That Ain’t the Easter Bunny

On the Parody of the Kingdom and the Children Who Know Their Father

Rob Massie

Rob Massie Sermon Collection, Volume 2: The Lion Who Is a Lamb, Chapter 18

Sermon preached September 8, 2024

The Parody

There is a sketch I rewatch every Easter. Two small children are bouncing in the yard waiting for the Easter Bunny, and when he climbs out of the car, he is six-foot-four and looks like some demonic refugee from a horror film. The children flee, screaming the same line over and over: *That ain’t the Easter Bunny! That ain’t the Easter Bunny!*

And I cannot stop laughing. I cannot. But the laughter has a serious edge to it. *There is a parody that can exist of what God has actually called us to be.* The traditions we erect, the worship that becomes the work of our own hands, can become something that looks the part on the outside but has none of the substance of what God meant us to be. The culture of Christendom can shape itself into a storyline that we begin to believe, *and we forget the beginning of it*. We forget the moment when the Lord first received us, when we first felt the release of forgiveness, when we first turned just slightly toward him and felt the deliverance that came from being met. We grow *wise* in the Lord. We learn the routines. The simple things and the simple deliverances begin to fade. We acquire traditions. We get exacting. We hold grudges a little longer than we used to. Forgiveness becomes a little harder to extend than it once was.

And what I want to walk through today is *the kernel* of what God has actually called us to be: the kernel that defies the parody that Western Christianity has, in places, slipped into. This is

not an indictment of every Christian in every place. *This is an indictment of me first*, because this is how I grew up. When you grow up in church (whether your parents shaped it, or your pastors, or your Sunday school teachers) *you can start to believe your own press*. You can start to believe you are a pretty good kid. You can start to think you are *better* than. You can start to imagine yourself as a king's kid in a way that means *privileged*, when what Jesus actually means by *children of the king* turns out to be something almost the opposite.

The Children of the King Are Exempt

Let me walk back into Matthew 17, because what follows in Matthew 18 depends on what happens at the end of 17. The tax collectors from the temple come to Peter and ask whether Jesus pays the temple tax. Peter, instinctively defending his rabbi, says *of course he does*, even though they had never discussed it. He comes back into the house, and Jesus, sensing the situation, asks him:

"'What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?' Peter said to Him, 'From strangers.' Jesus said to him, 'Then the sons are free'" (Matthew 17:25–26).

The children of the king are exempt. That is the line that hangs over the next chapter. And then Jesus, characteristically gracious, tells Peter to go down to the sea, cast in a hook, and pull out the first fish, which will have a coin in its mouth for the temple tax, *so as not to offend* (Matthew 17:27). The temple of God does not need Peter's money. *God is the provider, not the provided-for.* The lesson is filed away in the disciples' minds.

So when the next chapter opens with the disciples asking Jesus *who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?* (Matthew 18:1), the question is not abstract. They have just learned that

the sons of the king have privileges strangers do not have. Now they are wondering what other privileges they may have inherited. *Who, then, is the greatest among us?*

"Become Like Children"

Jesus' answer is one of the most counterintuitive moves in the Gospels. He calls a child (a toddler, probably) over to himself. He sets the child in the middle. And he says:

"Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3–4).

Both the entrance into the kingdom *and* what sustains and characterizes you as a child of God is *the humility of a child*. Not the humility you put on as an adult who is trying to be humble. The humility of a child who has not yet learned to defend himself. The full-hearted dependency on an authority called *Father*. The willingness to come when called. The expectation, when wounded, that the parent will make it better.

My granddaughter recently fell down. The very first word out of her mouth was *Mommy*. Not *Help*. Not *Ouch*. *Mommy*. She was reaching, by reflex, for the one she knew would make it better. *That* is what Jesus is naming. Are you children of the king? Then give your trust to the Father. He will provide, just as he provided the tax-coin from the fish's mouth for Peter.

And notice the verb Jesus uses: *humble himself*. That is *deliberate*. The humility is not passive. It is a posture you *take*: despite the things you have learned, despite the wisdom you have accumulated, despite the years. *The older I get, the wiser I get,* and the less I feel like I need to go to the throne of grace for help in time of need. *I'll figure it out. I can work this out.* But the kingdom is not for those who have figured it out. The kingdom is for those who can still come to

the Father the way my granddaughter came to her mother: *Mommy. Daddy. Father.* Not strategy. *Reflex.*

Recall what Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

Same logic. *You must be born again.* You cannot enter the kingdom by accumulating credentials. You can only enter the kingdom by starting over as a child. By coming back to the beginning. By becoming small.

The Lion Who Turned Out to Be a Lamb

Now hold that picture next to a passage in Revelation. Because the same upside-down logic that governs the kingdom in Matthew 18 governs the throne room in Revelation 5.

John is in the throne room. There is a scroll in the right hand of the one seated on the throne, sealed with seven seals. And the question goes out: *who is worthy to open the scroll and loose its seals?* (Revelation 5:2). No one in heaven, no one on earth, no one under the earth is found worthy. John begins to weep. And then one of the elders says:

"Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals" (Revelation 5:5).

The Lion has prevailed. Don't you love the prevailing of the Lion? We all gravitate to lions. We get tattoos of lions. We name companies after lions. We name sports teams after lions. *Nobody* names anything after lambs, unless you are a Christian and you understand the symbolism. *People are going to think you're a little funny if you've got a lamb on your arm. But if you've got a lion, Oh, man, you're a man.* That is the way the Gentile imagination works. Power. Strength. Dominance. The Lion.

But John, hearing *Lion,* turns to look, and Scripture says what he saw was something different from what he heard:

> And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. (Revelation 5:6)

The Lion has prevailed. John looks. And what he sees is *a Lamb. Slain.* With *seven horns* (all power) and *seven eyes* (all wisdom). The Lion was, in fact, the slain Lamb. The two were always the same. *The power of the Gentiles is spun on its head in the upside-down kingdom of God.* Within this kingdom, apparent weakness is where God's strength is found. The Lion that prevails is the Lamb that bleeds.

Paul knows this. When he was pleading with God to deliver him from his thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan that was buffeting him, three times he asked the Lord to take it away, and three times the Lord answered:

> "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

I am preaching to myself right now. The night before this message I sat around a fire with a group of men from this assembly and named, out loud, the fears I have been carrying. *My strength is made perfect in weakness.* If we will embrace weakness, really embrace it, we can expect that God will show up and make the difference in our lives. But the characteristics of the kingdom are not the characteristics of bravado and power and authority in the traditional sense. They are the characteristics of the Lamb.

The Greatest Commandment Is the One That Costs Us

Watch how Jesus develops this through Matthew. In the Sermon on the Mount, he had said:

"Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19).

And he had concluded:

"For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

Now when the Pharisees later come to test him, asking which is the great commandment, he answers:

> 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:37–40)

Put the two passages side by side. To be great in the kingdom is to do the commandments, and the chief of the commandments is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. The greatness Jesus is naming is not a greatness of position. It is a greatness of love that costs you something. And the righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is not a higher bar set at the door of the kingdom. It is exactly the opposite. The scribes and Pharisees set the bar so high that only the righteous could get in. The upside-down kingdom removes the filter altogether and instead opens the door wide (whoever wishes, let him come) and then once people are inside, they begin to be transformed by the love they receive.

That is why, in Matthew 18, the very next thing Jesus says after *humble yourself as a child* is this:

"Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me" (Matthew 18:5).

First, the way *into* the kingdom is through humility, becoming like a child. Then, *inside* the kingdom, the life of the kingdom is *receiving others*. The greek phrase *in My name* means *as though that child were Me*. *Receive that child as if you were receiving Jesus himself.* And the *child* in question is not just literal children. The image of the child is being used to point to *anyone*, from the oldest to the youngest in the assembly, who needs to be received in the spirit of welcome rather than filtered at the door.

Emmanuel: God With Us, Still

And here is where it gets weight. If Christ were here with us today, *in the flesh*, the way he was with the disciples, every one of us would defer to him. He would walk in this room. We would all sit down. *I've got a word*, he would say. *Say on, Lord.* We would set aside our own songs, our own words, our own contributions. We would give him the floor. We would *defer*.

That was the case when he was bodily present. *Emmanuel, God with us* (Matthew 1:23). But what about now, in his bodily absence? What about *now*?

The answer is in Matthew 18:5. *Receive a child in my name.* In other words: *in the flesh-and-blood absence of Jesus, his presence is now mediated to us through the children of the kingdom around us*. The poor saint sitting next to you in the pew. The stranger who walked in this morning. The brother you have known for thirty years and whose company you might be tempted to take for granted. *That person is the one through whom Emmanuel still meets you.* Receive that person *as you would receive Jesus*.

“When Did We See You?”

And nowhere does this come into sharper focus than in the parable Jesus tells in Matthew 25, the *very last* major teaching he gives in the Gospel of Matthew before his arrest. *The sheep and the goats.* The Son of Man returns in his glory. All the nations are gathered. He separates the sheep from the goats. And to the sheep he says:

> Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me. (Matthew 25:34–36)
>
> Now hear the response of the sheep. They do not recognize themselves in the description.
>
> Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” (Matthew 25:37–39)

When did we? They were not *aware*, all the time, of the presence of the Lord in those they served. They served out of love, and only at the end did they discover *who they had actually been serving*. The King answers:

“Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Matthew 25:40).

Notice how Jesus is *still* on the theme of *least and great* that ran all the way back through chapters 5 and 18 and 20. *Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to Me.* The least of these is where the King has been hiding.

And here is what that should reshape in us. When we are singing songs and the goosebumps rise on our arms and the Spirit is moving in this room, *yes*, that is the manifest presence of God among his people. *That is easy to be aware of.* What is harder to be aware of is the presence of God in *the naked, the hungry, the imprisoned, the stranger*. The ones who need. The ones we walk past on our way to the better seats. *Help us be aware of your presence, Lord, not just here in the singing, but out there in the hurting.*

The Millstone

And then comes the warning that should sober every one of us. Matthew 18:6:

"But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matthew 18:6).

Now I am not much of a water man. I can be in a pool where I see the bottom and I am fine. But start telling me about *depths* (submarine-level depths, Titanic depths, where the water crushes steel) and my imagination runs away with me.

Once, years ago, I was out on a small boat twenty miles offshore with a group of friends. A hurricane was several hundred miles away, but the entire surface of the sea was already churning, *the cauldron of the deep was bubbling*. I was the smallest man on the boat by a good margin, and the dinghy we were on rose and dropped through swells that could have swallowed us. My imagination ran. *If we go over, how long would it take to disappear?* That kind of fear.

And here, in Matthew 18:6, Jesus invokes exactly that kind of fear. *A millstone around the neck.* And he is not talking about a small grindstone. The Greek phrase here is *mylos onikos*, *donkey millstone*, the heavy upper millstone that was so massive a donkey had to turn it. Hundreds of pounds of stone. *Hang that around your neck and be cast into the depths of the sea.*

You would hit critical depth in seconds. There would be no struggle. There would be no time for the rescue.

And Jesus says: *it would be better for that man* than for him to face what is coming. The judgment Jesus reserves for those who cause his little ones to stumble is heavier than the deepest sea.

Now I want to be honest. I do not preach a lot of judgment in this assembly. I lean toward grace by temperament. But the one category of person God reserves his sternest judgment for is *the one who damages his little ones and persists in damaging them without repentance*. The bullies. The systemic abusers. The leaders who weaponize their position. The ones who present a parody of the kingdom and crush other people in the process. *Those* are the ones the millstone is for. And the warning is not to terrify the careful but to wake the careless. At any moment, those who have hurt others can turn and repent. The consequences may linger, broken relationships may not be repaired, but the door of repentance does not close. *The millstone is reserved for those who refuse to turn.*

The Bride and Her Parody

And here I want to take you all the way out to the end of the book, to Revelation, because the entire homiletical argument of this chapter is condensed into two women John sees in vision.

The first woman is *the Bride*. The Lamb's wife. The one Paul says Christ has *cleansed by the washing of water with the word* and is preparing to present *without spot or wrinkle* (Ephesians 5:26–27). She is the consummation of everything God has been doing across the entire arc of Scripture. She is united with the Lamb in purpose. She has been transformed by the love she has received.

