

True Greatness

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Matthew 18:1-5

Sermon Series: The
Kingdom of God

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Election years are an interesting phenomenon. We hear candidates telling us why they are the best choice to be president of the United States and why other candidates are not. But it's not only politics. Next week is the Super Bowl, and so we will see which team is the greatest, at least for this season or that particular day. In business, there's the Fortune 500 telling us who is the richest, and Time magazine publishes its person of the year. We live in a culture where the question of who is the greatest and what makes him or her so is grappled with in many and varied ways. The ambition to achieve greatness is a pursuit central to human accomplishment, which in and of itself isn't bad. We are not so different from those in Jesus' day. Even Jesus' followers wanted to know who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

The fact that the question was even asked not only shows us their humanness but also reflects they were still developing an understanding about what it meant to be Jesus' disciple, which was different from other forms of discipleship within Judaism and even the wider ancient world. Discipleship often involved a significant commitment to a rigorous course of study and disciplined lifestyle in order to attain to the master's level

of expertise. The truth is, they had all sacrificed significantly to follow Jesus for several years; they were serious about their discipleship. They wanted to attain the highest level of commitment to Jesus' kingdom agenda. That's why they asked the question.

But it's apparent that the disciples had a different type of greatness in mind from what Jesus' meant. Their idea of greatness came from human endeavor and heroic accomplishments. They wanted to find out what they must learn or what they must do to be greatest in the kingdom of God. But Jesus made clear what true greatness is by calling a child and having him stand among them. Then he made a startling statement: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

The reason Jesus used a little child as an object lesson is not because children are innocent but because they are innately humble—that is, they are completely vulnerable. It's worth noting that children were viewed quite differently from our day and age. They were powerless in society and had no rights or significance apart from their future value. In time, they would enhance the workforce, add to the defensive

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power, and guarantee the future glory of the family and society at large. Children were neither seen nor heard. They truly were vulnerable because they could do nothing to advance their own cause apart from the help and resources of a parent.

What's surprising is that Jesus celebrated this kind of humility, vulnerability and weakness. The visual aid of the child helped Jesus contrast the world's greatness to true greatness in the kingdom of God. And this is no small thing. As adults, we get used to the idea that it's all up to us. We have to make things happen. We learn the ways of human striving to accomplish and achieve status, significance and success. But Jesus made it clear that the kingdom of God is all about grace.

Those who wish to enter the kingdom of God must turn away from their own power and self-sufficiency and, in childlike humility, call on God's mercy to allow them to enter the kingdom of heaven. That's why childlikeness is the metaphor Jesus chose to use as the desired characteristic of all true disciples. All of us are completely dependent on our heavenly parent to forgive us our sins and to give us life in His kingdom. That's good news to those who are aware that they can't accomplish what is needed by their own efforts. But it may be challenging or even troubling news for those of us who think we're doing a pretty good job of holding it all together.

I want to talk about and reflect with you for a few minutes on the

nature of this change Jesus is calling us to. How it happens as well as how we can participate, and the result.

There is an explicit call to change in this passage. Jesus says, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God." Remember that Jesus is speaking to those who are already following him, but at this point in his ministry, he seeks to clarify what it means to be his disciples. Some have undoubtedly attached themselves to him while holding on to their own agendas. Judas, of course, is the primary example of this. He and others didn't truly understand Jesus' identity and mission. Jesus wants his disciples to check themselves to see if they truly believe. Even though they may already be his disciples in that they are following him, they still must repent, be converted and enter the kingdom of heaven. We are all called to live in dependency on God and His grace.

Jesus recognizes the depths of our depravity. It is not merely our human nature that seeks to arrange our lives to be independent and self-sufficient. It's our sinful nature that seeks to go our own way, to care for ourselves, to build up for ourselves a life apart from God and His grace.

This is a very important word for all Christians in our Western culture, and especially for us who are involved at VPC and live in Northern Virginia where power, prestige, and prosperity are so prevalent. Don't misunderstand me. We are blessed, and we can and should give thanks for our blessings. But we must also beware, because what we have can

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be a stumbling block for living in the kingdom of God and for receiving His love and grace.

