

The Greatest In Heaven
Matthew 18:1-5

March 15, 2020

1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2 He called a child, whom he put among them, 3 and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me (NRSV).

In Matthew, the journey of Jesus goes like this. There is a plot to kill him but his time has not yet come so they leave Galilee to go where it is safe, outside of the danger zone, so that Jesus can continue his mission of teaching, preaching, and healing. Jesus covers a very large area. When the right time comes Jesus sets out for Jerusalem. I like how Matthew tells us where they are in the journey to Jerusalem. In the 1st passion prediction Jesus tells them that he must go to Jerusalem. Then there is the transfiguration. Then the 2nd passion prediction is when they gather together in Galilee. Matthew shows us the physical movement as it applies to geography. Then they go to Capernaum. This is a specific detail that shows us where they are in Galilee. This is also where Jesus has made his home. It is while they are here in Capernaum that the disciples ask the question "Who is the greatest in heaven?"

We don't have the privilege of all the details. We do not know all of the various conversations that have been ongoing. We do not know what sparked the question. What we do see is that the disciples have been thinking about heaven. With all of the drama and excitement surrounding Jesus (the crowds pressing around, the unusual opportunity to witness miracles, the confusion over the plot to kill Jesus) some of the teaching has been getting through to the disciples. However, the question that is asked shows that the disciples have not been able to grasp what it's all about.

This brings us to today's Scripture. So, they ask Jesus Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? This seems like a good question. It seems like the disciples have progressed and no longer care about greatest here on earth. Their thinking is that they are going to heaven so now they want to know who is going to be the greatest. We may not notice a problem with the question. The question asks, What about me, will I be the greatest? The question is based on pride and vanity. It is a question of selfishness. The question is not a matter of if you are great yourself. It is a question of if you are better than others. The problem is just like here on earth where the argument is over supremacy. Jesus perspective is that it is not about you, your glory, vanity, pride, and selfishness. You have to change. You have to change your attitude.

The leading question presents Jesus with an opportunity to teach. Jesus uses a child for a dramatic illustration. In first century Judaism children were considered a lower social status. They were regarded as inferior with no rights and treated as property. Jesus uses a child to demonstrate the explicit reversal of values. God values those humans that society considers unimportant and insignificant. Jesus emphasizes a key point of relationships. Have humility like and innocent child. Have humility and do not be concerned with social status. Jesus teaches that the kingdom of heaven is a reversal of human standards. Selfish ambition is a vice. It goes against the very nature of God and Jesus and the heavenly realm. You have to change means you've been going in the wrong direction. Pride and the desire to be greater than others has no place in the kingdom of heaven. Greatness in heaven is God's people who welcome the rejected like Jesus does. It is people who are humble, like Jesus, who welcome those of lower social status.

Notice how Jesus responds. Jesus could be disappointed, upset, or angry. After all this time, after all of the lessons and all of his teaching, the disciples ask a selfish question. But Jesus is cool. So, instead of condemning disciple pride and arrogance, Jesus once again takes a situation from everyday living and uses it for education. Jesus teaches a lesson on humility and attitudes. To be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is to be humble. Jesus says when you welcome those that are regarded as inferior you welcome Jesus. When you are humble, and when you are welcoming to others, you are being the kind of person that Jesus meant for you to be.

One day I was watching children at play. All of the adults were gathered together inside and the little children were outside playing. The older children were looking after little ones. They were all happy with no worries and safe. Their food was provided for them without labor or worry. The clothes that they wore they did not have to make or save up money to buy. Their homes provided safety and shelter with no maintenance from them. All of the little children were clothed, fed, and sheltered without any care or worry whatsoever. They all had more. They had warmth, comfort, and love. They were free of worry because of the love of their parents. The children could trust their parents to provide everything completely. It is this level of love and trust that enabled them to run, play, and be happy.

The lesson for us is to live in accordance with the teachings of Jesus. Abandon the quest for status and accept your place as a child of God. Everyone can be happy with no worries, and be safe. Our food is provided in abundance. Clothes are plentiful and of good quality. Home is a place of safety and shelter. With God's loving care you are clothed, fed, and sheltered. There is no need to worry because God provides. We all have warmth, comfort, and love. We are free of worry because of love. God provides all. We as children of God can trust God completely. This level of love and trust in God allows us to be free and happy. Don't ask, who is the greatest in heaven? Ask instead, am I living up to my heritage as a child of God?