

I Am the Greatest

Matthew 18:1-6

“I knew I had him in the first round. Almighty God was with me. I want everyone to bear witness, I am the greatest! I'm the greatest thing that ever lived. I don't have a mark on my face, and I upset Sonny Liston, and I just turned twenty-two years old. I must be the greatest. I showed the world. I talk to God everyday. I know the real God. I shook up the world, I'm the king of the world. You must listen to me. I am the greatest! I can't be beat!”

Those familiar words came from the mouth of heavyweight boxing champion, Muhammed Ali, upon his victory over Sonny Liston 60 years ago, in 1964. He was still known then as Cassius Clay, but the memory of his words have never changed. “I am the greatest.” He is still remembered by that line.

Ali won 56 of his 61 professional fights, 37 by knockout. He was, indeed, a great boxer, a three-time world champion. But he can hardly live up to that boastful declaration. “I am the greatest.” Not hardly. As he lived out the years of his life, he could barely walk and barely talk. His body was ravaged by the physical and medical effects of his boxing career, most especially the debilitating symptoms of Parkinson's syndrome. He died at age 74, 8 years ago.

He could not even live up to his own legacy! “I am the greatest.” No he isn't. I have a different definition for you this afternoon, a different definition of greatness. And this is a very important matter, because this world is still attracted to the bravado of a man like Muhammad Ali. And even the church, for we often honor and exalt men who might not be as outwardly brash and arrogant as the young Cassius Clay, but who exhibit

that same boastful pride of life. Even among pastors, church leaders. Especially among many in the public arena of mega-church pastors or self-identified leaders and shakers in the evangelical church world or those who have a following on social media. Our celebrity pastors and conference speaker superstars are seldom identified by their humility! The rich and famous, in the church and in the world, are those known for their external claims of greatness. Money, success, personality, good looks, energy, leadership, eloquence, wisdom. You name it, and we use it today as a mark of greatness. External benchmarks. Objective accomplishments. We think those who grandstand demonstrate greatness. Those who show off. Those who are boastful. Those who advertise themselves, who exalt themselves. Think professional athlete. Think musical performer. Think politician. Many a man, or woman, will claim greatness for themselves, and yet miss the mark entirely when it comes to the definition of greatness Jesus gives.

Who is the greatest? We have a new label that has become popular in recent years, the GOAT, the greatest of all time. That is a question that is asked in many different contexts, and in our text today we're told that Jesus' disciples came to him with that question as well. “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” No doubt, that was a common question among the Jews, and it seemed rather common among Jesus' disciples, too.

Consider,

Mat. 23:8 “But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. 9 Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. 10 And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. 11 But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Mark 9:33 “Then He came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, “What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?” 34 But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest. 35 And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.”

Luke 22:24 “Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest. 25 And He said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called ‘benefactors.’ 26 But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. 27 For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves.”

Even a mother gets the perspective of greatness wrong,

Mat. 20:20 “Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. 21 And He said to her, “What do you wish?” She said to Him, “Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.”

Jesus’ answer was, of course, so helpful.

Mat 20:25 “But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. 26 Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. 27 And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

So, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Who is the greatest in this church? Is it me? After all, I’m the pastor. Maybe it is one of the elders, or the most influential of the elders. Maybe it is the person who gives the most money. Or who has the best gifts and abilities to teach, the one with the most dominating personality. This afternoon, I propose a very different answer, and that answer goes back to the matter of humility, the humility of a little child.

v.2-3

Jesus uses this little child as an object lesson, and it is the Greek word for very young child. Infant, perhaps.

I. CHILDREN: AN OBJECT LESSON OF GREATNESS.

Don’t miss this. There is a lot of talk about greatness among the disciples. Peter himself seems to have received a lot of prominence, as he talks to Jesus about the appearance of Moses and Elijah, offering to build them all tents. Jesus rebukes the disciples for the failure of their faith regarding the boy with a demon, and he again reemphasizes his commitment to “be delivered into the hands of men” and be killed.”

So who is the greatest? Specifically, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Who does God think is the most important? Such a human question! Such a fallen, human question. Such an inappropriate question, because the kingdom of heaven isn’t about ranking! As we begin football season again, college football fans may care about the top 25 teams, but God doesn’t! God doesn’t count and order and judge and assign relative positions of importance.

Standing before God is not like getting your SAT scores, where your score immediately places you in a lineup of every other student. Some are above you, some are below. And only

one gets the top score. God doesn't grade you that way. The kingdom of heaven is not a college classroom where the teacher is grading on a curve. All of that is irrelevant. This question is irrelevant, and therefore, in itself, offensive. Inappropriate.

So Jesus uses the object lesson of a little child; again, likely a baby. He brings the child and put it in the midst of them. And then he says to them,

v.3

So stop arguing about the positions of greatness, and consider a little child. Turn, says Jesus. The idea is to repent, to turn away from a particular pattern of conduct. Turn away from the pride and arrogance of seeking your own greatness. And enter the kingdom as a child. "Become like children."

Mat. 19:13 "Then little children were brought to Him that He might put His hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. 14 But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." 15 And He laid His hands on them and departed from there."

I have chosen two characteristics to consider today, covering much of the nature of children that must have been part of Jesus' thoughts and intentions. Two things about children that qualify them for the kingdom of heaven, according to Jesus object lesson. First,

A. The simplicity of children.

And the point is, children simply do not know how to play the sophisticated games that adults play. They are simple. Straightforward. With the idea of innocence. That is, children are unaware of many things, many dangerous things. Children are innocent of ulterior motives, innocent of manipulations and conspiracies so often common among adults. Children say what

they think, they think what they feel, they express what the please. They don't feel the constraint of decorum or expectations. They are not complicated. There is a naivety, an innocence. They simply don't know the finer points of how to manipulate and deceive. Even when they sin, it is straightforward, as it were. Direct. Even their sinful actions are simple.

Now, I am not denying the effects of original sin, nor the reality of sinful behavior in our children from infancy, but rather, I believe, Jesus is addressing this from the larger picture, the broader context. And the selfish competitiveness, the insecurities, the mean-spiritedness that characterizes adult relationships is generally absent at the beginning. Children, at first, don't argue about who is the most important, or who is the greatest? They only learn that from the example of adults. They don't have ulterior motives; they seldom can even identify their primary motives. They don't understand ranking and comparisons and levels of honor and prestige. In their simplicity, everyone else is equal to them, too.

Let me give you an illustration that I hope will make the point I am trying to express. What happens to the typical adult when you give them a gift? Why, they immediately feel the obligation to figure out how best to return the favor! If you receive a Christmas card or a Christmas gift from someone, you immediately add them to your list.

What, then, does a little child do when he receives a gift? Say, a toy. He takes the toy and plays with it! He accepts the gift and delights in it. And that's all there is! A joy and a delight in the gift that is given, not in the duties and responsibilities that society imposes upon those who receive gifts.

And so, you must enter the kingdom of heaven like a child. No sense of competition. No sense of personal accomplishment, or superiority. Just the simplicity of accepting a gift freely, and happily.

Then, a second characteristic which I believe is essential to Jesus' point here about children. For legal and tax purposes, we call children "dependents", for good reason. They are not "independent." Children cannot live and exist on their own, but are entirely dependent upon the goodness and benevolence of adults for their life and existence. I believe that is part of Jesus' reference here.

B. The dependence of children.

You must become like children! Now think, little children. Even, infant, newborn children. A newborn is the complete demonstration of dependence. Everything in life comes from someone else, beginning, of course, with their mother. Life and food, nurture and protection, stimulation and even movement, it all comes from an adult. A baby can't even move on its own. It certainly can't provide for food. Everything, absolutely everything, is provided. And a child happily accepts all of that, and we label that "bonding."

So there is the object lesson, and all of that is so obviously a demonstration of humility.

II. CHILDREN: A DEMONSTRATION OF HUMILITY.

That's where Jesus goes next.

v.4

So let's talk a bit about,

A. The humility of children.

It is a native humility, a humility that willingness accepts all the help and assistance that is needed. It's our pride, isn't it, that keeps us from accepting gifts from others. It is our proud self-sufficiency that keeps us from receiving the benefits and blessings that others would provide for us.

And children don't have that. Children are content to receive freely what is given. In fact, we would observe, in the healthy context of a well-functioning family, children can take for granted their needs. That's what childhood ought to be all about! Children don't need to worry about where dinner is coming from, or how it is going to be prepared. Children don't need to worry about paying the phone bill or the electric bill. They don't need to worry about gas in the car or money in the bank. Their security comes from the faithfulness of their parents.

Now, we do have to teach our children gratitude, but the essence of this humility Jesus identifies is the free willingness to receive whatever is needed from those who are faithful and good to provide it. They have no sense of obligation. No sense of self-reliance. No pride.

And there is no sense of having earned it themselves, either! No sense of superiority. No sense of inferiority. No sense of personal merit, nor any spite directed toward others. They just freely accept the gifts offered, and, again, as young children, actually take them for granted. That's the security of childhood. And that's the native humility of children.

So if you are worrying about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, if you even think in those terms, you have missed the whole point. If you think, with pride, that you excel above others and are to be exalted, you have missed the whole point. If you think, with the fear of insecurity, that you fall short,

you have missed the whole point. The humility of children doesn't comprehend either of those categories. Rather, this humility takes the promise of God at face value, and believes it.

So, the second characteristic of children is trustfulness.

B. The trustfulness of children.

Children believe what they are told. If you tell them that Santa Claus exists, they will believe you. If you tell them the moon is cheese, they will believe you. The responsibility on adults, of course, is to be truthful, but the point here is the trustfulness with which children live. Even naivety. And naivety isn't bad, is it? Especially in a child. Eventually, sadly I would say, we need to learn the wisdom of self-protection. We need to learn the wisdom of knowing when not to trust, when we are being manipulated or deceived, but for children, the great blessing of life should be that they don't need to be concerned about such things!

They trust. They believe. They accept. They rely. I should note that one of the worst injuries, of course, to a child's heart is to break that trust, to teach them that actually, they cannot trust. That is one of the hardest lessons of life, to be sure.

So in this context of adults arguing about who is the most important, Jesus puts a little child in their midst and says, "You need to become like this child." In the context of all the dysfunctional ways in which adults can interact with each other, Jesus says to us, "You need to become like this child."

With all the pride, all the bravado, all the self-absorbed preoccupation with ourselves, Jesus uses this little child to make his point so very, very pointedly.

v.3-4

So apply all of this to yourself. Are you like a child? Or, are you proud and self-sufficient, stubborn and self-reliant? Are you like a child? Or are you fearfully insecure about what others think of you, or arrogantly proud in the way you show disdain to others?

Are you like a child? Are you humble and trustful as a child? Are you simple and willingly dependent upon God, as a child? Or have you corrupted that childlike innocence in our own zeal to pursue your own importance?

So who is the most important here among us today? Maybe it is that little child soon to be born, or the littlest one among us. Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? You who will humble yourself in order to become like a little child.

Now, having said all of that, Jesus warns us that children need protection. Obviously, with such naivety, with such trustfulness and dependence, children must be protected. They must be kept safe, for they are so extremely vulnerable.

III. CHILDREN: A NEED FOR PROTECTION.

Such a transition, isn't it, from proud men competing with one another for positions of authority, to those who are called to protect the innocence and naivety of children. So,

A. A warning to those who would harm children.

v.6

The warning is plain, but so very pointed. A millstone was used for the grinding of wheat, and the obvious point here is that a millstone around the neck would cause you to drown. It was a punishment that was inflicted upon the most atrocious criminals, and Jesus' reference to this certainly demonstrates how dear and

precious his little ones are in his sight.

So it isn't just a warning against harming children, as appropriate as that is even in the realm of the civil government, but it is a warning against those who would harm the souls of precious believers who trust in Jesus!

Along with that, however, is the promise of a great blessing.

B. A blessing to those who welcome children.

Those who receive children.

v.5

So stop thinking about who is the greatest! That's the point of all this. Stop arguing about who and what is the most important. Stop comparing yourselves to others. Stop exalting yourself above others. Stop indulging your insecurities about others being greater than you. Stop all of that, and take the position of a little child. And as you look at others, consider them to be as little children as well!

Then, listen to Jesus.

v.5

You see, it takes humility to receive a little child. You have to go down to them, to their level. You have to condescend to them. You have to listen to them. You have to hear them. And honor them. And humble yourself, in order to engage with them, as little children. You have to become a little child with them.

And guess what? When you do that, when you receive a little child that way, you receive Jesus!

So who is the greatest among us? Who cares? What do you

see? We ought to be as a room full of little children. Please don't ever think, therefore, that you can think of yourself more highly than anyone else. For we are all to be as children entering the kingdom of heaven: simple, dependent, humble, and trustful. You are all to be as little children, that Jesus might address you as a little child.

For these are Jesus' words,

Mat. 19:14 "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven."