

Matthew 18:1-4

Introduction

You may recall that Matthew's Gospel includes five major discourses of Jesus, or five major blocks of Jesus teaching. Matthew has set these discourses apart by concluding each one with the same formula: "When Jesus had finished these sayings" (7:28; 19:1; 26:1; cf. "these parables", 13:53; "when Jesus had finished instructing His disciples", 11:1). The first discourse was the "Sermon on the Mount" or the "Sermon on living righteously in the **Kingdom**" (5-7). The second discourse contained Jesus' instructions about **kingdom** missions and evangelism (10). The third discourse contained the parables of the kingdom where Jesus revealed the mysteries of the "already" and the "not yet" (13). And now with chapter eighteen, we come to the fourth of the five major discourses. And just as with all the other discourses, we'll see that chapter eighteen has one common theme running throughout. We can guess right away that whatever this theme is, it will have something to do with the **kingdom**.

Remember that the kingdom is the rule and the reign of God in the person of Jesus, the Messiah. So the kingdom is not so much a "place" as it is an "*activity*". It's not so much a noun as it is a *verb* – it is the dynamic and active rule and reign of God in the Messiah. And since this rule and reign is universal, then the *kingdom* is also universal – filling all the world (Mat. 13:38, 41). But it's also true that this universal rule has not been universally accepted by all the nations of the earth – not yet, anyway! And so very often in Matthew the "kingdom" refers more specifically to the place where God's rule and reign has been received with true obedience and joy. And this "place" is none other than the "*assembly*" of the Messiah. That's what *we* are! That's what the *church* is – *the assembly of the Messiah* (Mat. 16:13-20)! So on the one hand, the kingdom is universal because even now the Messiah is sovereign over *all* peoples, nations, and languages. But on the other hand, the kingdom can refer more specifically to the *church*, which is the assembly of all those who have *submitted* themselves to the Messiah's rule and reign. The kingdom is *much* bigger than the church! And yet in many ways we could say that the church is the truest manifestation of the kingdom.

So let's apply this understanding of the kingdom to the first three discourses of Jesus. The first discourse (the Sermon on the Mount) was the sermon on living righteously as members of the Messiah's assembly (which is the Church). The second discourse was concerned with the work of this new assembly in the area of missions and evangelism. The third discourse talked about the "already" and "not yet" of the kingdom so that we, as the Messiah's assembly, would have a clear understanding of our purpose and calling in the world. And now we come to the fourth discourse, where Jesus takes up a most *important* and *pressing* question! We've seen that in many ways, the *kingdom* is all about the *assembly*! God has chosen to pour out the blessings of His rule and reign in the context of the *assembly*. As the Messiah, Jesus promised to build His assembly. And the church *is* this *assembly*! The church *is* this new, Messianic **community**. But now we come to the point. All of this assumes, of course, that we know *how* to live in community! This assumes that we know *how* to live as a true *assembly* – a collection of many different people from all walks and stations of life *joined together* in *one* new and living reality called the church. But do we *really* know how to live like this? After all, we are—all of us—*self*-interested, *self*-promoting sinners, bent on our own *individual* and *personal* agendas! *How then*

are we to live *together* in *community*, under the rule and reign of Jesus, the Messiah? This is the theme of this fourth discourse of Jesus here in Matthew chapter eighteen.

I. Matthew 18:1 — At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

At this point, it’s easy for us to very quickly become disgusted with the disciples. How could they ask a question like this? How could they be so *obvious* about their desires for greatness? But then we should ask *ourselves*: Are we really in any position to judge and blame the disciples just because we are better at being less obvious? After all, which one of us has never desired greatness for ourselves? Which one of us has never wished to receive the accolades and praises of others, and then delighted and reveled in those praises when they were given? Which one of us has never churned on the inside when we were not treated with the respect or appreciation that we felt we deserved? Which one of us would never struggle to see someone else get all the recognition and credit for something in which we had a part – no matter how small? Which one of us has never desired any recognition or credit at all? We have all desired greatness for ourselves. We have all wished in our hearts to be greater than the one sitting next to us in the pew – and yes, even to be the *greatest*. So the disciples have really just done *us* the favor by asking the question *for us*: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

