

Matthew 18:1-14

"Obtaining & Maintaining Greatness"

Sometimes the teacher's pet can stir the pot... I've mentioned to you before how that I think we can at times be guilty of removing the "human element" from scripture. Oh, I'm not speaking regarding the inerrancy of scripture. We believe whole heartedly, unapologetically in the *inerrancy*, the *infallibility* of the word of God. We would never even seek to insinuate that since scripture was *written* by fallible men that the word itself is fallible! No, not at all. It may've been written by the hands of man, but inspired by the *Spirit of God*, God using different men (throughout the ages) as His instrument, (the pen in His hand if you will) by which He gave the perfection of His written word to us.

Having said that, I believe that we can be guilty at times (albeit inadvertently) of kind of lumping the Word, & the men of God found *in* the Word into one big pot. "The word is infallible; those guys were infallible to." We can forget that they were as you are & I am. Especially in the light of how God used their lives, how they moved in the miraculous & it's hard for us to seem *them* on the same level of human fallibility as *us*.

James saw this struggle in his own day w/regard to how people perceived what we'd call the O.T. saints. So he issued the reminder, "*Elijah was a man with a nature like ours,*" *James 5:17* You see, James saw *his* nature as ordinary, but noted how people put Elijah in the category of "extraordinary". But James says, "No". *Elijah was an ordinary man who loved God, committed his life to God & God used him greatly for His glory. The idea being if God can use him in a great way, than God can use you in a great way as well...*

The people that God used/uses are ordinary, everyday kind of people. Not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble... But God chooses the foolish things, the weak & the base (Kinda sheds a whole new light on your spiritual leaders doesn't it? 😊) But I point that out because it really shines through in the very 1st Vs of our text today. Can I just say that the Lord's disciples were "exceedingly" human 😊? We like to place them in the category of "super spiritual" (& understandably so). However, the truth is, these guys struggled with same mindsets, the same incredibly lame things that you & I do.

& I love the fact that the scriptures keep that real for us... I mentioned the teacher's pet stirring the pot (& I'm certain that Jesus didn't have "favorites" in the petty sense that we think of) but those guys really liked to consider themselves in that position. & Every now & then they'd get into a full on fight about it. Oh, not physically, but they'd debate vehemently. & Evidently on this day, one of them decided to put an end to the debate & said, "Let's just ask the Lord directly..." notice.

Vs 1

Sometimes you wonder the if the Lord ever just wagged His head at some of the things these guys did, some of the conversations they had. Like, “Are you serious right now? I mean, you’re kidding Me, right? No? Wow...”

Need I remind you of the fact that they find themselves w/in about a month of the Lord’s ministry coming to an earthly close? The shadow of the cross is now looming over Him. He’s been speaking more & more of *His abasement*, yet more & more they speak of *their advancement*.

Isn’t it interesting though? Today when we think of great/godly men & the conversations they have, there they are debating the deep things of God. They’re probing the depths of God’s sovereignty Vs man’s freewill, they’re discussing eschatology, studying prophecy, they’re talking through the points of pre-trib rapture, post trib, mid trib, amillennialism... **What did the Lord’s disciples debate? Which one of them was going to have the greatest place of power, or the greatest platform or position of influence in the kingdom of heaven 😊... That is, who would hold the highest position in the administration Jesus would soon establish.**

& We don’t know what triggered the debate *this time*. However *now* they’re at the point where they’re ready for the Lord to settle the matter once & for all. Perhaps Peter had them all riled up remind them how he’d walked on water, how the Lord miraculously paid his temple tax, had taken him up on the Mt where He’d shared something w/*him*, shown something *to him* that was “classified” until further notice... **James & John were quick to remind him that they were there for that to, that they were there when He raised Jairus’ daughter, it wasn’t just Peter that got the pass for the private times... The other disciples pitching in, Judas pointing out that they weren’t the one’s Jesus trusted w/the money... on & on it went. Finally they just asked, “Lord, who’s going to be Your right hand man?”**

Couple things worth pointing out here. #1 They’re still not connecting the dots concerning the kingdom of heaven being spiritual, not political. For all that Jesus has told them concerning His coming death/resurrection, they still think He’s going to establish a physical cabinet, a physical rule w/in a short period of time & they’re all getting key positions.

