

LITTLE LOVED ONES

Matthew 18:1-6

THE WRONG QUESTION

Matthew 18:1

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matthew 18:1)

Let me just say that this is the wrong question to ask. I suppose it would be fine to ask, “How can I be great in the Kingdom of heaven?” but asking who IS the greatest is problematic. We gain some insight in Mark 9 and Luke 9. Mark tells us that they were having a discussion about which one of them was the greatest, which is quite an assumption. “Well, one of US is certainly the greatest in the Kingdom, but WHICH one?” And Luke says that they were arguing about who the greatest was.

It doesn't seem that anyone thought to say, “Well, guys, I think that maybe JESUS is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven.”

There were some other episodes where position and privilege come up. A chapter after the discussion of greatness in Mark 9, James and John asked Jesus to grant them the privilege of sitting next to Him in the Kingdom. In Matthew 20, we see their mother come to Jesus to ask on their behalf. Jesus made it clear each time that it was the Father's choice that would prevail. The other disciples became upset that James and John were jockeying for position, but only because they were also trying to get a high position for themselves.

TRANSITION: The question that arises in Matthew 18 had probably been simmering

beneath the surface for a few months. The disciples were growing increasingly interested in fame, notoriety, position, privilege, and prestige. I knew a Bible college student many years ago who barely graduated with a two-year degree in Bible. He immediately began sending out resumes to churches. He was looking for a lead pastor position in a multi-staff church. Did he have the right idea? Is ministry all about climbing the ladder of success and fame? Is the pursuit of greatness in the Kingdom supposed to be our focus?

THE DANGER OF THE PURSUIT OF GREATNESS

I hoped that you got the right answer to that question. No, the pursuit of greatness is not supposed to be our focus; in fact it's a terrible danger.

We see this warning in Third John, where the apostle who once sought greatness in the Kingdom has learned much:

I wrote something to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not welcome what we say. For this reason, if I come, I will bring to remembrance his deeds which he does, unjustly disparaging us with wicked words. And not satisfied with this, he himself does not welcome the brothers either, and he forbids those who want to do so and puts them out of the church. (Third John 1:9-10)

The pursuit of greatness led Diotrephes to hinder the ministry of the apostles. He disparaged those with whom he disagreed; the fact they were often apostles didn't matter; he spoke wickedly of them all the same. He refused to welcome brothers in Christ who were passing through. Worse, anyone who welcomed those he rejected faced expulsion from the church. It was such a major issue that John didn't give any instructions for dealing with Diotrephes; he said, "I'll deal with him when I come."

Galatians 5:14-15 contains this instruction,

For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
But if you bite and devour one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another.
(Galatians 5:14-15)

Think about Galatians 5:16-21 and the pursuit of greatness. Sandwiched between various moral issues are attitudes of pride and self-achievement:

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, **enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envying**, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21)

Now think about the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23,

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23)

According to the Bible, THIS is what a great person in the Kingdom is like. It should sound familiar; it’s exactly the character of Jesus Christ in His holy humanity. There is nothing in the fruit of the Spirit that even remotely sounds like the pursuit of greatness.

The pursuit of greatness is harmful to the pursuer. It is contrary to the purpose of God and destructive to the soul. That pursuit is also harmful to the church. Diotrephes hindered the ministry of the apostles and became enemies of those who lived godly lives. People who do this often dare anyone to oppose them, and then when they are opposed, claim to be victims of someone else.

Many years ago, I knew a man who wanted to be a filmmaker with every fiber of his being. It occupied his every waking moment. I urged him to give his talent away, to find a ministry he could serve for free by making two or three-minute videos for one purpose or another. I

felt that it would accomplish several things. First, it would give him much-needed experience (he had the theories down but little actual skill). Second, it would be a blessing to those ministries that couldn't otherwise afford to hire someone. And third, and most important, it would treat his talent as a blessing from God, something he was willing to give away. He wasn't interested in starting small and humble; he wanted to make feature films and was upset that our church wouldn't give him hundreds of thousands of dollars to make a movie.

