

Series: The Kingdom of Jesus

Message: Descriptions of the Kingdom: Who is the greatest?

Scripture: Matthew 18:1-4

Introduction: In this passage Jesus seeks to teach the disciples a foundational truth about the Kingdom of God. True greatness in God's Kingdom comes from serving rather than being served. The way to achieve greatness in God's Kingdom is the opposite of how to achieve greatness in the kingdoms of this earth.

The background to this teaching moment begins with Jesus taking Peter, James and John with Him up to the mountain upon which Jesus is transfigured. This means the disciples saw a glimpse of Jesus in His real glory. They also witnessed the presence of Moses and Elijah. God spoke from heaven confirming that Jesus was His Beloved Son. These 3 disciples are told not to tell anyone about these events until after Jesus resurrection. They could not hide however the change they experienced from this encounter. Jesus then confirmed His role to them as Messiah as they came down from the mountain.

Once they reach the bottom they find the other 9 disciples in a serious concern. A demon possessed boy is before them and the father appeals to Jesus because the disciples are unable to help. First they did not get to go with Jesus up the mountain. Now they were unable to handle the ministry while He was gone. They must have been wrestling with great yet unnecessary insecurity. Jesus told them the reason they could not cast out the demon was a lack of faith and a lack of perseverance. Based upon the situation the lack of faith was most likely a lack of correct focus. With Jesus not present they most likely chose to mimic His actions without really trusting God to work through them.

Jesus said also this kind (this type of demonic activity) does not come out of a person without prayer and fasting. Therefore it was not a quick fix. They would have had to trust in God and pray with perseverance for God to empower them and lead them.

Now Jesus tells them the events which will lead to His death and resurrection. Matthew says they were deeply grieved. What were they grieved about? This is a good question. Perhaps they were grieving the idea of Jesus death. This would mean they did not hear the part about His resurrection. It is just as likely, given the argument they begin to have about who is greatest, that they were grieving the fact that they did not get to go up the mountain or perhaps that they did not have what it took to deliver the demon possessed boy. The argument leads us to think the focus was not on Jesus but on their position in Jesus Kingdom.

In Mark's account of these events in Mark 9:30-34 we understand that after Jesus speaks of His death He then asks what they were talking about while they had been walking toward Capernaum. He had just told them of His suffering and death and resurrection. Rather than asking Jesus about this they quietly talk behind Jesus back about who is the greatest. They did not understand the concept of suffering because they did not understand the nature of Jesus kingdom and how it would be brought to the earth. Jesus question brought conviction and silence to the disciples. In Luke's account of these events in Luke 9:46 Jesus made it clear that He did not hear them talking but knew their hearts and minds. After this silence someone must have begun to ask out loud the question on everyone's minds. Matthew tells us they asked Jesus directly. The perspective of the disciples is the earthly kingdom they imagine for Jesus.

This is the perspective of the 3 who went up the mountain as well as the 9 who stayed below.

Jesus decision to sit down to teach and to summon them to Him meant it was a serious time. The place of honor was next to the teacher. Normal rabbi's would have the place beside him or in front of him designated for the best student. They have asked the question: who is the greatest? Now they are called to sit down around Him. It must have been like musical chairs. Then Jesus gets a child and places the child in the seat of honor. From this physical illustration Jesus is going to answer the question.

In the minds of these followers only one of them could be the greatest. They therefore wanted to know the order most likely in which they stood, 1 through 12. At least they would be the top 12 they must have assumed. Jesus wanted them to know that only one receives glory in the Kingdom. It is the Kingdom of God. He alone is to receive glory. Followers achieve greatness in Jesus eyes by being pleasing to God. Pleasing God is about faith. Pleasing God is about serving others.

Jesus said the first thing they needed to know was that they needed to be converted. This had to hurt. This word is used to indicate the experience of salvation. It also means simply a change of mindset or direction. Jesus was not saying they needed to be saved. He was saying they needed to see the Kingdom differently than they currently saw it. They needed to have their vision of the Kingdom converted to match His vision of the Kingdom.

Once they received this new mindset then Jesus said they needed to be transformed to be like this little child.

Being **in** the Kingdom of God and serving in the Kingdom of God is nothing like being a part of an earthly kingdom.

