

Introduction:

- A. As Matthew puts it, it seems like a simple, sincere, straightforward question. “*At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’*” Mt.18:1. But that question has been slimed. It was dripping with gooey self-importance. And the disciples who asked it, according to both Mark and Luke, had fought over who was greatest. However this question was asked, of this I’m sure: they were politicking for position. Turn to **Matt 18**. I preached on this text a few years ago and it has turned into a nag—frequently nagging me about how big I am so in this series about our Christian identity I thought it good to start with this.
- B. “*Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*” It’s a dangerous question, but it is not a bad question. After all, do you think God wants us to be mediocre, just *so-so*, in his kingdom? Isn’t it right for us to want to hear the Lord say, “*Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your reward*”? A church where no one cares whether they amount to anything in God’s kingdom is a sick and dying church.
- C. You and I had better desire to be great in God’s kingdom!
So let’s turn to **Matt 18:1-4...**

I. THE ONLY WAY TO BE GREAT IN GOD’S KINGDOM IS TO CHANGE INTO SMALL PEOPLE (18:1-5)

- A. That child there by Jesus could have been any boy or girl.
Given the question hanging heavy in the air—“*who’s the greatest?*”—that child there by Jesus would have been as out of place as a child at a Trump rally. In fact, on another occasion like this, Jesus’ disciples tried to shoo the kids away. The only reason that child stayed put was that Jesus was there, too. Jesus makes children feel safe. He makes children *of all ages* feel safe. Little people have no better friend than Jesus!
- B. This story is very much like Jesus’ parables. There is what meets the eye, and then there is a greater meaning—the

kingdom secret that you have to look for. This little story is about children, right? Yes it *is* about children. Children are a treasure to Jesus. He has time for them and blesses them, and so should we. But if you *only* see the child, you'll miss the main point.

Look again at **v.3**, “*unless you change and become like little children.*” **V.4**: “*whoever takes the lowly position of this child.*” **V.6**: “*If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble...*” Like me, you may have thought this spoke of little children who believe in Jesus, but the sense is that “*those who believe in Jesus*” speaks of *all* who believe, of any age. They are “*these little ones.*” **You and I are “these little ones.”**

Jesus explicitly spoke of his disciples as little children earlier in **Matt 11:25**, “*At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.’*” He means his adult followers who have become *like* little children. John says that at the last supper Jesus told his disciples, “**My children, I will be with you only a little longer.**”

When Jesus here in Matthew talks about the value of children, and the need to protect them, he means children, but he also means more than children. He is talking about all who wish to be his disciples. **We must all become like children. The only good kind of church is children’s church.**

- C. Did you notice that Jesus doesn’t actually answer the question of who is the greatest? **V.3**, “*Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*” First things first! Before you think about greatness, you’d better be sure you are in! Remember how Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “*small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*” You have to be small enough to find it! **It is a kingdom for child-sized people.**

Illus.: There’s a park near us with one of those huge wooden playgrounds for kids with all kinds of things to

climb on, towers and tunnels, swinging bridges and fortress walls, airplanes and trains. Did you ever play with your kids at one of those parks? How was it? What was hardest about it? *Getting small enough!* Being big in that kingdom is a distinct liability. That's how it is in the kingdom of heaven. Small people—lowly, humble people —have all the advantages. They're the only ones at home there.

II. TO CHANGE WE HAVE TO GET LOW

- A. The key for you and me is there in **v.3**, "*Unless you **change** and become like little children.*" No one, but no one, comes into God's kingdom unless we've **changed** to become as **lowly** as a **child**. Jesus wasn't really thinking about a child's innocence, simplicity, inquisitiveness, or free spirit. It was simply their smallness—their *lowliness*. **The thing about children is that they are little.**
- B. According to Matthew, Jesus spent a good deal of time teaching us the difficult lessons of getting little. Our main instruction came from the **Beatitudes** in **Matt 5**. Jesus requires a certain *kind* of smallness, and we only get it if we change.
- C. Let's change the metaphor for a few minutes. Illus.: Did you ever see the movie, *Get Low*? It's based on a true story about this old hermit named **Felix Bush**. He lives out in the Tennessee hills and people are scared of him. Heard stories about him. Then one day he drives his buckboard into town and heads to the little church. He walks in and the pastor is there. Bush sits uneasily in a pew and Pastor Horton, nervous himself because of the stories he's heard, perches across from him on another pew. "*What's on your mind, sir?*" the pastor asks.
- "'Bout time for me to get low,"* says Bush.
- "Get what?"*
- "Down to business."* And Bush reaches into his overalls a drops a balled-up wad of money on the pew.
- "Need a funeral,"* he says.
- The pastor looks up from the money. "*For who?*"
- "Me."*

What we find out is that Mr. Bush wants his funeral *before* he dies because he needs to square accounts. So *before* he dies, he wants to *get low*—perhaps to get the hard part of dying taken care of. Jesus said, “*If anyone would come after me they must **take up their cross and follow me.***” They must **get low**.