But what we want to see here is that as to where *humility* will unite us, *pride* will divide us. What is it that’s at the root of this schism, this division amongst the disciples?

It's pride. People thinking more highly of themselves than they ought. Paul would say to the Romans, *"For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly," Rom 12:3*

Translation, stay grounded in reality. But when we begin to *live* for ourselves, & look out only for ourselves there is bound to be conflict & division. Now we commend the disciples for having faith in His word. That there would be a kingdom, & that they would be in it, beyond that they began to miss the mark... Rather than seeking to *encourage one another*, they're looking to *exalt themselves*. Again, Rom 12:10, *"Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another;"* To the Philippians Paul said that like this, *"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself."* Phil 2:3

Yet there's something of a self-seeking (sin) nature that resides w/in us all that desires to be celebrities rather than servants. But God wants to get it in our head & get it in our heart that we're *not competitors*, we're *co-laborers*. You'll be strong where I'm weak, perhaps I can be strong where you're weak. & We're to work *together*, not for our own *greatness*, but for God's *glory*...

Jesus is going take this opportunity to teach us the counterintuitive rationale of the kingdom. That the way up is down, the way to get is to give, the way to be filled with the fullness of God is to be emptied of self, & the pathway to exaltation comes through humiliation... *"The fear of the Lord is the instruction of wisdom, And before honor is humility."* Prov 15:33

Vs 2-4

What's going on here? Jesus is pointing out a fundamental flaw in their mindset. The question they're asking reveals the way that they're thinking & it's all wrong. Rather than thinking, "How can I ascend?" They *should be* focusing on "Who can I serve?"

Now Jesus could've simply pointed to Himself & said, "I'm the Greatest." But rather than do that He drew their attention to *His nature* through the example of a child.

& We love the fact that Jesus called the child, & the child came to Him. That's not true of every adult. Just watch the lines at the mall of those waiting to see Santa☺! You'll see faces filled w/tears & terror as their told to hop on up on Santa's lap. Many of those kids are absolutely mortified & traumatized by the time they're finished! Mom & dad wanted a memory & man did they get one! ☺

But w/Jesus there's never an indication that children sought to stay away from Him, they were always wanting to be around Him & He had to rebuke His disciples when they sought to chase the kids away from Him. There was nothing intimidating or traumatizing about the presence of Jesus, kids wanted to come *to* Him, not run *from* Him...

But see the scene here. The disciples come to Jesus. "Jesus, settle this dispute for us will Ya? Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" & It's like Jesus stops them in their tracks, says, "Hey, let's not get the cart before the horse here." He calls a little child to Himself, sets him in the midst of them & says, "I'm telling you the truth, unless you are *converted* & become as little children, you won't even *get in* to the kingdom, much less become great." Jesus says, "Let's worry 1st about getting in, if you're not *converted*, if you're not "born again", you won't get in, much less become great."

These guys were expecting some revelatory answer (which they got), perhaps Peter was anticipating his name to be called, but Jesus sets in their midst a *little child* (talk about bursting their bubble)! Children were more like property; they definitely weren't prominent. They were to be seen, not heard, they wielded no power, held no position, they were the smallest, the simplest, the least important...

What's Jesus saying? That greatness in His kingdom isn't based upon great words, great works, incredible accomplishments, but upon absolute dependence & a spirit of humility & simplicity.

Now we could talk about the innocence, purity, or faith of a child, but that's not really what Jesus highlights here. He holds up the attribute of humility, the "unconcern" for social status.

So the contrast here is between the pride of the disciples, & the humility of the child. & For the record I want to say that when Jesus says we must become child *like*, He's not saying we're to be childish. Many people act childish (temper tantrums, wanting their way or no way at all...) that's the opposite of what Jesus is teaching. Those things are rooted in pride, Jesus is teaching on *humility*.

