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## *The Gospel According to Matthew*

### *Greatness in the Kingdom*

*August 10, 2019*

**Sermon Text:** Matt 18:1-14

**Scripture Reading:** Philippians 2:1-18

The visible church today is typically characterized by a lust for “greatness.” Many years ago a church I was familiar with was seeking a new pastor. You could tell from the job description they put together that they were looking for someone who could lead them into “success.” And by success, they meant a packed sanctuary, a thriving school with lots of students, and a name for that church in denominational circles.

Well, they called a man who had some kind of track record at another church.

When they introduced him to the congregation they put him forward as someone who had led his prior church through a big building program and impressive numerical growth. No one seemed to think about the obvious – “then why is he leaving?”

But they voted to call him. Within two years he was discovered to be in adulterous sin with the church secretary and when he was confronted he told the church board that he never wanted to be a pastor anyway and left.

In a subsequent conversation with one of the board members who had called me, I told him that the entire church had sinned. He was rather stunned and didn’t like what I said. But the fact is that those people all were seeking worldly greatness and it came back and bit them.

Greatness. That is the subject of our text this morning in Matthew 18. Who is great in God’s kingdom? Or, as the disciples were really asking, “how can we achieve fame in the kingdom?”

We see the very same kind of wrong spirit in the Corinthians:

1Co 1:11-12 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. (12) What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."

Follow along then as I read:

Mat 18:1-14 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.

Let's notice first of all that these 14 verses are a unit dealing with the same subject. At verse 2 Jesus calls a child to Himself, and then the section ends at verse 14 (see also vs 10) with still further comment on "these little ones." The point? Simply that the middle

section, vss 7-9 which speak of cutting off hand or foot or tearing out an eye, must be interpreted in relation to the broader subject – *these little ones*.

We are also helped in understanding the passage by seeing the parallel in Mark:

Mar 9:33-37 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. (35) And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” (36) And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, (37) “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

The thing we see here is the disciple’s motive. They had been arguing about who was the greatest. Who would be “first.”

Luke pins their motive down even more clearly –

Luk 9:46-48 An argument arose among them as to which of them was

the greatest. (47) But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side (48) and said to them, “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.”

Arguing among themselves as to which of them was the greatest! There it is. This was obviously then a recurring problem among them:

Mat 20:20-28 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. (21) And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” (22) Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” (23) He said to them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

(24) And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. (25) But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their

great ones exercise authority over them. (26) It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, (27) and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, (28) even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The world’s concept of greatness is *power and control*. Greatness in this world is fame and fortune, both of which enable power and control. The ability to “lord it over” others. To “exercise authority” over others. And all for evil, self-serving purposes.

I can tell you that this lust for greatness is a plague in the visible church. It always has been. Rome is probably the most visible fruit of such wickedness. Bow down to the Pope, you know. Power to justify and forgive. Power to control. Power to speak as if he is God.

But this plague is not only to be found in Rome. It is in under every rock in evangelicalism. The people crave it and the “great” leaders grow greater by delivering it. It is the evil spirit of Diotrephes:

3Jn 1:9-10 I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not

acknowledge our authority. (10) So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.

Do you wish this church were bigger in numbers and buildings and finances? Do you wish that we had a name for ourselves among the movers and shakers of evangelicalism? Do you wish we could mix it up with those who are “eminent” in the seminaries and denominations and mega churches?

Or perhaps the church scene is not your chosen stage for greatness. Maybe you want to be great in your career, or among your social circles. You want to be regarded as great by the people you mix it up with.

If so, then you need to get your brain and heart seriously adjusted.

You need to listen to Jesus very, very carefully.

Let me make a note here so we are clear: this worldly seeking of power and greatness that Jesus is rebuking here *is not the same thing as wanting to do your best*. We are to serve the Lord with all our heart. We are to use the gifts He has given us and to do our

best in doing so. *But we are not to do our best in order to seek greatness for ourselves. We are to do our best to serve the Lord and love Him.* Being a sluggard is no commendable thing and often the sluggard who claims to be a Christian tries to cloak his sluggardly ways in false humility.

Alright then, let's go back to Matthew 18-

Mat 18:1-6 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.

Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? We know that the disciples had been arguing among themselves as to which one of THEM was greatest or would be the greatest.

Jesus, characteristically, calls to one of the "least" in the crowd – a child. His concept of greatness is radically different than theirs. Jesus' idea of greatness in fact, is what real greatness is.

What can a child do for you? Very little actually. Little children don't have anything. You can't go to them for a loan. They aren't strong as an adult yet. They can't care for or protect themselves. They are needy. They are reliant upon their parents for just about everything. They aren't wise. They are often a danger to themselves because they lack wisdom. They must be protected – often from themselves.

Now, children are not wise and very often then, in fact typically, they are not humble. Jesus is not telling us that we should be like children in the sense of "see how humble they are, see how they acknowledge their lowly state." No. We all know that children often are foolish and arrogant.

*But in practice they are humble* in that they do rely on the strong for everything they have. And I think this is Jesus' point.

*When you acknowledge that you are totally reliant upon Me for everything you have and everything you do, when you confess that apart from Me you*

*can do nothing, THEN you are great in My kingdom.*

Joh 15:4-5 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. (5) I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

Want to be great in the Lord's kingdom? Want true greatness? Then bear fruit for Him. *And the only way you can do that is to be connected to Him by His Spirit in you, admitting that without this you can do nothing.*

Gal 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

This is true greatness. It is greatness as the Lord defines it. It is greatness because HE is great and HE is in us and working through us IF we do not quench that work by exalting and trusting in ourselves.

And therefore, all these supposed "great ones" we see in the visible church today are in fact trusting in themselves. And on that Day when

Christ examines our work, at best they will be saved as through fire, all their wood, hay and stubble going up in smoke, and many will be found to not belong to Christ at all:

Mat 7:21-23 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (22) On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' (23) And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

We will plan next time to look at this passage in vss 1-14 in more detail. Millstones and amputations. What did Jesus mean?