

FPFWC Christian Development



Called from the Margins of Society

March 2023

Spring Quarter

March 11, 2023

Lesson #2 – The Greatest in the Kingdom

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Matthew 18:1-9

ICE BREAKER –

1. What is it about children that Christ wants us to emulate?
2. What prevents us from being more childlike in our faith?

Key Verse: “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”—Matthew 18:4

LESSON BACKGROUND

By the time of today’s text, Jesus’ disciples had witnessed His divine power through His acts of healing (Matthew 14:35–36) and exorcism (15:21–28; 17:14–18), miraculous provision (14:15–21; 15:32–38), and control over creation (14:22–33). The apostles Peter, James, and John witnessed Jesus’ power personally as they observed Jesus transfigured before them (17:1–13; Mark 9:2). Later, Peter interpreted the transfiguration as showing Jesus’ divine honor and glory (2 Peter 1:16–18). In that event, God’s power was revealed in and through Jesus Christ.

Peter acknowledged Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). The title *Christ* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *Messiah* (John 1:41). Both designations refer to the anointed one of God, a phrase describing God’s chosen king (see 1 Samuel 16:1, 12–13; 2 Samuel 7:8–16).

When acknowledging Jesus as the Christ, Peter had certain expectations regarding Christ’s work. Hebrew Scripture, also called the Old Testament, traces the contours of God’s anointed one’s liberating His people, sitting on God’s throne, and ruling in righteousness (compare Genesis 49:10; Psalms 110:1; 132:11–12; Isaiah 16:5; Micah 5:2; etc.). Jews assumed that the Messiah would come with power and strength as the anointed servant of God (see Isaiah 42:1–4). They did not desire or expect a suffering and humbled Messiah (see Matthew 16:21–22; compare 20:25–28).

The Gospel writers use different names for God’s rule on earth as inaugurated by the Christ. All four Gospels include the designation “kingdom of God” (Matthew 12:28; Mark 12:34; Luke 9:2; John 3:5; etc.). However, Matthew’s Gospel includes a second designation: the “kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; etc.). The reason for Matthew’s unique designation is unknown, but students propose that Matthew used it to avoid writing the holy name of God. Both designations refer to the eternal kingdom established by God where He rules (see Psalms 145:11, 13; 103:19; compare John 18:36).

Jesus’ teaching and ministry prepared people to receive this kingdom (see Matthew 4:17; Luke 8:1). To receive the kingdom requires that people be born again (John 3:3–8) and obey the will of God (Matthew 7:21). Today’s Scripture

reveals a third condition to enter God's kingdom. Parallel texts to today's lesson are Mark 9:33–37 and Luke 9:46–48.

LESSON COMMENTARY

A. Humility: Necessary to Enter and Serve in the Kingdom (18:1–6)

18:1–6. The question, **Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?** may have arisen because of the mention of Jesus' death. Which of them would be leader in His absence? On **the kingdom of heaven**, see 3:1–4. Jesus' answer focused not on rank, but on the more critical issue of how to enter the kingdom—that is, by being **converted** (“change one's ways, to turn to God”) and becoming **like children**. This comparison could be understood several ways, but the key is being **humble** (v. 4), explained further in v. 6 as believing **in Me**. Entering the kingdom is the prospect only for those who humbly trust in Jesus for salvation (see the comments on 7:21–23 for entering the kingdom). In v. 4, Jesus returned to the initial topic of being great in the kingdom. Humility was needed to enter the kingdom and to be great in it, for the leaders of His community are to be its servants (20:24–28) willing to care even for the insignificant (a **child**, v. 5). **Whoever causes** [a Christian] ... **to stumble** (“spiritual harm”) will be held accountable for it (v. 6).

B. Personal Purity: Avoid Harming Self and Others (18:7–14)

18:7–10. Jesus does not say why **it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come** (v. 7), but later He indicates that evil thrives before it is expunged (24:6). Verse 7 indicates both God's providential superintendence of **stumbling blocks** and human responsibility for them. In v. 8, Jesus warns that His followers could cause themselves spiritual harm by their own imprudent behavior. The OT forbade self-mutilation (Dt 14:1; 1Kg 18:28; Zch 13:6), and Jesus surely did not mean this verse to be applied literally. His point is that dealing with sin requires severe steps.

Fiery hell (v. 9) is literally “Gehenna of fire.” For the history of Gehenna, aka the Hinnom Valley on the southwest end of Jerusalem, see 2Kg 16:3; 21:6; 23:10; 2Ch 33:6. Under King Josiah, the valley became Jerusalem's city dump where fires constantly burned to reduce volume and speed putrefaction. It was a graphic representation of hell. According to this context, some of the characteristics of being saved include being dependent upon God and believing in Jesus (see comments above). But if one harms and despises His followers (vv. 2–10) and does not deal severely with his own sin, he shows an affinity with the world that indicates he might be unsaved and condemned (destined for **fiery hell**). The main point of v. 10 is that believers are important to God, and if angels who serve them (Heb 1:14) observe one of **these little ones** receiving harsh treatment, God will “find out about it” from them and neither He nor they will approve.

LESSON NUGGET – The way we treat children (including those who are “children in the faith”) indicates how much humility we practice. Do we receive them (18:5) or despise them (v. 10)? Do we imitate them (vv.3-4) or cause them

to stumble by our bad example (vv. 6-9)? It was a sheep, not a lamb, that went astray (vv. 10-14)!

Sources: *Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, Wiersbe Study Bible and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary*