

Lowly & Small, Greatest of All

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[0 : 00] Well, we were talking earlier in the service about VBS, and last Sunday I shared a little of our vision for a weekly kids ministry here at our church in the fall, and urge you to think and pray about being involved with it.

And this morning I want to just continue to direct our thoughts along some related lines. So as we go to the Word of God this morning, and maybe for the next week or two, we want to take some time to reflect on some of the moments that Jesus had with kids.

Matthew and his gospel especially seem to take notice of this. We see several moments in which Jesus drew the attention of his disciples to kids, and so here we are as disciples of Jesus, and may he do the same thing in our hearts and minds as we listen to him this morning.

We're in Matthew chapter 18. Matthew chapter 18. Starting in verse 1.

At that time, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Just to give you a quick sense of where Matthew's at in the story of Jesus, we're somewhere between the transfiguration and the triumphal entry.

[1 : 24] And Jesus is in and around the town of Capernaum, which is up in Galilee in that northern part of Israel. And speaking of children, Jesus has just healed a demon-possessed boy.

And I don't know how many times I've read that story before, but for some reason this week as I read that again, it just got to me. How awful that is. That this evil spirit was messing with this boy, this child, trying to hurt him, trying to get him to kill himself.

And wonderfully, Jesus cast the demon out of the boy with a word, set him free, he was changed, he was healed. And now we come to this little conversation in chapter 18, verse 1.

Now this seems to have been an ongoing topic of conversation for the disciples.

It's not too long after this that the mother of James and John will come to Jesus and ask if James and John can have the two most important seats at the right and left of Jesus' throne as he enters his kingdom.

[2 : 37] And then we see again, a little later, at the Passover supper, on the night of Jesus' betrayal, that the disciples were fighting amongst one another about which of them was the greatest.

And we see glimpses all throughout the story of Jesus, really, in the ways that Jesus speaks to them, that this is an issue for the disciples. He encourages them not to be like the people of this world, not to desire greatness and power like the Pharisees or like the rulers of this world.

So this question really does show what Jesus' disciples are most interested in. Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Okay, maybe it's not us at the moment, but, you know, Jesus, give us some thoughts, give us some ideas.

Help us figure out what the secret is to that greatness, and maybe we might even come to attain to that ourselves one day.

And of course, even though Jesus has just told them five verses earlier about how things are going to go when he comes to Jerusalem, all indications are that the disciples are still thinking of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, setting up the kingdom here and now on earth, and maybe perhaps thinking, you know, what's my role going to be in this?

[4 : 02] What's my place going to be in this new order? I mean, I've been following Jesus since the beginning. I've been his loyal follower. Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

Verse 2. Jesus called a little child to him and placed the child among them.

Think about this. Picture this. Jesus is very deliberate here. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he called the child by name because he'd already taken the time to know this child first.

He very intentionally calls this child and puts him in the middle. Can you picture it? Twelve grown men or perhaps more, even more followers of Jesus, all standing around and a little child standing in the middle.

And Jesus said, Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

[5 : 23] Wow. I'm thinking at this point, the disciples are probably turning a little red in the face. I mean, what a statement. I'm just guessing.

But maybe before all this, they're thinking, well, if anyone's going to have some honor, some prominence in this coming kingdom of which Jesus is going to be king, it's going to be us. I mean, look at us. We've been with Jesus right from the start. We're his best friends. Amongst all his followers, we've got seniority here.

And then Jesus blows them away by telling them that as they are right now, they're not even going to enter the kingdom of heaven.

They're not going to be a part of the kingdom. And this is one of the stronger forms of negation. It's literally, you will not ever enter the kingdom of heaven unless you all have a massive change of attitude, change of heart.

[6 : 37] The Greek word for change that's used here most often is translated as turn. It means to turn the other way, to turn around, to change direction. So we're not talking about just a little change or just a little attitude adjustment.

We're talking about a big change, a complete change of mindset, a complete change of heart. You know, sometimes we might not like the many hard things that Jesus says to people, but at least Jesus is consistent.

He doesn't play favorites. He points out the sin of the Pharisees and He points out the sin of the closest friends, His disciples.