But the second woman is a *parody* of the first. She rides a scarlet beast. She is gold and pearls and purple. She has a chalice in her hand. And the chalice is full, not of grape wine, but of blood:

> And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. (Revelation 17:5–6)

She is *drunk on the blood of the little ones she has crushed under her feet*. She is bold. She is brash. She thinks she is the bride, but she is the parody. She looks the part. She has the trappings. She has gold and crimson and ceremony. But what fills her chalice gives her away. *Babylon is the bride's parody.*

And in Revelation 18, the call goes out:

"Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues" (Revelation 18:4).

Come out of her, my people. Babylon is about to fall. Do not be partakers of her sins.

And then watch what the strong angel does:

"Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, 'Thus with violence the great city Babylon shall be thrown down, and shall not be found anymore'" (Revelation 18:21).

The same millstone. The same millstone Jesus invoked in Matthew 18:6 against those who cause little ones to stumble shows up again at the judgment of Babylon. *Because Babylon*, the parody bride, *is the institutional crystallization of what Jesus warned about in Matthew 18*. When the religious system causes the little ones to stumble, when it crushes the children of God

under its own ceremony, when it presents itself as the Bride while drinking the blood of the saints, *the millstone is hung around its neck and the parody sinks*.

God takes very seriously what we do to one another *in his name*. When we abuse his people, and *everyone is his people*, God is particularly peeved. When we represent his kingdom as a parody, when we cause the unbeliever, looking in, to say, *That ain't it. That's not what they say it is*; *that is when the millstone-bearing angel begins his approach*.

The City We Are Coming To

But that is not the city we are walking toward. The city we are walking toward is the *Bride*, not Babylon. Revelation 21:

"Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea" (Revelation 21:1).

No more sea. Do you know why there is no more sea? Because the sea, from Genesis 1:2 onward, has been the symbol of *chaos*. *The earth was without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep.* The deep, *the sea*, is the place of formlessness, of disorder, of the powers that drown what God has built. And in the new creation, *the sea has been removed*. Isaiah said:

"The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt" (Isaiah 57:20).

Read that, and then read the next sentence of Revelation 21:

> Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor

crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

(Revelation 21:2–4)

No more death. No more mourning. No more crying. No more pain. No more anxiety. No more fear. No more uncertainty. No more doubt. *No more potential for being abused by bullies.* Only children of God, loved by the Father, loving one another, having given themselves to one another. *That* is the city we are walking toward. *That* is the kingdom Jesus has been describing all along.

Welcome to the Kingdom of God

So how do we live as people of the bride in a culture full of parodies? The night Jesus was betrayed gives us the model. *On the very last night, knowing what was coming*, he girded on the servant's robe, knelt, and washed the feet of his disciples, *including the disciple who was about to betray him*. And then he said:

"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:14).

That is the kingdom in practice. The Master with a towel. The King on his knees. The Lion who is the Lamb. The Lamb whose throne is a cross. *Be that.* In your home. At your work. In this assembly. With the stranger who walked in this morning. *Wash feet.*

I will be honest with you. I am approaching fifty-seven, and I still find I need heart-surgery. I need my own heart exposed. I need to become like a little child again. I need that soft baby skin again, because what I have right now is the thick hide of a pachyderm. Years of disappointment and self-protection have built scar tissue on top of scar tissue. There is an old saying: *I'm like an elephant. I never forget*. To which someone once replied: *there ain't going to be no elephants in heaven*. And whatever your theology of elephants is, I think the substance of

the reply is correct. *There will be no thick-skinned, long-memoried people in heaven*. Only newborn babies. Only children. Only sons and daughters who have come to the Father, trusting him and serving others the way they have seen the King do.

That ain't the Easter Bunny. *That is the resurrection life of Jesus.* That is new creation. *Be that.* Not just here in the singing. *Out there in the world.* Where the watching ones can look at us and say, the way Paul says they will, *God is among them of a truth* (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:25). Where the parody dies and the bride emerges. Where the lion turns out to be the lamb, and the lamb turns out to be enough.

Welcome to the kingdom of God. Welcome to new creation. Let's be new creatures in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit.