

## What Children Teach Us About the Kingdom

### Matthew 18:1-5

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Today we continue both our series on the kingdom of God and our series on the family with an intriguing question, *what do children teach us about the kingdom of God?* That is not a question that we would naturally come up with. We would more likely ask, *what does military power or political power teach us about the kingdom of God?* This is because we have been born and bred in the kingdom of man. It also explains the incredible angst in our country right now as the kingdom of man and government is all they have to live for and hope in.

Jesus had a difficult task while on earth—how to help people understand what his kingdom was like when his kingdom was almost always the exact opposite of the values and character of man's kingdom. Let me give you one small example of this: look at the spiritual nature of the kingdom of God. We don't have anything like this in our experience. All our kingdoms have national identities and citizenships based on where you were born and to whom you were born. But God's kingdom is not material like that. It's spiritual. Don't take this as a political statement, but for all the talk about borders and walls, God's kingdom has neither; only the internal walls of the human soul. That sounds like nonsense to the natural man. *That's not a real kingdom!*

But it is and the kingdom of God is the one true and transcendent kingdom established by the life and ministry of Jesus and spread by the power of the gospel to change us from the inside out. No political leader can do that. But God establishes this redemptive reign of Jesus in the human heart as he is enthroned within us. That's Jesus' kingdom, at least for now.

If you were Jesus, who would you put forward as the quintessential example of the kingdom of God? Jesus had some choices at hand. How about brash, self-confident Peter? Jesus didn't point to him. How about well-known followers like Nicodemus or James and John? Again, there were serious problems with all of them and Jesus didn't point to them. So who do you put forward and say, *Everyone, when it comes to my kingdom, this is what I am talking about?*

*"At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'"* (Matthew 18:1 ESV) Here is a glimpse into what is normal in the kingdom of man, arguments about who is greater or better or more important. While this looks like naked ambition, it is actually far worse. Notice the context. In Matthew 17:22 Jesus predicts his own impending death. You would think this would tamp down the selfish talk among the disciples. It didn't. That same chapter begins with Jesus' transfiguration as Peter, James, and John are given the incredible privilege of seeing the Shekinah glory of Jesus. You would think that glory show might bring soberness to the disciples. It didn't.

Further, notice in verse 1 that none of the disciples had the maturity to see their obsession with their own greatness as unseemly and inappropriate. They come to Jesus collectively. They had all been talking. Arguing. Debating. They say, *let's ask Jesus who of us will be the greatest.* None of them had the maturity to say, *perhaps this isn't an appropriate question. Does this strike anyone as really petty?* *"Who is the greatest in the kingdom?"* It's a question that infers, I think I am. *Jesus, Jesus on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?*

*"And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'" (Matthew 18:2-4)*

Jesus says, *you want to understand status in the kingdom of God? Bring me a child. You there, could you come over here please?* And a little boy comes. The word for child allows for a really young child. This could have been a toddler. Very small. You can see the disciples smirking, can't you? *What is Jesus up to this time?* A small child in their midst could hardly be seen among the full-grown men.

I want you to see that Jesus doesn't begin with their actual question; instead he addresses their massive and erroneous assumption. What was it? ***That they were in the kingdom in the first place.*** Behind the question of which of them was the greatest was their basic notion that they, the disciples of Jesus, would be there at all. We know one who wasn't. Judas Iscariot. But what about the others? Does being in Jesus' inner circle guarantee salvation and entrance into the kingdom of God? To that Jesus says, no. *"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

*"Truly."* The KJV uses *Verily*. Jesus used this to emphasize. We might say, "hear me when I say" or "Listen up." *"Truly, I say to you."* Who is he talking to? His own disciples. This is really important given what he says. *"Unless you **turn**."* The Greek word means *to change direction or change your ways*. Change from what? Their obsession with personal status that stands behind the question of *who is the greatest?* You keep up this selfish motivation, and you won't be in the kingdom. What's it look like?

