LIFE BIBLE MINISTRY

Matthew 18 (Part 1) :1-4

Who is the Greatest

Pastor Paul LeBoutillier · April 18, 2026

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

At that time, the disciples came to Jesus saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Stop there. I know.

Let's pray. Jesus, you know what? Maybe a drop of speech, but an ocean of truth. Speak to us today. Give us wisdom.

Give us insight. Give us understanding. For we ask it in your name, Jesus. Amen. All right.

What do we got going on here? Disciples come up to Jesus. You know, who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? We know exactly why they're asking this question. It's because it's one of their favorite topics.

They love talking about, in fact, they love arguing about this quite often. And, you know, it's just one of the things that reveals that they had not yet really kind of been delivered from an understanding of how the world of man works, operates, functions, right? And they were trying to bring that understanding of success and greatness and so forth into the kingdom of God. And so they're saying, so tell us, Lord. Probably thinking he's going to point to one of them.

Who is actually great in the kingdom of God? Again, their definition, their understanding of greatness is derived from the world. And so Jesus, I love how he responds. Verse 2, he says, calls a little child, brings this child, sets this child right in front of all of them. And then he begins to say these important things.

The response that he gives to them, once again, gives us two keys. Now, if you're one of those people that doesn't mind writing in your Bible, which I strongly recommend, by the way, I think writing in a

Bible is a good thing. Because then when you fill it up, you just get another one. You remember what they say about a used Bible, right? A Bible that's falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't, right?

Use your Bible, use it well. Anyway, you might want to write next to verse 3, write key number 1. And then next to verse 4, write key number 2. First, we've got key number 1, which is in verse 3. Jesus says, truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you won't even enter the kingdom of heaven.

That's the essence of what he's saying. Obviously, the key word in this passage is turn. If you have a different translation than the one I'm reading this morning, it's probably a different word. The NIV says change. The New American Standard, I believe, along with the New King James, says unless you are converted.

The whole idea, though, behind it is to change or to turn yourself from your conduct or your attitude or your thinking and go a different direction, all right? One of the reasons I'm not super crazy about the word converted, unless you be converted, is because when you and I think of the word converted, we think of what? Being saved. And so for us, it's kind of like Jesus is saying, unless you're saved, you won't see the kingdom of heaven. Well, we know that.

That's an obvious. You've got to be saved. You've got to be converted. But that's not, I don't think that's what Jesus is saying here. He's talking about turning from their thinking.

See, the whole thing he's addressing to them is how they perceive and think of the kingdom of God as it relates to greatness, success, and that sort of thing. And so Jesus says, well, first of all, guys, unless you just change your stinking thinking, you're not even going to enter the kingdom of God. Why? What is it about their thinking that would keep them out of the kingdom of God altogether? Well, their thinking is me-centric.

It's all about themselves. It's what I can do. It's what I can be. Listen, people. Entering the kingdom of God is all about who Jesus is and what he did.

It's not about what you can do. It's not what you can be. It's all about him. That's a good thing to remember. The kingdom of God is all about him.

It's not about you. It's not about you. You know how we need to hear this reminder in our American culture today where the universe essentially revolves around each one of us, or at least that's kind of the way we live. It's not about you. The kingdom of God is not about you.

And so he's addressing the way they're thinking about this. Do you guys remember way back when we were in Chapter 5 in this book and we were going through the Beatitudes and Jesus was talking about, remember, we talked about how the Beatitudes were those stair steps to kind of growing in Christ, and you can't get on to stair number two before you've gotten past stair number one. Do you remember what stair number one was? Let me remind you by putting it up on the screen here for you. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Now, do you also remember how we went through these words and we talked about what they mean? Poor means, do you guys remember? Destitute. It doesn't mean poor as in I don't have much money. It means poor as in I don't have a red scent to my name.

Destitute. I have nothing. And the word spirit speaks of the essence of a man. So now you put that together and you see what Jesus is saying is, blessed are those who are destitute of themselves. That's not the world's definition of success, by the way.

He says, blessed are those who literally have nothing in themselves, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And now Jesus tells us here in Matthew, unless you change and take on that posture where you are destitute of yourselves, the kind of humility that understands who I really am and who I am not. He says, you won't even enter the kingdom of heaven. Because remember, the kingdom of heaven is all about what he did for us. It's not about what I can do for him.

