

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew chapter 18. One day when I was in college, I was walking across campus with a few of my friends, and we saw a boy—maybe 10-12 years old—playing basketball on one of our school's outdoor hoops. As we passed by, he drained a shot, looked in our direction, and I said, "Nice shot, bud! You're gonna be the next Michael Jordan." The boy looked a bit puzzled. And then he asked me, "Who's Michael Jordan?" I could not believe my ears. "Who's Michael Jordan?!" I replied, "He's the greatest basketball player of all time!" And he replied, "No, Allen Iverson is the greatest."

Well, now I was speechless. Thankfully, I resisted the urge to argue, but we all know that with all due respect to Allen Iverson, that kid was very, very wrong. It's a fun debate in most sports to try and figure out who's the GOAT, the greatest of all time. And it's not just a conversation for sports fans. You can try to determine the greatest composer of all time, or the greatest novelist of all time, or the greatest leader of all time, and so on. You can consider their stats, their achievements, their enduring impact on history, and make your case. In many arenas of life, certain people with unique gifts and talents rise above the rest and establish their place as one of the greats.

But here's the question we want to answer this morning: How does someone become great in God's sight? What does greatness look like in the kingdom of heaven? That's the question the disciples are asking in Matthew 18, verse 1: *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"* Matthew 18:1.

They've heard Jesus talk about establishing this kingdom. And they want to know, "Jesus, which one of us is getting the top position?" Mark and Luke tell us that before they asked Jesus this question, they had been arguing about it among themselves. And now they're looking for Jesus to settle the matter. But instead of giving them the answer they want, Jesus gives them the answer they need. Instead of identifying the greatest disciple and saying, "If you want to be great, become more like him," Jesus calls over a little child, and says, "If you want to be great, become more like him."

So, do you want to be great in God's kingdom? Well...

Become Like Children

Look at verses 2-4: *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"* (Matthew 18:2-3).

Picture this scene. We know from Matthew 17 that Jesus and the disciples have returned to the city of Capernaum. Capernaum was Peter's hometown, and we know from other accounts in the Gospels that Peter's house served as a primary gathering place for Jesus's inner circle. So, it's likely that Jesus and the disciples are in Peter's house, and therefore, it's also likely that this child that Jesus calls over was Peter's son. But, regardless of whose kid this is, don't you love the fact that there are children around Jesus as he's carrying out his ministry? I guarantee you they weren't always perfectly quiet when Jesus was teaching. And we know that at times the disciples were a bit annoyed by their presence. But not Jesus. He never tells them to go away. He's glad to have them close. And here, he calls a child to himself.

Then, he tells these grownups, "You need to become like him." But we should ask, "In what way?" Well, go back to the disciples' question. They asked, "Who is the greatest in the

kingdom?” Which basically amounts to, “Jesus, which one of us is the best?” A competitive spirit with some selfish ambition has manifested itself among the disciples. And Jesus wants to put an end to it right away. So, he calls this child over, presumably a very young child, and says, “Become like him.” Why? Because a young child has no concern about status and position. It’s not on their radar. It’s not their goal. The walker nursery isn’t a cut-throat environment, with two-year-olds trying to outshine their peers to impress the volunteers. There’s none of that yet!

But as we grow, it doesn’t take long for that mindset to begin to show up as students begin to compete for popularity, as employees begin to compete for positions, and so on. But Jesus is saying, “There’s no place for that in my kingdom! There’s no place for selfish ambition.” No, the virtue Jesus prizes, which the little child exemplifies, is humility. Look at verse 4: “*Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 18:4).

In other words, “If you want to go places in the kingdom of heaven, don’t aim high, aim low.” Don’t try and impress. Don’t try to surpass others to gain recognition. Don’t try to make a name for yourself. As Paul says in Philippians 2, *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves* (Philippians 2:3).

Now, this does not come naturally to us. C.S. Lewis once said, “[Pride is the] one vice of which no man in the world is free.”¹ In one way or another, we are all tempted to try and elevate ourselves over others. And left unchecked, that twisted desire will grow, and it will become insatiable. Because, Lewis says, “If I am a proud man, then, as long as there is one man in the whole world more powerful, or richer, or more clever than I, he is my rival and my enemy.” That’s the sin that was beginning to manifest among the disciples. And it would have grown like a cancer, if Jesus’s didn’t provide the cure.