What better example of status-free concern than a child? Particularly in the first-century Jewish culture that didn't have Babies "R" Us, Children's museums, or Chuck E. Cheese. There was no catering to children like there is today. Children were valued within family but held no status in the broader culture. They were at the bottom. The disciples agreed. You may recall a different time when parents were bringing children for Jesus to bless and the disciples told the parents to leave and take their kids with them. They thought children were beneath Jesus and he had much more important matters to attend to. Jesus sharply rebuked them.

But the mindset was there. Children are unimportant. So this is not a message about children, this is a message about how children picture salvation and status in the kingdom of God. Here is the thing about children. While they have no office with their name on it, no fancy car to drive, no education degrees behind their name, no money, no ability to meet their own needs, children are completely content with non-status. They don't care. This is what Jesus is highlighting about children and the kingdom. A child's lack of self-awareness and status in the world is a basic requirement for anyone to enter the kingdom of God. There's another word for it—*humility*.

This kingdom of God is the kingdom of GOD; it is not the kingdom of man or a new context for man to achieve status and glory for himself. It is the kingdom of God and the fundamental requirement to enter it is a selflessness best exemplified in a child.

You may not be a citizen of the kingdom of God but all of us have been a child. Do you remember before the days of mean girl adolescents and playing king of the mountain? Back before you cared about your place in the world and all you cared about was your place in

mom and dad's heart? Do you remember? Do you catch glimpses of it in children or in your children? Does it echo in your mind a time, a great time, when your day wasn't about advancing yourself in any way and you didn't worry about food on the table?

I regularly ask Kiralee in the morning, "Baby, what you are going to do today?" Her answer is always the same, "Play!" It sounds so foreign. *What about your to-do list? What about preparing for preschool by reading key books? What about strategic thinking about getting into kindergarten? What about world events and worrying about what Iran is up to? What about the latest political dustup? What are you going to do today to advance yourself in this world?* "Play!"

My daughter is completely free of self-concern about her own status in the world or how she compares to other girls her age. Not a thought of it.

To get into the kingdom of God, every one of us must turn from viewing the purpose of life as the advancement of our own fame or status in this world. That's the kingdom of man not the kingdom of God. If we don't do that, we're not in.

Don't try and theologize what Jesus says away. *Well, he was overemphasizing it to make a point or he was talking in general terms.* No. He was talking to Peter, James, John, Andrew, Thomas, and all the other handpicked disciples and saying to them, *being a part of my inner circle doesn't mean you are in my kingdom and the fact that you would argue about who is the greatest tells me that you don't understand the first thing about getting into the kingdom much less greatness in the kingdom.* He basically says in our language, *you aren't saved. None of you. Not yet.*

Peter had to go through his catastrophe and all the disciples had to see their failure as they ran away from him at Gethsemane. They had to change. ***They had to realize they are not great men Jesus chose, but sinners Jesus chose to use.*** Nothing more.

How about you, dear friend? Is your life one big selfie? When you look in the mirror, what do you see? How about the mirror of your week? What was the basic impulse of your heart? My kingdom or God's? My glory or God's? The advancement of me or seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness? If you look at your life and the consistent story is you being about you, Jesus' words should haunt you: *"you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* (Verse 3)

### **Who is the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?**

After addressing their assumption, he addresses their question, *"who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"* (Verse 1) His answer is also unexpected. *"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."* (Verse 4)

As I was writing this sermon in my home office, my daughter Madeline kept toddling in. I really needed to focus on sermon writing but she's just so cute that I couldn't say no. She discovered a CO2 alarm we keep behind the door. She went to press the alarm button and I said, *No!* The pouty lip came out and she let out a blaring wail. As she wailed, I thought of this passage, *become like a child? This doesn't make sense.* There certainly are things about children that are not admired qualities.

So it's important that we realize what Jesus is actually saying. Greatness isn't "acting like a baby" although there's plenty of that around any church. Pouty lips are all too quick to appear when things don't go our way. Childishness is not greatness. Childishness is

immaturity. What Jesus is getting at is childlike faith and life. Childlike lack of personal awareness or concern for personal advancement. Or to say this way, ***what gets us in is also what makes us great.***

We don't humble ourselves to get into the kingdom and then use the kingdom to advance ourselves. The gospel requires that we bow before Jesus as King and Savior and that humility is ongoing. We should never get over the cross or the basic truth that we are great sinners and Christ is a great Savior. Growing in greatness is growing in humility and selflessness. This is what is behind being a servant to others as we heard last week. Really, it's a by-product of the gospel and God's work of grace in our lives.

*"Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.  
Naked, come to thee for dress; helpless look to thee for grace."<sup>1</sup>*

That's not simply how we get in, that's how we live in the kingdom of God. Like a child in the best sense of that word. Childlike dependence and trust. Childlike absence of personal glory as ambition. Childlike willingness to receive from God.

Some time ago I spoke to our AWANA kids and just shared the good news about Jesus and salvation by faith in him. I asked, *who here would like to receive Jesus as their Savior?* Nearly every hand went up. If I did the same message today to a room of adults, how many hands would go up? That would never happen in a group of adults and some of you are nervous that I might ask you. Why?

We become cynical. Skeptical. *Nothing's free. Nothing will change. I am who I am. I don't want to change. Nobody can tell me what to do. What will people think of me? I have a reputation to uphold. I'm too sophisticated for spiritual things.* These and a thousand other adult rationalizations close the heart to God's simple offer of salvation. All of them are rooted in pride and self-concern generally not found in a child.

Jesus says, you want to know what greatness in the kingdom looks like? *Look at this child who in this group is the only one NOT worrying about their own greatness.* You can know who is the greatest by who isn't concerned with being the greatest. Or as we heard last week, greatness in the kingdom of God is to be the servant of all. Greatness in the kingdom is trying to make everyone else great. Blessing others. Doing to others as you would have them do to you. Honoring others more than yourselves. Pride seeks to advance self. Humility advances the concerns and needs of others.

### **What About Humility and the Home, Marriage, and Family Relationships?**

How many of our home problems are sourced in basic human pride? Can we dare say all of them? *But you don't know my wife or you don't know my brother or sister!* I know because my family is not exempt and I see how over the years my own pride has negatively affected relationships. How about you? Think of these common family problems.

#### **Jealousy**

My brother wears the coat of many colors in our family. My parents always give him the benefit of the doubt. I'll be surprised if I'm even in the will. My sister thinks she's Cinderella and I'm Cruella de Vil. The green eye of envy rooted in self-regard ruins many a family.

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<sup>1</sup> Augustus M. Toplady, *Rock of Ages*

## Power struggles

Who's in charge here? Who gets their way? Who's the alpha male? Who gets to say what goes on the pizza? What game are we playing? What show we are watching? Who's in charge around here? Me!

## Passive aggressive behavior

This is the withdrawal of emotional intimacy in order to manipulate. This is a transactional relationship where I'll give you what you want if you give me what I want. It's about me!

## Bitterness/refusal to forgive

This is using other people's sins against us as leverage or permission to hold it over someone's head. Clinging to bitterness at all costs.

Is your family ravaged by these and other examples of pride? What does every home need? A new king and the ongoing humility that serving under Jesus requires. Is your home a kingdom home? Is your marriage a kingdom marriage? Is there any greatness about it? How can you know?

I have had to ask my 3-year-old to forgive me. *Daddy didn't handle that right or I shouldn't have said what I did.* The sweet thing about those moments is that Kiralee is so quick to forgive. It's almost as if she is unaware of the right she has to be mad. *OK, Daddy, I love you. Let's play!* Selflessness creates harmony by removing our need to fight for our rights.

*"Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* Your home isn't a kingdom home because you come to church any more than the disciples were in the kingdom because they were in Jesus' inner circle. In the end, *the real test of our status is if we are not concerned with our status.*

How many homes and marriages here could be dramatically changed if we applied the humility the gospel requires and produces? Married couple, there is a harmony of love waiting to be experienced, but this will require you to humble yourself and die to yourself. *I can't do that!* If you can't, then apparently you haven't humbled yourself before God. You must not be in the kingdom of God, in which case you have much bigger problems than a bad marriage or family.

Dying to self and receiving salvation by faith brings us into the kingdom and creates a capacity to humble ourselves with our family members. That's childlikeness. That's true greatness. That's *OK Daddy, I forgive you. Let's play.*

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