

"Who is the Greatest?"

Matthew 18:1-14

Key Verse: 18:4-5

"Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

In chapters 18-20 of Matthew's gospel, Jesus teaches about life in his kingdom. In this kingdom, which is a community, Jesus is the center as the King who serves, and who died for our sins. This kingdom is the Christian community and it foreshadows the heavenly kingdom. Chapter 18 is the fourth of five major discourses in Matthew's gospel. Jesus focuses on how to live in his kingdom, the Christian community.

Today's passage begins with the disciples' question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" "Who is the greatest?" This question has been raised by people of every generation around the world, and in virtually every field of endeavor. Students compete fiercely to be number one in their class and become the valedictorian. Universities struggle hard to be number one in their academic fields, and every year we wonder who will be ranked higher: Northwestern or U. of Chicago? In order to win the presidential nomination, political candidates spend all their energy and vast amounts of money until one of them emerges at the top. In sports, the Chicago Bulls had the best winning percentage in the NBA this year through intensive practice. The same struggle is going on in the fields of writing, singing, dancing, and even cooking and beauty contests. Greatness is usually measured by human endeavor, accomplishment and status. The problem is that there is only one number one. The rest are often regarded as losers and forgotten. That is why competition is intense. To reach the top, people climb over each other, often hurting each other. The winner becomes very proud, and the losers usually have a sense of failure, which crushes their spirit. This is the world we live in. But those in the kingdom of heaven must have a very different mindset, value system and lifestyle. This is what Jesus teaches his disciples in this passage. It is revolutionary and transcendent. Let's learn from Jesus three truths that characterize those in the kingdom of heaven.

First, change and become like little children (1-4). Look at verse 1. "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'" To understand this question, let's briefly review chapters 16-17. After Peter's confession that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God, Jesus began to explain that as the Messiah, he would suffer, die, and rise again. Peter reacted against this strongly, with his own idea. But Jesus reacted even more strongly, calling Peter "Satan." And Jesus taught the way of discipleship. Jesus promised that they would see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. His transfiguration showed them a glimpse of his kingdom. Afterward, in his way of paying the temple tax, Jesus taught Peter in a very practical manner that he was the Son of God. The disciples began to think that Jesus would establish the kingdom of heaven soon. A question arose in their hearts: "When the kingdom of heaven comes, who will be the greatest?" It meant, "Who would be the vice president?" This came out of their competitive spirit and human dreams. The disciples had left everything to follow Jesus. But they did not leave their own dreams. After experiencing Jesus' power and love, these ordinary guys began to think they would become really great through association with Jesus. In their dream world, they competed for the "top spot" among his disciples.

We understand them very well. There is a book called "Hope for the Flowers," that tells the story of caterpillars and butterflies. A certain caterpillar could not be satisfied with just eating, sleeping and walking around. He thought there must be more to life. One day, he saw a giant pillar made up of caterpillars that reached into the clouds. They were all trying to get to the top, thinking that they would find something great that would satisfy them. So this caterpillar joined in the struggle to climb from the bottom to the top. In the process he stepped on many other caterpillars, and sometimes he was stepped on by others. None of the caterpillars greeted another, for they were too busy climbing to the top to have relationships. Moreover, they regarded all other caterpillars as their enemies. In the process of climbing, most of them were crushed by others. A few made it to the top, only to find that there was nothing there. And they despaired a lot. This is the picture of those trying to be the greatest in this world. Although Jesus' disciples followed him, their mindset, value system and lifestyle were like the people of the world. How did Jesus help them? Usually, leaders encourage competition among their subordinates to stimulate hard work. But Jesus was different. Jesus introduced them to another world, in which there was no competition; a world in which humility was valued. To do so, Jesus used a visual aid by calling a little child to stand among them. Then he said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of

heaven." The disciples thought that naturally they were included in the kingdom of heaven. Their only concern was who would be the greatest. But according to Jesus unless they changed and became like little children, they would never enter the kingdom of heaven. Here Jesus emphasized that they must be changed and become like little children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.

