

“Come, follow Me”

Feeling Insecure

Passages: Philippians 2:1-11

Matthew 18:1-14

Are you a **secure** person? Do you feel **secure** in who you are and who God has called you to be? I ask these questions because, as far as I can tell, **it is a feeling of insecurity which lies at the heart of today’s passage.**

Let’s pray.

Listen again to the opening verse of today’s passage.

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?””

Why would the disciples be asking this question? Any psychologists would tell you that they were obviously feeling insecure. In an article in *Psychology Today* entitled, **“The Ten Signs of Insecurity”**, it soon becomes clear that the disciples were displaying at least 2 of these signs:

- 1. Self-promoting.** Insecure people promote themselves by exaggerating their deeds to make them appear great or heroic.
- 2. Overly competitive.** Insecure people are continually trying to prove their worth by comparing themselves with others.

Before we go on to discuss Jesus’ response to this insecurity, let’s talk a bit about **where the disciples’ insecurity may have come from.**

In Jesus’ day, all of the cultures in the Ancient Near East (whether Egyptian, Semitic, Greek, or Roman) were *“honour-shame cultures”*. (You will still find this type of culture in the Middle East and in many parts of Asia, today.) In an *honour-shame culture*, much of life revolves around ensuring you and your family receive public honour and avoided public shame. People in this type of culture would think nothing of praising themselves in public or, better still, getting others to praise them! (When I lived in Niger, I was publicly praised by a roving band of ‘praise singers’. This was not unusual!) Even ordinary citizens felt at liberty to parade their best accomplishments before others.

If you think this idea sounds strange, listen to the way the Jewish historian Josephus boasted about himself in his own autobiography:

I made great progress in my education, gaining a reputation for an excellent memory and understanding. While still a mere boy, about fourteen years old, I won universal applause for my love of literature; insomuch that the chief priests and the leading men of the city used constantly to come to me for precise information on some particular in our ordinances.

Consider the disciples in that light. Here was a motley crew of ordinary, mostly uneducated, Galilean fishermen! Even Matthew, the tax-collector (perhaps the most successful of them all), had little to boast about since most people considered him to be a traitor to Jewish society. Worst of all, these men had given up their families and incomes (the most common subject of our boasting) to follow Jesus. What was left to boast about? You can imagine why they were feeling a bit insecure. On top of all this, their leader was talking about going down to Jerusalem to die!

It makes sense, therefore, that **they felt a deep need to find something to boast about**, as if this might lift them up in the eyes family and friends. It would explain why they had given up so much for (seemingly) so little! And so, they fixed their thoughts on the glory that was awaiting them. Not only would they boast about *the Kingdom of Heaven*, but they would boast about their position and who held the *highest honour* in that Kingdom. After all, that's how *honour-shame* societies worked.

Surely, Jesus' response is not what the disciples were expecting! (Read vv 2- 3)

² He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. ³ And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

It's difficult for us, in the 21st century, to grasp just how incredibly unusual this act was, particularly if we're not familiar with *honour-shame* societies...so, let's go through it step by step.

The first thing to note is that Jesus deliberately chose a *little* child (the Greek word is **paidion**, the diminutive of **pais**) to stand in the midst of the disciples. In *honour-shame* based cultures, children had very little *intrinsic* value, and a “little child” had no value. That’s because a child’s value *developed over time*, as the child was increasingly able to contribute to the family honour. In fact, *if, at any point, the child brought dishonour to the father*, the father had the legal right to dispose of that child by selling it into slavery or even killing it. What was uppermost in a father’s mind was not whether his child was happy, or secure, or was learning how to live a moral life, but **whether the child could eventually bring honour to the family**. (This is why, in ancient honour-shame cultures, *boys* were more favoured than *girls*! Family honour was often accomplished, for example, when a *young man* participated in a military victory, or advanced through the ranks of official society, or was noted for some great service to the village. Girls stayed at home!) Remember—in an *honour-shame* based culture, **the highest good was to bring public honour to the family**. (Of course, in many modern *honour-shame* cultures, like China or Japan, girls now have almost as many avenues as boys to bring honour to the family. This has certainly raised their value!)

