

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor  
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)  
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834  
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## Matthew 18:1-5      “How to Enter and Be Great in God’s Kingdom”

Intro. The Bible says that there are two phases of every person’s life. There is your mortal, earthly life, and there is life after death that lasts forever and ever. And James 4:14 puts the two in perspective. He says, “For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.” Since your earthly life is just a dot on an endless line, shouldn’t you give more attention to your eternal existence than to your mortal, earthly existence? After your life vanishes away, where will you spend eternity? Will you spend eternity in heaven, in the kingdom of God? Or will you be excluded from God’s kingdom because of sin, pride, and unbelief? And if you are going to heaven, don’t you want to have a good eternal reward? Don’t you want to attain true greatness in that eternal kingdom? After all, eternity is a very long time.

Well in this text of Scripture Jesus tells us how to enter God’s kingdom, and how to be great in God’s kingdom. The Bible teaches that there are quite a few who *think* they are going to heaven, but are not. They are making wrong assumptions about themselves and the way to heaven. Don’t be among them. Listen this morning, and make sure you have taken the steps necessary to enter God’s Kingdom. Then we will talk about how to be great in God’s kingdom. Obviously, you have to enter God’s kingdom before you can be great in God’s kingdom. This text also deals with personal relationships, as does the rest of chapter 18. Jesus would soon leave them and He wanted to make sure that a strong, unified and loving community of believers would spread the gospel in His absence. So first things first. Now v.3 tells us the first step to entering God’s kingdom:

### I. YOU MUST TURN AROUND

There Jesus says, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted . . . , you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” That word “converted” means to turn around. At some point in our lives we need to realize that we are heading in the wrong direction! The Bible says that “all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). We all start off in life going the wrong direction, away from God. At some point you need to realize that you have been doing wrong, and thinking wrong thoughts. Too often we have had a wrong attitude.

Even after being with Jesus for about 3 years, the disciples needed to turn from sinful thinking and actions. Let me explain why. We read in v.1, “At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’” Matthew abbreviates the account of this incident. On a positive note, they believed that Jesus was the Messiah, and that He would set up an earthly kingdom. They hoped it would be soon. But on the downside, we know from Mark 9:34 that the disciples had recently been arguing about who was the greatest among them, or who would have the highest rank in the coming kingdom. They were quite sure that the establishment of the kingdom through Jesus would mean great power and glory for them. After all, they were His chosen apostles. They had sacrificed all to follow Jesus. So instead of seeking a place of service, they sought positions of supremacy above the others.

So the disciples illustrate my first point regarding the need to turn around. So in our text we see:

A. Why You Must Turn Around – Basically they had a sin problem. And what is the middle letter of the word “sin”? It is the word “I”. They had an “I” problem. Jesus had recently been talking about denying self (16:24), but they were only thinking of themselves! And this led to several problems:

1. Proudful Ambition – They were not interested at all in denying themselves, but rather they were interested in prestige and power and honor. Too often we want to be celebrities instead of servants. And so they started wondering out loud who would be the greatest among them in the coming kingdom. Peter probably said that he would be the greatest. He was the leader of the apostles. He was the one who openly confessed that Jesus was the Christ. He had walked on the water, had been on the mount of transfiguration with the Lord, and had even had his taxes paid by means of a miracle. But at least some of the others would not acknowledge that he was the greatest among them. James and John, as members of the inner circle, could have suggested that *they* would be the greatest. John could have claimed he was the disciple that Jesus especially loved, as stated 5 times in the Gospel of John (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). Judas probably reminded them that he was the treasurer of the group (John 13:29), and he was the most important one.

