

Greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven
Matthew 18:1-6
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Matthew 18 continues the section of Christ's training of the disciples for their future ministry. The focus of Matthew 17:14-27 was faith and now the focus will be humility. Matthew 18 is the fourth major discourse of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Matthew.

1. The sermon on the mount (5:1-7:29) focused on righteousness
2. The mission discourse (10:1-42) focused on ministry
3. The kingdom parables (13:1-53) focused on the messianic kingdom
4. The discipleship discourse (18:1-19:1) focused on humility
5. The Olivet discourse (24:1-25:46) focused on the second coming of Jesus

In chapter 18, we see how followers of Jesus should function in relation to those in various situations. We must serve those in need, not harm them, and we must pursue forgiveness. The chapter reads as Jesus spoke to the disciples the entire chapter on one occasion. This discourse took place in the town of Capernaum (cf. Mark 9:33-35).

The disciples' question (18:1)

The issue of "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" is also found in Mark 9:33-37 and Luke 9:46-48. Matthew includes more of the words that Jesus spoke about this than the other Gospels.

Mark 9 informs us that the disciples had been discussing the topic while they were traveling and Jesus waited to ask them about this once they arrived at the destination in Capernaum, "*What were you discussing on the way? But they fell silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest.*" Luke 9:47 adds that Jesus asked this question because He knew "*what they were thinking in their heart.*"

This appears to be different from Matthew's account. However, it is not hard to harmonize them if we consider them all to be accurate. Jesus knew their thoughts, knew about their discussion, and asked them about it. Their initial response was silence, followed by their willingness to come forth with their question.

There is no specific event that might have led to their discussion about who would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus had already taught that there are some who will be least in the kingdom of heaven and some who will be great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:19). Jesus had also recently spoken of the coming kingdom and the restoration of all things (Matthew 16:27-28; 17:11). So the subject of the kingdom was on their mind.

It is possible that the question of greatness in the kingdom may have come from the selection of Peter, James and John to ascend the mountain for the transfiguration. While Jesus instructed those three to not tell anyone what they had seen on the mountain until after His resurrection (Matthew 17:9), the others would know that they had been left behind. Conversely, the three who were selected may have a sense that they were privileged in a way the others were not. This sense of rivalry may also be seen in Matthew 20:20-21, where the mother of James and John ask for her sons to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in the kingdom. This request triggered the other disciples, *“and hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers”* (Matthew 20:24).

The theme of the failure of the disciples' faith persists (17:20, 23). After Jesus teaches about His coming murder, the disciples argue (Luke 9:46) about their place in the kingdom. In spite of Jesus' words regarding the requirement of the denial of self to follow Him (Matthew 16:24), the disciples are concerned about themselves. While three of them saw Jesus glorified, they remained interested in the glorification of themselves. They lacked the faith to accept what Jesus had taught and to apply that to themselves, trusting God for their future.

Reward in the kingdom of heaven is not zero-sum, where whatever is gained by one person is necessarily lost by another. God's infinite power and nature is not limited by resources. Greatness is not a competition and we have little understanding of all that is in store for God's people.

Jesus' answer (18:2-5)

Jesus called a child to Himself as a form of visual illustration to make His point. The age of the child is undefined in all three Gospels, as the word could mean any age under puberty. Yet the child was at least old enough to be called to come to Jesus. Also, he was young enough to be able to be held in the arms of Jesus (Mark 9:36). Some have speculated that the child might have been Peter's, assuming that the house they were in belonged to him (Mark 9:33), but this cannot be known.

As Jesus put the child before the disciples, He taught them about humility. A child was regarded by the people of the time (in many cultures) as inferior to adults. Children were far from doted over, and were not considered with the deference that adults received. Women gave birth to many more children than what we are familiar with in our day. Also, children died far more frequently than children die today. Children were used as a means of income for the family when they attained an age where their labor would be productive. Therefore, the use of a child as an example of humility would be more impactful for the disciples than for our society.

As was His typical means of emphasis, He prefaced His words with *“truly I say to you.”* His shocking statement *“unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven”* was the complete antithesis of what they had been discussing. Apart from becoming like children, they would not only not be great in the kingdom of heaven, they would not even enter the kingdom of heaven.

There are certainly traits of children that Jesus could not have been referencing, such as their immaturity, foolishness, and selfishness. Children are not innocent and exhibit aspects of self-will even at a very young age. The sense of the purity of young children is a social perspective, not a biblical view, as theologically speaking, *“there is none righteous, not even one”* (Romans 3:10).

The specific trait that Jesus referred to regarding children is humility. *“Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”* (18:4). Jesus spoke of referring to children who were able to be taken into His arms, or those who are humble in a variety of ways that adults struggle with:

1. Children had no social status. The Jewish society did not give them the privileges that were given to adults. Children accept their station in life without complaint. Adults are concerned with their prestige in relation to others. They seek to elevate their standing through money, possessions, fame, titles, degrees, privileges and even when they are dead, their legacy. Small children never think of having their name in lights or on a building.