To become like a little child is a process. They needed to go backwards. Rather than seeing themselves as adults with a lot of talent and passion and gifts to offer a king, they needed to become again as little children who trust and totally depend upon God. They had just experienced the inability to do anything on their own. The 3 on the mountain top had nothing to offer the glorified Jesus. Peter offers to build houses for them all to stay in on the mountain. He is a fisherman. The 9 below could not handle the ministry alone. They needed to become little children. They needed to understand the desperate need to trust and depend upon God to experience the Kingdom Jesus was building.

This call for humility and trust would continue to be a theme of Jesus. These disciples did not become Kingdom minded immediately. The night before Jesus death these same disciples are once again having this same argument. In every book of the New Testament we see an emphasis whether directly or indirectly to this call to trust and humility to walk with and serve God. The primary appeal of both Peter and Paul at the end of their lives was for the people of God to walk with love and humility. (Philippians 2:1-4)(1 Peter 5:5-6)

Let's consider a little deeper the two concepts Jesus communicated with this little child.

The need for a different understanding of the Kingdom- a conversion of vision

To be great in the Kingdom we must spend our lives doing what the world considers unimportant. We must serve those the world considers unimportant understanding we are serving Jesus.

This needed change of mindset will come to us first in the form of conviction. Jesus question to the disciples brought to light the sin which was growing in their hearts. The disciples acted as if Jesus did not know what their motives and desires were as they followed Him. Others saw them as followers serving and obeying the Master. Jesus exposed the wrong motives and said they were pursuing the wrong Kingdom.

As followers of Jesus we must understand that all resources, talents, training and opportunities are responsibilities given to us by God for His kingdom. To take what God has given to us and focus it on self reflects the need of a Kingdom vision conversion.

The need to become as a little child

All little children have sin natures and thus begin to reveal sinful attitudes and actions quickly. Jesus is not saying children are perfect. He is referring to the innocent trust and the total dependence of a child.

Illustration: Asking little children what they want to be: if encouraging they will all accept one another as unique

Illustration: Little children will play together often without prejudice, envy, strife unless these are taught-my experience watching a child being taught to be prejudice

To become as a little child requires a relinquishing of our desire for **prominence**. This desire to be noticed and acknowledged is a strong desire. Pride demands to be noticed. Pride demands that we be thanked and praised for our actions of serving or our endurance of circumstances. To give of ourselves for the purpose of gaining something to feed our pride actually removes the good from our actions. **Jim Elliott** said: "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what He cannot lose."

Illustration: Nurse serving in Christian ministry for many years with harsh conditions, little pay or recognition was told "God knows you are worth it" as someone tried to persuade her to go to a different place of greater notoriety and pay – said if that is true then that is enough for me

To become as a little child requires the relinquishing of the desire for **place**. To serve seeking a position or honor or control is not a Kingdom mindset. Any position God may give us is to be seen as a responsibility. All calls from Jesus to serve in His Kingdom are calls to greatness. How the world views the place of your serving or the earthly rewards of your serving do not define the greatness. The greatness comes from your trust in God to be able to serve. The greatness comes from your dependence upon God to be able to serve. All areas of our lives are areas of serving the Kingdom.

The disciples were filled with jealousy, envy, prideful competition and ambition which desired to push others down or aside to gain position. The mindset of the earthly kingdom seeks to be praised and thanked. It seeks to control. It demands certain rights and circumstances and comfort to keep serving.

Greatness in Jesus Kingdom is seen in:

Being humble: This is putting God and others first – to be humble leads to being exalted by God. This exalting is not about place or prominence. It is about influence in the Kingdom. It is about greater responsibility. God uses those who follow Him through the road of brokenness. Brokenness leads to trust and dependence which makes us humble therefore usable in His Kingdom.

Focusing on the Body of Christ and the Kingdom rather than about self

A willingness to serve those who have nothing to give in return- ministry to the least of these is ministry to Jesus

A willingness to serve when no one sees understanding that God sees and He is pleased

Summary thoughts

Trust and dependence on God lead us towards humility. Humility leads to contentment. Contentment leads to joy. He who humbles himself will not need to be humbled.

Humility comes from knowing who we are to God and choosing to trust God as we surrender our lives to God for the sake of His Kingdom. Jesus modeled this as He washed the feet of the disciples- John 13:3-4.

All of these disciples, except Judas, finally experienced the change in vision. The 11 disciples achieved greatness in the Kingdom through humbly serving others. All except John died a martyr's death taking the Gospel to others. Judas would not give up his earthly concept of Kingdom therefore he never truly trusted Jesus

Who is the greatest? Jesus said the one who truly becomes humble like the little child will be the greatest. There is room in the Kingdom of God for all of us to share in the greatness of Jesus.