It’s also important to note, here, that **God never intended that ancient Israel become an *honour-shame* based culture!** As the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy make clear, God called Israel to be ‘set apart’ from the surrounding cultures, to live *differently* to them. Indeed, the Laws given to Moses on Mt. Sinai set up a society of mutual respect in which **all of Israel’s children were given an intrinsic and fundamental value**, not based on what they did but by virtue of the fact that they were all “*created in God’s image*”. Regardless of your age or gender, **everyone in Israel was equally considered to be “a child of God”!**

It was for this reason that no Jew ever needed to prove his/her worth, or to compete against another Jew over *who was the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven*. As God’s children, everyone knew that they were equally secure in the hands of their **Heavenly Father**. **They knew that He was their shepherd; they knew that His angels constantly watched over them; they knew that He would provide for their needs**. This, in fact, is what had always set the Hebrew

people apart from the nations! As God's children, everyone in Israel had a keen sense of their worth and value.

This, I believe, was a major driving force behind Jesus' comments in today's text! As I said earlier, the values of the *honour-shame based cultures* that surrounded Israel had, over time, been rubbing off on her! **Israel forgot God's value system** and started treating her own children with the same indifference and disdain as in the surrounding nations. In fact, in some places in Israel, *infanticide* was even being practiced, mixed with the worship of foreign idols.

Now, we can better understand why Jesus stood a *little* child in the midst of the disciples. And as He did this, He gave them an ultimatum: ***“Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!”***

The word 'change' means 'convert'! Basically, Jesus was telling His disciples that, in order to follow Him, they had no choice but to **convert back to** the ancient Hebrew way of seeing the world; the way God had originally intended! That meant that *they needed to see each other ...and treat each other... as children; God's children!* Only by returning to this fundamental understanding of their worth as God's children could Jesus' followers...His new Israel... resist the unhealthy influences of self-promotion and competition that were coming from the surrounding *honour-shame* based cultures.

This leads us to a better understanding of what Jesus meant when, in **verse 4**, He introduces the idea of **humility**.

“Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

How would you define humility? According to the Apostle Paul, Humility is having a right view of ourselves in relation to God and others and acting accordingly. As he said to the Philippians, ***“Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”*** (Phil. 2:3–4).

John Dickson, in his book “Humilitas” (Latin for humility), says this: *“Humility does not mean humiliation. Nor does it mean being a doormat for others...*

Humble people lower themselves.” In fact, says Dickson, “*I would go so far as to say that it is impossible to be humble in the real sense without a healthy sense of your own worth and abilities.*” (Dickson, John (2011-06-07). *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership* (Kindle Location 170). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.)

What is important to realise, here, is that, way back in the Garden of Eden, **human beings were, by nature, humble!** That’s how they were created! They were confident of their own value and worth before God! And that meant that Adam and Eve had no need to boast or to prove anything. Because they *always felt* honoured, *always felt* loved, *always felt* appreciated and respected, they could step out and serve each other without shame. They could give of themselves in pure humility, since they had nothing to fear...and nothing to lose!

So, here’s a question for you: If God created us to be, by nature, humble, **what went wrong with the human race?** I mean, how did all the *honour-shame* based cultures of the world ever begin?

You don’t have to look very far in the Bible to see when they began! In Genesis chapter 4, a man named Lamech (the world’s first polygamist) boasts to his wives: “***Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. ²⁴ If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.***” In other words, the *honour-shame* cultures of the world began straight after *the Fall!* With the arrival of **sin** came insecurity-- people felt unsure about their intrinsic value and worth. That meant that human beings needed to find external markers to make them feel good about themselves—things that would bolster their feelings of worth.

