

Introduction

Mohammed Ali was born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky. He began training in amateur boxing at the age of 12. In 1960 at the age of 18, Ali won a gold medal in boxing at the Summer Olympics. The next year he turned pro and went on to become one of the most celebrated boxers of all time. Following his death in June 2016, the city of Louisville stood still for a parade that went from one side of the city to the other. At his birth Ali was given the name Cassius Clay. He changed it to Mohammed Ali when he embraced Islam. But many people know him by his nickname, "The Greatest." That is what he said about himself and that is what a lot of others said about him. But who really is the greatest? And what is it that constitutes true greatness? Those questions were swirling in the minds of the disciples of Jesus. This morning we see where they brought their question to him.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

The world has its definitions of greatness. We have halls of fame for just about every category of endeavor. On most levels greatness relates to achievement. Who has done the most? Who has performed the best? But how is greatness measured and defined by the ultimate authority? How does God measure and define greatness? This question is really important. There is a desire for greatness that runs through most of us. Competition, the desire and will to win, drive us in sports, games, commerce, and business. You even see it in the church. So what does the Lord think? How does Jesus define greatness? We are on that this morning.

The theme of this text is greatness in the kingdom of heaven, which is to say greatness in the greatest sense. Greatness is what the disciples came asking Jesus about. They were confused and so Jesus clarified.

So, then I want you to consider . . .

I. The Disciples' Confusion

A. Leading up to the question the disciples set before Jesus in this text, some enormously important events had transpired. Jesus fed massive numbers of folks with but puny resources. Peter confessed that Jesus is the

Christ the Son of the Living God. Then there was the transfiguration wherein the divine glory of Jesus was made manifest. He healed a boy with a demon. And then he made a miraculous provision for Peter to pay the temple tax for both himself and Peter. Anticipation of the advent of the kingdom of heaven was at a high pitch.

We have seen that the disciples were still expecting a strong and mighty Messiah who would valiantly take power and rule forcibly on earth right then. They were oblivious to the statements of Jesus in which he was indicating he would die. And as these disciples looked toward an earthly reign of Jesus, they were much in thought of the roles each would play. And each one was imagining himself to have a prominent and celebrated position. Luke reports that they were arguing over which of them was the greatest. So, clearly what was captivating their hearts was greatness according to the standpoint of the world. They were jealous and envious of one another and in competition with one another, each one wanting to be recognized and celebrated over the others. They were greatly confused about true greatness.

B. The engine driving the actions of the disciples was selfish ambition. Each one was concerned about his own claim in the future kingdom. How would they be honored, magnified, rewarded? The result was envy and jealousy and strife. They were far from what the Lord wants in his people.

James, in his epistle, recognizes how damaging it is when selfish ambition sets in. He wrote, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy with God." A few verses before these James had explained that where you find bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, you find what "is not from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic." And the result is disorder and every vile practice.

Self-seeking is people setting their eyes on themselves—their wants, comforts, recognition, their glory. That is the essence of what the devil is all about. He could not even stand being lower than God.

C. So the disciples were confused. They had a lot to learn. We do as well. We must recognize that the way of the world is not the way of God. Such a recognition is painful. It shows us there are things in us that are reprehensible to God and that are destructive to his family, our own brothers and sisters in the Lord. This was the problem in Corinth as different groups aligned themselves with different teachers and drew lines of competition. They were divided and weak and a poor testimony. Selfish ambition is an enemy to all our relationships. We need to flee from it. We need to heed the instruction Jesus gave to clear up this confusion.

So, let's look next at . . .

II. The Messiah's Clarification

A. Object lessons can be highly effective. Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words. If you are putting together a jigsaw puzzle, you rely on the photograph on the box. Can you imagine how difficult it would be if you did not have it? So Jesus meets the confusion of the disciples head-on with an image, a picture, an object lesson on greatness.

He called to him a child. Perhaps they were at Peter's house and a nephew or a grandchild was outside playing. Jesus calls the child over to him, and he says, "Men, here is the image of greatness in the kingdom of God."

How this image would have conflicted with the images in the minds of the disciples! They were thinking like we are prone to do, of skill and achievement and guts and resiliency and independence. They had their minds on crowns and places of honor and power. Jesus gives them the opposite image. The word here is of a young child. It could even refer to an infant. Clearly we do not have an infant here because Jesus was able to call the child over to him. Nevertheless it would have been a young child perhaps about the age of my grandson.

