

March 12, 2023

“The Greatest in the Kingdom”
Lesson 2

Matthew 18:1-9

Intro

Jesus had demonstrated his divine power multiple times before we get to Matthew 18. He had healed and cast out demons, fed 5000+ with a few loaves and fish, and walked on water. Peter, James, and John also saw Jesus in His true glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. Peter has called Jesus “the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”.

The expectation of the Jews from reading the Old Testament Scriptures was that the Messiah would come with power (which Jesus has been demonstrating). So they expected Jesus to liberate His people from Rome, to sit on God’s throne, and to rule in righteousness. They did not desire, or expect, a suffering and humble Messiah.

Jesus’ ministry prepared people to receive His kingdom when His work on earth was finished. Receiving the kingdom requires certain things. A person must be born again (John 3:3-8) and obey the will of God (Matt. 7:21). Today’s study reveals a third thing that Jesus says is required to enter God’s kingdom

Read Matthew 18:1-9

1. vs. 1: The disciples are being earthly here, seeking to know who will be the “greatest”
 - In other words, “Jesus, who is your right hand man?”
 - They’ve heard Jesus talk about the coming kingdom
 - In their heads, they likely think of the kingdoms of the earth that they know
 - All those kingdoms have lesser authorities who serve the king
 - Peter, James, and John have been singled out by Jesus before now
 - They all went with Him up the Mount of Transfiguration
 - Perhaps some of the others were jealous of them, concerned for where they fit in
 - They obviously missed the key “kingdom of heaven” phrase

2. vs. 2: Jesus doesn’t answer them with words
 - He uses a visual aid, a child who He calls to come into their group
 - Jesus has used this visual aid teaching style before
 - He uses the Roman coin in Mark 12 to teach about owing to God and to man
 - He uses washing feet in John 13 to teach about humility and service to others

3. vs. 3: Jesus now speaks to His disciples with the child in their midst
 - He tells them to “change” or “turn”
 - He’s speaking of a change in thinking
 - He uses the phrase “Unless you change...”
 - This indicates a necessary action with consequences if not followed

“Become like little children” is Jesus’ directive
He doesn’t mean immature

He wants the imitation of their honesty, their lack of guile
We all know that children can show dishonesty and cunning
However, for the most part, children show us exactly who they are
Jesus wants His disciples not to follow the worldly goal of power and status
This is not how God's kingdom is structured, not its value system

4. vs. 4: Jesus reinforces the message, saying, "Whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

The world considers greatness as those who have power and authority

Jesus says greatness consists in humbling ourselves

"Take the lowly position" He says

This is a voluntary action

Children demonstrate humility by trusting others to meet their needs

They know some adult will meet their daily needs

They know they aren't capable of providing all their needs for themselves

Jesus demonstrated this by living humbly while on earth

Mark 10:45: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Eph. 2:7-8 say that Jesus "made Himself nothing" but "humbled Himself"

Jesus teaches here that greatness in God's eyes comes from humbling one's self

5. vs. 5: This verse could refer to an actual child, but more likely means anyone with childlike innocence

Jesus here is calling on the disciples to do two things

Have the innocence and humility of a child

Greet anyone you meet with innocence and humility

Jesus says welcoming that other person is welcoming Christ Himself

This reminds us of Matt. 25:37-40, where Jesus reminds His followers, "Whatever you have done for the least of these, you did for Me."

6. vs. 6: The people Jesus is referring to in this verse seem to be believers

"those who believe in Me"

The argument could also be made that causing anyone to stumble is at work here

The "stumble" means something that causes someone to trip

It also means anything that breaks fellowship or causes sin

Jesus' meaning here seems to follow this second, more serious, idea

Doing something that causes another to transgress God's law

"Little ones" also has two possible meanings in this context

It could refer to believers in general

It could refer to believers who are less powerful, more vulnerable

Millstones come in pairs

The upper stone is vertical; it rolls around the surface of the horizontal stone below

Grain is poured between the stones

The upper stone crushes the grains into usable flour

Imagine having a large millstone tied around your neck as you are thrown into the sea!

Death is a certainty in this example

Jesus' point: causing others to sin leads to a serious, probably fatal, judgment

Followers of Jesus shouldn't cause others to sin
They should also not abuse any authority they might have

7. vs. 7: Jesus pronounces two woes here

On the world and on certain people

The world doesn't follow God, so its practices cause people to stumble and sin

Believers are not to follow its practices of seeking power, or of causing others to sin

The second is on people who cause others to stumble

Evil will always be present in the world

However, no one has an excuse to causing others to sin

8. vs. 8: What would cause a person to make another sin? Jesus addresses this in the last 2 verses

“If your hand or your foot cause you to stumble...”

Your hand grabs things, holds on to things

Your foot indicates where you go

If you hold on to things that cause you to sin, that's a problem

If you go places that lead you into sin, or away from God, that's a problem

Jesus says to “cut it off and throw it away”

This is metaphorical language

Jesus is not telling anyone to self-mutilate if they sin

The heart is still capable of sinning even without a hand or a foot

This “action” indicates the seriousness of sin

Jesus wants His followers to remove those stumbling blocks

Throw them away

Jesus's reasoning finishes the verse: “It is better if...”

Losing these things, even if that causes some other challenges, is better for you

“It is better to enter life...than...to be thrown into eternal fire.”

People's actions end in one of two destinies: with God or away from God

Jesus calls on believers to evaluate their actions for potential sinfulness

9. vs. 9: Jesus uses the same example set-up, this time with eyes

“If it causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away”

Again, this is metaphorical, not literal

The call is to find and remove temptation from our lives

The eye is “the window to the soul”

Through it comes the potential to lust in all its forms

The eye might “look down” on another as inferior or unworthy of aid

People can commit sin intentionally or unintentionally

Believers are called here to look at their lives thoroughly and made corrections

Application: This short passage of nine verses carries a great deal of weight. It first reminds us that greatness in God's kingdom is not that same as in the world. God desires people who humble themselves, who look out for others more than for themselves. That means not following the world's view and method of achieving greatness through power and status.

A second point it makes is about removing those things that cause either the believer or those the believer is in contact with to sin. Believers are to remove those temptations to sin in what they see, what they do, and where they go. A question for each of us to ask ourselves is, “Do my habits lead me to sin or cause others to sin?” If we answer yes about any of our actions or habits, then we are called to remove them, for we will surely be judged for not following the words of Christ. If we do obey, there is a promised—and much superior reward—than anything the world can offer.

Prayer: Father God, please transform our hearts and minds so that we continually seek the greatness that You require in Your kingdom. Help us develop and continue in habits that are godly and help both ourselves and others to grow in Your kingdom. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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