Once you understand that, you’ll also understand why, in most societies of the world, **humility has always carried negative connotations!** In honour-shame cultures, humility is associated with weakness and shame! Indeed, this is the way most of the societies of the world still operate! If you bring shame on me, I’ll kill you! You say something bad about my family, or my tribe, or my country, and I’ll make sure you pay! Retaliation and revenge is often linked to honour-shame cultures—(You’ve heard of honour killings?) Isn’t that one of the chief reasons why there is so much war in the Middle East right now? In Syria or Iraq, Gaza or Israel, Libya or Egypt, Ukraine or Russia; **everyone, it seems, is**

standing on their honour! Few are willing to humble themselves and come to the negotiation table. Negotiation, in fact, is a sign of weakness. Too often, the different players try harder to prove that they aren't weak! And all the while, the body count of innocent by-standers increases daily. That, in turn, adds more insecurity, which fuels more anger, more taunts, and more violence! It's the *honour-shame paradigm* going to its logical conclusion!

Interestingly, even though you see it today, **this was never to have been the way of life in Israel!** Just look at the Old Testament! Time and again, *humility* is mentioned as one of the most highly-valued of all character traits.

- Psalm 25:9—"God opposes the proud but guides the humble in what is right."
- Psalm 149:4—"He crowns the humble with salvation."
- Proverbs 11:2—"With humility comes wisdom."
- Proverbs 15:33—"Humility comes before honour."

Humility is having a right view of ourselves in relation to God and others which flows from the security that comes from being a child of God!

Now, as I was saying earlier: **Jesus' mission was to create a new Israel, made up of ordinary people who were humbly secure in God's love.** In this way, Jesus would deliberately subvert the influences of the *honour-shame* cultures that surrounded Him. His followers would see themselves as God's "little children" ...each being equally precious to God and equal inheritors of His Kingdom. Of utmost importance would be *their deep feeling of total security* that would free them to be other-person centred.

Of course, Jesus couldn't lead His followers into any experience that He, Himself, didn't already know! And that's why, as we read the Gospels, the consistent impression is that **Jesus was totally secure in the father's love!** He knew, without doubt, that He was a child of God! He heard the voice from heaven saying, ***"This is my son; in Him I am well-pleased!"*** It was out of this deep sense of security that He could give Himself to the world on the cross, as an offering for sin! As Philippians 2 makes clear, Jesus ***"humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!"*** He gave His life for us because **He felt secure** in the Father's love.

And this brings me to one final point concerning today's passage—it's that old familiar word, "*skandalon*"! **Skandalon occurs six times in today's text** (3 times as a noun and 3 times as a verb). As we've seen before, **skandalon** means "*offense*". Whereas, in past passages, Jesus was the *skandalon*...the offense....in today's passage, Jesus warns His disciples not to become a *skandalon*. They were not to become an *offense*!

Look at verse 6- Jesus says to them, "***Whoever offends one of these 'little ones' who believe in me, it would be better for him if a millstone was hung around his neck and he be drowned in the depths of the sea.***"

Becoming a *skandalon*...an offense (particularly to the '*little ones who believe in Jesus*') **is so serious to Jesus** that He goes on in verses 8-10 to add these words: "*If your hand or foot offends, cut it off...And if your eye offends, gouge it out...*"

Now, these verses are difficult! But I think they are clear! I mean, if the bulk of today's passage is an encouragement to *humility* ...to becoming weak and vulnerable like '*little children*' ..., then it follows that **anyone who takes advantage of that vulnerability is in big trouble with God**. What Jesus is acutely aware of is that the Gospel has a powerfully humbling effect, as it restore us to the way we were created to be! That being the case, then woe to anyone who uses the Gospel in an evil manner, to boost their own power over these "little ones".

It makes me think of all those priests charged with child abuse! Woe to them! It also makes me think of those Television preachers who use their rhetoric to take advantage of the poor. Woe to them! In the end, may we all take heed of Jesus' warning!

So, we come back to my opening question: Are you a secure person? Do you feel secure in the Father's love and in the unfathomable demonstration of that love shown to us by Jesus on the cross? That's the essential question for us all, because that's the only way we can truly become Christ's disciples! That's the only way we will ever follow Him in deep *humility*, joining Him as He restores the world to the original ways of His Father! **Otherwise**, out of our own

insecurity, will we only serve to undermine Him and His work by falling into the *honour-shame* games played by this fallen world!

Let us not forget what Jesus said: ***“Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”***

Let's pray!