So, he says, “Become like children. Humble yourselves.” But how is that possible? The key is in verse 3. Look there one more time: “*Truly, I say to you, unless you **turn** and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 18:3). Notice that word, “turn.” The implication is the disciples are headed in the wrong direction. They need to turn around and go the other way. And there’s a word for that, it’s repentance. The only way out of pride, the only way to kill selfish ambition and conceit, is to repent. And the only way to truly repent is to stop looking at yourself and to start looking at God.

Here’s Lewis one more time, “As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.” But when you look up and see something of God’s power and holiness you will realize your weakness and your sinfulness. And this will drive you down into humble contrition, which is the precise place where God brings us, so that he might lift us up.

Peter—who was in the room when Jesus spoke these words in Matthew 17—would write later in his life, *Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you* (1 Peter 5:5-6).

You see, when we confess our sin, God gives grace. God has mercy for prideful people like

¹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book 3, chapter 8.

Peter, and the disciples, and you, and me! And, at the proper time, in the proper way, he will exalt us. So, we don't need to exalt ourselves. We don't need to compete in his kingdom. We can become like children. Children who aren't concerned with status or position. Children, who know their weakness and aren't above asking for help. Children, who are humble. Humility is greatness in God's kingdom. And true humility will free us to get our eyes off ourselves, and onto the needs of others. Which is where Jesus takes us next, as he encourages us to...

Welcome God's Children

Look at verse 5, Jesus says, "*Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me*" (Matthew 18:5).

Now, here's a question we need to sort out: Who is Jesus talking about when he says this? Is he talking about the little child standing next to him? Or is he talking about those who become like children when they humble themselves before him? In other words, is Jesus talking about kids or Christians?

I appreciate this answer from R.T. France. He focuses on the words "one *such* child" and writes, "The word 'such' suggests that already we are moving beyond the specific child introduced in v.2 to a wider category whom that child represents. That category will no doubt include those who are literally children, but the wider reference of 'little ones' in the next part of the [passage] points us beyond children... to all who, as instructed in vv.3-4, have adopted the child-like position."²

I agree. For the rest of this passage, what Jesus says applies to kids, but also to all Christians. Perhaps especially Christians who are lowly in status and easily ignored or even despised by the world—like the "least of these" whom Jesus identifies with elsewhere. And again, Jesus says, "whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." Think about what this means. If you have humbled yourself before God, and turned to Jesus in repentance and faith, notice how closely Jesus identifies himself with you. Anyone who receives you, who welcomes you and shows kindness to you, receives him. He's that close to you relationally!

It's our kids' last week of school, and I think about their teachers. Every school day, they have welcomed our daughter and our son into their classrooms. They have cared for them, encouraged them, and taught them. And I am so grateful for them! Not because I was the one who went to school. But in all that they have done for my kids, I feel that they have done it for me too. Because as a father, I'm that close to my kids relationally. You bless them, you bless me. And Jesus is saying, that's how close I am to my disciples. What a privilege! And what a responsibility. Because it means that however we treat Jesus's disciples is how we treat him. If we receive them, we receive him. If we despise them, we despise him.

Notice that word down in verse 10. Jesus says, *See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven* (Matthew 18:10). Here's another powerful statement about the value of God's children. Not only are we so closely identified with Jesus that the way people treat us is the way they treat him, but also, we have angels in heaven who see the face of the Father. What does that mean? It doesn't mean that every child, or every Christian is assigned a guardian angel. It's actually better than that. It means that there is a multitude of heavenly beings, who dwell within

² France, *Matthew*

the presence of God, who he sends out as he wills to protect and to serve his children.

John Calvin writes, “The words of Christ [here] do not mean that a single angel is continually occupied with this or the other person... such an idea is inconsistent with the [rest of Scripture], which declares that... not one angel only, but many, have been commissioned to guard every one of the faithful.”

This is why Hebrews 1:14 says that the angels (plural!) are *...ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation* (Hebrews 1:14). Now, that’s very encouraging to remember that we are never alone. That God’s angelic servants have been sent out to serve us and protect us in ways we cannot see. But this is also very dignifying. It demonstrates the value of every believer. Think about it... If you were out to dinner, and you saw someone come in surrounded by strong men wearing dark suits and sunglasses, earpieces in—even if you had no idea who that person was, their security detail would tell you, that person must be really important! Well, brothers and sisters, we’ve got angelic security detail. We matter that much to God.

Therefore, if all of God’s children—even the lowliest ones—are this closely identified with Jesus, and this carefully protected by the Father, we must never despise them. We must always receive them regardless of what their worldly status may be. This is why it is so important that our church community be a welcoming place for everyone. For children. For the weak, the impoverished, the socially outcast.

