

“KINGDOM VIPs”
MATTHEW 18:1-6

We have heard a lot this past week about President-elect Biden’s nominees for his Cabinet. The reason we hear about this, the reason these nominees make headlines, is because each of those Cabinet positions are extremely consequential. The people who fill those positions will have enormous influence in determining policy related to national security, the economy, the environment, education, energy, agriculture, and health—in other words, all the things that are important to a nation’s well-being.

That is also the reason we will be hearing a lot more about these nominees in the days ahead as each of them are scrutinized by the Senate in confirmation hearings. That process, as it was intended by the Constitution, is supposed to ensure that the nominees are qualified, capable, and competent to carry out the vital duties of their Cabinet positions. So, the Senate will be investigating such things as the nominee’s character, training, experience, past performance, dependability, impartiality, etc. And if a nominee falls short in any of these areas, we can be sure that we will hear about it. Because we expect nothing less than the best possible people to fill these VIP positions.

The name of our series in Matthew is “*Upside Down Kingdom.*” We have seen over and over in this Gospel that the values of the kingdom of God are different than the values of earthly kingdoms in almost every way. We are going to learn this morning that this is also true when it comes to understanding and identifying kingdom VIPs—the people who possess qualities that God values most, the people who are given the most responsibility and who are most influential in the kingdom.

The subject came up when the disciples asked Jesus a question. Look at **Matthew 18:1**, *‘At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”*

Jesus’ Galilean ministry is just about to come to an end. It was not long before this that Jesus told His disciples that He must go up to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed, and then rise from the dead (16:21f). Matthew 18 will be Jesus’ last conversation in Galilee until after His resurrection.

The disciples did not completely understand all of this and may have even wondered if Jesus was speaking metaphorically when He talked about His death and resurrection. But they do seem to have been convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, and they seem to have believed that the messianic kingdom was just around the corner. For them that still evoked images of palaces and throne rooms and cabinet positions, which got them to thinking about their own particular roles in the kingdom.

In Mark’s account of this event, we are told that prior to asking Jesus the question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” the disciples had been arguing among themselves about which of *them* was going to be the greatest. One can only imagine that they believed the top cabinet positions in the kingdom were still up for grabs, and they were vying amongst themselves to snatch the most important ones. In fact, they were actually wondering which of them would be the *greatest*—presumably, which one would be second to Jesus when the kingdom was established.

Which reveals that even after all the time they had spent with Jesus, they still did not understand the values of the kingdom. Remember, just a few days prior to this, Jesus had talked about the necessity of denying oneself, which is the opposite of self-promotion and self-assertion (16:24f). In light of those words, this question seems highly inappropriate.

Look at how Jesus responds, **verses 2-3**. ² *And calling to Him a child, he put him in the midst of them* ³ *and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Jesus answered their question with an object lesson. He called a little child and had him stand in the middle of the group. Mark tells us that Jesus then took the boy in His arms, so that He would have been holding him as he spoke to the disciples. Imagine the poignancy of this scene. Surrounded by grown men, the boy must have looked insignificant, which was precisely the point Jesus wanted to make.

Then He says, *“Truly I say to you...”* which was Jesus’ way of saying, “Listen carefully. What I am about to say is extremely important.” And indeed, this turns out to be as important a statement as Jesus ever made, because before He declares what it means to be the greatest in the kingdom, He addresses the question of what is required to *enter* the kingdom of heaven. That is *the* most fundamental question for every human being. “How can I get on God’s side and obtain His favor? How can I participate in His blessings and avoid His judgment?”

Jesus solemnly declares that if His disciples have any hope of entering the kingdom of heaven they *must turn and become like children*. By the way, the disciples would have perceived this statement as one of the strangest things they ever heard Jesus say. For two reasons. One, children in first century Palestine had very little status and esteem in the community. Oh, they were considered a sign of God’s blessing, and men and women who had many children were seen as richly blessed. But because children were too weak, small, and undeveloped to fight in the army, or own a business, or work in the fields, or store up wealth, or give advice, or contribute substantively to meaningful conversations, they counted for very little. So, to tell the disciples they needed to turn and become like children in order to enter the kingdom would have been baffling, because, in their minds, children had nothing to offer to the kingdom.

Two, the disciples would have perceived this as a strange statement because they believed the goal of childhood is to grow up and become a responsible adult. Going from childhood to adulthood is progress. Reverting to childlikeness is regress—it is going backwards not forward.