The disciples have seen Peter, and James, and John singled out by Jesus for special privilege (Mat. 17:1-2), and of course all of them are among the chosen twelve. So in light of the disciples’ positions of authority, and privilege, and responsibility, it would seem very *reasonable* to assume that *they* will be the greatest. And if the twelve are to be the greatest, then the next step is to ask who will be the greatest among the twelve? Now certainly the disciples would not have wanted to admit to any attitudes of arrogance and pride. They were just asking a very realistic and practical question! When Jesus finally got around to setting up His kingdom (which they were still thinking of in ethnic and nationalistic terms), what would the chain of command look like? Which positions would be given to whom? How was the kingdom going to be structured? What was the plan? There was a plan, wasn’t there? We can be assured that in the disciples’ minds, their question was very innocent. But as the book of Proverbs tells us: “Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart” (Prov. 21:2). And that’s why Jesus knew that a question like this could never be innocent, because Jesus knows *our hearts*. Jesus knows that His first disciples have only done all of us the favor by asking the question *for us*. “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

II. Matthew 18:2-3 — 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.

This was certainly more than the disciples had bargained for. In the first place, it would seem that Jesus has not at all answered their question. The disciples asked about who would be the greatest (and presumably, *they* would be), but Jesus’ answer has to do not with who will be the greatest, but with who will get in! Jesus warns *the disciples themselves* that unless *they* turn, and unless *they* become like children, *they themselves* will not even be granted *entrance* into the kingdom of heaven! Certainly the disciples would not have thought that their question (innocent

as it was) deserved such an extreme and severe response – or else they surely would never have asked it! But we must know that Jesus *never* overreacts. Jesus’ response is simply the most accurate indicator of how serious our problem really is.

On the one hand, it would be right to say that the disciples have *already* entered into the kingdom. It has already been given to the disciples to see, and hear, and understand the secrets of the kingdom of heaven (Mat. 13:10-17; cf. Luke 12:32). But on the other hand, the disciples must never, ever *presume* on their *privilege*. They must remember that the kindness of God is meant always to lead them to repentance (Rom. 2:4). So Jesus’ warning here is very *real*, and should cause us all to *tremble*, and to *heed* His words. What, then, must the disciples *do* if they would be granted *entrance* into the kingdom of heaven? And just like that, the stakes are raised to a level infinitely higher than the disciples could have ever imagined when they first asked their question. Jesus had a way of doing this. They asked about the greatest, and now they’re being challenged about who will even get in.

The NASB translates: “Truly I say to you, unless you are *converted* and become like children...” The first thing we need to see is the truly radical change that Jesus is calling for. Jesus knows our hearts, and He knows that for an adult to become like a child will require nothing less than a complete and total change in our most instinctive ways of thinking, and acting, and living! Jesus knows that He is not requiring some minor adjustment, but rather a “*turning*” and a “*conversion*” in the whole direction of our lives! We must all *turn* and become like **children**! But what are children like? In verse four, Jesus speaks of the person who “*humbles* himself like this child.” So there are some who think that Jesus is talking about the natural humility of children. But, of course, we know that can’t be the case. We entered this world with the same innate pride and self-centeredness that we still struggle with today. At the level of the heart, children are no more “innocent” or pleasing in God’s sight than adults! One commentator wonders “whether [those] who speak of children as ‘unself-conscious,’ ‘unconcerned about status,’ and the like have ever been parents!” So what can Jesus mean when He says that we must all *turn* and become *like children*?

Let’s picture the scene. Jesus is standing (or sitting) with all of His disciples gathered around him. Jesus is the Messiah, the royal son of the living God. He is the Son of David and rightful heir to the throne. The disciples are those who have the greatest access to Jesus. They are the chosen twelve and the Messiah’s closest companions. They are all grown men with the weighty and important matters of the kingdom on their shoulders. And as they are all gathered there together, Jesus calls to Himself a child, and sets this child *in the midst* of the disciples. As one commentator puts it: “Surrounded by grown men, the child must have looked insignificant” (Morris). I wonder if this isn’t even something of an understatement! These are not just grown men. These are *very important* grown men! Imagine a corporate board meeting full of dignified and powerful adults, when somehow a little child wanders in from the hallway. There may be a few amused smiles, but then very quickly, *and appropriately*, the child would be removed so that the meeting could proceed without distractions. Naturally! And it’s this very *insignificance* of the child that is precisely Jesus’ point. All of His “important” disciples must turn and become like that child in the corporate boardroom. They must turn and *be* that child in their midst who stands surrounded by grown men. So the point here is not that we must imitate the thinking and attitudes of a little child, but that we must assume for ourselves the insignificance *of a little child*