The contrasting gospel account to this passage is the story of the rich young man in Matthew 19, who comes to Jesus asking what he must do to get eternal life. Jesus tells him, you know the commands. The man asserts that he has kept the commands. When Jesus says, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then, come follow me," Matthew says he went away sad because he had great wealth. As long as there was something he could do in the way of accomplishment, the young man was willing and ready to follow Jesus but when he was invited to give everything away and become vulnerable and humble, he resisted that and went away sad. Jesus said it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. But all things are possible with God.

Jesus didn't say it was bad to be rich. And he didn't say it was bad to do or achieve good. What Jesus did say is that it is difficult for rich people and over-achievers to be humble. It's difficult for people who have so much and who can do so much to recognize their need for God and to receive God's love and rely solely on His grace. And here's the tricky part. We can't really change ourselves. We can only change as we receive God's love and grace—but how does that happen?

Listen to what spiritual director and psychologist David Benner says in his book *Surrender to Love*: "Genuine transformation requires vulnerability. It is not the fact of being loved unconditionally that is life-changing. It is the risky experience of allowing myself to be loved unconditionally...Daring to accept myself and receive love for who I am in my nakedness and vulnerability is the indispensable precondition to genuine transformation. But make no mistake about just how difficult this is. Everything with me wants to show my best 'pretend self' to both other people and God. This is my false self—the self of my own making. This self can never be transformed, because it is never willing to receive love in vulnerability. When this pretend self receives love, it simply becomes stronger and I am even more deeply in bondage to my false ways of living."

The rich young ruler was unwilling to risk vulnerability to be loved by God. But it's not just his problem. We all have this problem. We have an instinctual tendency to attempt to get our act together before we receive love. But Jesus did not come to encourage self-improvement schemes. As long as we maintain our human striving, we will try to manipulate God to accept us on our terms, because it is absolutely terrifying to face how vulnerable and needy we really are. Many of us don't experience the love of God because we dare not accept it unconditionally. It's just too risky to face how vulnerable we really are.

Contemplative prayer is a way of waiting with a heart awake to the presence of God and His word, and trusting who He is and receiving His love for us.

Henri Nouwen declares in his book *In the Name of Jesus*, "...I am deeply convinced that the Christian is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self. That is the way Jesus came to reveal God's love. The great message that we have to carry, as ministers of God's word and followers of Jesus, is that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life."

Sometimes circumstances beyond our control thrust us into the place of vulnerability. Kelly Gould shared about her own experience of being pruned or thrust into the wilderness and how she was learning about her true identity as a child of God.

There are circumstances we don't choose and can't control. But there are ways and practices we can choose. Edward Demming, the father of total quality management, is famous for saying, "Don't just do something; stand there." We can choose to stop our doing, our striving, to simply be in the presence of God and to experience His love. Henri Nouwen and others assert that the way we become a person whose identity is deeply rooted in God's love is to practice contemplative prayer. This is the discipline of dwelling in the presence of the One who keeps saying I love you. This is the spiritual practice that keeps us from being pulled into the

continual temptations to do. It keeps us close to the heart of God and centered in who we are rather than running from one urgent issue to another.

What is contemplative prayer? We often associate prayer with the words we say, but contemplative prayer is a way of being with God that does not depend on giving Him information about what we would like done in the world at large. Just as friends can enjoy one another without conversing, contemplative prayer is a way of being with God without wordiness. Contemplative prayer is a way of waiting with a heart awake to the presence of God and His word, and trusting who He is and receiving His love for us. It is through contemplative prayer that we move from merely knowing intellectually to knowing experientially the love of God.

It is a key practice in becoming humble like a child. It's been very helpful to me, because I am a perfectionist and hyper-responsible person. I need to stop trying to do too much and to do it just right, and simply be in the presence of God and allow His love to flow over me. The past few weeks have been so busy that my normal rhythms of devotion have been interrupted. But I feel the tension in my body and in my inner being, and I see the results in my reactions to people and circumstances. I know I need to stop all my doing and practice this discipline of being. I need to experience God's love and acceptance of me apart from my roles and responsibilities.