But remember, pride is what caused the angels to be thrown out of heaven, and it will keep us out, if we are not converted from it. Indeed, one major barrier to salvation and spiritual progress is pride. And proudful ambition led to another problem:

2. Jealousy – As Peter, James, John, and Judas all claimed to be the greatest, you can be sure that this caused jealousy in the other disciples. When one is exalted, or if one exalts themselves, jealousy is usually the result. And that leads to another problem:

3. Conflict - Such a quest for power and position will usually lead to competitive conflict that can destroy relationships. When Christians are living for themselves and not for others, then there is bound to be conflict and division (Phil. 2:1ff). Churches face the terrible consequences of conflict when power-hungry groups or individuals within the church are all seeking to dominate and be the greatest. This reminds me of 3 John v.9 which says, “I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us.”

So the disciples were clearly heading in the wrong direction. They had a wrong attitude. It was an attitude filled with pride and arrogance. They were talking about selfishly attaining greatness. They needed to change direction.

Have you come to the place in your life where you realize that you need to turn, or change direction? Your main problem may not be pride or ambition, but any sin can keep you out of heaven. If you are going down the road of drunkenness, or lying, or immorality, or gluttony, or hatred, or stealing, or unbelief, you need to turn around. Have you?

So I hope you have seen why a person needs to be converted.

B. So Turn Around Now! - Jesus said in v.3 that we must be “converted....” Never mind about being great in the kingdom. Jesus first takes us back to how a person *enters* the family of God in the first place. Jesus demands that the disciples turn, or change direction. Likewise, Peter himself later said in Acts 3:19, “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out,....” The disciples needed a change of direction. They needed to turn from this sin of self-exaltation. They needed to be converted from their worldly and selfish ambition, their pride, and their coarse selfishness.

Even so Jesus demands a radical change in our lives. It is not enough to reform and make a slight adjustment. We must come to the place in our lives that we make a 180-degree turn from self-centeredness and sin, and to God.

Now let's suppose you do not give heed to the appeal of Jesus. Suppose you keep going down the same path you are on. We notice also:

C. What Will Happen If You Don't Turn Around – Jesus said in the last of v.3, “unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus clearly warns His followers that if they continue in their present state of mind and heart, each one being eager to be higher than his fellows and to lord it over them, you will be excluded; you not only will not be great in the kingdom, you will not even *enter* the kingdom. And He uses a strong double negative, translated “by no means” (οὐ μὴ). Likewise, Jesus said in Luke 13:3, “unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” If a person does not change their mind and change direction, they will perish in their sin and selfishness. Such a person will absolutely not enter into heaven!

Christ's answer was like a dash of cold water to their self-confidence and pride. In time the disciples would show by their lives that they were true children of God in this regard, but it would take a while. In the meantime, it wasn't long before they continued the argument about who was the greatest among them in chapter 20! (vv.20-28; Luke 22:24).

So you had better make sure you have done what Jesus says in the first part of v.3. But it is not enough to repent and turn around from your sin and selfishness. Jesus gives another necessary step:

## II. YOU MUST BECOME AS A CHILD

Again, we know from Mark's Gospel that the disciples had been arguing about who was the greatest among them. And so to settle their argument, the disciples appealed directly to the Lord. They asked in v.1, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” The disciples waited breathlessly for Jesus to name the greatest man among them. But He bypassed them completely and called a little child to come to Him, right into midst of the disciples. This would serve as a visual aid to make His point. By the way, it seems that Jesus often had little children in His audience. Mothers would bring their children, and they all would hear Him gladly. Or perhaps the chosen child was one belonging to the house in which Christ was staying, probably in Capernaum. And I believe that the child came to Jesus without hesitation. Jesus loved little children, and they loved Him, for He was kind and gentle. Mark 9:36 tells us that Jesus took the child “in his arms.” And Luke adds (9:47) that the child was then placed “by his side,” no doubt right in the midst of the disciples who had gathered around Jesus. Picture in your mind this little child, surrounded by all these “big” men.

