

Matthew 18:1-14 – “Measuring Greatness”

When I was growing up, my friends and I used to use the term goat for someone who messed up. We would be playing a game of football, and someone would drop the ball; we'd call them a goat. Somewhere along the line, the term goat became an acronym for something completely opposite – **Greatest Of All Time**. It's become a big debate in various circles. Who's the G.O.A.T. in hockey (clearly that's Gretzky). Who's the GOAT of football (gotta be Tom Brady).

Well, trying to determine who was the greatest goes all the way back through history and even Jesus' disciples were wrestling with that. So, they come to Jesus with the question, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? How will Jesus answer that? This is what we look at in this message today.

Summary Statement of our text: Greatness in the kingdom of God is measured by childlike humility, a desire to root out sin, and a concern for the salvation of others.

1. Humility is Key – 18:1-5

18:1 - *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”*

At what time? It helps us to look at the other gospel writers which fill in a little more detail regarding this time.

- **Mark 9:33–34**, *"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?”*³⁴ *But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest."*
- So, it's not just that the disciples come with a question about who is the greatest; no, they've been disputing about it. They're arguing over who's going to hold the best position in the kingdom.

Perhaps they've been reminiscing over the last few days. There's been some standout moments from Peter's confession of Christ at Caesarea Philippi and this coming by revelation from the Father (Matthew 16:13-17). Then you've got the transfiguration in Matthew 17 where Peter, James, and John got to witness Jesus standing in His glory alongside Elijah and Moses. Peter got to be a part of a special temple tax provision miracle with the coin in the fish (Matthew 17:24-27). So far Peter seems to be the frontrunner for the guy that is being favored. But

John would say he's the disciple whom Jesus loved. The rest of the disciples are wondering how they're going to compete with all this. But they're totally missing out on what Jesus has been trying to reveal to them. They've been getting all the wrong answers because they don't even know the question.

- I remember sitting in Bible college and in one of my classes the teacher was talking about Jesus being the key and the focal point of all Scripture. She asked the question, *'Who's the link of all Scripture?'* And the teacher called upon a girl sitting by me, and I knew she didn't hear the question, so I leaned over and whispered *Moses*. And that poor girl shouted out with the greatest confidence, *Moses!!* It's hard to get the answer right when you don't know the question.
- These disciples aren't asking the right question.

Jesus has already been preparing them up for His death and resurrection (16:21; 17:22-23). But all the disciples can focus on is a political kingdom and who's going to have the most prestigious position. But Jesus is going to teach them something so contrary to their thinking and contrary to the way of the world – the way up is down, and the way down is up.

He's going to give them a visual illustration of this...

18:2-3 - *Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.*

What an amazing scene this would have been. Children in this day were to be seen and not heard (and basically not seen either). They had no rights or place in society in this day. They were seen more as property. So when Jesus receives a little child unto Him (and Mark writes that Jesus took this child up in His arms) He was showing that all people, no matter social status, age, gender, or wealth, had access to Him.

But more so, Jesus is showing how that access comes.

- The disciples figured they were getting prestigious positions in the kingdom, but Jesus wants to make sure they know the way into the kingdom. And the way in is to become ***as little children***.
- In order for that to happen they need to be ***converted***. This means to turn or repent. Their entrance into the kingdom is not automatic. There needs to be a shift, an 'about-face', in how they see themselves and how they see others.

So, how are they to see themselves? With humility. They're to become as little children.

- Now that can be taken in a couple of ways. There are some in the church that like to be childish. They want things done their way, they want to be the focus, they're demanding. It's a sign of immaturity. This isn't what Jesus is getting at (thank the Lord!). He's not talking about being *childish*, but *childlike*.
- Children are a great example of innocence, trust, dependence, simpleness. These are all ways that we are to be as believers.

18:4 - *Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

The one that walks in the humility of a child is the greatest in the kingdom. This is what Jesus elevates as greatness.

You see, a child isn't worried about what they look like, or what others think about them. There's no smugness to a child, as though they think themselves to important to talk to you. They know they are children and they don't try to be more than that. In fact they enjoy being a child.

- We need to learn this sort of humility as Christians. Not humility to be seen as good, but humility to not be seen at all. You see true humility is not thinking badly of oneself, it's not thinking of oneself at all.

And remember, Jesus isn't just talking about the way we are to view ourselves, He's tying this in to the way we view others as well.

And when we receive a little child like the one He had in His arms, it's as though we are receiving Christ Himself...

18:5 - *Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.*

To receive a child meant that we receive someone that would not better our position in any way. We have to be willing to serve others with no ulterior motive.

Now it's important to note that the term ***child*** or ***little ones*** becomes synonymous here with all believers in Christ. This is a passage that is being spoken to the church. We never move away from that idea as being children of God.

- **John 1:12**, *"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:"*

This whole passage in Chapter 18 is dealing with our relationships with one another and is focussed on the church. Jesus introduced this new group in Matthew 16:18.

In fact, this is the 4th of 5 discourses Jesus gives in the book of Matthew. The first being the Sermon on the Mount (Chs 5-7), the second being the Commissioning of the Disciples (Ch. 10), the third is the Kingdom Parables Discourse (Ch. 13), this one is the Church Discourse (Ch. 18), and the fifth is the Mount of Olives Discourse about End Times (Chs. 24-25).

And in the church, we are to have a humble view of ourselves and were to view others as better than ourselves.

Philippians 2:1–4, *"Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, ² fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. ³ Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. ⁴ Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."*

- We must look at each other with a heart of love and grace, acceptance and forgiveness. Not as stepping-stones to reach our own level of greatness. That means the lowly, the outsiders, the downcast, are to be received with open arms, because in doing so, it's as though you are receiving Christ.
- Notice, the receiving is being done in **My name**, meaning they're not received because of their status or greatness, they're received because they are humble disciples coming in the name of Jesus. And nobody that comes through Christ is to be turned away.