- D. The first sermon recorded in the NT was preached by John the Baptist. Matt 3:1-2, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*” Then Jesus came preaching exactly the same sermon, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*” Point #1: Repent. Point #2: For the kingdom of heaven has come near. *Get low to get blessed.*
- E. To get low in repentance is a kind of dying. To be born again as a little child you have to die. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus told us what a newborn disciple-child is like. Turn to **Matt 5:3-10**, the Beatitudes. These statements don’t describe eight different kinds of people. They describe eight characteristics of a lowly, repentant heart.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Repentance is admitting our inward poverty; that “nothing in my hand I bring.” It is us sitting on God’s corner with a cardboard sign, a cup, and a sign pleading, “*Grace please.*”

*Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.*

Repentance is sad. To get low we face our pride and our sins with slumped shoulders, a shaking head and sighs. “*What a fool I’ve been! I am so, so sorry.*”

*Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.*

Who am I to put myself above others when Jesus took on the very nature of a servant. I am only a sinner saved by grace. I’m a glad captive of Christ, humbled by the honor.

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for
righteousness, for they will be filled.*

I’m so weary of sin, so weary of my foolishness! I ache to be righteous, to be like Jesus, to be good.

*Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.*

How can I withhold forgiveness from others when Jesus has forgiven all my sins? I will give mercy whether people ask for it or not because then I will be like my Father in heaven.

*Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.*

My heart has been a pigpen, a slum, a back alley, and with Jesus' help I'll haul out the filth and junk, quiet the racket and bring in light so that I can see God. And live in a glass house.

*Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.*

I've stirred up so many quarrels and conflicts trying to satisfy my own ego, to get what I want, and I will try to stop it. I will let Jesus reign in me so his peace might come to my relationships.

*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of
righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

If I am attacked for wanting to be righteous, for belonging to Christ, (and what an honor that would be), I'll accept it as God's blessing.

- F. Change to become *that* kind of small; low like that. Can you see the dying necessary to be like that? And if we have the common sense to realize that we cannot get that small, then we will know why we need Jesus. **In the vast gap between getting low and getting blessed stands our Savior Jesus Christ.** Jesus, in his great grace, makes us small enough to enter the kingdom of heaven. **The real miracle of our salvation is not that Jesus makes us great, but that he makes us so blessedly small!**

So Jesus said in **Matt 18:4**, *"Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."* One reason it is so great to have little kids around a church is that they're our models, our exemplars, our ideals. *"When I grow up I want to be little like you!"*

III. ALL THE GREAT BLESSINGS OF OUR SALVATION COME FROM GETTING SMALL

- A. Mark 9 tells how people brought their children to Jesus to be blessed and, despite his disciples' efforts to shoo them away, Mark writes, "*And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and **blessed** them.*" **That's what we want—Jesus to bless us, too!**

The Beatitudes pile the gracious, undeserved blessings of God on the repentant, "*theirs is the kingdom of heaven... they will be comforted... they will inherit the earth...they will be filled... they will be shown mercy... they will see God... they will be called children of God.*"

- B. Our identity as followers of Jesus Christ is completely different from all other people in these two ways:
1. We want to get smaller. It takes some serious dying, no doubt about that, but what wonders await the small!
"What's on your mind, sir?" the pastor asked.
And the weary, lonely man replied "*Bout time for me to get low.*"
 2. The other unique part of our Christian identity is we know we're *blessed* to be the *children* of God. **Children** of God. His little ones. The *little people of God.*

It is a God-given relief to be small, you know. Oh, it's rough to downsize our hearts and deflate our overblown egos. Often, it only happens because our heavenly Father *makes* it happen, humbling us, 'littling' us, reducing us. It's a lot easier for children to be small because it's all they know. Once you get big and have influence and accomplishments, once you've battled for respect and recognition, once you're *somebody* it can be brutal business to get small, but is it such a God-given relief, a gospel blessing, a great grace.

And at that small size, the gates of God's kingdom stand open to us. All the blessings of God fit in our hearts. We maneuver easily through life in God's kingdom. We're just the right size to love others well. And it is so much easier to rest in the Lord when you're small.

*Children of the heavenly Father,
Safely in his bosom gather,
Nestling bird nor star in heaven
Such a refuge e'er was given.*

Conclusion

It would be a shame, a waste, a sin, if you did not want to be great in the kingdom of heaven. But the secret is this: **To be great, get small**. Matt 18:4, “*Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*” You can be the greatest. And you can be the greatest. And you can be the greatest.

Illus.: Three years ago on Easter Sunday, during the preaching time, our children had their own special time. One of their teachers had an object lesson that depicted Jesus’ death and resurrection. The big moment came when a certain kind of teabag is ignited with a flame, and it shoots up into the air and then vanishes. Just at that moment Widia Viti took a picture.



See those kids. Be like that. Look at Jesus like that. Be great like that.