Now using the child to get His point across, He said in the last of v.3 that we must become as little children (*paidion*). Likewise, Jesus said in Mk. 10:15, “Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it” (cf. Lk. 18:17). Now the Lord is not saying that that you must revert back to your childhood in some unusual fashion, or that you are to become juvenile in your actions in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. We are not to be *childish*, but *childlike*. This is clear from the context. For example, in v.4 we see one of the childlike qualities we should have. First, in order to enter God's Kingdom, you must:

A. Be Humble Like a Child – Jesus said in v.4, “Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” It is especially humility that the Savior emphasizes in this passage. Children have low rank, and they take the lowest positions, especially

the last child in the family! And young children rarely boast, especially among adults. They don't have much of a choice. Children are very much aware of their own weakness. Can you imagine a 3-year-old going around bragging that they are the greatest fighter in town? I've known some young children that can put up a pretty good fight. In fact, I've known some who can kick and bite! But they are in reality no match for us adults. We can put a child in their place when we want to. A young child may brag that their daddy is big and tough, but they know their own weakness, and therefore they are not prone to pride. Even so Jesus says that we too must be humble.

So why is child-like humility so important to enter God's kingdom? Well, it takes humility to be saved. You have to admit to God that you have sinned. It takes humility to admit that you aren't good enough to save yourself. Jesus said in Mt. 5:3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." You have to recognize your own spiritual poverty to be blessed. Yet some dear people are working so hard, trying to earn their way to heaven. Listen, just as a child cannot save themselves, you cannot save yourself. So stop trying!

I read that there is a cardinal rule taught in water safety and rescue courses: Never try to save a person who is trying to save himself. The rescuer is to swim out, keep his distance, wait until the endangered person has no strength left, then move in for the rescue. Waiting until that person is totally dependent is the key to a safe rescue.<sup>1</sup>

So you must humbly acknowledge that salvation is a gift that we cannot earn or deserve. Paul said in Eph. 2:8-9 that we are saved by grace, and "not of works, lest anyone should boast." Listen friend! You don't come strutting into the family of God. You need to humbly ask Jesus to have mercy on you and save you. Then, and only then, you will be in a new family when you walk out of this building today.

Humility is also important in our service to God and others. Humility is promoted when we always remember that our abilities and gifts ultimately come from God. Yet by nature we tend to be self-reliant. This seems to be especially true of men. So there is another childlike quality that we need to enter God's Kingdom:

B. Be Dependent Like a Child - Babies and children are absolutely dependent upon someone else—their mother and their father. Their dependence is due to the fact that they are weak, very limited in strength and knowledge, and they usually do not deny this.

Even so we need to come to the place in our lives where we admit that we're totally dependent upon God. As long as you depend upon yourself, and your own good works to get you to heaven, you will instead miss heaven altogether. You must realize that you are totally dependent upon your Heavenly Father. Furthermore, there are so many who think they can handle life on their own, but they really can't. And if you think you can handle anything, then watch out! God may allow you to face something that you absolutely can't handle without Him.

By the way, do you want to know how much you are dependent upon God? It can be measured by how much you pray. Little prayer betrays self-confidence, and little dependence upon God. But much prayer indicates that you are conscious of your dependence upon God.

There is yet another childlike quality that is important to enter into God's Kingdom:

C. Be Trusting Like a Child – Children are so trusting. When our son Andrew was two years old, he loved to play football with me with a Nerf football. He would run with the football, and I would tackle him. Well one day he was not eating his food, so I told him that some cornbread on his plate was "football" cornbread. Guess what? He ate it! How believing and trusting he was.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Stanley, *The Wonderful Spirit Filled Life*.

Now the Bible teaches that we are saved, not by works, but by faith. We must not trust in ourselves, in what *we* can do, but trust in Christ, who died for our sins on the cross.

Have you trusted in Christ for the gift of eternal life? Have you humbly acknowledged your need to Him? This is a call for self-examination. Judas should have given heed to this call.

