**WHO IS THE GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?**

February 17, 2019

Matthew 18:1-14

Key Verse 18:4 “Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

After winning 6th Super Bowl title, a question arose, “Is Tom Brady the greatest quarterback ever?” They even began to ask, “Who is greater, Tom Brady or Michael Jordan?” This fixed way of looking at the world: jockeying for position, competing, trying to find a means to consider oneself great – is a human nature. It began with a snake in the garden, who tempted Eve, saying, “You will be like God…” as if who she was, created in the image of God, was suddenly not enough. Inferiority, pride, shame and fear came to our world that day when Adam and Eve listened to the snake, and the quest for greatness began. Brother killed brother from jealousy, and the violence and evil of the world has continued for countless generations. We each have elements of greatness, and elements of weakness, so it has become natural to compare, measure, and judge. But is the kingdom of heaven subject to such a paradigm? Is the pursuit of greatness – and the necessary corollary of making others less – the principle of Jesus’ kingdom, as it is in our world today? In today’s passage Jesus teaches his disciples about true greatness. Let’s think about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

**First,** “Who is the greatest?” Look at verse 1. “At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’” Probably Peter, James and John felt superior because Jesus took only three of them to the Transfiguration mountain. Also Jesus harshly rebuked the other nine disciples. This question also became an urgent issue because Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. Even though Jesus predicted his betrayal, sufferings, death and resurrection twice, the disciples did not understand what he was talking about. They firmly believed that Jesus would restore the kingdom of Israel in Jerusalem and appoint them as cabinet members of his earthly messianic kingdom. The question was: Who would become the prime minister? By saying, “the greatest in the kingdom of heaven,” they were asking Jesus which one of them was the most spiritually mature, and thus the most worthy of occupying the highest position of power next to Christ. At first they discussed among themselves who would be the greatest. Peter boasted that he was the greatest, since Jesus said clearly that he would build his church on his confession. John protested that even if Peter did have a big mouth, John was his favorite, because he usually called himself the disciple that Jesus loved. Matthew took this opportunity to point out the fact that he had left a very lucrative position as a tax-collector to follow Jesus. Andrew reminded them that he was the first to follow him. And Judas, the man with the money, no doubt mentioned his trustworthiness. They could not agree with one another because every one of them thought he was the greatest. So they brought this question to Jesus to settle the dispute.

**Second,** the greatest man humbles himself like a little child. (3,4) Look at verses 2-4. “He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’” Jesus’ answer must have been shocking to the disciples. First of all, Jesus seemed to be praising a little child in their midst for no obvious reason. To the disciples, Jesus’ one word of praise was more valuable than pure gold. They would do anything to obtain Jesus’ praise. But here was a little child, who had done nothing, being honored among them as if he were somebody. But the real shock came when they heard Jesus imply that they were not even in the kingdom, let alone candidates for greatness. Debating who is the star player makes no sense if you don’t even make the team! So their concern should not be about who is the greatest, but about entering the kingdom of heaven. Jesus helped them confront this most important issue. Many people are so busy chasing power and glory in this world that they neglect the kingdom of heaven. But sooner or later, entering the kingdom of heaven becomes the most vital issue to each person.

How then could they enter the kingdom of heaven? Look at verse 3. “And he said, ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’” The disciples needed to change. How much? A little? Was it a matter of changing their crude speech or unruly ways of eating? Was it a matter of cutting their long hair or learning how to wear decent clothes? No. They needed to make a complete transformation from physical men to spiritual men. As St. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:50, “...flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God....” We must all be changed into spiritual people to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus told Nicodemus, “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit” (Jn 3:5). Entering the kingdom of heaven requires a change so drastic that it is compared to a new birth. This new birth is carried out by God through the work of the Holy Spirit as we accept his word.

Look at verse 4. “Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Here “lowly position” means to “humble one’s self.” We can say many good things about little children. They are innocent, simple, trusting, and willing to learn and to grow. But the main point here is that they are humble. They know themselves, that they need help. They recognize how weak they are. They think that they are the least important ones. Proud people think that they are somebody. But humble people think that they are nobodies. Do you trust God and depend on him in all you do? It is not easy for us to let go of our worries, anxieties and doubts. But as children of God, we must trust in God and his word of promise. We must depend on him in all we do—in our school studies, our jobs, in raising up disciples of Jesus. Most of all, humbleness is obedience to God’s will. Jesus is the most humble man in history and thus he is the greatest. Philippians 2:5-8 says, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God…but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant…And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”

In our world, who can be the greatest? Only one person, and all others are less. Not in Jesus’ kingdom! All who humble themselves are the greatest, without ranking. This powerful truth gives us freedom to welcome even children in Jesus’ name. In the gospel we are all the same: a sinner saved by grace. So we can look others in the eye, and generously welcome, listen and understand one another. What divides us, or sets us apart, as great as these things sometimes seem, are insignificant in comparison with the blood of Jesus that was shed to make us one. When freed from the pursuit of greatness, we no longer need to be threatened by these differences, or have a burning need to criticize, minimize, or despise; we can enjoy the diversity, and work together in harmony. In fact, this is why Jesus has apportioned grace to us differently, in order that each may do their part in building up the body of Christ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:7-13).

