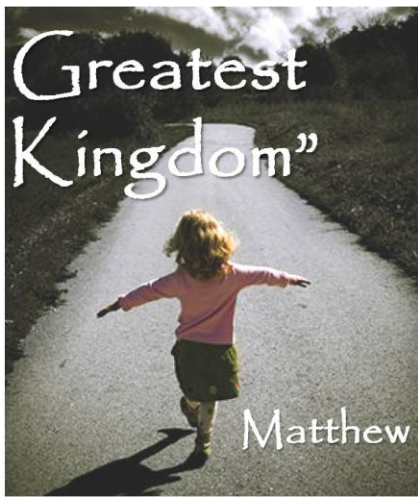


“The Greatest in the Kingdom”



“The Greatest in the Kingdom”

– Matthew 18:1-6

by Pastor Tim Dodson

of Jesus Fellowship of Believers Church

in Menomonie Wisconsin

on Sunday November 20th, 2016

(1) At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (2) Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, (3) and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. (4) "Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (5) "Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. (6) "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

The gospel of Mark actually gives us a critical piece of the story herein which sheds a great deal of light upon what was occurring. For in that gospel, we read how the apostles... apparently walking out of ear-shot of Christ, had been arguing over who amongst them was the greatest. By this time... approximately 1 and ½ years into the 3 year public ministry of Christ, the apostles would have had enough time to at least attempt a pecking order amongst the crew. Such a danger is something we all will face, especially those of us that are in the community of ministry. It is the fallen state of man it seems.

Jesus, as is always the case, knew what they had been doing and saying, yet He gave them the chance to personally ‘come clean’ to their sin. He still does that even today! He knew what they were talking about and so He said to them, "*What are you boys discussing?*" But they remained quiet in their guilt. Jesus, never seeming to miss an opportunity for a ‘teaching moment,’ begins to deal with the subject, and as is often the case, we find that the position of Christ and therefore the Kingdom walk was and *is* very different than that of the world! For greatness in Christ's kingdom is utterly different from the world's idea of greatness. And Jesus was going to go so far as to say that this sin was so grave, that if it characterized your life, you couldn't be part of the kingdom of heaven.

In what is often quickly read and received as a nice little story about Jesus with a child on His lap, we can lose the impact of a very critical aspect of our walk as believers. One in which if ignored, can cost us everything! For in this account, Jesus specifically defines the nature of kingdom greatness. Ironically, we all *began* the walk of faith...*if we are truly a child of God*, as a “broken vessel.” For the only way into this family is spiritually on one's face...prostrate before a redeeming Savior, aware of and acknowledging our sin! Humbled and busted!

Jesus teaches them in verses 3 and 4 that the way we actually become a Christian teaches us a lesson that we must never, ever forget. Such a position is not a one time visit, but is to be rather a lifelong state of being. Galatians 3:3 reminds us so, saying “*Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?*” Paul went on in that same letter saying “*But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*” (Ga 6:14)

How often those of this world, and sadly even we as Christians, base our decisions and lifestyle on what is good for us firstly. But such thinking and action is functionally contrary to the heart and soul of Christianity. I believe such thinking stems from the fact that most of us still as of yet fail to really understand what real “God love” looks like and lives like.

In fact many of us live our lives in a state of constant confusion because we want to live as Christians while still adopting and adhering to the world's definition of love. Therefore we are quite possibly in constant rub against God and the community of believers, or at least we have a great chance of ultimately one day falling because of such a clash of ideals and positions. Many of those who once graced our presence are with us no longer because they quite simply could not or *would not* embrace the definition of love that is given by Jesus. For love in the paradigm of Christ, is inherently other-centered, honest to a fault, and humble to its core.

Jesus, in the story before us, declares that a heart changed from pridefulness to humility is absolutely essential to belonging to His kingdom. In fact, He says to His disciples, those who had surrendered their lives to Him and had been ministering beside Him, that 'If your heart is not changed, if you are not converted to become humble like a little child, you will not enter My kingdom.' Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said, "*I sometimes think that the very essence of the whole Christian position and the secret of a successful spiritual life is just to realize two things: I must have complete, absolute confidence in God and no confidence in myself.*"

Now let us get a handle on just what this thing called humility really looks like. Humility does not mean a permanent inferiority complex. Humility does not mean that you're the person who hangs your head the lowest and you walk around with a dark cloud over your head, self flagellating and living in sackcloth and ashes. Rather, humility is "self-forgetfulness."