So I have shared with you what you must do to *enter* God's eternal Kingdom. You must repent of your sin, turn around, and humbly trust in Christ as your Savior. Now I want to move on and tell you how to be great in God's Kingdom. How can I have a great eternal reward? Jesus teaches that the pathway to true greatness is this:

### III. YOU MUST BECOME A SERVANT TO OTHERS

Jesus says in v.4, "Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Likewise, Jesus said in Mt. 23:12, "And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." So if you want to have a position of responsibility in the future kingdom, you must be humble, and you must be willing to undertake humble service. Such humble service is also indicated in v.5, "Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me." Many people have little regard for children, because they have no power, no prestige, and they seem insignificant. That is one reason why Jesus said in v.10, "Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven." Jesus says don't despise children, because they are so important to God, He even assigns angels to watch over them. After all, they are weak and vulnerable. God can do the same for anyone who humbly acknowledges their weakness and vulnerability.<sup>2</sup> So instead of despising them, we are to perform humble service even unto them. After all, Jesus says we must receive them. The word "receive" (*dechomai*) carried the idea of "to welcome." We are to welcome children who come to our church, or who want to come to Jesus. Some people don't want kids around, because they are trouble, and they mess up things. When our granddaughters come over, it doesn't take long before they create a mess. Even so, children require humble service to care for them in the nursery or elsewhere. But Jesus taught us to receive them, and offer service that meets their needs. When you work in the nursery and receive those kids in your arms, Jesus says you are receiving Him.

Jesus modeled humble service in His own life. He tirelessly went about healing the sick. He even washed the disciples' feet. He said in John 13:14, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

We have reopened our nursery and Eunice is calling for volunteers. Are you willing to serve? In November we would like to restart children's church, but we need at least one more volunteer to lead one Sunday per month. Will you humbly serve? That is the pathway to true greatness in the Kingdom of God.

Finally, to be great in the kingdom of God:

### IV. SEEK TO ATTAIN THE PROMISE OF GREATNESS

How do worldly people seek greatness? One way is through personal accomplishments. Another way is by trying to associate with the rich and powerful. But Jesus says that the pathway to eternal greatness is the opposite. You associate with and serve the weak among us. Jesus said in v.4, "Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of

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<sup>2</sup> Heb. 1:14 says, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?"

heaven.” The ones who will be great in the kingdom of God are not necessarily pastors, or worship leaders, or the other leaders in the church. If we are great in the kingdom, it won’t be because of our *position*. The ones who will be great will be the ones who have humbly served others, including those who seem so insignificant by the world’s standards. The great ones could include the ones who work with pre-school children, or who work with kids in AWANA or Sunday School or VBS, especially the ones who lead children to faith in Jesus. The great ones may include those who faithfully cut the grass, or perform some other service that many don’t want to do.

I can still remember what it was like to be a child. Adults tend to treat you as insignificant, as nobody. But Jesus loved and received the children, and children loved Jesus. If you follow Jesus, if you want to be great in God’s kingdom, you need to love and receive children, as well as others who are the lowly of society.

Conclusion: Your life will end someday, perhaps soon. The kingdom of God is coming, and I hope to see you there. Have you entered into the kingdom of God? Will you spend eternity in heaven? Well if you do not repent of your sin, and if you do not become as a child and humbly depend wholly upon Christ for your salvation, you will be excluded from the kingdom of heaven.

I don’t want anyone to miss heaven. Will you repent of your sin today? Will you turn from sin and selfishness, and turn to Christ today? Will you humbly trust in Him as your Savior? He died on the cross for your sin. He is the only way to heaven. And having trusted in Christ as your Savior, strive for greatness in God’s kingdom through humble service to others, including children.

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); Charles R. Erdman, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster, 1966); Oliver B. Greene, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Vol. 3, (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1971); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961 reprint); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol 6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, reprint, Christian Publishing Co.; A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. I (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through Online Bible); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on Mt. 18:1-14); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980); Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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