

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" <sup>2</sup> And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them <sup>3</sup> and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>5</sup> "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, <sup>6</sup> 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 (Mat 18.1-6).

## Introduction

Matthew 18 brings some sayings of Jesus together that He probably preached at different times and places. Everything begins with a question that the disciples ask of our Lord: **At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"** (18.1).

The disciples' question prompts an answer from Jesus. Mark indicates that the question grew out of heated discussion among the disciples. They *quarreled* with one another about greatness in the kingdom: **And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?"** <sup>34</sup> **But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest** (Mk. 9.33-34; "argued" means quarreled). This is further indication that the disciples are far from readiness for their kingdom work. The slowness of their learning, their ignorance, and pettiness are facts about them that teach us much about ourselves as disciples of Jesus today. They were with Him for almost three years; they sat at the feet of the Master; they observed His miracles and observed His loving kindness and His kind humility. Nonetheless, they absorbed things for understanding very slowly, and the translation of their learning into godliness came even more slowly.

It is similar for us because we sin against one another due to the slowness of our growth in sound understanding on one hand and the slowness of our translation of sound understanding into godly living on the other hand. Accordingly, Matthew 18 is about relationships between disciples in the church as an assembly of sinner-disciples who need correction, self-discipline, and church discipline (the use of "church" in Mat 16 & 18 gives us this definition).

Therefore, based on the text for today (Mat.18.1-5), our topic for this morning is "The Church as a Royal Family." There are two main ideas for us to cover regarding this topic with its slant toward relationships: 1) the establishment of royal family relationships, and 2) the importance of royal family relationships.

### 1A. The Establishment of Royal Family Relationships

Entrance into the kingdom and greatness in it intertwine in Matthew 18.1-4. Here, the disciples ask Jesus to settle their dispute. They want to know who has the highest position in the kingdom. This is why it is better to translate "argue" (v. 34) as "quarrel." They no doubt presented evidence to justify their different beliefs (that is arguing and it is not wrong), but something stinks about the discussion when the stench of self-assertive pride penetrates the air.

Before answering them, Jesus put a child in their midst (**And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, v. 2**). This is a concrete visual aid. Picture the physical contrast between the child in the midst and the adults surrounding him. I can only imagine the perspective of my grandson reaching up and holding my hand with a spring in his step going into Bob Evans for breakfast; once we walked through the door, his feet froze and his countenance changed, so little in the context of so many big people. I looked at him and said, "There are so many people here." I thought, "There are so many big people here."

The child represents littleness and illustrates humbleness. The child embodies the Lord's answer. Immediately, we get the impression that Jesus is going to give the disciples an answer that challenges their expectations (cf. Mat 20.20-28). His answer will challenge assumptions that

they have in their minds, assumptions that allow their quarrel to take place. The entire dispute is wrong-footed. All disputants in the quarrel are wrong headed.

Interestingly, they ask about greatness in the kingdom, but Jesus teaches about entrance into it (cf. greatest, v. 1 with enter, v. 3). Actually, the Lord answers their question and uses the occasion to emphasize some important things related to their question. His agenda is to teach them about relationships in the church. There are a number of indications here that show the Lord's emphasis on *mutuality among child-like disciples*: the presence of the child (v. 2), receiving such children (v. 5), "brother" in Peter's question (v. 21), the mention of the *brother* who sins (v. 15), and the language of "little ones" for believers (vs. 6, 10, 14) reek with family overtones. Thus, some translators use "if anyone in the church" to open verses 5-6 and 15 (surely, this is even better: "if any *fellow child* in the church").

Accordingly, child-likeness cuts across all differences and establishes family relationships. This is a royal family because the child-like attitude brings us into the *kingdom* and grants us greatness in it. So, let us now consider becoming a royal family and attaining greatness in the royal family. We might call this *becoming and being*, becoming a royal family and being a royal family. By these two things, we can develop the establishment of royal family relations.

#### 1) Becoming a royal family (18.3)

The kingdom is the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven's king. The smallness, helplessness, and vulnerability of a child picture the proper attitude of subjects in God's kingdom. A Christian views himself in this way; he acknowledges his comparative smallness before the perfect greatness of the king of heaven and earth. Taking the attitude of a small, helpless, and vulnerable child involves a trustful looking to God as your Father. Humility is the way of entry into the kingdom at the same time that it binds children together in a family. Powerfully, this text teaches that the opposite of humility, self-assertive self-centered pride runs the risk of failure to enter the kingdom: **unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**

To enter into the kingdom refers to salvation (cf. how the new birth brings sinners into the kingdom, Jn 3.3f). This use of kingdom is not a reference to Christ's universal dominion (Mat 13.38, 41); that includes both saved and lost people. Furthermore, entering the kingdom is not entering the church; we enter the church through the entryway of baptism (cf. Mat. 3.6, 11; 1 Cor 12.12-13). There is a saving aspect to "kingdom" here and salvation refers to the restoration of sinners to a place of submission to God as king, and therefore, it leads directly to the obedience of baptism and into the church. It is the opposite of human autonomy claimed by man in the fall. The use of "kingdom" for salvation stresses deliverance from entrenchment in autonomy to dependence on the Lord.