He tells the crowds to repent or perish in Luke 13 and He says the very same thing in a sense right here to His own disciples, the 12, the ones that He's chosen.

Unless you change, you will not ever enter the kingdom of heaven. Wow. Well, what kind of change must they make in order to enter the kingdom of heaven?

[7 : 48] Jesus says, unless you change and become like little children, like this little child now standing in the midst of you.

I mean, who would have thought that this would happen? That little boy or that little girl just sitting on the side listening to all this, is suddenly in the very center and is the example of how the 12 will be saved.

Here we are gearing up for another VBS this summer, gearing up for some kids' ministry this fall, and some of us, if we're honest, we might be thinking, well, I don't really care about the kids in Davidson.

What do they have to do with me? Maybe if we're honest, we're like the disciples who probably didn't even notice them until they were making too much noise or interrupting.

Or maybe we do notice them, maybe we do care about them, but maybe we think that this is all just about us teaching them, the kids. But could it be that Jesus actually has something to teach us as a church through them?

[9 : 04] Maybe not doctrine, but maybe about hard attitude kind of things. Maybe about faith, trust, worship.

Out of the mouths of children you have called forth your praise, said the psalmist. I don't know about you, but I can hardly get over this.

There's a lesson to be learned from this child standing in the middle of the circle here. And Jesus says, unless you learn it, you won't be in the kingdom of heaven.

So this is not an optional lesson for spiritual overachievers. This is an essential lesson, a bare minimum lesson for all citizens of Christ's kingdom. So in what way do we need to change and become like little children?

What is the change that Jesus longs to see in his disciples and in us? He goes on to explain verse 4.

[10 : 13] Therefore, he says, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Another more, perhaps more literal translation, whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

What do you mean by that, Jesus? This is a tough one. Some of us probably have the tendency to just assume we know what this means and move on.

Oh, it just means I need to have faith like a child or be humble like a child and am I? I think so. I hope so. Next. In fact, that's probably how the disciples initially responded to what Jesus said. Obviously, they didn't get it because not too long after they were fighting about which of them was the greatest. So I want to encourage you not to assume that you necessarily know what Jesus means here or that you've already done this.

[11 : 21] Let's meditate on this together. Whoever humbles himself like this child, this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

First, what is the action that Jesus is calling them to? Whoever humbles himself to humble yourself. He's essentially telling his disciples there's something you need to do. Something very important. you need to humble yourselves. It's not something that's going to happen automatically.

It's something that you need to be intentional and be deliberate about doing. Humble himself.

Humble yourself. He says to them. And as we reflect on this, you know, it comes to our attention that humbling ourselves is not mainly an outward action.

It's not like, well, I'll just go find some humble-looking clothes and put them on and now I'm good to go. Many of the Pharisees were well-practiced at acting humble.

[12 : 35] But this is not what Jesus is calling them to. No, humbling yourselves, humbling ourselves has to do primarily with a change of attitude, a change of heart.

Jesus is calling them right there to change the way that they think and feel about themselves and about other people.

It's easy to put on sackcloth. It's easy to forgo shaving for a couple weeks. It's easy to let your hair grow long and become unkempt. But it's much harder to change the way you think about people and the way you see yourself, the way you feel about certain people or the way you feel about yourself in relation to them.

Especially if, like these disciples, we're stuck in the habit and in the rut of seeing ourselves a certain way and others a certain way. And then we come to this question, what is it about a child that we must humble ourselves to be like?

This is maybe the hardest question of all here. This is the whole lesson. The child in the middle is the object lesson. That Jesus is trying to teach us.

[14 : 01] What does it mean to humble ourselves like this child? Maybe you know the answer. I know I've heard this passage and read it lots of times before.

I've heard a few different answers. You know, but when you come up here to preach, you want to know for sure, what does Jesus mean by this? And there are a couple different ways that you could take Jesus' words here.

some take this to suggest that this is all about the innocence of children, the purity of children, about the simple faith or trust of a child.

I'm not so sure about that. As I look at it, Jesus is not talking so much about faith or purity or innocence, but about humility, about humbling yourself.

Does Jesus mean that we should humble ourselves like this particular child is humble? Like is this specific child that he called out a shining example of humility among all the rest?

[15 : 08] I'm not sure about that either. In verse 3, he says to all of them that they need to change and become like children, plural. So this is, to me it seems, about, there's something about children in general that we need to see, that Jesus wants us to see.

Does Jesus mean that we should begin to think of ourselves as having the same importance in society as a child has? That's kind of what my Bible translation maybe suggests.

Whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. The idea here would be that when it comes to measuring greatness in our world, children are always considered to be at the very bottom.

They haven't accomplished anything. They haven't contributed meaningfully to their community at all yet. In fact, they're totally dependent on others just to live.

So if this is what Jesus means, perhaps he's calling his disciples to think of themselves as being like that, as being of little importance in the kingdom because they've contributed very little,

because they're totally dependent on the mercy of God, even to be citizens, that's a good possibility.

[16 : 30] Or does Jesus mean that we should humble ourselves and have the same general attitude that young children have? this is probably what I think, another good possibility.

It seems to me that there's a big contrast in attitudes here. There's the disciples and there's the kids. Look at verse 5. Jesus says there, whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

I got thinking about this. Why would Jesus say that to his disciples? Could it be that the disciples have not been all that welcoming to the children of Capernaum?

Could it be that they've not been warm to them or really taken an interest in them? Could it be that they think that this whole messianic movement that Jesus is leading would be better served by some competent adults who can really accomplish some great things and make this kingdom truly great?

Maybe they're looking at everyone who comes along through that lens. I don't know. They see Jesus talking to Nicodemus. Oh, Nicodemus, he's a member of the ruling council. If he becomes a follower of Jesus, just think of where this kingdom's going to go.

[17 : 58] But that crippled man over there that Jesus just healed, well, he's probably not going to do much for the cause. but children don't seem to see the world that way, do they?

They see people oftentimes as people, especially young children. I often smile at my own kids. Sometimes I'll see a stranger walking by and just not think to say hello or to greet them and the first thing they, hi, how's your day today?

In fact, even the stranger might be surprised at just how unexpectedly kind and welcoming the child is. Children, they do notice the difference in people's circumstances.

They see things like disabilities. They see the color of people's skin. They see the way that they're dressed. But amazingly, for kids, it doesn't automatically translate into thinking that they're somehow better than that person or looking down on them.

A child is far more likely to have compassion on the man with the broken legs who's sitting and begging on the street than their mom or their dad.

[19 : 19] A child would generally talk to and think the same of the prime minister or of the next door neighbor. They would talk to an accomplished businessman the same as they would talk to the college dropout.

They're easily welcoming to all kinds of people who are different than them. Perhaps Jesus wants his disciples, wants us, to get something of that kind of mindset towards others.

To stop thinking of ourselves as the most important, as the greatest, as wiser than so and so and humble ourselves and take up that mindset that a child has toward people all around.

Now it doesn't mean that children don't wrestle with pride. I think we know that they do. Even early on they can have that mentality of well I know better than mom or dad or I want to be first.

The world revolves around me. We're all sinners. Sin affects all of us even from the time that we're little. But there's something about a child's way of looking at other people and even themselves that's just lowly.

[20 : 42] It's just humble. They don't assume things about other people as much. And unlike us adults they actually know that they don't have all the answers.

And we know it because they ask questions all the time. It's such a wonderful and refreshing thing about kids. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

If we're listening closely Jesus is redefining greatness at least for his kingdom. And it's the total opposite of what we might expect.

He says the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the one who willingly deliberately humbles himself. Takes up the lowliest of places.

And I think we need to be careful here. Jesus is not telling us to pretend to be humble. He's not telling us to pretend to be like children. Neither is he telling us to pretend that we're unskilled or ungifted or that we're not good at certain things.

[21 : 59] It's not false humility that Jesus is looking for. So what is Jesus looking for? As I got thinking about this I realized Jesus is himself the best example of what he's looking for in his disciples.