who is surrounded by important and powerful grownups. Notice Jesus is not saying that children are insignificant in *God's* eyes – no more than are adults. But neither is Jesus saying that all children will get into the kingdom of heaven. These questions are beside the point! The point is simply this: When it comes to the day to day running of an adult world, little children have no importance or status whatsoever! And it's precisely this very *absence* of *any* significance, and *any* importance, and *any* status that we must *all* assume for *ourselves*. We must all be converted, and become as if we ourselves were the children in a world run by adults... as if we ourselves were the child in the corporate boardroom... as if we ourselves were that child standing in the midst of the disciples. Just think about that for a moment! And then let's be really honest with ourselves about how that makes us feel. And what would this actually *mean* for our thinking, and acting, and speaking, and living? One commentator writes: "*In the affairs of men* children were unimportant. They could not fight, they could not lead, they had not had time to acquire worldly wisdom, they could not pile up riches." (Morris). So obviously if we ourselves are to become like these little children, we can't be expecting any of the recognition, and credit, and appreciation, and respect that is given to the adults, can we? As those who have become like children living among adults, this is precisely the lesson we have learned: We are *nothing*. And *this* is the attitude and mindset that Jesus requires of us if we would first of all even *enter into* the kingdom of heaven. It's an attitude that sees that we ourselves have nothing to offer – *nothing whatsoever* – and that we have no claim to *anything* from *anyone* – and least of all from God. We're just sinners who are helpless to save ourselves and entirely dependent upon the saving *mercy* and *power* of God. That's the very heart of the *Gospel*!

And that's all very well and good. *We* already know all this, don't we? But the disciples didn't ask about how to get in, did they? They asked about who is the greatest. Granted, this has all been quite shocking, and *very* disconcerting. But maybe, *hopefully*, we can now move on now to the real question? OK. Let's just assume that we're in. Who, *then*, is the *greatest* in the kingdom of heaven?" And to this question, Jesus gives the very *same* answer:

III. Matthew 18:4 — Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus wants us to see that the qualification for true *greatness* in the kingdom of heaven *is no different* than the qualification for "*getting in*". In other words, the "rules" never change no matter how long we've been a Christian. And so we see that in the Christian life, there's a very real sense in which we must *never* "grow up", because we can never outgrow the requirement of *becoming like little children*. If we would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, then we must assume for ourselves the same *status* and *importance* as that of a small child living in world run by important grownups and powerful adults. As we'll see throughout our study of Matthew eighteen, *this is the secret*, *this is the key* to living together in true community, as the true assembly of the Messiah. We must all become like *little children*.

Conclusion

Which one of us has never desired greatness for ourselves? Which one of us has never felt entitled to the accolades and praises of others? Which one of us has never churned on the inside when we were not treated with the respect that our status, and position, and abilities, and

giftedness “deserves”? If I am lightly esteemed and thought little of by others, why should I complain? By God’s grace, I’ll just be that little child, living in a world full of important grown ups. Which one of us would never struggle to see someone else get all the recognition and credit for something in which we had a part – no matter how small? Recently, I was in a small circle of people where someone else was being complemented for something I had done. The person giving the complement was quite sincere and uninformed, and the person receiving the complement was also very innocent and oblivious to what was happening, but inside, I was struggling. I wanted to be the greatest. I didn’t want to be the insignificant little child in a world full of important grown ups. But that’s what Jesus has called me to be – *and* all of us. Which one of us has never desired *any respect, or recognition, or credit at all?* This is truly a scary thing to say, but it must be said: All of us here are guilty of desiring greatness for ourselves. We have all wished in our hearts to be greater than our neighbor – and yes, *even* to be the greatest.

But if we would truly be the greatest, indeed, if we would even enter the kingdom of heaven at all, then we must all assume for ourselves the same status and level of importance as little children. By any earthly and human standard, this is not so much humbling as it is humiliating (cf. France)! Jesus Himself did not simply humble Himself as we think of being humbled. Let’s not mince any words here! Jesus *humiliated* Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). Jesus made Himself *nothing* (Phil. 2:7). The problem with us is that we are willing to humble ourselves, but not to be humiliated. At *some* level, we still have our status to preserve, and our dignity to maintain. We’re only willing to go *so far*. But if we have become like little children surrounded by grownups, then of course we have no more status to preserve, and no more dignity to maintain. And it’s in this very act of utter humiliation that we find ourselves to be truly the “greatest” in the kingdom of heaven.

The great ones in this assembly are not those with the most gifts, and abilities, and talents, or those who have contributed the most in terms of resources and service, or those who hold positions of authority and leadership. The truly great ones in this assembly are those who have humbled, and even humiliated themselves by becoming like little children. *This is the secret, this is the key* to living *together* in true *community*, as the true *assembly* of the Messiah. We must *all turn* and become like *children*.