

Part 32: The Commitments of Kingdom Greatness

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Just this week there were three record breaking contracts given in the NFL. One receiver became the highest paid ever at his position in the history of the league. And one quarterback received a massive four-year extension in which he will make \$80 million dollars between now and March.

Now I love sports, but I've always been hung up on players who are already rich getting massive contracts. Typically I have two thoughts: 1. they don't need any more money, and 2. it keeps the team from signing better players. But I heard a former player discussing this on the radio once.

He said that when you are talking about the league's best players, it's never about the money. They all have money. He said it's about the appearance of value. When you are the highest paid at your position, you are able to say that you are the most valuable at that position. It is a measure of success for the individual.

Now there are other top players in professional sports who are willing to take less money because they measure value and success differently. They like to think that value is measured by games won, and dynasties built. The point is that people measure success in different ways.

The truth is we all want to find some standard for measuring success in our own life. Is it through the status of our job, the assets in our 401K, our highest level of education, or our ability to have a passport and Instagram full of adventure and portraits of the perfect family?

One CEO wrote an article for Forbes and spoke to the ambiguity of such measurements. She says: "Are you successful? What defines success to you? Is it what people say about you, or what you think about yourself? It seems that we are all in pursuit of what success represents to each of us individually. But what does it look like, feel like, and more importantly, when do we know we have it? Does it look like having material variety and choices? Or does it feel like unabashedly being able to exert power and influence over others and being respected? Which group do you fall into?"

That's an important question for us to consider because we often do group our ideas of greatness. We have a church with people from all sorts of different backgrounds. And I would imagine that the 50 year old executive is wrestling with a different standard of greatness than a 25 year old social worker. Yet both want a measure of success. But what if there was a universal standard? What if there was a way in which we can tangibly, objectively and effectively live a great life?

Well this is the question the disciples are beginning to ask Jesus in the book of Matthew. People know Jesus as the King, but Jesus has in less than two chapters predicted his death three specific times. This leaves his disciples asking a question that I'm sure all of us would ask if we were in that situation.

Matthew 18:1.

Once Jesus is gone who is the greatest? Who is the most successful? Who is the most valuable asset to King Jesus? And Jesus is going to answer this question by redefining the standard of greatness, not only

for the twelve disciples, but also for us. And what we are going to see this morning is that **Greatness in the Kingdom of God is a commitment to others.**

Specifically we are going to see three commitments of those who wish to be great: a commitment to Jesus, a commitment to costly selflessness, and a commitment to a shepherd's heart. A commitment to these things are what it looks like to be great in the Kingdom of God.

For those of you who were with us last week, we talked about how Jesus is entering a new portion of teaching where he is now beginning to show us what it is like to live like followers of Jesus. Prior to this part Matthew had been showing us who Jesus is, but now Jesus is stressing the connection between what we know to be true about Jesus and how that shapes the way we live as disciples of Jesus.

Last week we saw Jesus model a laying down of his rights for others, and it was Jesus ultimately doing that on the cross for our sins which sets the pattern for us to safely lay down our lives for others. This is going to continue to be a big theme for the next two chapters.

But right now let's return to the passage at hand. Let me first read **Matthew 18:1-5.**

This passage contains the first commitment today: **Kingdom greatness is a commitment to Jesus.**

Jesus really turns this question of the disciples on its head. They ask who is the greatest and Jesus calls into the inner circle a child. Contrary to western culture where we often craft our homes and lives around our children, in Greco-Roman culture the child was one of the lowest positions.

Whatever privilege or rights they had, they had because of their parents. On their own they were of little social value. So when Jesus sets a child in the middle it is not only a contrast of age, but culturally this is a complete reversal of social norms.

Now what is Jesus promoting about this child which is important to us? I want to share five reasons why Jesus is not using this child as an example: It is not because we should be wide-eyed and open to everything. It is not because we should be blind optimists. It is not because we should have an overly simplistic understanding of God. It is not because children are innocent. And it is not because children are worth more in God's kingdom.

Those are not the points Jesus wants to make here. Let me give you two reasons. The first is that if you look at verse six and verse 10 you see Jesus referring to these children as "little ones." That is the same word Jesus used back in Matthew 10:42, when speaking about the persecuted church Jesus says, "And whoever gives one of the little ones even a cold cup of water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you he will by no means lose his reward."