Titus is almost 17 months now. My how the time flies. He is walking. He is exploring. And he is always wanting to share what he finds. His identity is

tied up in relating to others. He is still very dependent. He depends on others for his food and for protection. He still does not know what to be afraid of. When he gets hurt, he wants to be held and comforted. When he is tired he wants to be held. Whenever there is something he desires, he has to get someone's attention to get it for him. He makes noises and sounds, but his speech is limited to ma-ma and da-da and ball. He depends on others to notice when his diaper needs changing. He has to be dressed in his jammies and taken to bed when it is time. Here is the image Jesus placed before the disciples.

B. Jesus responds to their question with an answer they had not expected. He answers a question they had not asked. There is a matter whose importance must precede any question of greatness in the kingdom. That is the matter of getting into the kingdom. Jesus brings the child into their midst and he says, "Truly I say to you" (here is a fact you must not overlook; it must not take you by surprise). "Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

The disciples want to know who is the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus says, "wait just a minute. What your question says about you raises concern about whether you will even BE in the kingdom of heaven. Let's talk entrance before we get to elevation." And he uses this word, UNLESS. The word, unless, sets forth a condition that must be fulfilled if the desired result is to take place. You will not get a paycheck unless you show up for work. Your house will deteriorate unless you keep it up.

Jesus told Nicodemus, "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." And here Jesus tells his disciples, "unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." No one should jump the gun and assume they are in the kingdom. No one should take for granted they are in the kingdom of heaven. People must ENTER the kingdom to be great in the kingdom. No one starts their life out in the kingdom. To BE IN, you have to GET IN. To possess greatness IN the kingdom, you must gain entrance TO the kingdom.

I sometimes hear people say "I have always been a Christian" or "I was born a Christian." I always become concerned when I hear statements like

these because it would seem they assume that at birth you are in the kingdom unless you do something to get you thrown out. Or they are assuming because their parents were Christians that they are also Christians, again unless they somehow get thrown out. These notions are greatly mistaken. No one is born on the inside of the kingdom of heaven. No one is born a Christian. What Jesus says here is a warning against all such assumptions. People are dead in sin. People are born outside the kingdom. They are born with a nature that calls forth not the favor but the wrath of God upon them.

In order to become a Christian, one must be reborn; one must turn; one must pass into the kingdom of heaven. To be in, you must want to get in; you must seek it; and you must find it. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus depicted the kingdom as having a gate. It has an entry point. To get into the kingdom you must enter by that gate. And here, as Jesus engages the disciples on the matter of greatness in the kingdom, he shows them the gate. Here is where you get in. He depicts for them how to enter the kingdom. "You must turn and become like children."

Here are two ideas which go together, but we need to look at them one at a time. First, says Jesus, you must turn. The insinuation is that you are headed in the wrong direction. You must turn. You are not who you need to be; you need to change. The idea is of an about face. It is akin to the word repent. Peter spoke this way as he preached in the temple. He said, "Repent . . . and turn back that your sins may be blotted out." The beginning of the gospel is a call to repent and to turn. You cannot continue to be who you are by birth and live the way you have always lived if you want to enter the kingdom. You cannot continue to define greatness the way the world defines greatness if you would come into the kingdom of heaven.

If you imagine yourself to be saved from your sin, if you imagine yourself to be in the kingdom of heaven, but you have not been turned around in your heart and life, you have not yet come in. Do not be deceived. Those who come in have been transferred from darkness to light. Their pursuits and heart desires change. They have turned from sin to pursue Christ and obedience to him.

And there is another idea here. Jesus says you have to “turn and become like children,” to enter. A child when in danger runs to the one who will protect him. When hurt, he runs to a big person for comfort. When weak and tired and asleep, he rests his whole self in the arms of his mother or father or Granddad. A child also has implicit faith. He just believes what he is told. He does not yet think he knows more than his parents. He thinks his mother and father know everything. Whatever they say must be true. A child has a certain humility. Jesus draws attention to it. Children of this young age do not seek greatness. They are dependent, and they make the most of it.

It seems the disciples had forgotten the sermon Jesus preached on the mount. “Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek.” There is an awareness of possessing nothing to bring to God but need. And there is a trust in Him to take care of it.