**Third,** the greatest man welcomes a little child. (5) Look at verse 5. “And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” What does it mean to welcome a little child? Someone may say, “Well, I love children because they are so cute. I have no problem to welcome a little child.” Such a person has an optimistic opinion about a child because he is thinking about the childlikeness of a child. But there is another word that describes a child, that is, childish. Children are childish and immature. For example, children’s demands never end. Children do not know how to thank others for what they did for them. They only focus on what they do not have and whine relentlessly until they get what they want. Children are egocentric, selfish and chaotic. Whenever they play, they tend to break things. They don’t know how to clean after themselves, making their places like a pig pen. But the comforting truth is that children grow slowly and steadily until they become mature adults. All human beings are like children. As children grow to be mature adults, all human beings have potential to grow to be great men and women of God. When Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,” he meant that we must understand others’ childishness and bear with it in the name of Jesus. Jesus bore with twelve different kinds of childish people during his life on earth in the hope of God until each of them grew to be a great servant of God. Jesus bore all our sins in the hope that we might grow to be great men and women of God. If we cannot bear with even one childish person in the name of Jesus, we are not great at all. But if we bear with at least 12 different kinds of childish people in the name of Jesus and raise them as great men and women of God, we are truly great in the sight of God.

**Fourth**, the greatest man does not cause others to sin (6-9). Look at verse 6. “But if anyone causes one of these little ones--those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” A little child is easily influenced by others. Likewise, those who are spiritually young are easily misled by bad influence. It takes months or years to build a house, but it take only a few minutes to burn it down. Likewise, raising up disciples of Jesus requires great persistence, prayer and Bible teaching, but causing others to stumble can be done by abusing them, planting doubt and distrust in them. Causing others to stumble is a very serious offense to God. Jesus said emphatically that it would be better for such persons to have a large millstone around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea and stay there forever.

There are three ways to cause others to sin. The first way is by teaching a false doctrine, or by misrepresenting who God is. For example, Job’s friends misrepresented God by saying that Job was suffering because of his sins. They argued with Job from the humanist position based on human experience. They believed that man must do things to earn God’s favor and therefore suffering is a sign of God’s displeasure. This caused Job to justify himself, condemning God as being unjust. The second way is by crushing their spirit or exasperating them. Parents out of their selfish ambition push their children to achieve levels that are impossible for them and thus set them up for failure. Then they have absolutely no sense of accomplishment, no sense of affirmation and satisfaction and so they get resentful and bitter toward those who push them without ever encouraging them. Or they overprotect them and do not challenge them and so they become fearful of challenging anything. The third way is by setting a sinful example. If we set a sinful example, we will lead other people into sin, perhaps people in our own family, people that know us and follow our life. If parents do not love each other but fight all the time, children would not know the love of God in the family. There was an old man who was on his death bed, and he was distressed. The people around him tried to find out why, and finally before he died he told them something that seemed so minor but had obviously influenced him so powerfully. He said this: “When we were boys at play, one day at a crossroads we reversed a signpost, and I have never ceased all my life to wonder how many people were sent the wrong direction by what we did.” Our life is a signpost, and if it isn’t pointing the right way, then how many people are going the wrong direction. It would be better for you to be dead than to do that. Instead of causing people to sin, lead them to righteousness. Instead of causing them to be provoked and exasperated, cause them to be joyous and full of praise. Instead of setting an example to sin, set an example to holiness. In short, be a blessing, not a trouble-maker.

**Fifth,** the greatest man goes after one lost sheep (10-14). Instead of causing others to stumble, the greatest man goes out of his way in order to restore one lost person back to God. Look at verse 10. “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.” Jesus teaches us that God values his little ones and protects them. So even if they look weak and helpless, it is a big mistake to despise them. Jesus then told a parable to teach the value of one little one to God. Look at verse 12. “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?" It is hard for modern people to understand this parable. Many will think, “Just let the lost one go. You still have ninety-nine. One lost one is nothing.” That is the mindset and value system of those who live in this world. But God’s mindset and value system is different. To God, one is not just one out of a hundred. To God one is the only one, who has absolute value. Susanna Wesley, mother of John Wesley, was once asked which of her nineteen children she loved the most. She said, “Whoever is sick, lonely, sorrowful, depressed or needy. That is the one I love the most.” This is God’s mind. When one of God's little ones is lost, he looks for that one until he finds it. When he finds it, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. Jesus concluded, “In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish” (14).

Today we thought about true greatness. Truly great men and women are those who are humble before God and continue to grow in the image of Jesus. Truly great men and women can bear all kinds of childish people and shepherd them in hope. Truly great men and women are those who give good influence to others and go out of their ways to find one lost person in the name of Jesus. May God bless you to be truly great men and women of God.