So Jesus is taking the idea of the child and growing it into a more general application.

Secondly, there is a key idea imbedded in verse 3. Look back: **Matthew 18:3.** That word translated in your ESV as "turn" is offered in other translations as "change and become like a child" and also "unless you are converted and become like a child." So it's not talking about a mere posture change, it's talking about a comprehensive transformation.

And the necessity of this turn is of ultimate importance because of what Jesus says immediately following it: [vs 3] without this change you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. One thing that should be noted on this point is that this may be one of the heaviest passages we have looked at in Matthew when it comes to warnings. Here Jesus warns us that without such a transformation we will not enter the kingdom of heaven and in verses 6, 8, and 9 there is a clear warning to avoid being cast into hell. We ought not to take this passage lightly.

All of this to say there is something bigger at play here than a child-like spirit. Jesus is speaking to the drastic conversion of which the identity of a child is paramount. The child which stood before Jesus had no identity and no standing outside of his parents. The same is true for anyone who claims to be a believer.

We'd like to think that we are the masters of our own destiny, that we are impervious to the pace of life. If we just think it and put our minds to it, we will achieve great things. But history shows us how few people have managed to be remembered within a span of 50 years.

This is not to say that individuals are insignificant, but it does say that if our significance is necessarily tied to what we can accomplish in life that is generally a recipe for disaster.

That's just on a horizontal and human level. On a spiritual level we are all enslaved by our own sin. Look at **Romans 3:10-18**. Also **Ephesians 2:3**.

If we only step back to examine the vulnerability of life and the brokenness of our own hearts, then we quickly realize that we cannot find a boast or confidence in ourselves. Which is why Jesus uses the example of the child. To come to Jesus as a child is to have your worldview so flipped upside down that you see the only person who brings us permanent and eternal rights and identity is Jesus who died in our place. To give us eternal life and to free our captive hearts.

Remember what Jesus said back in **Matthew 6:33**. Seek first the righteousness of the Kingdom of God and everything else you seek will be added to you. So where is that righteousness? In the question of greatness where to do we look so that the burden of success may not crush us? Look at what Paul says in **Romans 3:21-22a**. Jesus is the righteousness of God.

To gain entrance to the Kingdom of God is to be converted by the perfect performance of Jesus through faith. We are not saved from our sin and granted access to God's kingdom because of our performance. It is only by the performance of Jesus. This is what it means to come to Jesus as a child: it is not blind faith which is childlike, it is honest faith, humble faith, desperate faith which is childlike faith.

If you have been saved by the King, you are the greatest. Why? Because no one will find salvation any other way. When we get to heaven there is no comparing of costs. There is one cost and one Savior, Jesus Christ and you have either been saved by his universal greatness, or you have not been saved at all. Greatness is an exclusive and pure trust in Jesus over self.

The point Jesus is making here is that the only people who reach greatness are those who humbly receive the greatness of Jesus through faith. Look back with me at **Matthew 18:3-5**. Because we have all entered the kingdom as children, without rights of our own, we are all the least. But because we have all entered the kingdom as children, with rights coming from Jesus, we are all the greatest. Therefore to be saved by Jesus and to accept others who have been saved by Jesus is to live a life steeped in greatness.

But what does this mean? What does it mean to be committed to Jesus and to be committed to others who are committed to Jesus? This is where Jesus goes next: **Matthew 18:5-9**. Here we see our second commitment of greatness: **Kingdom greatness is a costly commitment to selflessness.**

Now for you super-stars who remember way back in Matthew chapter 5, you remember reading something similar to this. Look back at **Matthew 5:27-30**. It's important to remember that Jesus is speaking metaphorically here. How do we know he's speaking metaphorically? Because if you've ever struggled with lust you know that you can gouge out both eyes, but it won't keep your heart from sinning.

If only putting sin to death was as easy as cutting off a body part. Putting sin to death is actually a much weightier commitment for it takes a lifetime of spirit-empowered labor.

Here we see a passage which is similar to another passage in scripture and so we need to ask ourselves why the repetition? It could be that Matthew is just stressing how violently we need to oppose sin. But there is actually a new development here. Perhaps you saw it: Matthew 5 deals with lust specifically, Matthew 18 deals with anything which causes us to sin or to stumble. Matthew 5 appeals to one's own sense of security, Matthew 18 appeals both to the individual, but also to the corporate benefit of removing sin.