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As we experience the love and grace of God ourselves, the result will be an effect on the relationships and community we share with others. Our human insecurities often result in striving and achievement and often create a sense of competition and a spirit of comparison with others.

I know something about comparisons and competition because I'm a twin. When we were younger, I always wished I was more like my sister, because she's naturally outgoing, positive and encouraging, and the kind of person people naturally are attracted to. We were both competitive, not so much with each other—at least not directly—but with everyone else. We strove to be at the top of our class, to be the best on our team, to be officers of clubs, and...well you get the picture.

Growing in my relationship with God and understanding grace had a tremendous impact not only on me but also on my relationships with others. As I grew in my understanding of my value to God and uniqueness in his community, I was able to let go of my compulsion to compare myself to others and compete for attention or prominence.

If we, as individuals, receive life as a gift of the kingdom of heaven and can relax in God's love, it means we can give up aggressively pursuing our own status and success by our own efforts. As we find our identity and worth and purpose in belonging to God and being His followers, we will also see that we are integrally

related to others through this community that we belong to. We not only belong to God but to each other. That is what we affirm every time someone is baptized. We are part of the same family, equal brothers and sisters of Jesus with the same Father. As we give up comparing and competing against others, we can experience genuine love and give love to others based on who they are in Christ and not what they do. This is a radical shift from the world's mindset to a kingdom value.

The love and acceptance we receive from God and share in community will spill over as we care for those who are most vulnerable. Did you catch what Jesus said in verse 5? "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." We are called to welcome, care for and protect others, especially the most vulnerable. Who are the humble? Who are the most vulnerable?

Certainly this does include children. I have to confess that I am concerned about what our children are learning about God, about the kingdom, about life. Don't misunderstand me, I think they are receiving great teaching here at the church. What I'm concerned about are the messages they are receiving from life that we are modeling as adults. Do the beliefs and attitudes we have, the words we speak and the lifestyle we live convey and communicate kingdom values? Does our model make it abundantly clear that life itself and our salvation is a gift of God's grace? Are our children learning that they are loved and valued because they belong to God and belong to us? Or are we

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somehow conveying, like the rest of the culture, that what matters is what you know, or who you know, or what you have, or what you do? Children are vulnerable, and they are indelibly shaped by the messages they receive explicitly or implicitly, and I am concerned—not only as a pastor but as a parent of young children myself—about what we are communicating about God and His kingdom.

And our concern and compassion goes beyond our own children. There are many in our church right now who are going through a difficult time of brokenness. I appreciate Kelly sharing her own journey in this regard. There are many, even in this room, grieving at the death of loved ones, struggling with life-crippling illnesses, dealing with the devastation of divorce, wrestling with disappointments or fears of various kinds. These experiences bring a kind of vulnerability we don't want and don't ask for, but they can be transforming moments in drawing us deeper into the love of God and reliance on His grace. And it's important to love and support and come alongside those who are in this very vulnerable state.

There is meant to be concern and compassion for those who are weaker to extend beyond our church, as well. Not everyone who lives in Northern Virginia has all the opportunities and resources available that many of us have. And I'm thankful for Bonnie Grouge and Doris Cooper and the army of volunteers who lead our ESOL program and welcome those

who want and need to learn English as a second language. But the call to us individually and as a church is to go beyond welcoming them into our building and welcome them into our community and into our lives. The call is to love them and journey alongside them as friends.

There are so many other examples of how we can extend the unconditional love and grace of God to others in our church, community and around the world. What this passage makes clear is that Jesus calls us to change—to become humble like a child to enter the kingdom. It is not an easy call to leave behind our self-sufficiency and rely solely on God's grace. The only way we will risk this kind of naked vulnerability is if we grow in our experience of God's love for us. The way to experientially knowing is through contemplative prayer. The result will be a community where competition and comparison are obsolete and concern and compassion for the least of these abound. This is the way to true greatness in the kingdom of God. May it be true of us individually and collectively.

