



## Who is the Greatest in the Kingdom?

*Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom*

Matthew 18:1-10

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The words that we hear from Jesus this morning are some tough words – strong words. They are words of rebuke, words of warning, words of challenge, but ultimately they are words that are rooted in Christ’s love for His people, in His love for us. I want you to remember that the only audience for these words are his disciples. He is teaching them – not speaking to the crowds as a whole. That is very important to keep in mind as we look at this passage today. It is a passage that begins with a foolish question and a stinging rebuke, one that is meant to emphasize the truth that:

Being Christ’s Disciple Demands True Humility (v. 1-4) Look with me at verses 1-4: “At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:1–4, ESV)

Of all of the moments that Jesus shared with His disciples over the 3 and ½ years that they spent together, this has to be on the list of the most discouraging and disappointing. For the disciples to have the audacity and the foolishness to ask such a question of Jesus: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” – only demonstrated how little they understood Jesus, how little they understood the Kingdom of Heaven, and how little they loved one another. Mark, in fact, tells us that they were arguing about their standing, contending with one another.

To ask this question, it is almost as if the disciples had missed the point of all that Christ had been saying, as if it went in one ear and out the other. Had they not just heard Christ speak about His passion, speak about the cross that He faced in order to inaugurate and bring sinners

into the kingdom. Had He not just said to them: “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day,” (Matthew 17:22–23, ESV) Had he not explained to them: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 16:24–25, ESV) Yet here they were, debating about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, who would have the most juice, who would have the greatest clout, who would be of greatest stature, who would be the man. Let me show you ridiculous this is. When Jesus is revealed in all of His glory and splendor, they want to know “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” and you almost wish that Jesus would say “Me.” He doesn’t do that, but what Jesus does is to answer them in such a way as to roughly and strongly shake them out of their foolishness.

And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus calls a little child and puts that child right in the middle of everything where all can see him and He tells them – “Listen up, unless you turn, unless you repent of this attitude, of this heart of pride and arrogance, and humble yourself you won’t even see the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus is not giving them a pathway to greatness as much as He is pointing out how silly and ridiculous all of this talk is. All this talk of position and of prominence was the pathway to eternal damnation. Do you see it?

The disciples are acting like natural men. Natural men are concerned about position. Natural men are concerned with lording themselves over another. There is to be no pecking order in the Kingdom, no jockeying for position, no scrambling for honor, no pursuit of pre-eminence over another – that belongs to the world. Yes there are different rewards in heaven – but that is not what the disciples are concerned with here. They want to know who is the most important. But this kind of thinking is completely incompatible with the kingdom of heaven, completely incompatible with kingdom citizenship.

Here is the truth -- this is a ridiculous argument and question, but it is one that continues to rage, if not outwardly, at least in the secret places of the heart of almost every single human being. This question is not foreign to us – we have asked it ourselves, we have jockey for prominence in the church ourselves, for position, for influence. And because that is so, we need to hear what Jesus says here. This is as much a lesson for us as it was for the disciples.

Now when Jesus says that the true disciple, the one who is “great” in God’s eyes, is the one that humbles himself like a child, He is not talking about a subjective attitude, not some inherent virtue of humility that is unique to children. Children are seldom humble. He is not talking about a subjective virtue but an objective state. Let me explain. Our view of children in 21st century America where children are often deified and children in the Israel of Jesus’ day is vastly different. Children in those days, except for being a sign of God’s blessing, were not of great account. They lacked power, lacked social standing, were too small to fight, could not lead, and had no worldly wisdom or riches. They were weak, dependant, simple-minded, vulnerable, in desperate need of care and protection. Jesus is saying to the disciples – look this is how you need to see yourself and regard yourself– in the same way that you see this child. Unless you stop with this foolish talk of your greatness and turn and repent and see yourself as you are – that you are not “all that”, that you are a sinner without standing in and of yourself, powerless to save yourself, lacking in true wisdom in yourself, utterly unfit for dwelling in God’s presence, desperately in need of forgiveness, of mercy, and completely reliant upon God’s grace for salvation you will never see the kingdom of heaven.

Beloved, do you see how this goes to the very heart of salvation? Human pride is in complete opposition to divine salvation. God does not save the proud man or woman, does not save the self-reliant, does not save the self-ambitious, does not save the position-seeker, does not save the haughty, does not save the one who would strive to pre-eminence, does not save the self-important. The opposite is true. “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”” (James 4:6, ESV) And again in Psalm 18:27: “For you save a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down.” (Psalm 18:27, ESV)

Listen, the man or woman who is filled with himself or herself, who is filled with self-sufficiency and self-glory is not fit for the kingdom of heaven, is not fit for Christ. God sets Himself in battle array against the proud; He sets Himself in battle order against the proud. God hates pride. A proud man is a self-reliant, self-sufficient, self-satisfied man. A proud man sees himself as above instruction. He is stiff-necked. A proud man or woman steals glory from God, taking credit for what only God can do. A proud man loves being made much of and loves adulation, exalts himself over others. A proud man glories in himself and not in God.