Yet Jesus says that unless one *turns* and becomes like children, they will never enter the kingdom. What does He mean? Obviously, we need to understand what Jesus means by *turning*. The word “turn” essentially has to do with changing one’s direction, so it could also be translated “to steer” or “to bend,” or “to return,” as in the sense of walking in one direction and then changing course or turning around and going back. But it is a word that is used most often in Scripture metaphorically, and so it is also translated, “to convert,” or “to revert.”

Convert or revert to what? In this case, childlikeness. Jesus says “unless you become *like* children...” Not that you literally become children, but that you become *like* children. You revert back to a childlike quality or qualities that children possess, and that you once possessed.

What would that be? I do not think that we can fully understand or appreciate what Jesus meant by these words without interpreting them through the lens of how children were perceived in the ancient world. People commonly viewed children as insignificant and unimportant because they had nothing of value to contribute to society. To say it another way, they brought nothing to the table. No ideas, no skills, no solutions, no strength, no resources...nothing!

Which corresponds to and reinforces something Jesus said earlier when introducing His Sermon on the Mount. He said, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:3)*. Being poor in spirit is the recognition that one is spiritually impoverished or spiritually bankrupt. It is the acknowledgment that when it comes to gaining entrance into the kingdom one has absolutely nothing to offer, nothing to contribute, nothing of one’s own he can put on the table and say, “Here you go! I’ll exchange this for membership in the kingdom.”

And that is essentially what Jesus was saying about turning and becoming like children. Like those who are poor in spirit, children understand that they bring nothing to the table that is valuable enough, substantive enough, impressive enough to earn entrance into the kingdom. They recognize that there is nothing in them or about them that qualifies them for the privilege of being a member of the kingdom. And so, if they are to be given this great privilege, they are completely dependent on God to give it to them, just as they are completely dependent on their parents to provide for them.

By the way, the word for child in these verses has reference to a *little* child, for sure under the age of twelve, but most likely even younger. When little children eat, they do not first go into the kitchen and prepare a meal, they simply climb into a chair and sit at the table, and lo and behold, there is food already prepared for them. When children need to go somewhere, they do not jump into the driver’s seat of a car and zoom away. They climb into the back seat and let their parents take them to that place. When children need clothes, they do not sit down at a sewing machine and make them or go to the store and buy them. Their parents do that.

Jesus is introducing a theological concept of spiritual inability and ineptitude as it relates to a person securing a place in God’s kingdom, which the Apostles would fully develop in their epistles after His death and resurrection. We are all helpless sinners who have nothing to bring to the table in terms of our own righteousness, good works, good intentions, or moral achievements. We are actually dead in our trespasses and sins in which we used to live...and were by nature children of wrath. But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our sins. It is by grace we have been saved (Eph. 2:1-4).

But the disciples did not yet understand this. The very question, “Which of us will be the greatest in the kingdom?” is saturated with self-righteousness, presumption, and pride, the very things that prevent people from entering the kingdom of heaven. So, Jesus, in answering their question, has to begin by addressing a more fundamental issue. “Before you guys ask which of you will be the greatest in the kingdom, you’d better make sure you are even *in* the kingdom, and so you need to understand what is required to enter. You must turn and become like children—children who understand that they bring nothing to the table, children who understand they are helpless, and children who understand they are dependent on adults to provide for them.

After telling them this, Jesus goes on to answer their question about greatness in the kingdom. **Verse 4**, *“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”*

Humility is the specific childlike quality that corresponds to the kingdom—both in gaining entrance into it and attaining greatness in it. One must *“humble himself like this child.”* Jesus is drawing their attention to the child that He has taken in His arms, who was the concrete expression of what Jesus was trying to illustrate. But we should not interpret this to mean “whoever humbles himself as this little child humbles himself” but rather “whoever humbles himself so that he becomes like this little child.”

Do children know that they are humble in the way Jesus is describing humility here? No. It is not something they are conscious of, nor is it something they feel, or something they try to be. So, Jesus is not describing a subjective attitude, but an objective state. Children, by virtue of their stage in life (weak, small, vulnerable, undeveloped) live in a perpetual state of unconscious humility because they depend almost entirely on the adult world for their protection and provision.

And that humble state of dependence and helplessness is the quality that is possessed by those who are greatest in the kingdom. Why? For one very simple reason: because it is the quality that most corresponds with the truth.

Think about it. The disciples were competing for the highest cabinet positions in Jesus' kingdom—positions of responsibility, positions where they could use their skills and competencies, positions where they could exercise influence and power. And they were especially vying for the *greatest* position in the kingdom, which, in their minds, was Jesus' right hand man (was it His chief of staff, or vice-Messiah?).

