
Kingdom Life

Matthew 18:1-14

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What makes someone great in the kingdom? More importantly, why do you care?

How can children be a counter example to adult self-promotion?

Now, to get this text right, we need to understand the vast differences in culture between the Bible days and our days. This gap between us and them is a vast chasm when it comes to children. In most of the west, children today are prized, idolized, catered to and treated sometimes as the most important part of a household. Not so at all in Jesus' day. Children were often thought little of and little consideration taken for them. What Jesus does throughout all this section, while it seems normal and appropriate to us, would have been shocking to the disciples.

What is Jesus teaching us? What is Matthew doing? This whole chapter is about relationships and responsibilities in the Kingdom. This teaching is focused on relationships within the kingdom. It is about how we treat two groups of people in the church: those who are among the church but not yet converted (children, as an example), and those who are new to Christ and are tending to sin and to stray (young Christians).

The Burning Question (v.1)

The disciples have a question for Jesus.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

The Timing of the Question

Note how closely Matthew ties this question to the context. It is almost surely a matter of discussion among the disciples. Are the three who went to the mountain with Jesus greater than the nine who stayed. Was their inability to heal the lad with a demon and exhibiting epileptic-like symptoms because they were somehow lesser?

What have they heard about the privilege of the sons of the kingdom? If they are the sons of the king, who then would be first among the king's sons?

For Matthew, the "at that time" immediately follows Jesus' teaching on the cross and resurrection with the freedom of the sons of God and the obligation not to *offend*.

The Trouble with the Question

There are so many things wrong with this question.

It reflects a prideful heart.

This is very clear from what Jesus says is needed. The disciples ask this question because they are prideful.

It evidences a jealous heart.

That discussion is going on among the disciples simply is either jealousy of the three who were singled out to go to the mountain with Jesus or by the three to protect their perceived elevated status. You may be jealous of the recognition of others or of the recognition you have received.

It mirrors a worldly way of thinking.

In the world, the greatest rule. This is what they are really wanting to know. Who is greatest and therefore will be the boss of the rest?

It elevates position and place over service.

It seeks to be elevated to a public, visible place of authority and power. It is seeking to be over people, not to serve among people or even better, just to serve people.

It confuses who we are with what we do and what position we hold.

The disciples want to know who among them is greatest because they have wrapped their identity around being recognized and rewarded by Jesus. They are seeking to affirm themselves through Jesus' appointment of them.

It assumes that one of them, the disciples that is, are the greatest.

It is stunningly obvious that the greatest in the kingdom is Jesus, not one of them.

The Truth of the Question

We are not so much different...

The Marks of Greatness (v.2-6)

Jesus sets a child in their midst who becomes a very pointed illustration of what they are not...

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.

Jesus addresses their question two ways:

They are concerned about *elevation*; Jesus is concerned about *entrance* (O'Donnell)...

They are concerned about their *position over others* in the kingdom; Jesus is concerned about their *poise towards others* in the kingdom.

Who really is the greatest in the kingdom? There are two key marks

The One who is Humble (v.2-4)

A mark of greatness in the kingdom is humility. This is not about some kind of false debasement or fake self-deprecation. Humility has nothing to do with how you see your gifts, abilities, or experiences. You may be utterly blind to your uselessness and still be proud. Or you have an accurate and spiritual assessment of your service to the Lord and be humble. Humility is not about what you can or cannot do. Humility is about how you see yourself in relation to God and in relation to others. Humility gladly bends the knee to the sovereign Lordship of Christ. Humility sees others as more significant and therefore gladly gives up oneself to serve others. Humility is the antidote, the opposite of pride. Pride is the root of both boasting and pity. It is a breeding ground for jealousy. Pride boasts in order to draw out the recognition of others; pride will express itself in pity when others withhold the recognition that you think you should have. But humility accepts with grace both the affirmation and the lack of recognition of others.

Repentance is needed. Jesus says the disciples need to turn from being sophisticated, self-serving, self-promoting adults to being humble, submissive, obedient children. This repentance is not so that you can rise in the kingdom. No, this is needed for entrance into the kingdom.

But, in what way are we to be like a child? This is the positive aspect that was represented in this particular child. This child was humble before Jesus and in the presence of the disciples. He came willingly at Jesus' summons. He stayed quietly at Jesus' side. He obediently trusted Jesus.

The responsibility rests on us to humble ourselves. How do we do that? By repenting of our pride and self-centeredness. We turn from seeking to be over people to seeking to serve with people. We quiet our hearts before the Lord. We come and go at His bidding. We stay where and when He requires. We accept with grace His cross knowing that it is the way of life. We take whatever steps are necessary to lower the sinful esteem of ourselves and to elevate our esteem of others.

The second mark flows out of the first.

The One who Welcomes the Lowly (v.5-6)

A mark of greatness in the kingdom is how you accept and guard the "little ones".

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 stumble [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.