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones,” Jesus says. “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.” I wonder how that might impact who we stop and say hello to in the lobby on Sundays. Who we invite into our life groups, our ministries, our homes. Church, we want to be a place where we gladly welcome all of God’s children. And then lastly today, Jesus helps us see our responsibility to...

Protect God’s Children

Look at verse 6: *“...but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea”* (Matthew 18:6).

Jesus is speaking about the serious nature of causing someone to sin, to stumble, and to falter in their faith. Again, he’s speaking about all who become like children by trusting in him—all Christians. But let’s not forget there’s an actual child standing next to him. So, what he says certainly applies to the grave offense of leading a child into sin. And he is saying, this is such a heinous thing, that it would be better to have a great millstone fastened around your neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. It’s a graphic image meant to underscore a great evil. To cause someone else to sin, stumble, and fall is an awful thing, a woeful thing.

Look at verse 7: *“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!”* (Matthew 18:7).

In this fallen world, it is inevitable that we will all face temptations to sin. And when we do, if you look at verse 8-9, Jesus tells us to fight that temptation with all our might. He says, *“If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes*

you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire” (Matthew 18:8-9).

It’s hyperbole. Don’t take this literally and come back next week looking like a pirate with a patch over your eye and a peg for a leg. But put sin to death. When you see, kill it. Confess it. Set a guard against it. Do everything you can to cut it out of your life. As Christians, we are always wrestling with sin, because as long as we are in this fallen world, we will face temptations to sin. But again, Jesus says, “Woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!” Don’t be the one tempting others! Don’t be the source of stumbling for any of God’s children! For literal children, for the least of disciples, or for anyone else. That is a great evil.

Instead, protect God’s children. Do all you can to lead others away from sin toward the Savior, who is their ultimate protector. And I want you to see how that wonderful reality shines through in the final part of the passage. In verse 12 Jesus says, *“What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?”* (Matthew 18:12). The good shepherd cares for each of his sheep. So, if one goes missing, he goes looking. Verse 13: *“And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray”* (Matthew 18:13).

A couple years ago, we lost our son John at the library. It happened so fast. Suddenly, I looked around and I didn’t see him. When I called, he didn’t answer. Within a few minutes the library staff and a few kind parents were looking as well. But he wasn’t turning up. Then, finally, we found him. The whole ordeal probably lasted a total of 5 minutes, but that was 5 minutes too long! The relief was intense. And in that moment, I was rejoicing over John more than Joanna or Lydia. Not because I love him more, but because he was lost, but now found.

Friends, our God loves to bring back sheep that have gone astray. And he will make sure that none of his sheep are ever ultimately lost. Verse 14: *“So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish”* (Matthew 18:14). He is the perfect protector. The great shepherd of the sheep! And no one can snatch his people out of his hands. There is immense comfort here. There’s comfort for those who grieve over a child, a family member, a friend, who has gone astray because someone has led them into temptation. If they truly belong to Christ’s flock, he will bring them back. And he may very well use your prayers and your pleading and your patient love to do so.

There’s also comfort for anyone who has led someone astray. Maybe you hear Jesus pronounce that woe and declare how serious it is to lead one of his little ones into sin, and you’re thinking, “I’ve done that! I deserve to be plunged into the sea with a millstone around my neck!” Yes. That sin is very serious. But Jesus is very gracious—and he can restore you and bring you back too. The truth is, we all deserve to be plunged into the depths of death and hell for our sin. But Jesus plunged himself into that darkness upon the cross, and rose again victorious, to offer forgiveness to us.

In Matthew 12:31, Jesus declares that *every sin... will be forgiven* for those who trust in him. Every sin. Friend, have you gone astray? Have you led others astray? Confess your sin to Jesus, who is faithful and just to forgive you and to cleanse you. And commit yourself, from this day forward, to do all you can to help others do the same. Do not harm God’s children, protect them.

Conclusion

So, brothers and sisters, do you want to be great in Christ's kingdom? Don't aim high. Aim low. Become like children. Walk in humble dependence upon God and with humility toward others. And welcome God's children. Do not despise even the least of his people... the youngest... the weakest... they are precious in his sight, let them be the same in your eyes as well.

And by God's grace, in his strength, protect God's children. Do nothing that would cause someone to stumble and fall into sin. Put no temptation in anyone's way. But in love, seek to build others up in the faith.