Really? What did they have to offer Jesus? Did He *need* their help in running His kingdom? Was He going to say to Peter, "Simon, I'm really swamped right now with my kingly responsibilities...I need you to give that press briefing this afternoon instead of me?" Or to Judas, "Judas, I need your assistance in putting together the annual budget. Why don't you run some numbers and get back to me next week?" Really?

When you compare the intelligence and skill and competence and capability of Jesus to one of His disciples, or to any human being for that matter, it is laughable. For the One who knows everything, for the One who can do anything by simply thinking it or speaking it into being, for the One who knows how to do everything, for the One who already has everything figured out from eternity past to eternity future, it's absurd to think that someone could help Him. He doesn't *need* anyone! To think that any human being has something to offer or something to contribute to Jesus and His kingdom is ridiculous! We have nothing. We bring nothing to the table. No skills, talents, ideas, advice, resources, righteousness—nothing!

That is the truth! And believing that truth and living in the light of that truth results in humility. Not a subjective humility that you feel, necessarily, or that you try to be, but an objective state that comes when you realize that God doesn't need or require or even want anything from you, except for you to simply receive and enjoy what He has to give you. Just as a child subconsciously understands that he/she is utterly dependent upon those who take care of them, and that they do not earn that care and protection and provision, so are those who are VIPs in the kingdom. Childlike humility is the attitude that pleases Jesus most because it is the attitude that corresponds with the truth.

Let me give you an illustration. I went golfing one time with a nephew who was very athletic but who had only been golfing once before we played together. I beat him by thirty or forty strokes. He thought I was pretty good. He kept asking me for advice about his stance and his grip and his swing, which I was more than happy to give.

I also went golfing one time with a professional golfer. He beat me by thirty or forty strokes, easily. Interestingly, he never once asked for my advice during the whole round. But can you imagine me trying to give him advice? Are you kidding me? That would have been insulting! Because I have nothing to offer such a person.

Going into this conversation the disciples still had a skewed understanding of Jesus, the kingdom, kingdom values, and themselves. They still had an earthly perspective. The kingdom of heaven is not like earthly kingdoms. Rulers of earthly kingdoms surround

themselves with the best and brightest because they *need* their advice, experience, expertise, skill, and competency. But the Ruler of the kingdom of heaven does not *need* anything or anybody. He surrounds Himself with humble people, not because He needs them, but because He loves them.

The LORD made an interesting statement through the prophet Isaiah that reveals what He thinks and feels about humble people. He said, *“This is the one I esteem, declares the LORD, he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and who trembles at my Word” (66:2).*

Jesus’ followers are not great achievers who carve out for themselves a niche in the kingdom of heaven. They are those who know they can bring nothing to the table, so they let Jesus carve out the niche in the kingdom for them. They come to Him and say, “Nothing of my own I bring, simply to You I cling.”

Jesus goes on in the next two verses to talk about the extraordinary value He places on children, which, remember, was counter cultural. He says in **verses 5-6**, ⁵*“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,* ⁶*but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”*

Though Jesus is still talking about children, He is changing subjects, here, and is no longer talking about childlike humility, but actual children. He says that children are so highly valued to God, that the way we treat children is the way we treat Him. If we treat children well, we will be rewarded; if we treat them badly there are dire consequences.

I am not going to explore these two verses today, because I think it might distract from the main idea in verses 1-4. So, let me close with this: It is human nature to think that if we are going to get on God’s good side, we have to impress Him with our goodness. In every major world religion this is the premise. You earn God’s favor (you earn salvation) by doing, performing, impressing. Perhaps you believe that premise, too. That your status with God is based on your church attendance, your Bible reading, your charitable gifts, your benevolent deeds, your good works.

Jesus declares that it is not. There is nothing we can do to impress God except receive His provision for our salvation, which includes eternal life. *“For as many as received Him to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12).*

Kingdom VIPs **Matthew 18:1-6**

Main Idea: *Childlikeness is the means of gaining entrance and attaining greatness in the kingdom.*

Introduction: Cabinet member qualifications versus Kingdom member qualifications

The disciples question Jesus about greatness in the kingdom (1)

Jesus declares that greatness is attained by childlikeness (2-4)

He calls a child to stand before them (2)

He says that childlikeness is an entrance requirement for the kingdom (3)

The meaning of "change"

The meaning of childlikeness

He says that childlike humility is the measure of greatest in the kingdom (4)

Jesus discusses the treatment of children (5-6)

Receiving children is equivalent to receiving Christ (5)

Causing children to sin is extremely dire (6)

Application: Isaiah 66:2