive the child – that's me! Put a stumbling block (*skandal-*) before the child – death! Such extravagant, emphatic language! Without explanation. But just tell me what to do!

How do I become like a child? What is so special about a child? Vulnerable? Unimportant? Powerless? Self-centered!? Dependant on parents? Jesus lets the disciples and us think.

As we watch the way Jesus has talked with his disciples, the issue may not be some positive virtue of children so much as that we adults have gone through full-life training to think like grown-up humans: self-protective, guarded, self-promoting, never free, never able to understand what Jesus teaches so emphatically in the Sermon on the mount: "Don't worry about your life ... your Father knows what you need," etc. etc. We are trained to control life ourselves. Think again about Peter: confessor and stumbling block. He says God's words, but isn't yet free to mean them with the radical self-giving love of the life of Jesus and God.

G. K. Chesterton speaks of God having the fierce, free vitality of children, "the eternal appetite of infancy." Jesus is trying to break us serious adults out of our tired, dying, self-protective adulthood that just wants to do things right, into the free grandeur of God's self-giving love.

## A World of Stumbling Blocks

So Jesus talks about *skandala*, stumbling blocks. Not so much "temptations" or "causes to sin" (though that comes with it), as all the things, the ways of thinking, the control, the self-protection that keeps me from living in a world with God and God's rule at its very center.

The *skandala* are what make the world, "the world" spiritually. God is pushed to the periphery or out altogether. I am at the center. I'm gaining my life. I lose it absolutely. Jesus says, the *skandala* are always there. Being a disciple means you never give in to their definition of life. Fight it in yourself. Make any sacrifice. "Lose your life for my sake." Then Life is really yours.