Now here is the important point: at the same time that sinners find restoration from the fall, God creates a family, the new covenant community. Thus, *restoration includes restoration from the alienation of the fall*. Alienation from God is a consequence of the fall and so is alienation from other people. Child-like submission to God leads directly into the church as the new people of God. As the saying goes, "no Christian is an island." The new community of the restored is a childlike community, child-like in humble submissive faith. Members take a posture of submission to God and to each other.

Thus, before tackling the question of "who is the greatest," Jesus says, "you need to humble yourself like a child in order to enter the royal family. You have to be in the kingdom first before the question of greatness has any bearing for you whatsoever."

#### 2) Being a royal family (18.4)

**Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (18.4).** This verse is about attaining greatness as a royal family. We find greatness, our true greatness, in lowness and smallness like a child. Bigness derives from lowliness.

Granted, we usually think that greatness relates to self-worth and dignity. We typically think that it relates to a feeling of success, accomplishment, and a sense of meaning to our lives. However, we are not going to find true greatness by getting ahead of others or by becoming superior to them in any way, not as individuals, and not as a church. Humility is the way to receive exaltation from God (cf. Mat 23.12). Moreover, according to Jesus, lesser is greater.

This leads to a redefinition of being the greatest. Thus, we need to ask, "How can there be *many* people who are *the greatest*?" It sounds like others are lesser: some are superiors and others are inferiors in rank, accomplishments, success, money, power, or even excellence in spiritual graces. However, it is not primarily tiered or a matter of rank because here we have a meaning of "greatest" in which multitudes can share. Literally, of course, being greatest means being greater than everyone else, being the greatest is exclusive and puts one over against others. However, *Jesus redefines greatest to mean greatness*. Without eliminating the fact that some are apostles and have greater gifts and works to perform in the church, our Lord teaches us to have a different mindset about the differences of giftedness, "success," prosperity, and opportunity that are real among the people of God. He anticipates Paul's language about the human body that depicts differences of greatness where the little toe does not have the prominence or greatness that the head of the body has. Then Paul redefines:

**For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup> For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free- and all were made to drink of one Spirit. <sup>14</sup> For the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.... But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, <sup>25</sup> that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. <sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it (1 Cor 12.12-27).**

If one part of the body receives honor, then all rejoice because in that way the body receives honor and thus *each member individually receives honor as well* (like a fly on the back of a wagon, we can say, "look at the dust that we are stirring up."). Therefore, as a little toe in the body of Christ, I can rejoice knowing that my name is written in heaven. I can rejoice knowing that the works of those who have prominence in the church are works that I am doing, and we are doing, as the children of one Father in heaven, as a royal family in Christ our king and elder brother. We have to grab hold of this point tenaciously in order to defeat pride on one hand and envy on the other. If you are proud, then you cannot risk being wrong and receiving correction in the family (cf. again, the church as a family of sinner-disciples in need of correction, self-discipline, and church discipline, as in vs. 15f.). In this light, your prayer must be "Lord I submit to you, help me with my lack of submission." If you are envious, then in effect you are saying, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body." Genuine, true, real greatness comes from fellowship, from the communion of the saints and the communion of the Holy Spirit (1 Jn 1.3).

Consider the prince who has his standing by birth and therefore cannot boast; he has no basis for pride. The way for him to grow into his true greatness, is not merely by birth. It takes much more; he must give himself to royal service. He must serve the people of his kingdom to show himself to be a great prince. Similarly, by birth into the Christian family, the new birth, God adopts us into His family as joint heirs with Christ. We have nothing whereof to boast; we have nothing by our own power but we have it as God's gift. That adoption gives us dignity and greatness *but it is insufficient; we must grow in greatness*. We do so by humbly serving God and others. It is active, not just a possession. Whatever may be the state of human giftedness that we have, great or small, we realize our true greatness by serving our brothers and sisters in Christ with child-like humility! Then, like the great prince, our greatness arises from our service to the subjects of the kingdom; by serving them, we serve the king.

## 2A. Importance of Royal Family Relationships

We can speak about importance in this context because kingly family relationships involve us in direct relationship to Jesus our risen Lord. Thus, He says, <sup>5</sup> **"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me (18.5)**. Significantly, our mutual relationships have a radical importance for our walk with Christ. Mutuality carries over from the character of those who enter and from what makes them great in the kingdom. Thus, here we have the importance of how we relate to one another from different angles. Jesus explores different aspects of relationships in the kingdom where people dispute about who is greatest.

As a central ingredient per this context, "receiving" others as fellow members in the royal family means to help others avoid sin. We know this because failure to receive them goes with causing **one of these little ones who believe in me to sin (18.6;** Christ's little ones include both children and adults who have child-like submissive humble faith). We have much more to cover on this text (v. 6), and we will save it for next week when we deal with versus 6-14. For the present, we want to emphasize the positive side: it means *to promote the spiritual good of others in the kingdom*. This should be a *fundamental concern*, namely, that we look at other believers and ponder *how to join with them in the battle with sin*, to encourage, comfort, uphold, give a helping hand, and give a shoulder to cry on, be there, and find ways to seek their good. It means to do all we can for others to help them grow in grace and godliness *for their advance in the battle with sin*. For balance, we should note that this helping might include the difficult process of correction (18.15f.) that tests our submissiveness to Christ; submission only plugs in where there are differences to work on and adjustments to make. Even here, especially here, we must be mindful that those we correct are Christ's little ones.

It is radically important that we receive the little ones who believe because in receiving His lambs and sheep we receive Him. Our attitude toward other saints is our attitude toward our Lord. I do not want to have malice in my heart toward the Lord Jesus, but I do have it toward Him, if I have it toward one of His child-like saints. How I treat others is how I treat Him (cf. Mat. 25). Lesson: our relationships to the family of God, to our brothers and sisters in the church (local and universal) are radically important because what we do to each other we do to the Lord Jesus. Thus, we humble ourselves before those of child-like faith because of our love for Christ. We cannot overstate the importance of this principle.

Becoming child-like in association with receiving the child-like indicates an important mindset for us to have, namely, we are to see (view) others in the church family as children with us before the Father in heaven (we have the same one Father, Eph. 4.5-6). There is mutuality here; this is how we are to view each other. We are to stress this and not the superiority or inferiority status that exists on a different plane (Cf. WLC, Qs 123-130). From a different angle, there are God-given authority structures for the home and church; there are God-given differences regarding money, work, opportunity, blessings, possessions, benefits, and abilities. The God-given structures and life differences are not saving nor do they define our greatness. In marked contrast, child-likeness is far more basic; it establishes our very existence as members of the royal family; it establishes and defines our true greatness.

### Concluding remarks (implications and applications)

#### 1) Humbly submit yourself in child-like submission to Christ

Whatever you may claim as your standing before God, whatever your history in the church may be, take a good look at this duty to Christ because without this spirit, you will never enter His kingdom.

The true Christian acknowledges that he cannot advance his own cause in work, possessions, or ultimate safety. He depends on the Father of the family. You cannot attach yourself to Christ and have your own agenda. To be His disciple in truth, you must submit to His

kind of discipleship submitting all of your agendas to Him. Surely, the prayer, “your will be done, O Lord” is basic in child-like faith in the risen Lord.

2) Humbly submit yourself in child-like submission to one-another

Granted, the aspiration for greatness drives people to exalt themselves rather than to humble themselves. However, if you humble yourself in child-like submission to Christ, then you must put this ambition in check and seek the good of the family for the glory of God.

Therefore, do not look for things that set you apart and above others. Do not pride yourself in human accomplishments. I speak to all of you and to myself. I must not look to have heroic accomplishments in the work of the gospel and though I seek fruit for my labors, I must rest all in God who gives the increase. My job is to discharge my duties to my Savior carefully and prayerfully. Accordingly, how do you find greatness as a church and as individuals? Your true dignity and accomplishments all begin in your prayer of child-like submission to Christ.

Receive others in the church. Receive little ones, believers, those of child-like faith with you in the royal family. Receive them in the name of Christ. Closely related is Paul’s word, “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5.21).

Be like little children. What are some good characteristics of children that we should emulate (that relate to this context of disciple-sinners in the church)? They manifest dependence and simple trust. They ask questions driven by youthful curiosity. “What are you doing? Why are you doing it? What is this, what is that? My son Jonathan’s first words were, “Wass dat?” while pointing his finger. Kids ask, “Why does the sun come up in the morning? Are grandma and grandpa going to heaven when they die? Are you going to die? Why do people die?”

They are vulnerable to ridicule and they expose their ignorance, gladly, playfully!

They welcome correction because they want to learn.

The way I see this, and earnestly long for it as your pastor, comes out in a quote from a story about a teacher trying to relate in a Harlem school. He said this to his class as to what it is all about, “I teach you, you teach me, and together we learn to love to learn.” There is mutuality in our childlikeness. I feel child-like in my learning (I have only begun; I have barely touched the hem of the garment). I hope you can engage Scripture this way with me. If you do, then you can be vulnerable, expose your ignorance to each other, and to me, and you can do so gladly, even playfully!

Do you want to be a great person? Do you want to be a great church? You will not find it in a better job and rising up the ladder of success. You will not find it as a church in size, numbers, buildings, and budgets. You will find it; you are it in child-like humble love for one another.

Being child-like and seeing each other as child-like is an important principle that we need in order to deal with the pain we bring to each other. It is a key in the resolution process that Jesus outlines in the rest of Matthew 18. We need to keep this principle in mind as we go forward in the study of this passage to understand more about the church as a gathering of sinners in need of correction, self-discipline, and church discipline.

In the end, you need to ponder carefully the important passage from James, namely, that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4.6).

**May we fall down before the majesty of our God and Father with child-like humility, and may we receive grace from His hand to display child-like humility in the royal family, may we find true greatness in humble service to our great king by humbly serving one another. Lord Jesus, teach us about this kind of greatness for your honor and glory, amen.**