

“The Greatest in the Kingdom”

Matthew 18:1–11

The Authority of the King

Introduction

The world’s idea of greatness is based on power, strength and success. It’s all about comparing ourselves to others and feeling superior—smarter, richer, stronger, better-looking. It’s about self-exaltation. But how does God determine greatness?

Context:

- The disciples were in Capernaum (Mark 9:33–34) and they asked Jesus: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (v. 1).
- Luke reveals they were arguing about this (Luke 9:46). They wanted to know which one of them was the greatest.

Jesus responds to the disciples’ question by presenting them with an object lesson—a little child.

How To Be Great In God’s Eyes

1. We must be converted (v. 3)

The Greek verb for “converted” is *stréphō*. It means to twist, bend, turn, or change direction. It can even mean to turn into or become something else. Conversion is a fundamental change in our nature that results in a radical change in our conduct and thinking. This is a necessary condition to enter the kingdom of heaven.

2. We must become like children (v. 3–4)

In what ways should we become like children?

- Children have a measure of purity and innocence.
- Children are needy and dependent on others for their well-being.
- Children have a simple faith that is willing to trust and believe what they hear.
- Children are humble. This is the main quality Jesus is thinking of (v. 4).

Humility is not thinking less of yourself than you should, and it’s not thinking more of yourself than you should. It’s thinking of yourself less.

Pride was at the root of the disciples’ desire for greatness. Humility enables us to live for others rather than ourselves (cf. Philippians 2:3-4).

3. We must welcome our brothers and sisters in Christ (v. 5, 10)

Verse 5: “whoever receives one such child in My name receives me...”

Does this refer to children literally... or does it refer figuratively to the disciples who have humbled themselves *like children* and entered the kingdom?

- Almost all commentators recognize that Jesus shifts his focus from children in general to the children of God in particular.
- One clue is in verse 6: “**whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble...**” (v. 6).
- Jesus sometimes uses the term “little ones” to refer to his disciples (cf. Matthew 10:42).

Note that receiving God’s children in verse 5 contrasts with despising God’s children in verse 10, which is how the disciples were acting. They were fighting, arguing, and competing with each other, rather than helping, serving and honoring one another.

4. We must not be a stumbling block for others (v. 6–7)

A stumbling block is anything you encounter in your path that trips you up and causes you to fall into sin. The Greek word can also refer to a trap or a snare, indicating the seductive and deceptive nature of sin. It looks attractive, but it’s a trap that brings destruction. The punishment for stumbling others is likened to being tied to a millstone and drowned in the depths of the sea (i.e.—a death penalty.)

5. We must not be a stumbling block for ourselves (v. 8–9)

Jesus switches to the word “you” and makes this very personal. He moves from external stumbling blocks that exist in the world to internal stumbling blocks that exist within the members of our own body. Our hands, feet and eyes cause us to sin in countless ways.

This passage is the strongest possible warning... using the strongest possible language... designed to teach us two things:

- 1) Sin is so infinitely heinous and offensive to God that it requires an eternal punishment in hell (i.e. “eternal fire” in v. 8).
- 2) Whatever the cost, we must deal honestly with our sin and seek to eradicate it from our lives (like cancer).

John Owen: “Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.”

Conclusion

How do we eradicate sin from our lives?

Jesus is not instructing us to literally cut off our hands or feet, because that wouldn’t remove the source of the problem: *our heart*. Therefore, we cannot defeat sin in our own strength. Only God can accomplish that through the power of the Holy Spirit working in us:

1. It begins with conversion (John 3:3; Ezekiel 36:26–27)
2. It requires ongoing repentance from any known sin in our lives (Matthew 3:8; Romans 2:4)
3. It requires the cleansing, sanctifying influence of God’s word (John 17:17; Ephesians 5:25–27)
4. It requires the daily renewing of our mind (Romans 12:1–2; 2 Corinthians 10:4–5)
5. It requires the support of a community of like-minded believers (Galatians 6:2)
6. It may require specialized counseling to resolve the hurts & habits from our past (Proverbs 11:14)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What would you say is the difference between the world’s definition of greatness and God’s definition of greatness?
2. In what ways should adults become like children? (See verses 3–4)
3. How does a person know if they are really humble?
4. What are some of the world’s stumbling blocks? (See verse 7)
5. How do you personally try to eradicate sin from your life? What has worked well for you... and not so well?