Once I'm in the kingdom, I can begin to serve the Lord. But getting there, all about him. So that's an important thing to remember. Let's take a look then at the second kingdom truth. So just in review, this first truth is the idea that a humble attitude is necessary for us even opening our heart to the kingdom of God.

By the way, before we move on, let me just say this. I think some people struggle and even stumble over the definition of humility sometimes. There are a lot of things that masquerade as humility that people will do and say. Somebody says, oh, I'm not very good at that. In fact, I'm terrible at that.

And they keep telling you and telling you how terrible they are. And somebody might say, oh, that person's so humble. No, they're not. Humility is not this self-abasement. Humility is not thinking about yourself at all.

It's thinking about other people. It's thinking about the concerns, the needs, the affairs of others. Putting those people literally before yourself. That's humility. It's understanding myself to be the lowly individual that I really am that will cause me to serve others.

What is the kingdom of man all about? Self-esteem. You need to think well of yourself. And if we can just build up people's self-esteem, they'll be good human beings. Look where that one got us.

Now all that's happened is we really feel good about our sin. That's all that's happened. We do feel good about ourselves. We feel good about ourselves while we just absolutely violate every rule in the book. But we feel good about it.

That's what self-esteem has done to us. It's a lie. The kingdom of God says that you and I need to see ourselves properly with true and genuine humility, understanding that we are bankrupt before God. And when we come to that understanding, when we come to that realization, let me tell you something, folks. Not only is the kingdom of heaven open to you, it'll unlock a whole lot of other doors along the way, too.

As long as we keep and maintain that attitude of humility before the Lord. What does the Bible say? Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift you up. Humble yourselves before God, you know, very important key of the kingdom, guys, keep that one in your pocket because you're going to run into some doors along the way that only that one will open. That's kind of a master key in the kingdom of God, to be honest with you, that'll open just just incredible amount of doors.

Now the second kingdom truth is what's given to us here in verse four. This is where Jesus comes out and directly answers their question. Or what the question was, who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? OK, he brings the child, puts the child right in the midst of them and says, verse four, whoever humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. There you go.

Now, you and I might read this from our personal perspective today, and it doesn't have as much bearing on on the answer as it might have for for these guys. Do you know that back in this time, a child, a child. Had no rights under the law. And of course, these guys knew that this child is without rights doesn't mean that their parents didn't love them or take care of them. Of course, they did.

But from a legal standpoint, there were no rights for this child. And this is something that kind of strikes us at the heart of our American way of thinking, because we're very we're very focused on rights. In fact, we've come to the place of perceiving someone's humanity essentially predicated upon whether or not they they have an exercise their rights. And we're very big on that. And not that that's a bad thing in and of itself.

You know, and believe me, I love the United States of America. I fly the flag proudly. I am delighted that we uphold the inalienable rights of human beings and so forth and so on. I appreciate it, especially when I see the violations of personal rights that go on in other nations. However.

We Americans, you know, we have a tendency to kind of take something and just blow it all out of proportion. And this is one area where I believe we've done that because because, again, in the world, your rights are absolutely enormous. Jesus takes this child who has none. No rights places this child right in the midst of the man and says, here, you guys, this is the picture I want to show you of greatness in the kingdom of God. Now, that doesn't mean literally that all children are great in the kingdom of God.

Not saying that he's using this child as a picture. What do we see in this child? Well, first and foremost, we see this child has no rights. No way to demand, you know, their way. Their their thoughts, their their voice.

Their voice isn't even heard, probably. And yet there is something about this child that Jesus talks about that is great. Are you aware that Jesus set aside his rights, too? You know, you know what's interesting about this whole ordeal, this whole example that he's doing for him? Even him taking a child.

And putting this child in the midst of them is an act of humility on his part. You know why? Because he's the best example. You want to know you want to see an example of greatness in the kingdom of God. Look no further than Jesus Christ, you guys.

He's the best, the top, the ultimate example. But his humility is so rooted in his being that he even takes a child, which is a lesser example and uses this. But he could have just said, guys, keep your eyes on me. You want to know what greatness in the kingdom of God looks like? Follow me.

Do what I do. They didn't have a concept of that at this time. The disciples, that is. But they learned it. They learned it.

