

Defining Greatness

Matthew 18:1-14

Mark Vroegop

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2 And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them 3 and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

5 "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, 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.

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! 8 And 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. 9 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.

10 "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. 12 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? 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. 14 So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish (Matt 18:1-14).

I was reading an article recently about the amazing number of corporate leaders who had been convicted or fired because of shocking behavior. The piece was entitled "The Corner Office Alters Nice Guys" and it was acknowledging a brutal and scary reality in our power-grabbing world:

"The very traits that helped leaders accumulate control in the first place all but disappear once they rise to power. Once the nice guys reach the top, the headiness of wielding power causes them to morph into a very different kind of beast. They lose their ability to empathize with others, especially lesser mortals and ignore information that doesn't confirm what they already believe. Most tellingly, perhaps, they learn to excuse faults in themselves that they are quick to condemn in others. Even the most virtuous people can be undone by the corner office."¹

¹ "The Corner Office Alters Nice Guys" by Jonah Lehrer, Wall Street Journal as cited in THE WEEK – August 27, 2010, p. 36.

Translation? Be sure that you know what true greatness is all about because the world-based, self-focused lure of promotion, advancement, or success can easily destroy you. All you have to do is think like everyone else, live like everyone else, act like everyone else and then think that you did it by yourself, and it will not be long until you are just another body-bag on the road of life. Worse, you could be a personal “train-wreck” with a fish bumper sticker. The gravitational pull of our culture and our flesh are so strong that a follower of Jesus dare not set his or her life on auto pilot. We need a constant re-orientation with the horizon of God’s word.

What would Jesus REALLY do?

Today we begin a new seven message series that will take us through Matthew chapter 20 and the month of October. These chapters mark a bit of a transition for Jesus until we get to chapter 21 where he enters Jerusalem, the active opposition to him grows, and he begins his final march toward the cross.

For the most part, chapters 18-20 record the words that Jesus spoke to his inner circle about what it means to be a follower of his. Matthew seems to use this section in order to show his disciples what real-world Christianity is like; he is laying before them some important and practical concepts of how to live by the right value set in a broken world. We will hear passages that address the following:

- How do you define greatness?
- What do you do when people do you wrong?
- How can we forgive people?
- Is divorce okay?
- Why are there more kids than rich people in heaven?
- Why will the last be first and the first last?

Through it all we will see that Jesus calls us to live in a way that is a bit radical. He calls his followers to live by a value-set that runs against the grain of culture. So these chapters will remind us that Christianity has always been counter-cultural, and they will remind us that there is no way that we could live this way unless Jesus makes us new creatures with a new heart, new appetites, and new actions.

Our text this morning asks and answers a very important and basic question: Who is the greatest in the kingdom? Implicit in the question and its answer is the foundational issue of what is really important in God’s kingdom. Jesus uses this opportunity to answer the question in principle and to drive home its importance by giving a series of strong warnings about what God thinks when this principle is violated. Jesus is not only talking about how one lives in a future kingdom, but how one is to live now.

The Principle: Greatness is found in dependent, life-transforming faith

Matthew 18 begins with a question from the disciples: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Now we are not exactly sure why the disciples are asking Jesus this, but Mark 9:34 gives us a hint.

33 And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" 34 But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest (Mark 9:33-34).

Busted! It is likely that the exclusivity of Jesus' relationship with Peter, James, and John and the transfiguration experience was creating an unfortunate dialogue between the disciples as to the pecking order of greatness.

Jesus seizes on the opportunity to teach the disciples by means of an object lesson. Verse two tells us that Jesus called a child to come in the midst of them, and then he says something incredibly profound and revolutionary:

"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 18:3-4).

Notice what Jesus says here:

1. He elevates the discussion to include entrance into the kingdom.

He changes the dialogue from an argument about who is greatest to a very basic and non-negotiable principle (notice the double negative: "unless...you will never") for even getting into Jesus' kingdom. By their argument about who is the greatest, the disciples are assuming that they have or will make it. Jesus shocks them by identifying for them that there is a much bigger issue in play here. In other words, if you miss what Jesus is saying greatness is going to be the least of your problems. Jesus elevates the issue to lower the self-opinion of the disciples.