So, what Jesus is saying about the entrance into the kingdom of heaven is the gospel message. You do not enter the kingdom of heaven by trying to be great, to be something in yourself. If you think you have some greatness to offer God, you are reprehensible to him. You will never get in. But if you turn from your defiance and if you turn from your natural ways and you turn from your pursuit of greatness and if you will trust him like a little child, then the gate will surely open for you to come in.

One of my favorite moments as a grandparent is when Titus pulls up at my legs and reaches those little hands up in the air. Oh what a joy it is to reach down to Titus, hands raised up and pull him up in my arms and hold him close. The Lord delights to do the same to those who come to him. This is how he welcomes children into his kingdom. We have nothing to bring him but our needs. We are not great but he is. We are unrighteous but he is righteous. We are needy; he is the supplier. We deserve his wrath, but he gives mercy to those who will come to him like this.

C. At last, Jesus answers the question the disciples had presented to him initially. Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Says Jesus, “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Here is the measure of true greatness. Here is what heaven

celebrates. Humility. It is the opposite of looking for position, for recognition, for reward. The person who is characterized by humility is not in it for themselves, not for what they can gain. They cede the fact that they are unworthy. They do not compete for advantage. They yield their privilege for the good of another. A humble heart is a servant-minded heart. He or she is not asking "what is in it for me?" but "how does it affect others?"

I have noticed a lot of self-centered thinking surrounding the current situation. Persons have argued with the order to stay at home because, they said, "I am not afraid." There may be some good arguments against the stay-at-home order, but "I am not afraid" is a self-centered one. What about others? What about their situation? A real question to be asking now is what about these whose jobs have been lost? What about these who are struggling to feed their families?

We are going to see as we move forward in Matthew 18 that the entire chapter is concerned with the people of God as his children. We are all weak, immature, dependent, and prone to wander. And this chapter deals with how fellow children are to interact with one another as children. Humility is key. Peter and the other disciples were in need of Jesus' instruction here. They needed it and they got it, and the lesson stuck with them. As we saw last week, Peter's entire first epistle is consumed with humility. A humble spirit is a spirit that is subject-citizens to government, servants to masters, wives to husbands, husbands to God in respect of their wives, and each child of God to the other. Listen, "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind." And what does that look like? Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called" (1 Peter 3:8-9).

Humility is willing to suffer for doing good. Humility loves earnestly, shows hospitality, does not grumble, uses its gifts to bless others to the glory of God. In the church there is a humility with which everyone clothes themselves. The elders are to be eminently humble. They are to exercise oversight but not in a domineering manner. Rather they are to be examples to the flock. Here is greatness in the kingdom of heaven.

Greatness in the kingdom of heaven is what can make it a pleasure to live in relationships here on the earth. Just think if husbands and wives would embrace kingdom greatness, their relationships would be conflict-free. They would not live in competition except the competition to outdo one another in love and honor and serving. Their love would be an inspiration to everyone who observes. Serving God for his glory, their joy would flow far more abundantly than living for recognition for themselves.

I was watching the NFL draft the other night. I like hearing the stories of the young men who were selected. The story of one of them really stood out. The reporter referenced the Good Samaritan to describe the Dad. He was a true inspiration and example to the son who was now being drafted. The dad stopped one night to assist a stranded motorist. In the act of changing a tire, another motorist ran into him and killed him. That father's example had inspired his son to give his all. Tragic as it was this is an example of humility—serving others at the risk of cost to oneself.

D. The supreme example of this greatness is Jesus himself. As I read the question being asked by the disciples, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom?" I want to scream out to them, "you are looking at him! Jesus is the greatest in the kingdom!" The greatness of Jesus is indeed that he is the living God. But Jesus took the greatness of God to its full level by humbling himself! He emptied himself by taking the form of a servant and being obedient to the point of death on the cross. And how heaven celebrates! Therefore God has highly exalted him and given him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Conclusion

The world celebrates power, achievement, chest-beating. It disregards the humble. But not heaven. The kingdom of heaven rejoices over those who seek the glory of God and who do so at expense to themselves. They are not looking for accolades; they are looking for praise and glory to go to the one who truly is the greatest without any rival. The servant of all—Jesus. Turning and humbling oneself before God is how one gets in and it is how those who get in become great in the kingdom of heaven.