Not *false humility*, "I'll be the one in the back sweeping the clouds..." We're not speaking of an arbitrary asceticism or false modesty. It about knowing yourself, accepting yourself & being your best self to the glory of God. Don't think more highly of yourself than you ought, but don't downplay the gifts God has given you, use them for His glory.

Again, the ultimate example is found in Jesus Himself. God in the flesh, Who (according to Phil 2:8) *humbled Himself*, being obedient to the Father to the point of death.

Even the death of the cross. Jesus didn't need to be the center of attention, He never clamored for position, He didn't carry Himself in an intimidating, self promoting manner, He Humbled Himself, was here to serve & not be served. Therefore (the bible says), *"God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* Phil 2:9-11

God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time (1 Pet 5:6)... Jesus carries on Vs 5-6

Now as for the interpretation I'm sure Jesus still has that little child that He's using as an illustration. Yet as for the application it seems that Jesus' implication holds reference not only to a literal child *physically*, but also to the one who's been "converted" & become as a child *spiritually*.

So when He's speaking of *receiving a child, or stumbling a child*, it seems to me the application is 2-fold. There's no doubt He's talking about children, but there's also no doubt He's speaking of *God's children in general*.

Here in Vs 5 He issues a blessing. To receive a child in His name is to receive Him... One might say that the true test of a church's spirituality might be if people speak in tongues, or raise their hands in worship or do outreach in the community... Another might say a better test of spirituality is defined by what's happening in the children's ministry... How are the kids being treated in the church. I think if we really had a handle on the Lord's heart toward children there would be a waiting list to serve in the children's ministry, to give God's word & share God's heart w/those little lives.

I read about D.L. Moody coming home after one of his meetings & his family asking how many converts he had that night. He said, "2 ½". They said, "Oh, 2 adults & 1 child?" He said, "No, no, 2 children & 1 adult." He said the adult only had ½ a life to give, he was only ½ of a convert. ☺ The kids are so important. God forbid when kids don't want to come to church because of how we squelch them. I'm not saying they shouldn't be respectful & all that. I'm saying that Jesus wants them around & this should be a place that they *want* to be. Jesus says, "To receive a child (or a child of God) in His name, is to receive Him.

Then the warning, “But to cause one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be *better* to have a cement necklace (3-400lbs) tied around his neck & to be thrown (*not into the shallows*), into the crushing depths of the sea to be drowned.”

To destroy the faith of a child, to lead a child (or a child of God) into sin... Jesus says it would be *better* for that person to die a horrific & terrifying death than to undergo the judgment that awaits them for that... Wow. I think of misinformation in a child's education, I think of child molestation or trafficking, child abuse in any manner. Even a poor example at home... What a premium Jesus places on the evangelism of children & being stepping stones to build others up rather than stumbling blocks that bring others down.

Now we should say that Jesus isn't speaking of 1 isolated act leading to damnation... But if your lifestyle is characterized by causing others to sin, seeking to destroy their faith than you don't belong *to* Jesus, you've set yourself as an enemy *against* Jesus... & What awaits the enemies of Jesus is a fate worse than the most terrifying death you could ever imagine.

You see it's certainly a wicked thing to sin, but it's far worse to entice & lead others *into* sin. As it pertains to the children of God, make sure there's nothing in your life that will lead others to stumble. Liberties stop at the door of stumbling, notice.

Vs 7

The 1st “woe” is one of *lamentation*. The 2nd is a “woe” of condemnation. In other words, we live in a fallen world so problems, sins, offenses are inevitable. However, if people are being derailed in their faith because of *you, your cynicism, your criticism & unbelief, woe unto you.*” Because God will hold you accountable for that.

Now as a sidelight, let that help you release & forgive those who've offended *you*. God promises to deal w/it in *His* time & in *His* way. You don't have to carry it, vengeance is the Lord's & He *will* repay. You're free to trust in the Lord & lead your life for His glory.

Vs 8-9

Can I just say that this is an *illustration*, not a *recommendation* or even an *exhortation* 😊. Jesus isn't teaching self mutilation (cutting of your hand or gouging out your eye physically). He's using hyperbole. If you cut off your hand you still have your other one. Gouge out an eye you still have the other. Take them both & you still sin in your mind, the problem isn't w/the body (He's already taught that) it's in the heart! Transformation takes place, not from the outside in, but from the inside out.