2. No one enters the kingdom without dependent, life-transforming faith.

Jesus gives his disciples a two-fold conditional statement ("unless"). First, he says that they must "turn." The word means a spiritual turning or conversion. It carries the force of going a different path, having a different life, and seeing the world differently. And the path that Jesus calls them to embrace is what comes next. Secondly, he says that they must become like children.

That raises an important question. Why children? What is about children that Jesus is advocating? He is showing the disciples that they were asserting themselves, relying on their own strength, and that the real solution was to become like dependent little children. They had to turn from their self-concern, their self-justification, their self-advancement or they will not only miss greatness; they will miss the kingdom entirely. Without genuine dependency they will not even get into the kingdom!

Here is the gospel of faith alone. Jesus is identifying here something critically important; something that makes the difference between heaven and hell. Entrance into the kingdom only comes to those who stop placing their confidence in themselves and who wholly, dependently, and decisively place their confidence in God for their spirituality. Jesus says that people have to become like children – dependent, helpless, and trusting – in order to come into the kingdom.

It is the mission of Jesus to become the object of faith and the means of entrance into the kingdom. He is the great example of dependency, and he is the greatest object of dependency as people are able to be forgiven not by what they've done but by trusting in what Christ has done. Kingdom-entering faith means that a person turns away from their attempts to earn God's favor, and instead placing child-like dependent faith in Christ's sacrifice as a sufficient payment for his or her sins. It is by faith in Christ that a holy God is able to be just in his judgment of sin and to be the justifier of those who deserve punishment (Rom 3:26). No one comes to the kingdom unless it is through humble, dependent faith

3. Life in the kingdom is continually lived by dependent faith.

Now Jesus gets the answer of the original question. He says, "whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom." What does this mean? Some take it to mean that Jesus is highlighting humility here. However the problem with that is two-fold: First, children are not humble creatures. They are incredibly self-absorbed and self-centered. So Jesus cannot be talking about an innate humility. Secondly, he says humble yourself **like this** child. He doesn't say humble yourself like this humble child, but to humble yourself to like this child. So the humility is a description of something else. In other words, humility is what you need to embrace so that you become something different. What is it?

I think that Jesus is simply calling for a continuation of the kind of dependency that he has just taught. He is identifying dependent faith, trust, or confidence in another as the hallmark which the disciples should humbly embrace. Greatness, therefore, is not defined by prideful triumph but by personal trust. And this personal trust is not only what gets a person into the kingdom is the defining hallmark of greatness in the kingdom.

The kingdom of heaven is entered by humble, dependent faith and the essence of greatness – what God truly loves – is continual humble, dependent faith. Don't make the mistake of thinking that justification requires dependent faith while sanctification is all about your effort.

God-dependent faith is at the root of both. In fact unless you know that the only way that you are righteous is completely because of the work of someone else (Christ), then anything good that you do will not actually be good because you could do that good to earn God's favor. Good and greatness are not good and great unless it is truly rooted in the gospel of faith alone. Where is greatness found in Christ's kingdom? It is only found in dependent, life-transforming faith. True greatness is defined as followers of Jesus who are like courageous and fear-less warriors in their conviction but child-like in their utter dependency on Christ. A child can do nothing to bring about his status; all that the child is and has come from someone else.² So too are the followers of Jesus.

The Warnings: True dependency is demonstrated by love

Having laid down this important principle, Jesus next drives home the importance of this dependency by warning his disciples about what would happen if they create a scenario where they undervalue, hinder, or neglect those who embrace this child-like faith. He is telling them how they should relate to other people in light of this call for dependency, and he uses the child to illustrate an important point: true dependency on God creates a love and concern for others – especially the helpless and dependent. As 1 John 3 tells us, love for God naturally creates a love for others.

16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers (1 John 3:16-17).

Verses 5-14 gives us four warnings all of which are designed to reinforce this important concept:

1. Beware of compartmentalizing

Jesus tells his disciples that when they receive a child or a child-like person that there is more that is going on than just what they see. He warns them that he is personally involved here. He says, "whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." The treatment of people who are "less than great" is personal for Jesus.

This is why James says the following: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:26). That is why there are so many hospitals with religious names on them (e.g., Methodist Hospital). There is something incredibly powerful when the followers of Jesus truly care for those who are the dependent-ones in our society. Adoption, foster care, working with the disabled, caring for the elderly, serving as a mentor, ministering to the homeless, discipling the under-privileged or any number of ministries are not just ways to serve

² Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Jesus – Pillar Commentary Series. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 460

people; they are the ways that you serve Jesus. In other words, if you serve out of the spotlight and you minister to defenseless, dependent people realize that you are really serving Jesus personally.

