

THE GREATNESS OF HUMILITY

Matthew 18:1-14

May 14, 2023

INTRODUCTION

In this passage from Matthew, Jesus finds His disciples in the middle of a discussion about who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. It's a topic that fits nicely with Matthew's particular focus on Christ's kingdom and the nature of it, but there are parallel passages in both Luke and Mark, some of which we will also look at, as they add extra information and their own particular perspective on the events.

SO, WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY?

Today being Mother's Day it seems appropriate to reflect upon mothers at least a little. Every mother knows that special feeling she has about the birth of her first child. There's nothing that really compares with the joy and contentment of those early days of cuddling that baby, of holding him as he sleeps warm and safe in mother's arms. Those quiet-time memories are precious to every mom. Of course, we don't have to list all those moments when child rearing isn't a particularly enjoyable experience to know which ones they are, but those sweet, special times are things that every mother holds in her heart forever.

The problem, not just for moms but for all of us, is that our happiness is easily disrupted when we start comparing ourselves, our children, our possessions, or our talents, with others. This happens because what often passes for happiness tends to amount to taking pleasure in some type of achievement that lets us feel we are somehow better, or smarter, or more prosperous than others. Happiness, then, for many of us has little to do with being content with what the Lord has given us, and more to do with having *more* than others around us. C.S. Lewis said, "Pride gets no pleasure out of having 'something,' only out of having more of it than the next person. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good looking, there would be nothing to be proud about." **The thing is, the kind of pride that comes from comparing ourselves with others and feeling superior, or coming out on top simply does not belong in the kingdom of heaven.**

THE DISCIPLES' FOCUS IS NOT JESUS' FOCUS

In the passage before us, while the disciples are debating who is going to be the greatest in the kingdom, Jesus' focus, as He picks up on what they are discussing, is going to first be on who actually *has* entrance into that kingdom, and it isn't going to be *at all* who the disciples are imagining it to be. The kingdoms of this world are built on military might and achievement. They focus on power, wealth, excellence, strength. Not so for the kingdom of heaven. That kingdom's economy is based on something entirely different—humility. Jesus is going to teach them that:

- Entrance into the kingdom requires conversion to humility.
- Advancing in the kingdom is based on the treatment of the humble.
- God Himself demonstrates the value of the humble in the keeping of the kingdom.

CONVERSION TO HUMILITY FOR ENTRANCE INTO THE KINGDOM (MT 18:1-4)

Matthew's account tells us, "*At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'*" Mark's parallel passage adds the detail that the disciples had been discussing this quite some time as they had walked along the road to Capernaum. "*Then He came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, 'What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?' But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest.*" So, we can surmise by harmonizing the accounts that although they hesitate to admit what they have been talking about, they finally do, and at that point they apparently go ahead and pose the question directly to Him.

William Barclay, in his Bible commentary says of this: "**The very fact that they asked the question shows that they had no idea at all what the kingdom of heaven was.**" That the disciples would be debating who is the greatest is understandable, though, really. After all, in Matthew 11:11 Jesus had said that even the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist. Plus, only recently they had seen Jesus set apart Peter, James, and John for the trip up the mountain where, unknown to the others, they had seen Jesus transfigured. Peter himself had, one way or the other, achieved a level of prominence within the group. Also, they had been hearing Jesus speak repeatedly about His future kingdom, and they still had no idea what form it would take. All this would have been very present on their minds during their discussion.

ADVANCING IN THE KINGDOM IS BASED ON THE TREATMENT OF THE HUMBLE

In one of those teachable moments—the kind we should all take advantage of, Jesus uses their debate to instruct them about what is of true value in His kingdom. To illustrate His point He calls a little child over to Him, puts him in the middle of the group and tells them, *“Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”*

His choice of a little child in this context is an interesting one, since in that day little children were not seen as valuable nor were they the center of attention in the home—something that stands in stark contrast to the place children in our culture occupy within the family. Children had qualities such as humility and vulnerability, but they had no special rights. Being children, they were dependent, weak, defenseless, and vulnerable. They were the antithesis of what earthly kingdoms valued in their citizens. **Yet, not only is Jesus attaching a high value to their place in His kingdom, He is also telling His disciples that becoming like a child is prerequisite to even entering His kingdom. He is teaching them a paradox: in order to be considered the greatest you must become the least.** He turns on its head any preconceived ideas the disciples had about what constitutes greatness, or even value in a person, whether as part of Christ’s kingdom or any other kingdom, really.