When He starts speaking of “cutting things off” He’s teaching us to deal radically, drastically, completely & mercilessly w/that which leads us to sin... Don’t play w/it, don’t coddle it, crucify it, cut it off! Like a surgeon w/a cancerous growth. We’re not to hang on to our sin, we’re to confess & forsake our sin. **Some people will refrain from sinning if it’s convenient or something simple for them to do. But Jesus is saying, “Hey, you’ve got to be willing to sacrifice in the fight against sin! Better to sacrifice now than to face judgment later!”**

Billy Sunday once said that one reason sin flourishes is that it’s treated like a cream puff instead of a rattlesnake! We’re to safeguard holiness in our lives. Jesus mentions the hand (what we do), the foot (where we go) & the eye (what we see). We’re to honor God w/the totality of our lives.

The world indulges in the things that you’re to cut off & separate yourself from. But better to crucify your flesh & look like you’re really “missing out” for your spiritual discipline, than to indulge your flesh now & be cast into “everlasting fire.” This world’s not your home, you don’t live for this world. Your reward is to come. Better to sacrifice temporarily (no matter how drastically) than to perish eternally.

Vs 10-11

Again, **physical children, children of God, don’t look down on them, don’t *despise* them, it’s an offense to God, they’re of great *value* to God. So much so that He sent J.C. to lay down His life on our behalf, so if they’re of value to God, they’re of value to us.**

Now, do we have “guardian angels”? It would seem that angels watch over us, I’m not sure that we’re assigned a particular angel, but Jesus mentions “angels” here watching over children (& children of God). You might write down, Ps 34:7, 91:11, Heb 1:13-14

Vs 11-14

Now it’s common to apply this parable to seeking after sinning or straying saints (& that’s fine). More *specifically* Jesus is hammering home the *value* that God places on His children *individually* (all of them).

Jesus is speaking to the love of God for His own. He shows us it’s an absolutely *unconditional love*, staying or straying God loves you. He didn’t say, “That stupid sheep, maybe he’ll learn his lesson out there.” **No, his love was independent of the obedience rendered by the sheep... Nothing can separate you from the love of God. Oh there are ramifications that come as consequences to our decisions... But God loves you regardless.**

2ndly His love was *individual*. He didn’t say, “Ah it’s just 1, I got 99 more here.”

He loved the one that was straying just as much as all those who were staying. God sees you individually, He loves you personally. & Should you stray He's faithful to seek you diligently.

Finally, (God's love is unconditional, it's individual) it's also *emotional*. We're prone to wander, He's prone to seek us, & when He finds us He doesn't lecture us, beat us, shake us or skin us... He rejoices over us. My son, My daughter was lost, but now they're found.

Why does God rejoice when He returns the sheep that was straying to the flock? (Vs 14) because it's not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish...

After all (Vs 11), that's why Jesus came. To save that which is lost. Are you glad that Jesus came to save that which was lost? I'm so glad...

Now that you know the Lord, walk in *humility*, don't lead a life that causes others to stumble nor presume upon yourself some sinful *liberty* (we're not free *to* sin, we're free *from* sin, cut it off), & value each individual in the body of Christ *personally*, esteeming others as better than yourself & you will be great in the kingdom of heaven...

Prayer points:

Lord may we learn the lesson of Your word today. That we not be mindful of ourselves but mindful of others. Esteeming others, receiving others & serving others to the glory of your name. Help us to crucify our flesh, to cut off those areas of sin in our lives & to honor You completely, wholeheartedly. & Jesus we thank You for seeking us out & saving us, laying down your life for us, now may we lead our lives for You. Use us this year in a way that leads others & brings glory to You. Magnify Your grace in this place.

Jesus came to save that which was lost. Perhaps today that applies to you, Jesus is seeking you & you've been trying to hide from Him, but today there's no hiding. God loves you, Christ died for you, He longs to forgive you, give your life to J.C. & leave here different than when you came, new life can be yours, believe on the Lord J.C.