Let us not miss the punch, for Jesus speaks in very strong terms here! He begins by saying, "Assuredly" or "Verily, I say to you"; which is an indication that He is about to say something of great importance. Certainly we should always listen to what Christ has to say, but we should especially do so when He begins with the words, "Assuredly, I say to you". And then, He lays down some serious retribution against those who did not do what He was telling them to do. Unless the disciples or anyone else failed to hear and obey what He is telling them, they would not in any way enter the kingdom of heaven. It's not that they simply wouldn't be "great" in the kingdom; they wouldn't even enter it! These words, therefore, are essential to our very salvation.

One of the greatest attributes of humility that Jesus teaches us here is that true humility manifests itself in our care not to cause others to stumble. Jesus says two things in this passage. One, that the receiving of these "little ones" is receiving Me; and secondly He says if you cause these little ones to stumble you are not only displeasing Him but you are displeasing Him to such a degree that He will cast you into the deepest sea with a millstone wrapped around your neck so that you will never come back up.

We must realize that even though Jesus did so with a gentle spirit, this is still a story that was told in the context of a rebuke. It's a story that conveys His welcoming tenderness toward us; but is also meant to result in our repenting of and rejecting of the sin of pride! The disciples had been arguing among themselves over which of them would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven; and Jesus called this little boy forward to serve as an object lesson—to show the disciples what true greatness in His kingdom looked like.

Again, we read in Luke that somewhere along the way in their travels—a dispute had arisen among them over which of them was the greatest (Luke 9:46). The events that had recently transpired were likely to have fueled such a discussion. Peter's declaration that Jesus was the Messiah had garnered some serious praise from the Master. Peter, James and John had been selected to accompany Jesus to the mountain top where they were witness to a seriously powerful event. Then Peter had an awesome "one-on-one" time with Jesus with the catching of the fish to pay the temple tax. One can certainly look back at these things that had happened prior to this point, and can perhaps extrapolate as to what led up to that little debate on the road. *Who was the greatest? Was it Peter? Was it James and John? And if it wasn't Peter; which of the other two was it?—James, or John? Or why only them? Why couldn't it be one of us others? After all, we're just as much disciples as you guys! We hear from God too you know.*

It's a sad fact that, whenever we experience the riches of God's grace toward us, we so often start to think about how wonderful we must be—rather than on how wonderfully gracious God is. We start thinking that we somehow *deserve* position and status...that 'we're the man' and the body of Christ is lucky to have us. It could be that the disciples didn't know what to say when Jesus' questioned them. But it has also been my experience that we can get in so deep that we don't seem to even understand what we're being accused of in such confrontations.

Instead of an eye-opening acknowledgment, we stand back all incredulous and defiant! Because unless this kind of thing is 'nipped in the bud' early on, we can so very easily pass the 'point of no return.' We can get so we don't hear our brothers and sisters, and if we don't, don't tell me you are hearing a God in spirit and one with a "still, small voice!" Seeing this state clearly can help us understand why our passage begins as it does. We're told those boys actually came and asked Jesus "Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (v. 1). Bad move boys. Ahhh, the blindness of pride!

In response to their question, Jesus reached for the object lesson. I guess even then a "picture speaks a thousand words." I think that when someone needs to draw us a picture of the situation, it is a "do or die" event. We are apparently beyond reason therein. We read, "*Then Jesus called a little child to Him*" and "*set him in the midst of them . . .*" (v. 2). Our Lord called, and the child apparently willing stopped whatever he was doing and came. That's good practical theology, by the way! When Jesus calls, we should come! This little boy did better than a lot of us do when Jesus calls! No record of excuses or "I'm busy over here Jesus!"

Jesus places this little boy in the middle of the scene that was transpiring, and then He dropped a bombshell on them all. He said, "*I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven.... anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.*"

Now check this out: He says that we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven unless we are firstly "converted." But we know that already right? Yes, but that word does not just mean some simple "religious experience." Jesus meant more than saying the sinner's prayer and making a head decision to do this Christian thing for some nebulous and self-motivated reason. That's not what Jesus is talking about. The word He uses means "to turn around". It means that we recognize that we're going in a wrong direction; and that we are turning around and going in the opposite direction. Not that you have "arrived." Oh no...not unless you are dead! But rather that you are "traveling" in a new direction. That you are truly "moving," not just camped out in a pew somewhere waiting for the Santa Jesus to come down the chimney and bring you stuff. And if that is true, we have to admit that there are some "converts" that have never been truly "converted" at all. And we prove it in the end don't we? In our failure to follow through: *In our failure to finish the race*. In our failure to answer the call upon our lives.

Then Jesus says we have to "*become like little children.*" But what does that mean? Well; we can be sure that it doesn't mean that we should become "childish". The disciples were being childish; and that's why the Lord needed to rebuke them. And we also know that it doesn't mean that we become "children" in our understanding; because, as the Bible tells us, in understanding we are to be "mature" (1 Corinthians 14:20). The Bible is full of direction and admonishment to "grow up" and "mature" into spiritual adulthood.