Did you track the flow of this passage? If you're reading in the ESV there is a really unfortunate heading inserted between verses 6 and 7, it has a tendency to break up the logic of Jesus in this text. Listen to the argument of Jesus and try to stay focused on what he is saying here: **Matthew 18:6-9**.

Here is the flow of this text: If you want to be great you must look to Jesus. If you want to be great you must see that welcoming other believers is like receiving Christ. If you want to be great be careful to not cause others to sin. If you want to avoid the punishment of causing someone to stumble, you must violently oppose sin in your own heart.

If we fail to read verse six along with verses 7-9 we may wrongly think that not causing others to sin and removing sin from our own hearts are two different ideas. But Jesus here is saying they are one in the same. If you want to love others, if you want to live a life of greatness, kill the sin in your heart.

You want to be great: kill your sin. You want to have influence: kill your sin. You want to contribute to the good of others: kill your sin.

Notice what Jesus says: Woe to the one through whom temptation comes. We tend to think that the sin we do in private or in our heart is a sterilized wound. Sure it's bad, but it's not hurting anyone else.

But that's not the point Jesus is making here. If you are sinning, you are a vehicle for sin. Your sin is the equivalent of sitting in a waiting room as that person with the oozing nose and the earthy sneeze. It's gross. It's airborne. It's everywhere. And no one is safe from it. Why is sin so dangerous? Because as Jesus alluded to, sin is not a series of actions. Sin is at its core any thought or desire which opposes God. It is fundamentally the actions and thoughts which believe the promise of sin over and above the promise of God. Sin models deceit.

In this text Jesus is setting a standard for what a community of discipleship is like. In chapter 16 Jesus promised to build his church, and here Jesus is giving the church its marching orders. We are to be so concerned with the holiness of others that we are motivated to put sin out of our own lives even if it comes at a great cost.

This is where pro-life politics meet real life applications. If we are going to beat a drum that God has given every single human innate worth and value regardless of being inside the womb, or outside the womb, male or female, black or white, American or Mexican, crippled or healthy then we need to model to this valuation of life. That there is greater value to life crippled in this world and to enter into the Kingdom of God, than it is to live healthy in this world and be thrown into hell.

Jesus establishes a new valuation of life. Jesus sets the standard for true quality of life. Don't be deceived by the temporary promises of sin when the benefit of eternal life stands before you.

Who is the greatest? He or she who out of the overflow of their conversion puts sin to death in their members for their own joy and for the security of others. Why is that person the greatest? Because that person is humble enough to see their continued need for Jesus.

We need Jesus to help us kill our sin because we need a knife that goes deeper than skin and bones. We need his Holy Spirit to remind us of his promises and empower us to believe them in thought and deed.

I dropped my son off for his first day of school this year and I was nervous about the influences he might meet. How will other relationships affect his walk and understanding of Jesus? But as I studied this text this week I was convicted that my concern for my son had never before led me to examine the danger my own heart might provide him.

The sin of the father he lives with is a much greater threat than the desk-mate he sits by for three hours a day. So it is with all of us. If you care about this church, if you value this community, if you want to be great in this assembly plead with God to reveal your own sins and ask him for the power to put them off.

Men, many of us fantasize about heroic situations where we save our friends and families from hostile attacks. For the glory of God be heroic in your fight against sin. Save your family, love your wife, serve your church by severing sin from your heart with the help of God.

I want to provide a point of clarity here. Do not let your sinfulness stop you from fighting sin. In light of texts like this we can often think: Man, I'm never going to be rid of this sin so why stop. Brothers and sisters, we will never be sinless in this world. But we can, by the grace of God, sin less in this world. This is what Paul means when he says in **2 Corinthians 3:18**. This is process, but it is a process of transformation none the less.

One writer said of this text: "Discipleship was never going to be an easy proposition, but that is no reason for anyone to make it harder by irresponsible behavior towards fellow disciples." Kingdom greatness is a commitment to costly selflessness.

Lastly we see our final commitment: **Kingdom greatness is a commitment to a shepherd's heart.**

This passage begins with Jesus reminding us of the importance of our fellow believers: **Matthew 18:10**. If there is anything opposite of welcoming our brothers and sisters in Christ, it is despising them. And

here Jesus uses the example of angels. We may consider other believers too lowly for our own consideration, and yet there are angels in heaven who remind God of each and every believer.

