

Greatness and Depravity 6-12-05

Matthew 18:1-9 (NIV)

¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"² He called a little child and had him stand among them.
³ And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. ⁶ But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.
⁷ "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! ⁸ If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

We have been walking with Jesus and the disciples through the Gospel of Matthew for the last year and a half. During that time, we have covered about three years of His ministry. I hope that it has been an experience in which you have grabbed a hold of the truths Jesus taught, as well as seeing our own weaknesses in the disciples' responses. We left off with the disciples alone with Jesus in Peter's home asking why they could not perform the miracle of delivering the man from demonic possession. Jesus explained that it took prayer and faith, both of which the disciples were lacking at the time. That led to the question of greatness.

¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

In other words, "Who is the person of faith, the one that has a life of prayer? When You set up Your kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, who will be the greatest?"

The question is so shaped by human nature. We are forever comparing ourselves with others and looking for a hero. America is fascinated with its quest to find the next American idol. The newsstands are filled with the latest rumor of a popular superstar. Man is always asking, "Who is the greatest?"

The greatest is Jesus. He is the only perfect hero. He is the only One to whom we should compare ourselves. Here is how the Apostle Paul put it, *We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.* 2 Corinthians 10:12 (NIV) All the heroes throughout time put together are only a dull candle compared to the brilliance of Jesus.

I imagine that some of the disciples were hoping that He might name one of them, or perhaps Elijah or Moses who had both recently appeared to talk with Jesus on the Mountain of Transfiguration. (Matthew 17:2-3) We are really obsessed with comparison. We are always looking for something in which we can boast. If you must

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Matthew 17:2-3 (NIV)

compare, then compare yourself to Jesus. In the contrast you will learn humility. You see, when we compare ourselves with others, we can pick their imperfections and compare them with our strengths and feel pretty proud. However, when any of us compares our life to that of Jesus, we all feel pretty small. There is no room to boast. If you must compare, use the right standard, Jesus! (Isaiah 46:5)

² *He called a little child and had him stand among them.*

Let me help you connect with this today. Who is the greatest in Wayside Chapel? (Have 3-year-old Ethan come up for a moment and send him back.) The answer is not Ed or Ida or Ethan or Emma. It is everyone who simply trusts and believes in their heavenly Father like Ethan trusts his daddy and mommy.

Jesus is the master illustrator. After all, He created every physical thing and designed all things to help you see the essence of the invisible God. (Matthew 17:2-3) Do you really want to understand how God sees greatness? You must see things from the perspective of heaven. We have come back to the right side up world of the kingdom. The world says greatness is power, asserting your rights, demanding your place, and climbing past everyone else so that you stand out as someone who has earned respect. (Matthew 20:25-26) That is upside down thinking. But the kingdom of heaven sees greatness in the humble and trusting nature of a little child. That is right side up thinking, and what a contrast!

³ *And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Here is one of those extreme expressions of Jesus. It is meant to shock us out of our lethargy, and challenge us to see life from a completely new perspective. (Revelation 3:18) Not only do we need to be like a little child to pray and have faith and believe that our heavenly Daddy will do what is best, but we have to be like that little trusting child to enter the kingdom of heaven. Never mind who is the greatest in heaven! You have to change to even get in, be a part of, or ever hope to have a place in the kingdom of heaven. YOU have to change. If you do not change, you are not getting in! (1 Corinthians 15:50)

Sounds pretty serious! Instead of being concerned about my position in heaven, I need to just focus on getting there at all. But what does "become like a little child" mean? Do I need to get on the floor and play with trucks? Remember, we can understand Scripture with Scripture. (2 Timothy 2:15) We know from numerous passages in the Old and New Testaments that salvation, the entrance to the kingdom, is the possession of those who have placed their trust in Jesus. (Romans 10:11) Jesus is saying that just as a child is utterly dependent on the provision, protection and guidance of their parents, we must put our trust in Him. We have to change from being independent, self-guided, prideful people, to carefree, trusting, dependent children. Little children are not comparing themselves with one another. That happens when they get a little older. Little children just look constantly to mommy and daddy.

What happens when we pull Fiona or Caleb or Emma or Logan away from Mommy and Daddy? They might put up with it for a little while, but soon they will be screaming for their parents. They are their security, their comfort, and their home! That is where they

Commented [notes2]: ⁵ "To whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared? Isaiah 46:5 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Matthew 17:2-3 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: ²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, Matthew 20:25-26 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Revelation 3:18 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: ⁵⁰ I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 1 Corinthians 15:50 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: ¹⁵ Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2:15 (KJV)

Commented [notes8]: ¹¹ As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." [5 Romans 10:11 (NIV)

feel safe. Get it? Do you really get it? I hope so, because unless we change and become like them. We will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Mark 10:15)

Maybe you are here this morning and you have never let go of your pride, and your demands, and become like a little child and trusted in God. Unless you do, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Those are Jesus' words. I do not care if you are the CEO of a multi-billion dollar corporation, on the cover of Time Magazine, or known by the whole planet. Greatness in the eyes of your Creator is trusting totally in Him. If you are not there, God just sees you as someone on an ego trip. To God, our ego trips are the greatest form of self-delusion. (Psalm 138:6)

⁴ Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

I hope it makes a little more sense to you now. Notice Jesus' emphasis is on the humility of the child. He or she does not think they are greater than anyone else is. They know they are dependent. They know they must look to mommy and daddy for everything. Jesus set us the perfect example in this because He did nothing without His Father's direction. (John 8:28-29) The temptations Satan threw at Jesus were always to get Him to act on His own without the Father's direction. "If you are the Son of God then..." (Matthew 4:3) But Jesus humbled Himself. He refused to act on His own. He would only act in obedience to the Father. He was like a child with His Father. (Mark 14:36) Jesus practiced what He preached, and so He is our perfect example in humility and dependency. He is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven because He was utterly dependent on His Father, just like a child. (Philippians 2:8)

⁵ "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.

Jesus so relates to children and children of God that what is done to them may as well have been done to Him. He states this in a number of other places. Jesus takes both blessing and cursing toward children or children of God personally. That speaks volumes about how our actions will be judged. The church should be the safest place in the world for children and for those with simple trust. Jesus says, "If you welcome these little children, you are welcoming me." I am so thankful we are a church that does not mind the disturbances of little children. We count them as a blessing. There are churches that turn and glare when a baby cries. They are not welcoming Jesus. May the Lord continue to make us a church that welcomes children and simple trusting souls in His name, realizing that by doing so we are welcoming Jesus. He identifies with these children. (James 1:27)

Then Jesus moved to a new but connected thought. He spoke on true greatness. He turned around the way they looked at greatness by connecting it with childlike humility. He then turned to the vulnerability of a child. The people of God are easy to take advantage of. (Luke 16:8) We regularly get calls from cons asking for money because the world sees Christian childlike humility as a weakness. We are vulnerable to the pleadings of the helpless.

Then He gave us His warning to those would harm them.

⁶ But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in

Commented [notes9]: ¹⁵ I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." Mark 10:15 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: ⁶ Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar. Psalms 138:6 (NIV)

Commented [notes11]: ²⁸ So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [the one I claim to be] and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. ²⁹ The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him." John 8:28-29 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: ³ The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Matt 4:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: ³⁶ "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." Mark 14:36 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! Philippians 2:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. James 1:27 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. Luke 16:8 (NIV)

the depths of the sea.

Standing in the city of Capernaum, you can see large millstones with the Sea of Galilee in the background. They actually hewed these millstones there in Capernaum. That was a part of the local industry. They weigh several hundred pounds. Do you want to know how Jesus feels about pedophilia? Here it is. If you would rob a child's innocence, if you would cause them to sin, Jesus said it would be better for you if one of those stones were tied around your neck and you be dropped into that deep lake where the pressure would crush the life out of you.

We have had so many horrible stories of child murders lately. It makes us so upset, and it should because this is how Jesus feels about it! However, let us not only hold these words to the most severe of cases. Does our bad example lead children into sin? What if by our example we teach them to be lackadaisical and halfhearted about their faith? Is that not causing them to sin? God help us be a good example for the sake of the children that come after us. (Deuteronomy 6:7) How many young people are not attending church today because of the factions they saw in their parents' church? God help us! We should take this very seriously.

⁷ *"Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!"*

Jesus' thoughts move on from sin toward a child to sins toward anyone. He pronounces the prophetic woe to all things that cause people to sin. They must come. They must come because man has free will. They must come because we must have a choice as to whom or what we will serve. They must come because this world is in a fallen and cursed state. But woe to those who cause others to sin. Sin is so destructive, so depraved, so death dealing that anyone or anything that ushers it into others lives is cursed by God. He pronounces His certain doom upon all such things, "Woe". In case we did not get it the first time, He repeats the warning with the individual in focus, "Woe to the man through whom they come!" Woe to the college professor who declares there is no God and influences young minds away from faith. Woe to the dealer of drugs and vices that ensnare the souls of youth. In addition, woe to you and me if we give people a reason to mock the name of Jesus. (1 Timothy 6:1)

In this passage, we have gone from greatness to depravity. We have seen the heights of greatness in a trusting child dependent on their father or the child of God dependent on their heavenly Father, and the depths of depravity in a person that would drag a child toward hell with them. This is man, capable of greatness, and capable of utter depravity.

In the next verses Jesus gets very personal and practical. He is attempting to literally scare hell out of us.

⁸ *If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.* ⁹ *And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.*

This is the second time Matthew recorded this expression. (Matthew 5:29-30) It must have been something Jesus said in several contexts. It is certainly an unforgettable

Commented [notes17]: ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.
Deuteronomy 6:7 (NIV)

Commented [notes18]: ¹ Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed.
1 Timothy 6:1 (KJV)

Commented [notes19]: ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.
³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.
Matthew 5:29-30 (NIV)

expression. Jesus is not saying to literally disfigure your body. He is not promoting self-mutilation. What He is saying is that sin is serious. It has eternal consequences. If you are tempted, you had better cut that source of temptation out of your life before it destroys you. That is the end product of sin, death. (James 1:15) James tells us that desire gives birth to sin and sin gives birth to death. Paul tells us the wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23) It literally destroys life! Jesus is the giver of life. (John 5:21) Whatever is keeping you from following with all your heart, soul, mind and strength should be, better be, cut off from your life. You have to be intentional and deliberate. Do whatever it takes.

You might need to end some relationships. You might need to avoid a certain location. You might need to stay out of certain stores or even change your occupation. Sin is not worth it. I often pray for folks that are caught in sin's web that the Spirit of God would unmask the evil that looks so enticing. It looks like pleasure, but that is just the mask. Pull that mask off and it is the face of death. Connie was telling me about a person that spoke to the Rotary on the drug problem of met amphetamines. They showed a picture of a lovely young woman and then again after 5 years on the stuff. She looked 20 years older and lifeless. That is sin unmasked, and I am not just talking about drugs. All sin is the same. Whether it is ignoring God and just doing your own thing, adultery, covetousness, or unbridled anger, each can do the same thing that drugs do. All rebellion against the Spirit of God is deadly both physically and spiritually.

In our passage for today, Jesus was addressing one of the most common vices, pride. Who is the greatest? If you will change the way you think, the sin is no longer as seductive. It has been unmasked. When you think of greatness as childlike faith in your Father God, you are not as tempted to try to be what you are not. When you realize true pleasure is knowing God and walking with Him, you are not as tempted by some other form of temporal pleasure. The mask comes off and we see it for what it is death-dealing rebellion against our loving Maker. (Deuteronomy 4:40)

Here is our challenge from this passage. Allow the Holy Spirit to transform the way you think about greatness. Be great in God's eyes, not man's! Let God teach you the joy of walking as a child with your Father. It is just a part of renewing your mind, but a very important part. (Romans 12:2) Since it is such a challenge, and so opposed to the way we naturally think, I ask you to take this one thought home with you this week and work on it. Ask your heavenly Father to show you what it means to be great in His eyes. Ask Him to show you the joy of being a humble dependent child. See Christ's wonderful example in the Gospels and follow Him. In addition, let us consider how we can be a better example for our children and grandchildren. Will you commit to doing that this week?

If there is some habitual sin in your life, if you have been caught in its deceitful, destructive web, do whatever you must to be free. Ask God to show you the real face of it, not the seductive one that lured you in, but the real one. That will give you the incentive to rely upon God's power to set you free. If you need help to break free, come counsel with me about it and we will pray together and see what God can do in your life. For whom the Son sets free is free indeed. (John 8:36)

Commented [notes20]: ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.
James 1:15 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 6:23 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: ²¹ For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.
John 5:21 (NIV)

Commented [notes23]: ⁴⁰ Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time.
Deuteronomy 4:40 (NIV)

Commented [notes24]: ² Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.
Romans 12:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes25]: ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.
John 8:36 (NIV)