Why is this about children? I want us to pause a moment to think about this. We are used to valuing and even putting children at the center of things. People leave churches because of what is perceived as inadequate children's ministries. In our culture, this text seems to affirm our child-centeredness. Of course, a church is really good when it prizes my children as much as I idolize them!

Many commentaries suggest that this is something more than, greater than, just how we view children. It is not less. But there is more to it. Jesus refers to the "little ones". The disciples are concerned about being the "great ones", Jesus is concerned about the "little ones". As Jesus continues to talk, it seems that the child He has brought into their midst is first literal and then a symbol for something else.

We need then to carefully hear what Jesus is saying to the disciples and what Matthew is saying to us. This is not about having a huge children's ministries that cater to their every desire. What we have today in many Christian families and in many churches is the opposite of what Jesus faced. But that does not mean it is good and right. What is Jesus actually saying and who is He actually referring to?

Jesus is referring to the "little ones". He does it throughout the rest of this text. It is a "diminutive". It is a term of endearment. But more powerfully, it is a term that speaks of their standing, their lowliness. Children then represent those who are in the church who have no status, little standing, little natural importance. It does not matter whether they are children or adults. They have no power. They have no position. They are the "little people" in the church.

Jesus describes the second mark of greatness in the kingdom in terms of two verbs.

The first is positive, "Whoever receives..."

The second is negative, "Whoever causes to stumble [sin]..."

Whoever receives...

The humble person in the kingdom receives the lowly. This was a constant challenge in the church and is still an issue in many churches. I love what Michael Green writes, "The church should be the place, above all others, where the children and the leftover people can be sure of a warm, unjudging and unpretentious welcome. And what an encouragement for those who particularly care for the poor or for children, or do some similarly unspectacular job! " (Green, p.192)

May I point a very fine point on this? Do you welcome, receive with humble joy the children who sit in our gatherings? We offer no children's church. We have very young children sitting in our services. Are you Ok with that? Are some of you parents squirming now because, well...

Whoever causes to stumble [sin]...

The greatest in the kingdom are those who are very careful not to cause others to stumble.

Listen to it again and see if you get the shift in who the children are. Jesus said, "but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble [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."

Did you hear it? The little ones *who believe in Jesus*. So now we are talking about the lowly in the church and those who are children in the faith. The little ones who

believe in Jesus, we are to be especially careful over. What is it that we are to be careful over? We are to be careful not to causer them to “stumble”. Our translation is doing a little interpretation here... The words here mean to trip, to stumble over something in the path. In other words, the truly great in the kingdom evidence humility when they are careful, wise and unoffensive around those who are still children in the faith.

Now, this is not talking about you being the sin police. This is talking about you being the temptation or provocation for their sin. That will be very evident in what follows. The prideful are the ones who think they know what is best for everyone else. The humble watch over their own lives carefully and though they are free, live as those who are free to love and not be a stumbling block.

Is this important? Yes. It is so important that Jesus gave a startling warning. You must take your relationships seriously. You must humble yourself in the Lord’s kingdom. Otherwise, it will go so badly that you would have been better off having a huge millstone hung around your neck and be thrown into the river or the lake never to rise to the surface again.

Now Jesus does not say that is what will happen to you. He is not here, in this case, threatening a punishment. It is not what He said. The Lord said, “It would be better to have that happen to you than to have caused children, the lowly, the young in faith to stumble and sin.” It is a comparative. In other words, the way you treat others in the kingdom does have this kind of great weight and consequence.

Is this how the disciples thought? No. Is this how the church Matthew was writing to thought? It appears, no. But what about you? Is this how *you* think?

The Warnings against Relational Sin (v.7-14)

Jesus raises the bar even further in the pointed warnings He gives.

Against being the Cause of Stumbling (v.7-9)

A mark of greatness in the kingdom is a willingness to pay any price to avoid relational sin. The issue once again is not *elevation*, nor is it now about *entrance*. It is all about equivalence. It is a comparative, “What is better?”

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.

Jesus is dealing primarily with our actions around and towards the lowly. To understand what Jesus is getting at here, you will probably have to temporarily set aside what you have always heard what this text is about. This has been hard to wrestle with. But look carefully at the text and keep it in its context.

First, Jesus simply states that the world is condemned when it tempts to sin. It is under God's condemnation, not only for its acts of sin, but also for its provocations and temptations to sin. In a sense, this is just the world being the world. There is a kind of necessity that temptations operate in the world. This a part of an understanding of the nature of evil in the world and God's allowance and use of it.

But, what is not expected and what is absolutely not acceptable is that believers should be the provocation and temptation of other believers. Woe to the one by whom the temptation comes. What then is the sin that Jesus is warning against *in the context*? It is the sin of putting a stumbling block before children and the "lowly". The sin is not being loving, not being humble, not thinking of others as better than yourself so that, your actions free them to sin or to violate their conscience.

What Jesus is alluding to may have baffled the disciples at the time He spoke it. But when Matthew wrote it, it was becoming a huge issue in the church. The Jew-Gentile divide, the multi-cultural issues were major issues in the church. Jesus is setting the stage and Matthew is calling out the church for acting in such a way that children rejected the faith and those young in faith were tempted to sin.

This is so serious that Jesus seems to be saying that it would be better to be maimed than to sin in this way. It is so serious that a person who refuses to do what is necessary is in danger of eternal punishment.

Here is an example of the common way of understanding this text and may have some application if it is consistent with other texts. Michael Green writes, "The challenge comes to us all as individuals. Does your hand cause you to sin—the hand raised in anger or grasping at money? Does your foot cause you to sin, taking you to places where you should not go, and declining to undertake Christian service? Does your eye cause you to sin—the never-satisfied eye of the consumer society? Be single-minded! Deal ruthlessly with whatever causes you to stumble in your walk with Christ in the body of his church." (Green, p.194)

But I ask, *is this really what Jesus is talking about?* The direct application is more than that. The temptation here is not primarily in personal acts of sin. The temptation here is in attitudes and actions *that cause little ones to stumble.*

It may be children who reject the kingdom because of your sinful and offensive way of treating one another.

It may be little ones in the kingdom who are tempted to sin or stumble in their Christian life because of the way you treat them or treat others.

Now, look at it more carefully. What is actually being warned against? Causing someone to sin. What is being amputated? That which is causing that sin. In my opinion, then, this verse is not talking primarily about dealing with personal, individual sin. This is talking about corporate relationships in the church. This is talking about *the removal of people in the church who continue to act in such a way that demonstrates they have no regard for Biblical relationships and tempt and provoke others to sin.* In other words, this text is setting us up for what will come in verses 15 and following.

Why do I say this? This is simply the outworking of the last paragraph of Matthew 17 and so many texts in the rest of the New Testament. In matters of liberty, we are free. But we are not free to give offense or to cause others new believers to stumble, that is, to do things that violate their consciences. Acting in humbler love towards others in Christian liberty is not optional. In fact, it is so serious it puts your profession faith into question.

What in the world would cause us to act this way? Well, thus the second warning.

Against Despising Others (10-14)

Those who are greatest in the kingdom have a Biblical attitude toward others...

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. [verse 11 is an insertion from the parallel text in Mark and is not here in best manuscripts] 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.

Your Attitude (v.10)

Jesus' command is in its strongest form. It is not a suggestion. It is not an option. It cannot be ignored. You are to see to it that you do not despise the little ones. This includes children. This includes the lowly. Don't excuse yourself. Carefully evaluate your attitudes towards those Jesus is concerned about.

What is meant by "their angels in heaven"? The statement is not intended to create a theology of guardian angels or anything like it. First to note, the angels referred to here are in heaven, not on earth. The point here is a "if that, then how much more this." So if these little ones are esteemed in heaven, then how much more are we to not feel contempt them here on earth.

Where is verse 11? It is an insertion from Mark but should not be here in Matthew according to the best texts. The insertion is true because it is from the Word of God; it just isn't here in this text.

God's Attitude (v.12-13)

We are to have God's attitude toward the little ones. Whether they are children or even ones who are straying, we are to have a love that causes us to pursue them. God's attitude as the good shepherd is to seek after the straying.

The second aspect of God's attitude is to rejoice over the repenting. Jesus often uses this metaphor of a lost sheep being sought out and brought back with gladness over repentance. Our own attitude toward others should be the overflow of love for God that loves others.

God's Will (v.14)

God pursues the straying because it is His decreed and determinative will that they will not perish. This is not to be used to say that children are assured of salvation until a certain age. That is not Jesus' meaning here. This is the pursuit of a little one who wanders away. Think of a child with the family in a large store. Seeking the child who wandered away does not imply bringing them into the family. Being a part of the family is what launches the pursuit.

Reflect and Respond

I suggest that we are getting an insight into what went on in the previous chapter. Did the disciples fail to heal the boy because their little faith was mixed up with pride, offensive treatment of the lad, a disdain for the lad and possibly even his condition? If so, then Jesus' talk here is explosive.

Jesus is preparing us to think about the next step in causing to stumble and choosing to sin: we move from elevation, to entrance, to excommunication.

Are you more concerned about *elevation* in the kingdom than your *entrance* to the kingdom?

Are you more concerned about your *position over others* in the kingdom or your *poise towards others* in the kingdom?

How do you think about the little ones among us? Are you OK with children being in our gatherings?

How do you treat younger believers who not as well taught, have not thought through matters of wisdom, who may tend to live differently than you do?

This is serious stuff. Every failure, sin, offense in this text is rooted in a lack of humility. The resolution is repentance - to turn from pride to humility. The call to kingdom living is a call to humble yourself under the Lord and before others. Humble people will primarily not seek to rule over people, but to serve people and serve with people.

Are you living this kind of kingdom life?