They came to a place of understanding eventually. There is no greater expression of humility and greatness and how those two can be merged together in the kingdom than Jesus Christ himself. And Paul actually wrote about it in one of the most powerfully, doctrinally charged passages in the New Testament, which is in Philippians. I'll put it up on the screen so we can see it together. Jesus being in the form of God, Paul wrote, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.

And you know what that means. That means held on to and not relinquished, which we do with our rights, don't we? In other words, what it's saying here is that Jesus, who being God, did not consider his right to hold on to everything that is part of who God is. But what did he do? He emptied himself.

He emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. That's a little bit of a humbling statement right there, isn't it? We sometimes think we're all that, and God has to empty

himself to be like us. Puts us in our proper perspective. And then being found in human form, he went further.

What did he do? He humbled himself even further by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death, on a cruel, brutal Roman cross. That's pretty crazy. You see, so Jesus is the example of this key to the kingdom, to understanding, to functioning, to walking in this kingdom of God that you and I are born into. Personal greatness is not defined by all the things that you have and all the things that point to you.

Personal greatness in the kingdom of God is defined many times by what you don't have, what you've been willing to let go of, what you've been willing to surrender and lay down before the Lord and give up for others. What did Jesus say about himself? He said, I'm the good shepherd, and the good shepherd does what? Lays down his life for the sheep. That's what the good shepherd does.

He lays down his life for the sheep, and we all think that's wonderful. We all applaud that. We say, well, thank you very much. The fact that you laid down your life for the sheep, because I'm a sheep. You laid down your life for me, and I am the beneficiary of that act of gracious humility on your part.

Thank you very much. And then Jesus says, no, go do likewise. Now wait a minute. Am I saying that we can actually die for people like Jesus did? Of course not.

But are we called to an attitude of sacrificial service? Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. That's the part we don't like to hear about. In fact, that's the part I don't like to hear about. Sometimes I consider people to be inconvenient, don't you?

And they'll call about something or want something, and it's always during the football game. You know, or sometimes it's just, you know. And then I remember, Jesus laid down his rights. He laid down his conveniences. He laid down his comfort.

He gave those things up. And now he says to you and I, this is a key. This is a key of the kingdom. This is going to help you operate. If you take this key and put this one on your kingdom key ring, this one's going to open doors.

This one's going to get you to a place where you need to be. But it's going to mean following in his footsteps. And those footsteps, remember, lead to Calvary, Golgotha, whatever you want to call it, the place of the cross. And it's not a fun trip. The Via Dolorosa or the way of suffering is not a fun journey, but it's the journey of the kingdom.

And that's one of the reasons why the world looks at you and I operating and functioning in the kingdom of God, and they're like, I'll pass. It's not really a thing I signed up for. You see, we want to take what the world is running after, what the world desires, and we want to bring it into the kingdom. We want to make it part of living for Jesus. It's not, and it doesn't work.

What the world runs after is vain and empty and passing away. What you and I endure for the kingdom, the attitude that we have about what we do and the giving of our lives to other people, yeah, but I don't want to go do that. Well, are you thinking about the other people or are you thinking just about you? Because remember, the kingdom of God is not me-centric. It's others-centric.

It's thinking about other people. That's what Jesus did. That's what he taught you and I to do. That's what he encourages you and I to do. Get out of your comfort zone, move beyond your me-centered world, and begin to serve others.

Yes, even to the point of laying down. Your life. Wow! I don't know about this. You know, Jesus doesn't try to paint a picture that's other than reality for us.

He all along told us, listen, unless you're willing to take up your cross. You know, you're really not worthy of being called My disciple. Take up your cross. It's a death instrument. You can die on it.

So all the complaints about, I don't wanna, have to go on the cross and get nailed there. Because you know what? There's people's souls hanging in the balance. You know, tonight we're doing Harvest America. And you know, we talk to you, we give you these cards, we put on the chairs, and, hey, give this to somebody.

You know, it's, oh man, it kind of creeps me out to have to do that, you know. What if they say, you know, get out of my face, or I'm gonna call the cops, or, you know, or something stupid, or they throw it back in my face. I, you know, I don't know if I could take that kind of rejection. Yeah, it's inconvenient, I know. Evangelism usually is.

Laying down your life is always inconvenient to you. But here's the question. What are we thinking about? Whose needs are you considering? Remember what Jesus said?