2. Beware of consequences

To counter act the tendency to think that the more significant the person the more serious you should take the ministry, Jesus warns his disciples about causing a "little one" to sin. He says that if you should do this then it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened on your neck and you were drowned in the sea. The imagery here is meant to make you shutter. The punishment is serious because the crime is serious, and one might be tempted to think that "lesser people" can be treated with less concern for the consequences.

So what is meant by causing one to sin? The Greek word here is scandalizo which means to cause someone to trip or to bait a trap. ESV translates the word as "cause to sin." That's not a bad translation but the nuance of the word seems to be more that just sin. It seems to mean to cause someone to sin such that they walk away from their simple trust in Christ. The specific sin is not mentioned, and I think it is because Jesus is concerned about any actions that cause a young one to walk away. These little ones are so important to Jesus that to cause spiritual damage to even one of them is more than a capital offense.³

3. Beware of casualness

Jesus next turns to the problem of temptation, and he begins with a "Woe-statement." He says, "Woe to the world for temptations to sin." He is lamenting the reality of a fallen world that is filled with tempters and temptations, and their inevitability ("For it is necessary that temptations come"). But Jesus' focus here is on the person who facilitates the temptation. He wants the person who is a potential tempter to consider carefully.

Therefore, Jesus uses hyperbole in verses 8-9 to show his disciples the recommended radical action that they should take.

And 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. 9 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 (Matt 18:8-9).

Now we've heard this before. In a section of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:29-30), Jesus said the same thing, but in that context it was directed to personal righteousness. This warning is different. Jesus is warning here about the danger of being overly casual with

³ R.T. France, The Gospel According to Matthew – NICNT, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 682.

tempting others. While the Sermon on the Mount advocated radical action for how to handle sin personally; this text calls for the same radical action when considering others.

Again, causing a little one to fall into sin is serious enough that radical action is required.

4. Beware of callousness

The final warning is given to warn the disciples against callousness toward one of these little ones where you might think, "What's the big deal...they really aren't that important anyway." Jesus is calling out a religious pragmatism that weights the spiritual worth of person by their perceived earthly importance. The disciples wanted to know who was the greatest, and Jesus is concerned that the spirit that motivated that kind of discussion will affect how they minister to people.

Therefore he 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 (Matt 18:10). This is a very interesting reference to some kind of activity in heaven. Some think that this is referring to guardian angels or simply to the fact that angels are serving these little ones too. Regardless the point is that there is something going on in heaven that is important.

Jesus then talks about a shepherd's love for his sheep. Verse 12-13 talk about the fact that a shepherd would search diligently for his lost sheep, and he would greatly rejoice after he found the one lost sheep. The implication should be obvious, but just to be sure Jesus makes one final statement: So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish (Matt 18:14). In other words God does not desire for one of these little ones to stumble, be neglected, or to perish.

These little ones are on God's heart, and they should be on the hearts of Jesus' true disciples.

Implications

Do you see the connection between the right definition of greatness and the right ministry? Let me give you some implications for us personally and for College Park Church:

1. **The gospel of faith alone through Christ alone defines everything about us and what we do.** Dependent faith is not just how your sins were forgiven; it is the essence of how you pursue sanctification and gospel ministry. The right definition of greatness makes an eternal difference.
2. **Those who are captivated by dependent faith are compelled to love dependent, "little-ones" kind of people.** It just makes sense that those who understand the grace of God are gracious.

3. **The definition of success at College Park must always be dependency and selfless love not size, scope, facility, programs, or community perceptions.** On the Sunday after we put up the 40 foot walls of our new sanctuary, I want to remind you that we ought to pray that our community says, "Wow, look how they love people" not just "Wow, that's a big building."

4. **We must strive to make this church a hospital for hurting people.** Let us not forget the "little-ones", the "hurting-ones", the "abandoned-ones", the outcast, the disenfranchised, the neglected, the scorned, the hated, and the abused.

Dependency is what Jesus wants, and he wants it for his followers and for his church. So let us heed his admonition and his warning. Let us run to him for forgiveness and linger there to learn what Jesus really values.

Let us never become so great that we are no longer truly great.

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