And pride is so offensive to God in the heart of a believer because pride denies the very heart of the gospel and shows a lack of understanding of grace by which Christ's people are saved and the gospel that he professes. Pride in a believer greatly miscalculates the wickedness of the sin from which he was saved, deeply undervalues the price of his redemption, grievously underestimates gratitude he owes to God for His saving mercies, and demonstrates that he has lost all sight of the One who has redeemed him. And that kind of pride destroys the unity of the fellowship of believers and God hates that. That was what was going on with the disciples and that is why Jesus speaks so strongly to them saying in essence: "Unless you repent, you won't even enter the kingdom of heaven." Is not humility one of the great themes of Matthew? It is – 5:2-4; 6:1-6; 7:3-5; 8:8; 10:24-25; 11:25-30.

The truth is that one of the surest marks of true conversion is humility. If we have seen the depth and pervasiveness of our sin, understood the destruction we deserve for our rebellion against the goodness of God, by God's grace been born from above and trusted in the death and resurrection of Christ in our place for our salvation, and are filled with the Holy Spirit, it will be evidenced in true humility. It is that fact that calls into question so many so-called conversions. It is easy to be converted in your actions, in your theology, in your opinions – but from pride and self-exaltation to true humility before God – that is evidence of true conversion. John Calvin said it so well when he said: "That man is truly humble who neither claims any personal merit in the sight of God, nor proudly despises brethren, or aims at being thought superior to them, but reckons it enough that he is one of the members of Christ, and desires nothing more than that the Head alone should be exalted."

So Jesus is basically saying to His disciples – "REPENT. All this talk of position and pecking order is both ridiculous and offensive and has no place in the kingdom of heaven." That is so true. Real greatness in the Kingdom is found in a humility that sees yourself as you are so causes you to see Christ as He is. But Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on and in his words we see that

True Disciples Desire Unity With Other True Disciples and Seek Their Good (v. 5-7) Jesus says in verses 5-7: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, 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. "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!" (Matthew 18:5-7, ESV)

Now what is Jesus saying here? Well the first thing we need to see is that the child, the little ones, to whom Jesus is referring in these verses are not actual children but those who are the children of God by faith. They are the little ones that believe in Him. When Jesus talks about us receiving one another, He is talking about the unity of His people. And that unity depends upon personal humility. Christ's point is that humility in each of us should produce unity among all of us. Without humility there can be no unity, no closeness, no intimacy, no real bond.

When we become small in our own eyes, we cannot look down on other believers, on our fellow Christians, but instead we see them as fellow recipients of grace and mercy. Seeing ourselves as we are by God's grace, frees us to receive others and truly love our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. When Jesus speaks of receiving a child of God, He is talking about taking someone in, deliberately joining someone to yourself, welcoming someone with an open heart in kindness and with tenderness with sincere care for their well-being. Let's just be honest – what is it that keeps us from really receiving other believers and investing our lives in other believers, joining our lives to other believers – is it not pride, self-importance, a sense of superiority to someone else, a sense that we deserve better friends than we have, a sense that we cannot give ourselves away to anyone else because our emotions and our lives are more valuable than theirs and deserve to be protected, a smugness that we alone are trustworthy or virtuous, sense that others just cannot measure up and are not worth it, a pride that refuses to forgive and be restored to the truly repentant, a conceit that refuses to serve someone of a lower station? It is so foolish and arrogant and haughty.

The truth is this. When we see ourselves as we really are. When we are little in our own eyes because we are so unworthy as sinners. When we see our true state apart from Christ and that in spite of what we are and what we have done God has loved us and Christ has redeemed us, we must abandon any thought of our own standing and position and refuse to think of ourselves as better than anyone else without rejecting everything we know about ourselves and our salvation. To look down on others, as if you were better than they, more important, more significant, more to be praised is a terrible kind of hypocrisy.

But a person who knows they have been forgiven much loves much. A person who is overwhelmed with God's mercy and grace to them is too amazed at God's kindness to them to think himself more worthy than someone else. He may every now and then slip into that kind

of thinking, but they know how foolish it is and will repent of such folly. Beloved, when pride is dead, there is no barrier to receiving one another to welcoming one another, to opening your heart to them, of inviting them into the fold with kindness, of sharing life with one another, of investing in life with one another, of encouraging one another and spurring one another on to holiness, of living in harmony and unity with one another and caring for one another's well-being. True humility results in real unity, in receiving one another.

But Jesus is saying even more, is making it even more striking and pointed. This is how serious Jesus takes receiving one another. How we receive one another is how we receive Christ. How we treat one another is how we treat Christ. The church is made up of little ones who receive other little ones. It is made up of disciples who in humility welcome and receive other disciples. That is what Jesus is getting at in verse 5. There is a unity and closeness that we are to pursue because in receiving one another in Christ, we receive Christ and honor Christ Himself. When we welcome a fellow brother or sister in Christ as an honored and true friend, we do the same with Christ.