TRANSITION: The disciples can only think of how great it would be to be the important people, the ones everyone else noticed. I was at a pastor's conference one time. I spent a couple of minutes speaking of David Jeremiah, and you would never have known that he was anyone. Then I saw another pastor, very well known in Southern California and now living in Texas, walk by with his entourage and personal security. No one got close to him; he was protected; he was important.

The disciples had no idea of how harmful the pursuit of greatness could be, so Jesus gave them a practical, memorable lesson involving the least impressive person any of them could think of.

CHILDLIKENESS IS MATURITY

Matthew 18:2-4

And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever therefore will humble himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:2-4)

Children are not perfect people; most people understand this, especially parents. Nevertheless, children are not known for selfish ambition or pursuing personal greatness and prestige.

The child in this story is not the focus; he's an object lesson. How do we know that Jesus isn't talking about literal children? The text tells us. Sinners have to be converted to enter the Kingdom of heaven. Heaven does not belong to those who insist on being their own masters. Heaven does not belong to those whose lives are marked by pride, self-accomplishment, and independence. Heaven belongs to those whom God converts, so they lay aside their self-ambition and accomplishments, give up their ideas of position and power, and trust and obey their heavenly Father. Heaven belongs to those who become like children in their relation to God.

We need to be clear that Jesus is not celebrating childishness but calling for childlikeness.

Romans 12:10 describes the need to be

devoted to one another in brotherly love, giving preference to one another in honor, (Romans 12:10)

This isn't typical adult ladder-climbing behavior. This is kindly, gentle childlike behavior.

In Philippians 2:1-4, we read of the unity the Lord desires of us:

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, fulfill my joy, that you **think the same way**, by **maintaining the same love**, being **united in spirit**, thinking on **one purpose**, **doing nothing from selfish ambition or vain glory**, but with humility of mind **regarding one another as more important than yourselves**, not merely looking out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. (Philippians 2:1-4)

Again, children are not perfect in any sense, but children do tend to want to belong to the larger group. Some of these acts might sound like high-level activity, but they all arise out of the humble, simple, yielded mind and heart.

Ephesians 4:1-3 calls for us to live in gentleness and peace:

Therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, exhort you to walk worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all **humility and gentleness**, with **patience, bearing with one another in love**, being **diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace**. (Ephesians 4:1-3)

This is selfless thinking, thinking that puts others first and does not need self-promotion. It is childlike Christianity. It is genuine and authentic. There is nothing fake about it. The Lord wants it of us, and so we strive to live that way.

That little boy set before the disciples was probably indifferent to his own sense of greatness. He probably didn't care much about how others saw him. He most likely cared nothing for personal achievement. He just wanted to live each day in peace and joy. A child doesn't have much ambition beyond playing hard and sleeping peacefully.

To be a child of God is similar. It means caring little about how others view you. It means active dependence upon God the Father. It means not being aware of your standing in the Kingdom of God. It means being unassuming about yourself and others. It means having little ambition beyond being faithful to God as you glorify and enjoy Him.

But this is why we must be converted. These are not the traits of an adult in our world. They aren't powerful or meaningful or important. We can't do them on our own any more than we can grab ourselves by the scruff of the neck and lift ourselves off the ground. Our Father must do this work in us by His grace, on account of His lovingkindness, showing mercy to us in love.

TRANSITION: Jesus promises a blessing for those who receive one of His children; not a literal child, but a sinner whom He has converted to a child of God.

THE BLESSING OF RECEIVING A CHILD OF GOD

Matthew 18:5

And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; (Matthew 18:5)

Just how closely does Jesus identify with His child by conversion?

He says that the person who receives His child is credited with receiving Him. The person who welcomes His child is credited with welcoming Him. The person who accepts His child is viewed as accepting Christ. The person who shows hospitality to Christ's child is regarded as showing hospitality to Jesus Himself.