What does it mean to become like children? It does not mean to become childish--demanding diaper changes and milk bottles, but to become childlike. We can say many good things about little children. They are innocent, simple, trusting, and willing to learn and to grow. But the main point here is that they are humble. They know themselves, that they need help. They recognize how weak they are. They think that they are the least important ones. Proud people think that they are somebody. But humble people think that they are nobodies. Some people try to humble themselves thinking it is the way to become great. We call this false humility. Humbleness is not a means to an end. It is the genuine realization that we are weak and helpless and that we need God. The problem is that human beings are innately, naturally proud. In order to become truly humble, we must be changed in our nature by the help of the Holy Spirit. Jesus called this being "born again" (Jn 3:3,5). This can happen when we acknowledge that we are weak and helpless to change ourselves, and surrender to God, asking his mercy and grace.

Look at verse 4. Jesus said, "Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Here "the kingdom of heaven" is the Christian community of which Jesus is the King. The most important characteristic in the kingdom of heaven is humility. Humbleness is the foundation of spirituality and of happiness. Those who are humble experience peace. Those trying to become the greatest in the world are usually anxious. They may suffer from high blood pressure and many kinds of heart disease. They hurt others and are hurt by others. They cannot please God; rather they provoke God to anger. The Bible says that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (Ja 4:6). Those who are humble receive God's grace and become a blessing wherever they go, whatever they do. If we want to enjoy true peace and joy and become a blessing to others, we must learn humility from our hearts. This is something everyone can do. In a community in the world, the top position can be occupied only by one person. But in the kingdom of heaven, everyone can be great, because it is not a matter of position or title, but a matter of heart. In this world, those who obtain the top position are very insecure. They face enemies and constant challenges. So they are anxious and have no peace. However, those who are humble are secure. They have peace because they are in a lowly position. Jesus is their King. Jesus is everything to them. These humble people are the truly great ones in the kingdom of heaven. That is why Jesus tells us to change and become like little children.

Second, welcome little ones (5-9). In the first part, Jesus taught his disciples that a humble person can be the greatest in his kingdom. In this part Jesus teaches us that those who welcome little ones in Jesus' name can be the greatest. In the world, those who become the greatest ignore little ones. Why do they ignore the little ones? It is because they think it is a waste of time and resources to invest in little ones. They always think about how much benefit they will get. From a business point of view, little ones don't give any benefit, only burden. They seem to be useless. It seems to be better if they are not around. We have a tendency, under the influence of pragmatism, to disregard little ones--not valuing them at all. With this mindset, we cannot be Jesus' disciples. So Jesus teaches us what attitude we should have toward little ones in the Christian community.

Look at verse 5. "And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." Here, "one such child" refers to one of the little ones. The phrase "little ones" is repeated in verses 6, 10, and 14. These little ones refer to those in the Christian community who believe in Jesus but are weak in faith. They may have low self-esteem and be vulnerable to the devil's temptation. They easily fall into self-condemnation and have no strength to serve others. So they seem to be useless. It is easy for those who have strong faith to judge them. If we have a judgmental spirit toward the weak, the Christian community becomes like the world where Satan reigns.

Jesus' community is different. Jesus wants us to welcome them in his name. Apostle Paul echoed this in Romans 14:1, saying, "Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters." And again in Romans 15:1-2, saying, "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves."

Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up." Welcoming is not a matter of lip service, it is a matter of heart. It is to recognize, appreciate, value and embrace a person who is weak for Jesus' sake. I want to share with you a classical Chicago UBF illustration of this. When Steve Stasinis first entered the Chicago center about 16 years ago, he looked like a typical wild rocker with long hair, a heavy metal t-shirt, and chains hanging from his pockets. Many people were afraid of him. But Mother Barry said, "I like your hairstyle. It looks like Jesus' hairstyle." Then Steve's heart was moved. He was happy to participate in our Christian community, and has grown to be a spiritual leader. Those involved in campus ministry tend to look for disciples who can be leaders. We can easily look down on those who are weak, and to value only those who receive discipline well. When Tentmaker messengers delivered beautiful Easter messages, I was very happy to see the fruit of prayer and training. I felt that I should devote my time only to raising such people as outstanding Christian leaders. I hesitated to spend my time caring for little ones. However, Jesus' words in this passage rebuked me. Jesus' way is to have mercy on the little ones, to take care of them, and to raise them as disciples. For example, Matthew was a little one. He was like a bruised reed because of his selfishness and sins. He seemed helpless and useless. But Jesus had mercy on him, and embraced him in all his weaknesses, and raised him into a great influential leader: the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Jesus taught us by word and deed to welcome little ones in his name.

