

Text:

Matthew 18.1-14

Big Picture:

Chapter 18 of the Gospel of Matthew lists several stories that help us understand how we should live with one another. Using the example of a child, Jesus explains what it means to be not the greatest in the kingdom, but a member of the kingdom.

Preparing for the Lesson:

It seems to me that asking the question “Who is the greatest?” is a common occurrence in just about any situation. Just ask a sports fan who is better, LeBron or Jordon and see if you do not get impassioned responses. At times, our questions are an attempt to better ourselves—improve our craft, if you will—but in the kingdom, such hierarchal focus misses the point of following Jesus.

The disciples’ question makes sense when you consider it comes on the heels of Jesus’ comments that the children of the king are not the ones from whom he collects taxes (17.24-27). If the disciples saw themselves as “sons” of Jesus, the new king, then their assessment of their place in the kingdom is expected.

Jesus, however, points to a greater reality. The focus of kingdom living is not on the greatest, but on those who have humbled themselves. Notice that Jesus says two things about the child he places among the disciples. First, we should take the lowly position of a child. Remember that the status of a child in Jesus’ day was non-existent. (I was reminded of this every year about this time when the extended family would gather for holidays and the kids would eat at a table in the other room. Every year there was some sort of joke about children being seen, not heard or perhaps out of sight and out of mind. Although these comments were simply a part of our family lore, they perhaps are not far from the truth of Jesus’ day.) So for Jesus to say we should be like that child was to take the position of the one “out of sight and out of mind.”

But Jesus also says that whoever welcomes a child welcomes him. Jesus’ point in this passage is not simply for all of his followers to humble ourselves, but perhaps more important: we all recognize and look out for those who do humble themselves. One is reminded of the prophets who were often recorded as admonishing the people to remember the “fatherless, the widow, and the alien (foreigner).” In other words, our job is not just to be humble, but also to draw in those who, in their humility or lowly-status would otherwise be shunned or outcast.

We see this to be true by the next passage in Jesus’ discourse. Jesus’ warning about causing a “little one” (at this point, we should recognize he is talking about his followers, not simply a child) to sin emphasizes the way we treat others, specifically, those who are “lowly.” We often take these warnings about cutting off our hand or foot as instruction about the importance of us not sinning (keep pure by removing the offending part), but Jesus’ point here is that sin against those who are lowly should be eliminated. It seems that Jesus is more concerned about the relationship with that person than he is your own personal piety.

We again have this idea reinforced when Jesus tells the story of the shepherd who will leave the 99 sheep to seek out the one who has wandered off. The “loss” of the 99 does not supersede the value of the one. The

Father, Jesus says, does not want the “little ones,” that is, the individuals who have humbled themselves, to be overlooked in the emphasis on status and prestige.

We often make application of this passage by focusing on the need for us to humble ourselves, to be like a child. This is certainly true and should not be minimized, but given the nature of these passages taken together, I think it more accurate to consider how we treat one another. Do we seek those who meet our expectations of the “greatest” in our circles of faith? Or do we seek to build up and support those who most often, like children, are out of sight and out of mind?

Possible Lesson Outline:

If you have children in your group, I would encourage you to look at the “For the Kids” section for your introductory time of group. If you do not, you might ask yourself: Who are the people we overlook the most at church? (Not necessarily the people by name, but the types of people.) Why is it so easy for us to overlook them?

Ask discussion questions.

Close with a time of prayer.

For the Kids:

Have your children answer the following:

- Do you feel like you are an important part of our group? Why or why not?
- What do you think we as adults can do to include you more?
- If you were going to plan our time together as a group, what would you plan?
- Why do you think the things you planned are important to our group?

Conclude with a short prayer of blessing for the children. Make sure they hear you say how important they are to your group.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is the question of “who is the greatest” such a common question for us today, just as it would have been during the time of Jesus?
2. What would we expect the answer to be to the question of “who is the greatest” if we were answering from the perspective of good religious folks? What about if we were answering from the perspective of the world? From Jesus’ perspective? What surprises you about Jesus’ answer?
3. What do you sense Jesus is thinking about when he tells his disciples to “be like a child?” What things does he say that make you think this?
4. What sort of actions would “welcome one such as a child?” In this section, Jesus is speaking of how we (good church folks) live in relationship with one another. How does this idea (talking about living with one another versus talking about just simply us humbling ourselves) affect how you answer this question?
5. Jesus continues his instructions on how to live life together in the next section of our text. We often think of the idea of our hands/feet causing us to stumble within the context of our own personal focus

of achieving heaven. How does our understanding Jesus' words being focused on our relationship with others affect our understanding of this passage? How does it change our perspective? Do we consider the way sin damages our relationship with others as often as we think about how it affects our relationship with God? Why or why not?

6. In what ways does it make more sense to stay with the 99 sheep and leave the one to his/her own devices? Jesus seems to indicate that going after the one is the expected choice. In what ways is this true or the more logical choice?
7. How can we as a church and as a small group be focused on the well being of "these little ones?"

This Week:

If our understanding of this passage is correct, Jesus is just as concerned about our relationship with people who are on the margins, who we might consider outcasts or unseen, as he is us humbling ourselves. As you answered the last discussion question, I hope you came up with some specific ideas as to how to focus on "these little ones." This week, spend some time actually doing those things you mentioned together as a group.

What's Next:

Next week's section is Matthew 19.1-20.34. One Groups will be looking at 20.20-28.