It's like Paul writes in Romans 15 starting in verse 5: "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." (Romans 15:5-7, ESV) Paul's point is pretty clear. Appealing to the great grace of Christ in receiving us as His own, He is saying: "Just as Christ has received you into His love, into communion with Him, into friendship with Him, into relationship with Him so that God the Father may be praised and glorified, in a like manner, you are to do the same with one another." And doing so gives glory to God.

True disciples pursue unity with other true disciples and they seek their good. And that leaves no room for encouraging one another into sin. That is why He says to His disciples: but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, 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. "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!"

Jesus is speaking here of the great sin of enticing and tripping up, of influencing and leading a child of God in any way that leads him to sin or makes it easier for him to sin. A person who is responsible for leading a child of God into sin is committing an offense not only against that person but also against Christ Himself. And here's how serious it is. Jesus says that it would be better for someone who does such a thing to die a terrible death – having a massive millstone, the massive sort of wheel that would crush grain that weighed hundreds of pounds, roped around his neck and thrown into the deepest sea than to have to face Christ and his discipline in the case of a believer, or His judgment for an unbeliever.

When Jesus says, “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!” What He is saying is this: We live in a fallen world and it is inevitable that temptation to sin will come – that is part of living in fallen world in which men love their sin and hate God and love to see others trapped in sin – there is no escaping the reality of temptation in this world. Temptations are a part of living in this world, but the one who tempts others will not do so with immunity. Those who bring temptation to the child of God, temptations to sin that undermine devotion and faithfulness to Jesus Christ, temptations that undermine trust and reliance upon God and His grace, temptations to sin that damage the soul, temptations to sin that destabilize and weakens kingdom unity, temptations to sin by undermining the Word of God, temptations to disbelieve God's truth or to weaken it by human philosophy or wisdom, temptations to sin that discourage and injure the thoughts and affections of brothers and sisters in Christ – they will not escape God's discipline and punishment.

Jesus' purpose in pronouncing this woe against the world while He is speaking to His disciples privately is for this reason – He is warning His disciples not to act like they were part of the world in opposition to God. He wants His disciples to understand how serious is their responsibility to lead one another away from sin and to Christ, away from sin and unto holiness. It is millstone around the neck serious. It is an enormous crime to tempt another believer into sin and they are not to be guilty of it. The world is filled with temptations and they are not to be part of the problem.

This is a sobering word for us, isn't it? To entice a child of God to sin, to cause them to be drawn away from Christ, is so serious that instant death is preferable to the way that God will deal with that. It makes sense when we think about it. The person that sows temptation in the heart of another is at that moment setting himself against Christ, against that person's soul and

is, at that moment, acting as an instrument of Satan. At that moment they are trading allegiance to Christ for allegiance to Satan. Strong words. Sobering words. Words that, for professing Christians who truly desire to follow Christ, demand reflection.

How do we entice others to sin? You can lead people into sin directly. You can lead them into sin indirectly. You can fail to lead them to righteousness. And you can lead people to sin by failing to be sensitive to the stage of their spiritual maturity.

Leading people to sin directly is soliciting people to engage in gossip, slander, into lying or evil speech, sexual sin, drunkenness, watching what you shouldn't watch, listening to what you should not give an ear, stirring up strife, encouraging them to disobedience, encouraging them to join you in your pride and discontent – there are a million ways that we can be guilty of directly leading people into sin.

Leading people indirectly to sin is when we maybe try to shake someone's confidence in the truth, when we push certain buttons knowing what kind of response we will get, maybe deliberately withholding what they need, maybe closing of your heart to someone, maybe manipulating someone, or trying to cause them to doubt the truthfulness of Scripture.

The failure to lead someone to righteousness is the idea of failing to set an example or a path that someone can follow – maybe if you are a husband, your wife or your kids; if you are an employer, your employees; as a student, other Christian students.

And last, failing to be sensitive to the stage of their spiritual maturity can entice someone to sin even in an act that is not in and of itself sinful. By carelessly flaunting your liberty in Christ in a certain area and participating in an activity that is not itself sin and is perfectly appropriate for a stronger Christian, it is possible to cause weaker brothers and sisters to stumble, to go against conscience and sin. And so the Apostle Paul, for instance, in 1 Corinthians 8:9 can say: "But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." (1



Corinthians 8:9, ESV) In other words, the way you use your freedom should not become a temptation an occasion to entice others into sin.

These are sobering words and important things to consider. JC Ryle says of this text: There is something very fearful in the doctrine here laid down. It ought to stir up within us great searchings of heart. It is not enough that we wish to do good in this world. Are we quite sure that we are not doing harm? We may not openly persecute Christ's servants. But are there none that we are injuring by our ways and our example? It is dreadful to think of the amount of harm that can be done by one inconsistent professor of religion (Christ). He gives a handle to the infidel. He supplies the worldly man with an excuse for remaining undecided. He (stops) the inquirer after salvation. He discourages the saints. He is, in short, a living sermon on behalf of the devil. The last day alone will reveal the wholesale ruin of souls, that "offences" have occasioned in the Church of Christ. One of Nathan's charges against David was, "you have given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme." (2 Sam. 12:14.)

These are strong words. Let them lead to repentance were repentance needs to be pursued ...

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