You know, we read this beautiful passage from Philippians. But did you ever read what comes before that? Do you know why Paul wrote this beautiful treatise on the deity of Jesus and him laying down his rights and his, you know, his everything, so that he might become a man? He started off the passage saying that we are not to be motivated by selfish ambition or vain conceit, but rather we are to consider

others better than ourselves. And then he launches this into this amazing sort of a, you know, doctrinal thing in order to show the length, the depth that Jesus went to to accomplish that very thing.

And now he's doing it as by way of comparison to say to you and I, I challenge you in the name of Jesus Christ to lay down your life, to lay down your wants, to lay down your wishes, to lay down your agenda, to lay down your plan and give yourself so wholly to the Lord that your desire in life is to serve Him and to live for Him. And you won't complain when people, you know, don't give you the accolades and the pats on the back and whatever else that you might otherwise be longing for, because that's not why you're here and that's not why you're doing it. You're doing it for the Lord. It's for Him. And that's all there needs to be.

And so laying down my rights, boy, that's a big thing. Now, I'm going to close with this. This discussion about who's the greatest and stuff, you know this didn't stop here. This was an ongoing discussion. Do you know this?

Much to the shame of the disciples, this conversation was still going on at the Last Supper. Hours, literally hours before Jesus would hang on the cross for the sins of the world. These guys are arguing still about who's the greatest. I'll let you see it. We'll put it here.

It's from Luke 22. It goes like this. A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, the kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you.

Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater? One who reclines at the table or one who serves? Obviously, it's the one who reclines at the table, right? But look what Jesus says, and this is very important here.

But I am among you as one who serves. Now, Luke doesn't record for us what happens next. But what happens next is very significant because Jesus, after saying, I am among you as the one who serves, he stands up in front of them all. He takes off his outer garment, wraps it around his waist. He gets out a bowl of water and then takes the function of the lowliest household servant.

And one by one, he washes all of their dirty, stinky feet. One by one. And we go to the book of John, actually, on the screen to pick up where this carries on. And it says, when he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, do you understand what I've done to you? You call me teacher and Lord, and you're right, for so I am.

If I then, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, right? So also, he said, you also ought to wash one another's feet, for I've given you an example that you should do just as I have done to you. I don't know if any of you have been in a foot-washing service before. They can be a very humbling thing, not actually the washing, but even the being washed. But, you know, if we interpret this or apply this as a literal, so we need to wash each other's feet, we've missed the point.

Because once again, the point is, who did the foot-washing back in that culture? The lowest servant. The one who is at the absolute bottom of the ladder in terms of any kind of progression of greatness. And so what Jesus is doing here is, frankly, more than just washing their feet. What he's doing is he's exemplifying that attitude of humility that is willing to go to the lowest spot and there, humbly serve.

And let me tell you something, washing people's feet has to be inconvenient. I mean, talk about inconvenience. It's not something that I dream of doing. And I dare say I'm not alone in that. But when you and I take out this key to the kingdom and we understand that with it, we walk in the example of Jesus by being willing to be the lowest slave, the lowest servant, doing that which nobody's ever going to know, this side of glory.

No one's ever going to come up to you and say, oh, thank you. You did such a great job. They don't even know you're doing it. But that's not why you do it. You're serving God.

You're serving him. And it doesn't matter what the job is because you understand how to operate in this kingdom. And you understand greatness as it is defined by this kingdom. And so what we see here in our conclusion is that greatness is defined as this humble, childlike humility that is willing to do whatever needs to be done and that considers the needs of others more than the needs of oneself. This isn't going to come naturally, okay?

Don't expect this to, you know, don't expect to hear this message today and then leave from this place and go, all right, I'm going to go do this. I'm going to go walk this out. Thank you, Lord. Appreciate the information, insight. Great, wonderful.

Let's go do this. Let's go be humble. Yeah. This isn't going to come naturally. The flesh does not like to limit itself.

The flesh does not want to give up anything. It is only through the work of the spirit. It's as you and I recognize that these are keys of the kingdom and we invite the Holy Spirit to do a work in our lives to fashion those keys, not just in our pocket, in our heart, to literally place them in our heart so that they

become part of who we are. Lord, it's like I need to learn what real humility is. I need to learn what real service is.

I need to learn what real greatness is in the kingdom of God. I need to be willing to allow myself to be inconvenienced. I need to be willing to serve in the lowliest, most undesirable position that there may be because in so doing, I am following in your footsteps and I show myself to be a true child of God by walking in this path. You