So what is the ground of comparison between being "as a child" and living as a true disciple - an adult mature disciple in the right spirit? Well, for one, there is the perfect non-resistance of a child. Christ called the child, and the child came. There was no resistance. And secondly, there is in a child a perfect trust and the absence of all fear. If you have ever had a child leap off some high point at you in the full expectation that you will catch them, you know what I am talking about! And lastly, there is a full dependency upon another for their life. A child doesn't think "hey, if this whole parent thing doesn't work out, I'll just grab a job and do my own grocery shopping." Bearing all that in mind, it sure changes the view of who will be sitting up front at the "Marriage Supper of the Lamb" doesn't it? I think I'll be back, in the 'nose-bleed' balcony seats!

Now before we leave this passage, let's hit that last verse: "*But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea.*"

Why would He interject this here? No doubt because this is the “M.O.” of those who fail to check their ego at the door. Those who fail to “get what He is saying.” Because it never fails to manifest this way when someone is into themselves and have lost the battle with self. Invariably, in one’s pride and incredulous attitudes, we attempt to gather people around us who will back our position. And who do we go to for that? The spiritually mature and those who have a bead on what we are doing? Oh no. We go for the young and the weak. It’s the “Wild Kingdom” thing. From 1963 until the late 80’s, there was this TV show called “Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom” with guy named Marlin Perkins hosting. It didn’t take too many of those shows for me to figure out that the way for a lion or some other carnivorous animal to get dinner is to separate a young one or a weak one from the protection of the pack. I have warned you about such for 25 years here in this fellowship, and yet still folks will plug their ears and ignore the counsel. It’s funny...why do you think that the disgruntled individual will saddle up to you? Why do they call you or email you and act all chummy? ***Because frankly, they see you as a sucker...as an easy prey. If they can get you, then they can feel better about their sin.*** Again I warn you: *don’t be someone’s ‘patsy.’* Wise up. There are people who will happily sacrifice you to prove a point.

Jesus doesn’t take kindly to people messing with his kids. Hey parents, *do you?* Notice that Jesus isn't just saying that someone who harms one of His little ones should have a millstone tied around his neck and be thrown into the sea. He is saying that such a person *would be better off* if that were done to them than what will happen to them when He gets a hold of them in judgment! Jesus is in fact warning that an unspeakably **worse** destiny awaits such a person than anything that could be done with a millstone and the sea! He speaks later of being *'cast into the everlasting fire'* (v. 8), or of being *'cast into hell-fire'* (v. 9).

No one had better **ever** interfere with their faith, or hinder them from coming to Him; and once they come, no one had better ever cause them to stumble in their faith or tempt them into sin! They will most certainly answer to the Judge of all the earth for it if they do.

Way back around 1600 there was a preacher by the name of Antony Farindon. He said this: *"The craft of Satan is various, and his wiles and devices manifold. He knows in what breast to kindle lust, into which to breathe ambition. He knows whom to cast down with sorrow, whom to deceive with joy, whom to shake with fear, and whom to mislead with admiration. He searcheth our affections, he fans and winnows our hearts, and makes that a bait to catch us withal which we most love and most look upon. "He fights," as the father speaks, "with ourselves against ourselves;" he makes snares of our own desires, and hinds and fetters us up with our own love. If he overcome us with his more gross temptations, he insults: but if he fail there, he then comes towards us with those temptations which are better clothed and better spoken. He maketh curious nets, entangles our fancy, and we straight dream of kingdoms. Like a wise captain, he plants all his force and artillery at that place which is weakest and most attemptable. We see the disciples' hearts were here the weakest, and here lay most open: hither therefore the devil directs his darts, here he placeth his engines, to make a breach. So dangerous a vice is ambition; and so hard a thing it is even for good men, for mortified persons, for the disciples of Christ to avoid it!"*

How you treat God’s children is gonna affect your relationship with Daddy. If you contribute to the welfare of His children by spiritual influence, by lifting them up, by teaching them the things of God, by encouraging them in holiness and in community, then you and their Father are gonna get along fine; but if you influence His children for evil, then you are going to have a problem with Him.

All the way back in Genesis chapter 12; and when God first set out to call a nation out of Abraham, God said this. *"I will bless them that bless you and curse him that curses you."* In other words, from the very beginning, how one treats God's children is a determiner as to the blessing or the cursing of God on that life. How you treat God's people is a determiner of blessing or of cursing.

This is the millstone. This is not the little one you had in the house. This is the one that was pulled by the mule, the one that Sampson was tied up to when he was grinding grain in his blindness. An ox or mule has to pull it. A massive, huge stone, weighing tons, and it will most assuredly be your end...