Interestingly in Mark and Luke's gospels they add at this point this account:

Mark 9:38–40, *"Now John answered Him, saying, "Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us." ³⁹ But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. ⁴⁰ For he who is not against us is on our side."*

You see, some of these disciples were not receiving others who came in Jesus' name. They were hindering them and being a stumbling block. This is what Jesus warns of next.

2. Rooting Out Sin – 18:6-9

18:6-7 - “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. ⁷ Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!

Again, this is not a warning for how you treat children only. No doubt children are included because children can be believers, but the overall emphasis is on all spiritual children; the humble disciples who may have been cast aside by others. And Jesus is saying that if you cause one of these humble disciples to sin, it would be better if you were drowned in the sea by a large millstone hung around your neck.

- This is another use of biblical hyperbole. Jesus is not advocating for someone to be taken out if they cause a person to sin. Nor is this speaking of an eternal punishment in hell. A believer will not be condemned for a sin. But they will lose out on rewards; there will be eternal consequences for leading others astray.

We recognize there will be offenses in this world. The word **offenses** is the Greek word *skandalon*, and it speaks of stumbling blocks, or enticements to sin. We live in a fallen world and offenses are an inevitable outcome. But woe to the person that is the source of the offense.

- “There will continue to be temptations in the world as long as there is sin in the world; this is expected. However, we must not add to the world’s temptations by leading one another to sin in the church. For instance, don’t gossip to me when I am already fighting off that tendency in my own heart. Don’t lead me astray in the name of your supposed Christian liberties when I’m fighting every day not to turn those liberties into license to sin. Both materialism and sexual temptations also come to mind in our culture, as it is all too easy to lead others astray in these areas without even realizing it. It would be better for you, Jesus says, if you would put a stone around your neck and throw yourself down into a watery grave (v. 6).” ¹

We need to take seriously the holiness in others and be sure we’re serving them in a way that is leading them to Jesus. But if we’re going to be committed to the holiness of others, we must be sure we’re considering our own holiness as well.

¹ Platt, D. (2013). *Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (D. L. Akin, D. Platt, & T. Merida, Eds.; p. 239). Holman Reference.

18:8-9 - “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. ⁹ 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.

What these verses tell us is that we need to take sin very seriously. Sin leads to death. If there is an area that is causing you to be tripped up and to stumble in your walk with Christ (and thus become a stumbling block to others) cut it away. Ruthlessly deal with the sin in your life. Though it may hurt, it will be far better to enter into heaven limping along than to not deal with it and be cast into hell.

When Jesus spoke this, He wasn't speaking literally but figuratively. He's not advocating for self-mutilation. If we were to take this seriously, I'd be standing here before you as a little stump of a carcass.

- You see, if we were to cut off a hand or a foot, or take out an eye, it just wouldn't go deep enough. Sin is an issue of the heart. I could have both eyes removed and still lust because it's an internal action. I could have both my hands cut off and still be a thief.

The point is that we must take whatever steps are necessary to prevent us from stumbling ourselves and others. Sin must not be tolerated because of the devastating outcomes it brings.

3. Concern for the Salvation of Others – 18:10-14

18:10 - “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.

Jesus is certain to be sure that we are caring for the least of these; that the little ones are not despised. They may not be able to do anything for you but serve them and be an example to them.

The angels that are serving them are always before our Heavenly Father. This means that they are so loved by the Father that He has his angels attending to them. If He cares this much for the little ones, shouldn't we as well?

- Does this mean that everyone has a guardian angel? We know from **Hebrews 1:14**, *"Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?"*
- So, angels are deployed to be of service to us. Does that mean everyone has a specific personal guardian angel? Not sure. I know when I'm driving there's about 10 guardian angels around my car.

18:11 - *For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.*

Now if you're reading from a more modern translation, you'll see this verse is not in your Bible. Does this mean some Bible verses have been removed? Not necessarily. The modern translations have used the earliest manuscripts that originated in Alexandria. The NKJV uses the Majority Text which is older but has more manuscripts and originated in Antioch. It could be that this was a copyist that added this verse as a summary statement to this section. It is fitting and it's a verse perhaps copied from Luke 19:10 and John 3:17.

Regardless of origination, the statement is biblical and true. Jesus has come to save that which was lost. This is the Shepherd's heart.

18:12-14 - *"What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? ¹³ And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. ¹⁴ Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.*

The Shepherd goes after those that are lost. Jesus' heart is to go after those that are wayward.

It's very easy to say to the one that wanders, *'Serves them right, they shouldn't have gone over there. Let them find their own way back to the herd.'*

But Jesus lovingly seeks out those which wander and graciously receives them back with rejoicing, not condemnation.

When we look at people through the eyes of the Father, and with the heart of Jesus, our attitude will shift. No longer will people be inconveniences, annoyances, or hindrances. They will be people loved by the Father and people Jesus died for to give them life. Are we following in that same attitude and mission?

Applications:

1. As children of God's kingdom, we are to exude a childlike humility.
2. Our greatness in God's kingdom will depend largely on how we humble ourselves (**James 4:10**, "*Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.*")
3. A hospitable heart toward God's people is hospitality toward Jesus Himself.
4. Anyone who causes a fellow believer to sin will suffer great loss.
5. We must be sure to deal seriously with sin in our own lives.
6. The Father will make every effort to restore a believer who strays into sin.
7. The Father rejoices over each believer who is brought back from sin.