At the risk of sounding silly, this doesn't mean that eternal life comes through receiving Jesus' people; sinners must trust and receive Him. But there are temporal rewards He gives to those who welcome and bless His people, even if they are unbelievers. What those are specifically is up to the Lord to provide. He might bless a business for the sake of the believers there. First Corinthians 7:14 says that an unbelieving spouse who is married to a Christian will be blessed, as will their children.

TRANSITION: But while there is a blessing for receiving a child of God, there is also a danger of harming a child of God.

THE DANGER OF STUMBLING A CHILD OF GOD

Matthew 18:6

but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him

that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matthew 18:6)

The blessings an unbeliever receives for receiving a child of God are temporal, but the judgment on those who harm the saints is eternal.

At the back of this picture is a man; you can just see the top of his head. Let's assume that he's 5'5" tall. We can guess that the millstone – the vertical round stone in the trough – would be about 3' tall and about 18" thick. It looks like it's made of quartz, which puts the weight at about 1,500 pounds. So it's better to be chained to 1,500 pounds of stone and cast into the depths of the Sea of Galilee than to cause one of Christ's disciples to stumble. Putting it another way, the judgment for causing one of Jesus' disciples to stumble is worse than being forcefully drowned.

We're going to explore the following verses more carefully in the next couple of weeks, but we see that the context remains the same. It is inevitable that the children of God will be caused to stumble; it's the nature of this world. But woe to the one who causes them to stumble. It would be better for that person to amputate their own hands and feet and eyes than to harm a child of God (Matthew 18:7-10). It is not the will of God that any of His children go astray, and woe to the person who even seeks to cause them to stray.

Jesus isn't talking about the "iron sharpens iron" kind of issues we all face from time to time. In fact, as Matthew 18 moves on, we will see Jesus speak about what happens when a fellow believer sins against us. We are to seek to restore the relationship by going to them repeatedly and giving them every opportunity for peace.

In these verses, Jesus is speaking about unbelievers who deliberately set out to destroy the faith and spiritual life of a Christian. It isn't accidental but deliberate. They are tools of the enemy who wants, if he can, to deceive God's elect as he deceived Eve. Some are co-workers or fellow students in school. Some are friends and acquaintances. Some are even family

members. They have this in common: they deeply resent the faith of a Christian and want to destroy it if they can. And they face the wrath of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, for harming His people, His sheep.

BRINGING IT HOME

I don't think that we Christians ever really understand how powerful and devoted the love of God for us is. We all know the words "for God so loved the world," "God is love," and "we love because He first loved us." But we don't really comprehend the height and depth and breadth and weight of the love of God.

Paul writes,

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

Every Christian should daily confess the sin of doubting the love of God, questioning the devotion of God to us, putting limits on His love, and treating His love as just a bigger version of our love. Friends, our love is weak and fickle. It can change with a single experience. It grows and shrinks according to our mood. More than anything else, our love is a measure of how we happen to feel about another person in any given moment.

But the love of God is absolute. God is not merely a loving being; He IS love itself. Doubting God's love is doubting God. Questioning God's love is questioning His very nature. Thinking that God's love is based on His experience of us is the same as calling Him a creature subject to some higher power.

There is no need for us to pursue greatness in the Kingdom, as though we have to secure

our own place by proving how important we are to our God. If you are His child through Jesus Christ, then He has set His love upon you and will never, ever, under any circumstance, relinquish it.

That's why the greatest in the Kingdom are like little children. They know they have the love of God simply because God is love. They are so assured of His love and affection that trusting Him is the most natural thing to do. Obeying Him is not a hard call to make. Every step that I take is guided by Him for His glory and for my good. Every move of His Spirit upon my life is an expression of the fullness of His love for me. I believe that this is true with all my being; over time, my heart is becoming increasingly convinced of it.

I want you to rest your full weight, all your hopes, and dreams, in His love. I want you to let go of everything else that you think is going to keep your head above water, every plan that you have for your own survival and success, and rest in His love. I pray that we would do that today.