Here he is, God's chosen king. And what's he doing? He's not sitting on a throne. He's among his people loving them, caring for them, serving them, washing their crusty feet. He didn't come to be served by them. He came to serve them. He didn't come so that all his citizens could lay down their lives for him as their great king but so that he could lay down his life for them. In our world it's the other way around. The subjects give their lives for the king. The body guards of the president jump in front of the president to take the bullet for the president and protect him. But in the kingdom of heaven the king jumps off his throne to take the bullet for his citizens, for his people.

[23 : 21] that is greatness. A king who will get off his throne and literally actually physically become a child.

Give up his rights and privileges and even his very life to rescue an unworthy sinner like me. that's greatness.

Verse 5 Jesus says whoever welcomes one such child like this in the midst of you guys. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

in these words I can almost hear Jesus saying to his disciples, do you want to serve me? Do you want to help the cause of my kingdom?

Do you want to welcome me as your Messiah, as your king? If that's what you want to do, then you can start by welcoming one of these little children here. That's your assignment.

[24 : 37] I can only wonder what Peter and James and John were thinking as he said this. I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised though if moments before this conversation they were already dividing up the land of Israel into regions or tribes or districts and thinking which one am I going to be the governor of when Jesus takes his seat on the throne?

What's my job going to be here? What's my role? And Jesus says, unless you have a massive change of attitude you won't even enter my kingdom.

You want to do something great for me? Start by welcoming the children in my name. In fact you could almost summarize this whole conversation like this.

Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Answer humble yourselves and welcome the children or you won't even enter it.

What a word. What a moment here with Jesus. Are you feeling convicted? I'm feeling convicted. I've been feeling convicted all through my preparation here.

[25 : 53] What do we do with this? first of all I think we need to ask ourselves the question the disciples should be asking themselves in what way do I need to humble myself?

And before we get to all the other aspects of life I think the first and most important question is have you humbled yourself before God? have you come to that place in your heart where you admit that you really don't have anything to offer him?

Where you admit that yes I am in need of you Jesus I'm in need of your forgiveness where you admit to him that you're a sinner.

this is the first and most important way that we all need to humble ourselves and like children just come to him and say father I've blown it I'm sorry I haven't listened to you I'm sorry I haven't treated you the way that I should would you forgive me?

We all have to come to this moment with God this humble moment in order to enter the kingdom of heaven and the good news is that God is rich in mercy and he forgives and if you've done that then I invite you to consider another simple way another practical simple way to humble yourself pride is an elusive thing it's something that's very difficult to see in your own life because it blinds you to its own presence and so this morning I want to simply invite you to ask the Lord Jesus to reveal to you Lord are there any proud thoughts proud attitudes in my heart that I have convict me show me what they are show me the ways you want me to change how I'm thinking and as you do maybe it's helpful to start thinking about some different people in your life you can start with your family how do you think about them in relation to yourself how about your friends how about your co-workers how about your neighbors how about one another here in the church from there you might want to consider

[28 : 36] Lord what what are some lowly some humble things that that you would have me do whether it's at home with your family or in the church or in your community what are some of those thankless tasks and jobs that God has maybe put before you to do maybe it's taking out the garbage at home maybe it's cleaning the church maybe it's visiting with someone who's shut in or who's an outcast in the community maybe it's even serving as the secretary on a board of the

library or the school community council has pride or a worldly view of greatness been keeping you from humbly serving the least of these or serving in one of these lowly ways these are just some questions to get the prayers rolling

Jesus said whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and amazingly he applied this rebuke this command specifically to welcoming children in his name something that the disciples felt was maybe not that important but something that Jesus felt was very important and so we can think about this even as we're gearing up for VBS this summer and kids ministry this fall are we willing to do that to welcome to serve some of the kids of our community in Jesus name whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me said Jesus let's pray Lord in these moments would you speak to our hearts and truthfully

Lord these are the kinds of conversations that we need to have with you that can happen in just a couple minutes so please would you speak to us all throughout the week would you show us each one of us how we need to humble ourselves would you forgive us for the pride that we've had in our hearts for those ways in which we've thought that we are better than others that we see more clearly that we're wiser than others that we deserve a better kind of service or responsibility than others Lord even as these we plan to have these kids come in the fall and later this summer we pray and ask would you use them to teach us this very lesson that you taught to your disciples that day and would you give us ears and hearts to hear it we ask this in your name Jesus amen