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How Jesus Defines Greatness; Matt 18.1-6

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Introduction – When we come to faith in Christ and as we grow in Christ, many things in our lives begin to change. Our perspective, our desires, our source of comfort and security, our future hopes and plans, our attitudes, our outlook – all of these qualities about who we are and what we are about begin to take on new meanings and new directions. Coming to faith and living by faith for sure transforms us into new creations. The deeper we dig into God’s Word, the more we experience God’s faithfulness to His promises, and the farther our faith is stretched we begin to see the world with different eyes. Old patterns of thinking are replaced with new patterns. One theologian put it this way – the Bible becomes our spectacles through which we view the world.

That’s really the heart of the lesson that takes place here between Jesus and the disciples. He is teaching them a new way to view greatness. Our view of greatness is often very much like the disciples here in our text. When we think of greatness, we think of accomplishment and achievement. We think of fortune and fame. We think of followers and likes. We think of awards and accolades. But as Jesus will teach the disciples and as we grow in Christ, we begin to understand that greatness in the kingdom of heaven takes on a whole new meaning.

- I. Greatness in the Kingdom Is Not What You Think (vv1-3)
 - a. The disciples have the right goal in mind. At least they are thinking in terms of the kingdom of heaven rather than the kingdoms of this world. They’ve got their eyes on eternity rather than on the earthly. The problem is, however, while they may have the right goal in mind, they are on the wrong track to reach that goal.
 - b. They are caught up in worldly thinking when it comes to spiritual matters. They are applying earthly reasoning to kingdom life.
 - c. They want to know what it takes to be well-known and respected. What does one have to do to get noticed and applauded. Who is the greatest? Who has the most favor with God? What does it take to make it big in God’s kingdom?
 - d. When Jesus begins His reply to their question, He takes an action that turns their way of thinking up on its head. He calls to him a child.

We don't even know the child's name. And that's the point. Jesus is saying true greatness in the kingdom is nothing like what you are now thinking. It's something totally different.

- e. In fact, before Jesus can answer the question of who is the greatest, He takes the disciples a step back. They are so far off course with understanding greatness in the kingdom that Jesus has to first of all remind them of entrance into the kingdom.
- f. Jesus' actions are saying your idea of greatness is so skewed by worldly thinking, let's first settle how you enter the kingdom. Once you get that squared, then you can begin to see true greatness in the kingdom. Then you'll be on the right track to reach the right goal.
- g. Then Jesus says, "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Greatness in the kingdom has nothing to do with how much you can accomplish or achieve or making a name for yourself. You have to turn and become like children.
- h. You have to turn. What does that mean? You have to change your way of thinking. The kingdom is about God's perspective, not the world's perspective. You have to turn. The word turn here is the simple definition of repent. Repentance begins with your thinking and then follows through your behavior and actions. You have to turn your mindset. You have to turn from what you can do and earn and merit.
- i. You have to become like children. What does that mean?
 - i. Sometimes to know what something means it's helpful to first discuss what it doesn't mean. Children are immature. Children can be irresponsible and disobedient, are often selfish. We know Jesus does not mean these things.
 - ii. But children are dependent. No matter how strong-willed or how lively their independent spirit may be, they are dependent on their parents for the basic necessities of life.
 - iii. That's getting us closer to what Jesus is teaching. You see when it comes to the kingdom, we don't enter by our own means, through the strength of our own determination and will. We are dependent on the grace and mercy of God to gain access to His kingdom.
 - iv. It's not about how great we are; it's about how great He is.

- j. We have to turn, we have to repent from our self-sufficiency and realize our utter dependence on our heavenly Father. And that leads us right into Jesus' next statement about humility.
- II. Greatness in the Kingdom Is Found Among the Lowly (v4)
- a. Now that Jesus has taken a huge step back with the disciples and talked about how one even enters the kingdom, now our view of greatness is being reworked and redefined. Now we can get a better grasp of true greatness. It actually has nothing to do with how high you go, but rather how low you go.
 - b. You don't find the great ones in the kingdom on the top, in the spotlight, on the billboards. You find the great ones in the kingdom behind the scenes, down in the trenches, laboring without notice or care to be noticed.
 - c. Greatness is found among the lowly.
 - d. Biblical example. Remember back in Matt 11. John the Baptist was discouraged in prison and sent word to Jesus asking if He was the One. Jesus sent word back to John encouraging him and assuring him from the fulfillment of Scripture that Jesus was indeed the One who was to come. Then Jesus begin teaching those around Him about John. Remember how He described John. He lived in the wilderness. His dress was rough and rugged. IN the eyes of earthly greatness, he was nothing. And yet, he was the prophesied forerunner of Christ.
 - i. Jesus then gave John an incredible affirmation – among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.
 - ii. And yet Jesus goes on to say, the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.
 - iii. Someone asked me not long ago, “Do you think the Lord will tell every Christian ‘Well done my good and faithful servant’ when they get to heaven?”
 - iv. Because our view of greatness tends to be as the disciples' view, I tell you this: I think they'll be some we'll be surprised who won't hear that welcome and they'll be some who will receive fanfare and celebration and we won't even know who they are. Because greatness in the kingdom is found among the lowly.

- e. Modern example. Last week my family and I visited JAARS in Waxhaw, NC. A mission organization that supplies missionaries with the tools they need to go into unreached people groups around the world and translate the Bible into their language. Our tour guides, Dave and Becky Spencer, was one of those frontier mission couples. They went to a little known, in the middle of nowhere village in Brazil, to a people group of only 53 people, the Ma Ma Day. Spent 33 years on the field to see that unreached people come to know the God of all creation. They gave up all to follow Christ. They forsook the American dream to pursue the glory of God. Virtually unknown in this world, but well-known in the kingdom of God. Because greatness is found among the lowly.
- III. Greatness in the Kingdom Is Seen In How You Treat Believers (vv5-6)
- a. Greatness, as defined by the world, is me-focused. Greatness, as defined by the kingdom, is others-focused. To achieve worldly greatness, you have to put yourself first and climb over others. To know kingdom greatness, you have to put others first and serve them.
 - b. In vv5-6, Jesus is speaking metaphorically about believers as children. V6 makes that clear. If you receive a believer, if you welcome him and love him and serve him, you are loving and serving Jesus because that precious soul, known or unknown belongs to Him.
 - c. But on the other hand, if you hinder a child of God. If you cause her to doubt her faith or wander from truth or yield to the world, if you in any way steer her from the Lord, you will incur the wrath of her Father who is in heaven. God watches over every single one of His children.
 - d. You can tell a lot about a person's faith by how he treats the faithful.

Conclusion – There's nothing wrong with being the best you can be, as long as it is for the glory of God. There's nothing wrong with living to your full potential, as long as it has eternity in view and not just this life. There's nothing wrong with pursuing your dreams, as long as you are lifting others up along the way. The question is, as a believer, what is the best we can be? What is our full potential in terms of God's kingdom? What dreams are we pursuing as we peer over the horizon into forever? Do we define greatness as Jesus defines greatness?