

Matthew 18:1-5

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-18/matthew-181-5/>

The disciples enter the house and Jesus asks them about who the greatest is in the kingdom of heaven? He holds a child and tells them that they must become like this humble child if they are to enter God's kingdom.

The parallel accounts of this event are found in Mark 9:33-37 and Luke 9:46-48.

Chapter 18 of Matthew is the fourth of five extended accounts of Jesus's words, called "discourses." It is sometimes called "The Discourse on the Church" (Matthew 18). The first three discourses of Matthew were "The Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5:3-7:27), "The Missionary Discourse" (Matthew 10:5-10:42) and "The Parabolic Discourse" (Matthew 13:1-35). The final discourse in Matthew will be "The Olivet Discourse" (Matthew 24-25).

Either during or shortly after *Jesus's* conversation with Peter about how as sons of the king, they are not required to pay the temple tax, *the* remaining twelve *disciples* entered the house (Matthew 17:25-27). Luke tells us that they had been arguing about "which among them might be the greatest" *in the kingdom of heaven* (Luke 9:46).

They seemed to pause their bickering once they entered the house. Whether through natural discernment and *the disciples'* inability to hide their ambition, or *Jesus's* divine omniscience, He knew what they were thinking in His heart (Luke 9:47). He asked them "What were you discussing on the way?" but they kept silent, because they were ashamed or embarrassed about their argument (Mark 9:33-34). Knowing these details from Mark and Luke's gospel indicates that *Jesus* may have been poking fun at *the disciples'* expense.

Greatness *in the kingdom* seemed to be a common topic among *the disciples*. This was not the only time *the disciples* argued this topic (Matthew 18:1-5; Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48). At one point James and John reignite this debate when get their mother to ask *Jesus* for her sons to be exalted *in the kingdom* (Matthew 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45). *The disciples* even argued about which of them was the greatest after the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:24). In all these instances *Jesus* never dismisses *the disciples'* question or chastises them for thinking this way. In all three instances He validates their ambitions for greatness by telling them how to be great. *Jesus* does not attempt to tamp down their ambition, but to redefine their perspective of what constitutes true greatness.

Man's ambition and drive for greatness is innate. It was imparted to us by God when He made us in His own image. Indeed, His divine mandate calls for man to have "dominion" over the earth as we steward all of His creation (Genesis 1:28). Everyone wants their life to matter, which is a form of desiring greatness. This ambition for greatness is a godly desire to become what God created us to be.

But the Fall (Genesis 3) perverted this godly desire. It distorted man's ambition away from God's original intent and misdefined greatness to mean having as many people as possible serve "me" and "my desires." The world's idea of greatness is often applied to those who exhibit the greatest ability to exploit others, and bend them to their will. Many men dubbed "the great" by historians were great butchers, and oppressors. The worldly images of greatness held by the disciples were likely kings and priests who demanded honor, glory, and often tribute from their people.

Jesus did not want His *disciples* to fail or be mediocre. *He* wanted His *disciples* to be great, but to be great *in His kingdom*, not the world's. *The disciples* were asking the right question. Their ambition for greatness was healthy, but their aim was wrong. Their worldly image of what *the greatest* looked like was the exact opposite of how God defined it. *Jesus* took these opportunities to realign His *disciples'* picture and paradigm of greatness to the truth.

Mark records that *Jesus* began by telling His *disciples* the greatness principle.

"Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, 'If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.'"
(Mark 9:35)

Greatness was not lording one's position of authority over other people, as the world and *the disciples* imagined. True greatness is found in serving. It is doing the work to lift others up, helping them be successful. It is doing "my best" to play "my role" to help "the team" succeed. This requires living a life of faith, believing God's promise that we will gain great benefit from serving in ways that bring us no earthly reward, and often even brings us grief from the world.

After *Jesus* made this paradigm-flipping statement, *He called a child to Himself* and continued to explain. Mark adds that the detail that *Jesus* took "the child in His arms" (Mark 9:36) as *He* taught these things.

Jesus spoke from His own divine authority—*truly I say to you*. With this, *He* explained, *unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven*.

The Greek word that is translated as *converted* is "strepho" (G4762). It means to "turn back" or "turn around." Matthew uses this word to convey *Jesus'*s warning to His *disciples* that they were on the wrong path toward becoming *the greatest*. And *unless* they turned around their thinking about what greatness was, they would *not enter the kingdom*. *Jesus* wanted *them* to change their perspective about greatness. *He* wanted *them* to set aside the worldly definition (to power over), and replace it with a godly definition (to serve).

Jesus told *them* that to be great they had to *become like children*. *Children* had no recognized standing in society. Their demands or commands carried no authority whatsoever. Moreover, if an adult asked *a child* to do something, they were obligated to obey. Further, children believe what they are told; they are prone to faith. *The disciples* were to *enter the kingdom of heaven* by adopting the humble position of *a child*, a position of trusting obedience to their heavenly Father.

Jesus was God, but chose to live a life of complete obedience to His Father (John 5:19). As a result of His complete obedience, *Jesus* was given the name that is above every name (Philippians 2:8-9). *Jesus* showed us the path to true greatness.

Jesus further told *the disciples*: *Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.* In other words, whoever does not force his own claims upon others and whoever serves others in trusting obedience to their Father is able to *enter the kingdom*. This picture of greatness is what *Jesus* has been teaching His *disciples* all along. That they are to learn to serve first. And only by learning to humbly serve others, trusting that God's ways are for our best, will they be able to co-reign with Him in His *kingdom* as servant-kings (Matthew 5:3; 5:40-42). *Jesus* told *the disciples* that they had to be humble like *this child*, to give *the disciples* a tangible image to grasp.

It is important to note here that *the disciples* have already believed on *Jesus*, and therefore, like Abraham, would have already been declared righteous in the sight of God (Genesis 15:6). Entering the kingdom therefore has to do with rewards for faithful service. It is similar to the nation of Israel. They were chosen as God's people because of His love for them (Deuteronomy 7:6-7). But Israel was not allowed to enter the land, and possess their inheritance, until they were willing to walk by faith.

In a similar way, *Jesus* here is telling the disciples that they will not possess (*enter*) the great benefit of the kingdom unless they exercise the trusting faith of a *child*. Children believe whatever they are told. *Jesus* asks His followers to believe whatever He tells us is true.

Jesus continued to teach *them* that, *whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me.* Mark adds that *Jesus* extended His statement, "and whoever receives Me, does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me" (Mark 9:37).

This Luke passage makes the same point:

"Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great."
(Luke 9:38)

Jesus reiterated this greatness principle many times. In each instance, *He* made it clear that the true path to greatness is through serving others in love.

By "*receiving a child*" *Jesus* likely meant to serve and benefit those who cannot return the favor. Children were among the least of these. They had no way to pay someone back for the service rendered to them. They could not give someone a reward. Only *Jesus*'s Father in Heaven, who sent Him, would be able to pay back and give a reward for the service done for these *children*. God's reward for serving these children, was allowing people to enter and be great in His kingdom.

Jesus was essentially telling His *disciples* that by *receiving* and serving *children*, they were actually *receiving* and serving God (Matthew 18:10; Matthew 25:40). Rather than serving those

who “can do something for me,” *Jesus* makes clear that true greatness is serving those who cannot return the favor.

Biblical Text

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2 And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, 3 and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me;