

Kingdoms and Greatness
Matthew 18:1-20
September 10, 2023

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 18:3: Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

I. Greatness in the Kingdom of God

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? That’s what the disciples want to know. They have this discussion several times in the Gospels, and I suppose we can interpret the question in different ways.

The worst construction would be a lust for power. In that case, the question’s force is, “Lord, we see that You’re exceedingly powerful, so we want to be part of Your kingdom. We want as much of that power for ourselves as we can get, because we like the respect that it brings. So how can we be great and powerful like You?”

The best construction would be along the lines of a pursuit of excellence, of wanting to make the most of being a follower of Jesus. In that case, the question is, “Lord, we want to be the best disciples we can possibly be. How do we go about doing that?”

Whatever the intent of the question, Jesus answers by calling a child to Him and saying to the disciples, “Unless you 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.”

We need to clarify what this means and doesn’t mean. It’s not about behavior: Jesus isn’t saying, “You’ve got to stop being rude adults and start being respectful and obedient like this little kid.” In fact, we have no idea how the child has been behaving—he may be a little terror much of the time. Some kids behave better than others.

Jesus isn’t speaking of innocence, either: He’s not saying, “You’ve got to clear out your minds, get rid of your suspicions and start acting like the naïve, sheltered children you once were.” Given the conditions for children in the ancient world with its realities of slavery, infanticide and violence, it’s debatable exactly how sheltered or protected a child could be. Besides, if the disciples are going to apply the Word of God to people, being naïve isn’t going to serve them very well.

So Jesus isn’t talking about behavior or innocence: He’s not a romantic. He’s talking about something else entirely. To set the stage, consider the child in the text. English isn’t quite as flexible as Greek, so English translations have to make a choice and call the child “him;” but there’s nothing in the Greek that says that the child isn’t a little girl. Now, that would really be a shock to the disciples, and it would serve the purposes of Jesus well: if you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven, be like this little girl. At the time of Jesus, girls don’t have any power at all in society. They have no rights, they will receive no inheritance. They have to be protected from all the predatory men until they reach the right age, and then they get married off to somebody without having much say in the matter.

No rights, no power, no wealth, no say in how life should be: how could that be great? Because greatness in the kingdom of heaven is completely different than greatness in the kingdoms of this world. Greatness in the kingdom of heaven is measured in terms of neediness, weakness and vulnerability.

That bears repeating: the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the one who is the neediest, the weakest and the most vulnerable. Why? Because the one who is the neediest, the weakest and the most vulnerable is the one who will trust in Christ the most.

Consider a little boy and a little girl at the time of Christ. The boy is raised with the knowledge that he's going to have rights, perhaps he'll receive an inheritance and he has potential to improve his situation by what he does and how hard he works. Because of who he is, his destiny is somewhat up to him—at least far more than his sister.

With no rights, power, wealth or much say in life, the girl is vulnerable: she has little choice but to trust in her parents during her childhood, and then trust in her husband when she's married. Of course, it may or may not work out well for the girl in the kingdoms of this world, because those she must trust are sinful: her parents may be cruel or her husband might be a pig. But when it comes to the kingdom of heaven, the One to trust is **completely** trustworthy: He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

The one in the kingdom of heaven who is the neediest, the weakest and the most vulnerable is the one who will trust in Christ the most, because he has nothing else to trust in; and the one who trusts in Christ the most is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

You are the neediest, the weakest and the most vulnerable in the kingdom of heaven. You might feel otherwise, so let's give a quick quiz: are you holy and perfect apart from Christ? No. That makes you needy for His righteousness. Do you sin? Yes. That makes you too weak to save yourself. Can you raise yourself from the dead? No. That makes you vulnerable to death and hell.

That's why you live a life of repentance, confessing your sin. That's why you keep saying, "I cannot save myself, but Jesus is my Savior." That's why, when it comes to your actions, you say with St. Paul, "I can do all things—through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

And that is why you marvel with great thanksgiving at this astonishing truth: the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is Jesus Christ. But wouldn't that mean that Jesus is the neediest, the weakest and the most vulnerable? Yes—at the cross. As the One who bears the sins of all on Calvary, Jesus is the neediest and most unrighteous, the weakest/most sinful and the most vulnerable. He suffers death and hell for all the world there. He confesses this with words like, "I thirst" and "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

So far, then, the Law is that apart from Christ, you're the neediest, weakest, most vulnerable sinner who could never get into the kingdom of heaven. The Gospel is that Jesus became the neediest, weakest and most vulnerable sinner in your place so that the kingdom of heaven is yours. As one redeemed, you live a life saying, "By nature, I remain needy, weak and vulnerable. That is why I need Christ, His grace and His victory over sin and death."

This, by the way, sets the stage for the rest of our text.