If the lowest believer is constantly before the face of God, should they not also be considered in the hearts of men? This is where Jesus gives the final example and pattern for what life in God's kingdom community is like: **Matthew 18:12-14**.

I'm going to start with the back end of this text in order to help us understand the weight of it. Jesus says to his disciples that it is not the will of the Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. Who are these little ones? Look back at **Matthew 18:6**.

In other places we see God's desire for the lost, but here in this text the little ones whom God desires are those who believe in him. They are those who are already Christian. We know that because even in the illustration the sheep belong to the shepherd. He's not sheep stealing, he's sheep redeeming. He's taking back what is his.

Look at what Jesus says in **John 10:28**. In John 10 Jesus is stressing the ultimate security of his sheep. No one will snatch them away. None of them will perish. But in Matthew 18 Jesus is stressing the means through which that end is accomplished.

God's will is that no one who is saved will fall away and perish. That's why he just told us to get out the axe when it comes to our sin. Our individual fight against sin is part of the means by which God will preserve his whole church.

In other words Jesus is clearly stating the will of the Father here so that we might feel the weight of responsibility in this text. Why does this parable follow Jesus' command in verse 10 to not despise these little ones? Because even though Jesus is the chief shepherd, he has called the corporate church to go to the costly expense of bringing back those of the faith who have wandered away.

You want to know how God measures your greatness? It's converted people laying down their lives to call other converts back to God. That's the desire of God. None of us can save anyone, none of us can ransom anyone, none of us can redeem anyone, but we can all go after someone.

This is why we do church membership. Church membership is something that will one day go away because we will be under the chief shepherd for all eternity, but as of right now we need to know who wants to be treated like these sheep. Who wants us to pursue them when they wander and call them back to safety, and who do you want to pursue you when you wander.

Starting next week you are going to hear more about the desires of the 50/50 Legacy. We want to be a Healthy church, a Missoula Church and a Sending Church.

But to do any of that we must first be a Matthew 18 church. We must see our greatness as something stemming from our conversion. We must see the life of greatness as something lived out daily in the service of others even when it is costly to us.

What does this look like in our church? In our community groups? In our discipleship relationships? Matthew is in many ways going to tell us in the following verses, but right now I want to give two ways in which we can pursue other sheep.

Number one, don't be scared of asking questions that probe the heart. I know that in my years in ministry, I've seen people falling away from the faith, and I am too scared to ask specific questions because I'm scared of what their answer might be. But that's not selfless seeking of the lost. That's a selfish preservation of my own comfort to the detriment of my brother in Christ. Don't be afraid to ask, "What's going on in this area? Why are you engaging in this behavior? Where are you at with Jesus right now?"

That's number one, number two: remember that the Bible is sufficient for the answers to number one. When we start asking questions, we are going to get honest and hard answers. But God's word is sufficient to give us wisdom in whatever they are going through. You don't have to have all the answers in that moment, but you can encourage them that there is a way forward. There is hope. There is always hope.

We don't do this because we want to preserve our numbers as a church. We don't do this because we love pointing out people's sin. We do this because we are after the joy of salvation. Look back at **Matthew 18:13**.

A shepherd's heart is a weighty and sober reality of what it means to be part of God's followers. But we do it because of the joy that comes through gospel restoration. In verses 7-9 God is calling you to be concerned about your own sin, and in 12-14 God is calling you to be concerned about the sins of others and both are lined with joy.

Joy that you might enter eternal life, and joy that you might rejoice with a brother or sister who has returned to the pen. As an elder at this church I can tell you that we elders know the weight of pursuing those who have seemingly walked away, we know the pain of futile attempts to remind them of the faith they once claimed. But we also know the joy of those who come back.

That joy is our standard of success. That joy is the horizon of greatness that our church wants to fix its eyes on. A preoccupation with this measure of success may never be seen as remarkable by our world. It may not have the shine of a new contract or the status of a PhD, but none of those are our King.

Our King is the shepherd who not only sought out his erring sheep, but laid down his life for them. Who is the standard of greatness and the portrait of success? Jesus is. Therefore the measure and standard of greatness for us is first in being saved by Jesus and secondly in living like Jesus.