What Jesus is teaching His disciples is something also for us, and it isn’t really optional if we are to be rightly related to Him. Peter himself, in I Peter 5:5, 6, is the writer who penned this, so he clearly learned the lesson he is passing on to his readers: *“...all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.’ Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time...”* So, the way you truly come to God is in humility. You don’t need to be someone of great accomplishments, your good does not have to outweigh the bad, you don’t need to have gone to church all your life. You need nothing else at all apart from a humble repentant heart. Titus 3:4-6 says, *“But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior.”* And furthermore, Isaiah 64:6 tells us, *“But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags...”* **We literally have nothing to offer of worth apart from a repentant heart that in humility embraces faith in what Christ accomplished for us at Calvary.**

GOD HIMSELF DEMONSTRATES THE VALUE OF THE HUMBLE IN THE KEEPING OF THE KINGDOM

Those of us already citizens of that kingdom need to remember our own dependency on Christ, and our place in the whole scheme of things, as Romans 12:3-5 says, *“For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.”* Indeed, we need to rehearse this regularly if we are to keep things in perspective, and we must remember that even in this, Christ is our model. Jesus was dependent on the will of His Father, whom He served faithfully and in humility.

When it comes to children, we all know how little barrier there can be between what goes in their ears and what comes out their mouth. It’s a trait that is both endearing as well as borderline dangerous. As adults we learn to dissimulate, to disguise our weaknesses and put up a good front. We fear being taken advantage of, or being hurt, or looking bad. We can be quick to be self-protective, which is the opposite of what a small child does. Instead we may become competitive, prideful, and perhaps critical or judgmental of others who seem weaker or less capable than we are. So, we find that we also need the same instruction the disciples needed, *“Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.”* He reminds us against despising the little ones, which is to say, the humble ones. **Why? Because it is our responsibility as members of the kingdom to create a receptive, nurturing environment for those entering the kingdom and for those weak babes in Christ who could be made to stumble by our carelessness.** Think of the impact one’s childhood upbringing has on future adult behavior. Examples set before us in childhood can live on in us for a lifetime. They can either twist and spoil the personality or nurture and beautify it. Within the kingdom we need an environment that nurtures and protects the weak; one that does not compromise on doctrine but that nonetheless allows the young believers to safely grow into fruitful mature Christians.

THE REWARD AND THE WARNING

Our care for other believers brings with it a reward. *“He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward. And he who*

receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward" (Matthew 10:40-42). The word "receive" here carries with it the idea of "lift up, show respect, or hold in regard." **This is how we serve Jesus, love Jesus, and in that sense, receive Jesus—by caring for His children.** The Lord's brother James, wrote this in his epistle: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27).

But just as there is a reward for caring for His little ones, there is a grave warning for disregarding this responsibility. Matthew 18:6, 7 puts it starkly: "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!" It is a grievous transgression to cause a weaker brother to stumble, or sin. **We must be careful in our dealings, not just with immature Christians, but within all of the household of faith, to treat each other with care, respect, and with deference.**

The issue of deference has previously come up as we have worked our way through Matthew. We saw it with Jesus and the temple tax in Capernaum. Now we are reminded again how important it is. Jesus tells His disciples in Matthew 18:8-10 that "If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire. Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones..."

Our God is a loving and gracious God, but there is a reason for the warning. Sin is a deadly serious matter that can have eternal consequences in a life, which is why we ought to put the spiritual welfare of others above any concept we may have of personal liberty. Hell is real. We must never take it lightly. It was to save us from this place that Jesus died for us on the cross. He took our punishment so we could enjoy and serve the Father with our lives. **Our lives, then, through our words, our attitudes, or our conduct, must not cause damage to another spiritually.** Jesus Himself very pointedly said that we would be better off dead than to be guilty of that. Sobering words.

WHAT OUR CHURCH SHOULD LOOK LIKE

We must be careful to not make differences between people, to not consider one person more important than another based on their apparent ranking within the group. We must have not the world's view, but Christ's *heart* when it comes to how we deal with one another—a heart that receives the weak, the little ones, and cares for them. Young Christians are greatly valued by God, and His angels protect them. We also ought to place that same high value on them.

Christ intends for His church to be a place of love, and acceptance, and protection. It should be a place where among His disciples there can be an openness about personal weaknesses and vulnerabilities, where there can be a sharing of burdens and the frank expression of dependence. These things should not be foreign concepts to the members of the body of Christ. Our church should never be a place where people feel the need to be guarded and self-protective. In other words, it should be far more like a loving family. That is the scriptural model—one that never compromises the truth, but that is a safe place for believers of all stages of spiritual development. It must be a place where all of Christ's followers can be well-received, well-loved, well-protected, and free from a spirit of judgmentalism. In I Thessalonians 2:5-7, Paul writes, "For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness — God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children." **There is nothing gentler than a nursing mother. This is what should characterize our church, because this creates the kind of atmosphere where God's people truly flourish and grow.**

CONCLUDING APPLICATIONS

- Christ's kingdom is made up of humble, dependent believers.
- Christ cares deeply about the treatment of weak believers.
- Christ values, loves, and secures each individual believer (so should we).