In the kingdom of this world, you gain greatness by exploiting the weaknesses of your opponent; and, let me say that isn't necessarily a bad thing. But in the kingdom of heaven, it's forbidden. Jesus declares, "My people confess they are needy, weak and vulnerable. If you exploit this and cause them to stumble, there will be hell to pay—it would be far better for you to go swimming with a millstone around your neck or to start lopping off your limbs than to exploit My children. They are weak, but I am strong—and I will judge the wicked."

That's also why Jesus says, "See that you do not despise one these little ones." In the kingdom of this world, weakness is shunned and despised. CFL teams don't draft the slow, spindly guy with no hands because they feel sorry for him. The Canadian Armed Forces don't select a weakling to serve in one of their search and rescue teams. The chain in this world is as strong as the weakest link, and so weakness is scorned and avoided.

If a sheep gets lost, it's probably the one that the wolves were going to get anyway. But it's not so in the kingdom of heaven. If a sheep is lost there, Christ goes after it. Why? Because the sheep that says "I'm lost" is the one who knows he's vulnerable and needs the Shepherd.

And that's why Jesus goes on to speak of church discipline, about what to do when your brother sins against you. If your brother refuses to repent, then he's saying, "I'm not that weak. I can have this sin and be good with God, too." When a Christian fails to repent, his brothers and sisters in Christ go to him and say, "You're fooling yourself! You're not strong, just deceived. Confess your sin and trust in Christ so that you might be in the kingdom of heaven once again."

In the kingdom of this world, the chain is only as strong as its weakest link. In the kingdom of heaven, the greatest is the most vulnerable of all. If you're going to be great in the kingdom of heaven, be like a little child.

II. Pray Hard. And Keep Rowing.

Having said all that, you must also realize that, as a Christian, you are currently in both kingdoms—you are in both the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world. The kingdom of heaven is a kingdom of grace, where all good things are given to you. The kingdom of this world is a kingdom of Law, where you work for what you get. When it comes to the kingdom of heaven, you live as one who is weak and completely dependent on the grace of Christ. When it comes to kingdom of the world, you want to give it everything you've got.

Thus the excellent Russian proverb: pray hard, and keep rowing. Confess your sins and weakness before God, then do everything you can to the best of your ability in this world.

See, it would be a terrible mistake for, say, a Christian high school student to say, "Since the pastor said I'm powerless, I'm not even going to try to pass my Algebra exam because I'm a Christian." It would be wrong for a Christian to say, "Since I'm needy and God provides everything, I'm not even going to try to earn a living but will live off the work of others;" or for a parent to say, "Since I'm a poor, miserable sinner, I'm not even going to try to raise well-behaved children." It would likewise be

wrong to say that Christians shouldn't aspire to positions of leadership in this world because they must maintain their vulnerability.

These are more than mistakes—these are examples of false doctrine, a confusion of living in two kingdoms. Behold how the sinful nature works to get things completely backwards: by nature, people want to work for a place in heaven, and at the same time get free stuff in this world without lifting a finger for it. That is precisely opposite of how God ordered things to be.

God ordered this world to run according to His Law. This was true even before the fall into sin. He gave Adam and Eve things to do—laws to follow like caring for the earth and not eating from a certain tree. The difference is that, before the fall, they would naturally delight in labor. After the fall, they would not; and after the fall, labor would have all sorts of discouraging thorns and thistles attached because of sin.

We need to be clear about this: if you don't like work, the reason you don't want to work hard in this world is not a pious wish to be a vulnerable child of God. The reason you don't want to work hard in this world is because work is a gift from God, and your sinful nature doesn't want to make use of the gift. As those who understand that everything is a gift from God, Christians should be striving for excellence in whatever is given them to do.

To put it another way, God has given you gifts and abilities so that you might be of service to those around you. When it comes to the kingdom of this world, you're God's instrument to work for the good of others.

This leads us to one more aspect about this world. This world does not have injustice because God has ordered it to run according to the Law: God gives His Law to curb evil against all people. This world has injustice because sinners abuse the Law that God gives. Instead of working hard in service to others, the temptation is to work hard in service to self. Because this is a sinful world, the vulnerable are exploited, neglected, used or killed by the powerful. But as a Christian, you work hard in service to such. You go out of your way to speak up for the unborn, to help the disabled and to care for the weak and frail. You do so because you have the voice and the ability; and you do so because Christ went out of His way to the cross to give **you** life and strength.

So pray hard and keep rowing. Remember that you're in the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of heaven at the same time. In this world, work hard to use what talents and skills you have in pursuit of wisdom, excellence and service; and should you become the greatest at what you do in the world, then be the greatest for as long as it lasts.

But always remember that you're also a child in the kingdom of heaven where worldly greatness counts for nothing. There, you remain the neediest, weakest, most vulnerable. And there, Christ declares that He has gone to the cross to die for your poverty of righteousness, your weakness against temptation and your powerlessness against death. He has taken your place in death so that you might have the kingdom of heaven forever.

It is yours. It is all yours because the One who died for your sin is risen again to give His kingdom to you with these simple words: you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.