In verses 6-9 Jesus teaches us the seriousness of causing little ones to stumble. Jesus said, "If anyone causes one of these little ones--those who believe in me--to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." What would happen to such a person in Lake Michigan? Jesus also said, "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!" Many people enjoy their sinful desires, claiming freedom of choice, and deny any responsibility for their influence. Through such people, many stumble in their Christian faith. Jesus says, "Woe," to such people. Some send e-mails that discourage others in their faith, and then deny any responsibility for their words. But Jesus says, "Woe" to them. Jesus said in Matthew 12:36, "But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken." Apostle Paul was very careful about not causing others to stumble. He said regarding weak Christians for whom Christ died, "When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ" (1 Cor 8:12). So Paul decided that if eating meat caused someone else to stumble, he would never eat meat again (1 Cor 8:13). Verses 8-9 teach us that we must apply strict rules to ourselves, not others. But please don't apply these verses literally. We cannot cut off our sinful desires by cutting off our body parts. Still, Jesus wants us to be serious about dealing with sin. Why is sin so serious? It leads to eternal condemnation in hell. Here we see the challenge to us. We must nurture a welcoming attitude toward little ones, while also being serious about sin. We will think more about this in the next passage.

Third, share the Father's heart for his little ones (10-14). In this part Jesus taught us how the Father sees his little ones. Look at verse 10. "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven." This does not imply that each believer has a "guardian angel" assigned to him. However, angels are present with God's children as ministering spirits, and they are in constant contact with the Father in heaven, because their role is to serve God's children (Heb 1:14). God values his little ones and protects them. So even if they look weak and helpless, it is a big mistake to bother them.

Jesus then told a parable to teach the value of one little one to God. Look at verse 12. "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?" It is hard for modern people to understand this parable. Many will think, "Just let the lost one go. You still have ninety-nine. One lost one is nothing." That is the mindset and value system of those who live in this world. But God's mindset and value system is different. To God, one is not just one out of a hundred. To God one is the only one, who has absolute value. Susanna Wesley, mother of the Methodist church was once asked which of her nineteen children she loved the most. She said, "Whoever is sick, lonely, sorrowful, depressed or needy. That is the one I love the most." This is God's mind. When one of God's little ones is lost, he looks for that one until he finds it. When he finds it, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. Jesus concluded, "In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish" (14).

Through his teaching in this passage, Jesus wanted his disciples to learn the heart of God so they could grow to be truly great and build a healthy Christian community--caring for God's little ones very personally and with sacrifice. When we know God's heart we enter a new world. We are freed from the haunting ambition to climb up the ladder of success, and the fear and anxiety that accompanies it. Instead we can have real joy and peace. Our hearts enlarge to value little ones and care for them. Let's return to the story of the caterpillar. After falling down from the top position among caterpillars, he found a mentor who taught him a great secret. It was that caterpillars can change into butterflies. So the caterpillar stopped struggling among caterpillars, submitted to metamorphosis, and through a kind of death and resurrection was changed into a beautiful butterfly. Then he flew around freely and enjoyed a panoramic view of everything. The same is true for us. When we accept Jesus' teaching in our hearts we can change and enter a new world, the world of God's love for each of his little ones.

In the past, we were all the little ones. Once we were useless and burdensome. We caused so much trouble for others. But God had mercy on us. God sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and shed his blood for our sins. He accepted us as we were and bore all our weaknesses. He helped us to grow as servants of God. Let's remember how Jesus cared for us, learn his heart, and care for little ones with his love. Then our Christian community will be pleasing to God and a blessing to others.