2. Young children have no concern about the future. They do not plan, for they trust others to provide for them. This dependence is unlike adults who worry about what may befall them. The disciples were told *“do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”* (Matthew 6:25). Our tendency is to be anxious about everything, but particularly about the things that are most basic to life itself.

It is in this sense of trust that connects faith with the kingdom of heaven. If we do not trust our Heavenly Father, as a young child trusts their parents, then this lack of faith will prevent us from entering the kingdom of heaven. True belief in God involves a child-like faith.

An element of such faith is the lack of appetite for personal glory. Rather than seeking to be the greatest, we are called by Jesus to humbly lose our lives for Christ's sake. *"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"* (Matthew 16:24-26).

The question the disciples asked was answered, but not directly. They asked who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and Jesus answered how greatness in the kingdom of heaven is achieved. The path toward greatness in the kingdom of heaven is humility. This then parallels Matthew 16:25, for as the apparent paradox of the one wishing to gain his life will lose it and the one wishing to lose his life for the sake of Christ will find it, so the desire for greatness comes from humility. In other words, one cannot desire to be great for their own sake. Rather they must lose their personal ambition for the sake of Christ, and adopt His desires for themselves. True humility does not come from self-exaltation. *"How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?"* (John 5:44).

Jesus had previously spoken of the exalted position of children, *"I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants"* (Matthew 11:25). The humble received the revelation of God and the humble and meek shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5).

Humility was the attitude of Christ that we must follow. *"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 2:3-5).

The haughty and proud will be thwarted, *"all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE"* (1 Peter 5:5; cf. James 4:6). The singular factor given for greatness in the kingdom of heaven is humility.

Jesus' statement, *"whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me,"* continues the same analogy of the child representing the humble person who is great in the kingdom of heaven. This is confirmed by the qualifier of *"little ones who believe in Me"* in verse 6. He is not arguing for a ministry to children, per se.

The result of humility is that, like children, we will be indiscriminate about the social status of those to whom we relate. We will receive and welcome others who are humbly seeking to follow the Lord. *"Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation"* (Romans 12:16). We will not think ourselves wise for by the grace of God we will see ourselves as God sees us. *"For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith"* (Romans 12:3). Our humility will lead us to consider no class of people to be beneath us.

The opposite of welcoming those who are humble is to harm those who are humble. Jesus depicts a powerful image of judgment upon those who in their pride cause these believers to stumble. *"To stumble"* is set against receiving the one who believes in context. Therefore, to cause a hindrance to a humble little one by not receiving them is to make it more difficult for them to follow Jesus.

This should not be understood as leading one into apostasy, for the victims of the harmful one remain *"little ones who believe in Me."* *"He who believes has eternal life"* (John 6:47). It is only a stumble, not a fall.

The hyperbole of it being *"better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea"* is evidence of the extreme consequences of hindering one of these believers. Drowning was a Gentile method of execution, not a Jewish one. To discourage a disciple of Christ from the exercise of his faith is the evidence of one who rejects Christ.

Certainly, those who are following Christ have a responsibility to receive others who are humbly seeking the Lord. This goes beyond being hospitable for it is done in Christ's name. Also, receiving these ones is receiving Christ Himself. This echoes Matthew 25:40, *"to the extent that you did it to one of the brothers of Mine, even to the least of them, you did it to Me."*

The humble servants of Christ will be moved to embrace whoever desires to follow Jesus Christ. We will seek out those who are humble in faith to involve them with us in the fellowship of believers. They will feel welcomed and quickly become a part of the life of our church.

Conversely, those who are not humble will not embrace the humble and lowly, but rather discourage them. This is the way the Pharisees functioned, about whom Jesus said *“you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.”* (Matthew 23:13). These were hypocrites who professed fidelity to the Law but did not practice it in their lives.

Those who are proud will cause the little ones to stumble by using them for their own benefit. They will use them for their money, like the moneychangers in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13). They will aspire to places of honor and titles of honor (Matthew 23:6-7). Believing that they know best, they make unrighteous demands of men and do nothing to help them (Matthew 23:4). They present themselves in religious practices as a pretense for spirituality (Luke 20:46-47). These types of religious manipulation may be appealing to those who are likewise attracted to external pomposity, but they turn off the humble who desire sincerity over pride.

Conclusion

Young children are perfect examples of Christ-honoring faith. Their humble trust is an example for us as we follow Jesus. Like a child, we can trust our Heavenly Father. *“He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?”* (Romans 8:32).

Humility is the characteristic that defines greatness in the kingdom of heaven. It is not our knowledge, our ministry, or our legacy. If God has freely blessed us with all things, we must never think of ourselves as having achieved any form of greatness. *“For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?”* (1 Corinthians 4:7). We must always keep in mind the grace of God that has delivered us. *“Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God”* (2 Corinthians 3:5).

When we understand the grace of God, we will be forever humble. This will move us to serve others in Christ’s name, regardless of their status in life. Those without humility and who cause barriers to ministry will be judged by the Lord.

Matthew 18:7-14 will expand upon these first six verses of the chapter. The value of humility is seen in the parallel passage of Luke 9:48, *“for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great.”*