

Exegetical Notes, Matthew 18:1-14
“Who Is the Greatest?”

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Matthew 18:1-14

Verse 1

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

- Apparently, the disciples discussed this question on several occasions. See Luke 9:46, 22:24, and Mark 10:35-45. Luke indicates that they even argued about which of them would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Verse 2-4

He (Jesus) called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: “I tell you the truth unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

- In answer to their question about greatness, Jesus put a little child in their midst and said that this child was a model of true greatness in the kingdom of heaven.
- For centuries, Bible scholars have debated what it is about children that makes them great in the kingdom of heaven. Some say that it is that they are trusting and unpretentious. Others say that it is their openness and/or their willingness to learn. The word that Jesus uses is “humble.” This word implies that what makes children great is that they take no thought of being great. It is not part of their consideration. They are simply who they are. However, this humble attitude does not last long, even among children. Soon they adopt the standards of the world and begin to argue about which of them is the greatest, the strongest, the richest, has the stronger Dad, etc. Apparently Jesus sees them in their true and purest state.
- Jesus clearly indicates that the disciples do not exist in this pure state. In order to be like this child they must “change.” The NAS

translation says that they must “convert.” The word means that they must turn from the behavior they are demonstrating deliberately and voluntarily. This conversion requires conscientious effort. It is not natural for them or for us.

- Jesus told the disciples that this change in attitude was required of them if they wanted to be part of the kingdom. To be part of the kingdom, they would need to be humble like a child, to stop thinking about personal greatness.

Verse 5-6

“And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. 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.”

- Jesus highly valued little children. He says that to welcome a little child is to welcome him. He warns those who would lead a child into sinful ways.
- Jesus said that it would be better for a person to have a large millstone around his neck. Millstones came in two basic sizes. There was the small stone that a woman would use to grind grain for normal household use, and there was the large industrial size that was turned by a donkey or an ox. The millstone that Jesus had in mind was the second size stone.
- If a person had such a stone around his neck and was cast into the sea, he would drown. Jesus’ point was that such a fate would be better than that of a person who led a child into sinful ways.

Verse 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!”

- The world is cursed by sinful behavior and these behaviors cause others to fall into sinful ways.
- This is inevitable until the time when Jesus comes and casts out sinful behavior.
- However, people need to be very careful that their sinful behaviors do not lead others into sinful behaviors. Those who do lead others into sin are also cursed.

Verse 8-9

“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. 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.”

- Jesus is not encouraging the mutilation of the physical body in this passage. He is making a point about the seriousness of avoiding sinful temptations. This passage is figurative and not literal.
- In verse 7, Jesus was talking about the influence that people have over other people. He was warning people who were a harmful influence of the judgment that they would face if they continued to lead others into sin. In verse 8-9, he is telling people how important it is to avoid sinful influences. We need to avoid bad influences in our lives. We should cut them out of our lives and throw them away, for if we are led into sinful practices by such influences, we will lose heaven.

Verse 10

“See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

- Jesus returns to the original subject, the child. He warns the disciples not to underestimate the importance of children. He says that they have angels who watch over them, guardian angels, who always have access to God.

Verse 12-14

“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? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.”

- It is important to remember that Jesus uses this illustration of the one lost sheep in different ways in the Gospels. Here, he wants us to understand that a little child is as important to God as is the one lost lamb. Jesus wants us to understand that God’s heart desires that every child come to him through Jesus Christ.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Who Is the Greatest?* They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship,

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