

**Be Like Children****Sunday, August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2025 - 10:00 a.m.**

Have you ever wanted to be great? I mean, who hasn't wanted to be good at something, recognized for something, valued for something?

When I was 10, I vividly remember waking up each morning and turning on TSN to see the sports highlights from the night before. In 1998, there was a back-and-forth battle between two giants. Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa. They were in a race to hit the most home runs in a single season. They were trying to beat the record Roger Maris held for 37 years. I remember waking up one September morning to find out Mark McGwire hit his 62nd home run and broke the record. Almost poetically, McGwire's Cardinals were playing Sosa's Cubs that night when he beat the record, solidifying himself as the winner of this season-long home run war. Every recess from that point on, I wanted to be the Mark McGwire of the school yard.

Maybe as a kid, you wanted to be the richest person in the world. Maybe as a teenager, you wanted to be the most famous actor. Maybe as an adult, you've wanted to be the top of your field at work, the one others admire. Maybe, deep down, you just wanted to be noticed or thought of by others as wise, spiritual, or important. That desire is built into us, isn't it? From the time we're young, we're trained to want to climb higher, to prove ourselves, to stand out. At school: kids compete for grades, sports teams, awards. At work: promotions, raises, achievements. Even in friendships, we find ourselves comparing who's more popular, more talented, or more accomplished. And if we're not careful, that same competitive spirit can creep into our faith. And that's exactly what was happening with the disciples.

This morning I want to look at the beginning of Matthew 18. The disciples asked a question: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And the answer Jesus gives them deserves to be studied:

**Matthew 18:1-4 - [1] At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" [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. [4] Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."**

Matthew 18 opens with this question: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" That's a bold question, isn't it? But if we look at the context, it makes sense. Jesus has been teaching them about His kingdom. They've seen Him do miracles, they've heard Him speak about glory, they've heard hints about thrones and judgment. In their minds, the kingdom is just around the corner, and they're already dreaming about who gets the top seats at the table. In a commentary I read, it said, "They were so focused on the crown that they forgot the cross." They wanted the privilege, but not the pain. They wanted to reign with Jesus, but they weren't prepared to suffer with Him. They wanted to hear about His glory, but they skipped over His words about His suffering. Can you imagine the conversation that led up to this question? Luke's gospel also mentions our main verse this morning. But it gives us some backstory:

**Luke 9:46 - An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest...**

They were actually arguing among themselves about who was greatest. I picture Peter saying, “Come on, guys, I’m obviously the leader here. Jesus said he would ‘give me the keys of heaven.’ It’s obviously me...” Maybe John chimed in, “Yeah, well, I’m the disciple He loves... I’m clearly His favourite.” James might have said, “Hey you two, don’t forget, I was on the mountain with you guys when Jesus was transfigured. I’m clearly important.” And maybe Judas sat back quietly, holding the money bag, thinking, “You fools, I control the finances. I have the real power.” Grown men, the future apostles of the church, bickering like children about who’s the best. But let’s not laugh too quickly. Don’t we do the same thing in our own ways? We might not say it out loud, but in our hearts, we compare. Who’s the most gifted? Who’s the most spiritual? Who’s the most important? And then, in the middle of this power struggle, Jesus does something no one expects. Verse 2 says:

**Matthew 18:2 - And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them.**

Picture this. The disciples are expecting a lecture on greatness, maybe even hoping Jesus will point to one of them as the top guy. Instead, He calls a child into the middle of the group. A child—someone with no rank, no title, no accomplishments, no influence. In their culture, children weren’t admired. They were dependent on others, overlooked, and considered “unimportant.” And Jesus says something wild:

**Matthew 18:3-4 - [3] Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. [4] Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.**

Jesus presents this child as the example. Unless you become like this child, you can’t even enter my kingdom. And if you want to be great, you must humble yourself like this child. Here we have another typical Jesus answer. He doesn’t just answer their question, He flips their whole worldview upside down. So today I want to use these verses in Matthew 18:2–4. I want us to see what Jesus is teaching us through that child. He’s showing us that greatness in His kingdom looks nothing like greatness in the world. In fact, He’s showing us three truths about humility: Humility is required to enter the kingdom. Humility is the path to greatness in the kingdom. Humility is the character of Christ Himself.

### **1. Humility is Required to Enter the Kingdom**

Let’s look again at verse 3:

**Matthew 18:3 - “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

Notice Jesus’ words. He doesn’t say, “Unless you become like children, you’ll never be great.” No, He goes deeper: “Unless you become like children, you’ll never even enter.” Do you hear how radical that is? The disciples were concerned with ranking in the kingdom, and Jesus says, “Hold on, you’re not even asking the right question. Before you think about who’s greatest, you need to ask if you’re even in.” This would have been a shocking statement. These were the disciples—the ones closest to Jesus, the ones who had left everything to follow Him. And Jesus warns them: Pride can still keep you out. Ambition, comparison, self-importance—those attitudes are not just “little sins.” They’re barriers to salvation itself. As followers of Christ, we must be converted. We must repent of our sins. To repent is

more than saying sorry because we got caught with sin in our lives. Repentance is a change of heart and mind. It means you turn away from your sin.

That's the reason our youth room has "one80" graffiti on the wall. Because we're making the decision to turn away from our sin and follow Jesus. We must turn from our old way of thinking. Turn from pride to humility. Turn from self-reliance to childlike dependence. This isn't just about making small adjustments. It's about a fundamental reorientation of your heart.

And here's the sobering truth: You can be close to Jesus—like the disciples were—and still miss the kingdom if you refuse to humble yourself. Judas is the clearest example. He walked with Jesus, heard His teaching, even performed miracles in His name, but his heart was never converted from pride and greed. That's why Jesus says this so strongly: "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus isn't messing around. In other words: without humility, there's no way into the kingdom. When Jesus says, "be like children," we need to be careful how we apply that. Jesus is NOT saying children are perfect examples of purity or innocence. Anyone who has raised kids knows that children can be selfish, stubborn, and sinful. No one teaches their kid to be a bully in the nursery and steal all the good toys from the other kids. That comes naturally to them. And because of that, we actively try to teach our kids to avoid those kinds of actions. So clearly, that's not the point Jesus is making. I would argue that He is pointing out other characteristics about children. I can think of three examples of "childlike" character traits that make for good followers of Christ.

#### **a) Dependence**

A child cannot provide for themselves. They need someone to feed them, guide them, protect them. In the same way, we enter God's kingdom not by self-sufficiency but by relying completely on the Father.

#### **b) Trust**

A little child naturally trusts their parents. They don't question whether food will be on the table or whether their needs will be met. They simply believe. That's the faith Jesus calls us to.

#### **c) Low Status**

In the first century, children were not admired. They had no social standing, no rights, no "status." They were the lowest in society. Jesus says: Take that low place. Don't seek honour. Don't demand recognition.

Let's pause here and talk about pride for a moment. Pride is not just a character flaw—it's deadly. In a commentary I was reading, it said: "Pride threw the angels that sinned out of heaven, and will keep us out, if we be not converted from it." Pride was the devil's sin. He wanted to exalt himself, to rise higher than God. And Jesus is saying, if we carry that same pride, we will face the same punishment. This means we can't treat pride lightly. There is no excuse for ANY follower of Christ to hide pride in their hearts—even someone who's been a Christian for over 70 years. Sometimes people let pride creep into their lives. They make excuses for it. They try to cover up their pride by calling it "being ambitious" or "being driven." And it doesn't stop there. Pride wears all kinds of masks. Some cover their pride with "perfectionism," saying they just "have high standards." Some cover pride with "control," insisting they're just being responsible, when really they don't trust God enough to let go. Others disguise pride as "passion," blowing up in anger and demanding things their way. Pride can even hide in

“independence,” refusing help and instead insisting they can do it on their own. Pride is a master of disguise.

I would say some of those are more obvious signs than others. But there is also another type of person who is secretly full of pride. For them, it shows in the opposite way. Someone who is insecure will downplay themselves. And on the surface, that can look like humility. “Don’t worry about little old me...” But hidden underneath that “humility” is actually a strategy to avoid being criticized, rejected, or exposed. King Saul is an example of this in 1 Samuel 9. When he’s being chosen by Samuel to be the king, look what he says:

**1 Samuel 9:21 - “Am I not a Benjaminite, from the least of the tribes of Israel? And is not my clan the humblest of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin?”**

Saul wasn’t actually humble. Later on in 1 Samuel 15 he creates a monument for himself. You could argue the power went to his head, and that’s why he made the monument in his honour. But I think right from the beginning of his reign as king, his pride was showing. It was subtle, and no one would want to point it out. He was the king! Who would be bold enough to point out the sin—the pride—in the life of the king? But if only someone had helped him recognize the dangerous road he was on. Samuel tried. But it wasn’t just his image he was obsessed with. He was also obsessed with control. When Samuel tried to warn Saul that his kingdom was going to be torn away, Saul says, “I have sinned...” Good start. But he’s not willing to give up control, and instead he says: “...yet honour me now before the elders of my people and before Israel.” His concern is not repentance. It’s his reputation. That’s why Saul was so jealous of David. What would that look like for Saul if David—of all people—took over as king? Saul wouldn’t fully repent. He said a version of “I’m sorry” a few times. But he didn’t repent. And because of that, he suffered the consequences and fell on his own sword and died. We know David was far from perfect, but the difference was, his heart remained soft. Saul’s hard heart is what ultimately destroyed him. In God’s eyes, pride is rebellion. And until we turn from it, we cannot enter His kingdom.

Let me give you a picture. Imagine you’re trying to enter a doorway that is only four feet high. If you walk toward it standing tall, proud, shoulders back, you’ll hit your head every time. The only way to enter is to stoop, to bow down, to humble yourself. That’s what Jesus is saying about the kingdom. The entrance is low. If you come standing tall in your own pride, you can’t get in. The only way is to bow, to stoop, to acknowledge your weakness and your need for God’s mercy. Remember humility isn’t just a nice character trait. It’s a salvation issue. You cannot enter God’s kingdom unless you admit that you are not enough. Unless you repent of pride and self-reliance. Unless you humble yourself before the Lord.

For someone who hasn’t made the decision to follow Jesus, this means you can’t come to God by your own goodness. Your résumé, your accomplishments, your morality—they can’t save you. You must come like a child, empty-handed, trusting in Christ alone. And for someone who is following Jesus, this means pride can still creep in, even after conversion. We can drift back into self-reliance, self-importance, and ambition. Maybe that’s where you are today. You know Jesus, but pride has started to take root. You compare yourself with others. You crave recognition. You’ve forgotten what it means to simply depend on the Father like a child. Jesus is calling you to turn back, to humble yourself again.

## 2. Humility is the Path to Greatness

Look again at verse 4:

**Matthew 18:4 - Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.**

The disciples asked, “Who is the greatest?” They imagined thrones, positions of honour, maybe even crowns. Jesus shocks them by saying, “The one who takes the lowest place. The one who humbles himself—that’s greatness in my kingdom.” This is completely upside down compared to how the world defines greatness. In our world, greatness is measured by how many people serve you. In God’s kingdom, greatness is measured by how many people you serve. The world says: Be first, Be strongest, Climb higher. Jesus says: Be last, Be servant, Bow lower. Children don’t try to be humble—they just are naturally. They aren’t calculating their rank. They aren’t competing for status. They simply accept their smallness. That is greatness in the eyes of God. Jesus isn’t just telling us to humble ourselves—He modelled it for us. Look at what Paul wrote in Philippians 2:6–8 about Jesus:

**Philippians 2:6–8 - [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.**

The greatest in the kingdom is the one who humbles himself. And that’s exactly what Jesus did. He was the eternal Son of God, yet He stooped down, became a servant, and died a shameful death for us. He didn’t demand a throne; He picked up a towel. When Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, that was the lowest task of the lowest servant. But the King of kings knelt down and did it. He didn’t cling to status; He chose sacrifice. That’s greatness in God’s eyes. There’s something we often miss about humility. Our humility doesn’t just glorify God—it also frees us. Pride keeps us trapped in comparison, always measuring ourselves against others. Pride makes us insecure, because no matter how high we climb, someone else is always higher. But humility sets us free. When you’re content to be small, you don’t have to compete anymore. When you humble yourself, you can serve joyfully, because you’re not worried about who notices. Humility may make you seem weak in the world’s eyes, but in God’s eyes, it makes you great.

In the church, humility means being willing to serve in hidden ways, not just the visible roles. It means showing up early to stack chairs, or staying late to clean up, even if no one says thank you. That’s greatness. At home, humility means putting your family’s needs above your own. Parents should humbly listen to their children. Sometimes, they actually know what they’re talking about. But at the same time, children should honour their parents. Spouses should lay aside their own rights for each other. That’s greatness. At work, humility means refusing to step on others to get ahead. It means working hard, not for applause, but for the glory of God. That’s greatness. In relationships, humility means apologizing first. It means choosing forgiveness over grudges. It means letting go of the need to win every argument. That’s greatness.

John the Baptist understood this. Look what he said about Jesus:

**John 3:30 - He must increase, but I must decrease.**

That's greatness. When you humble yourself, you fear you'll be overlooked, ignored, forgotten. But Jesus says the opposite:

**Luke 14:11 - For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.**

God's kingdom is upside down. The path to greatness is humility.

**3. Humility is the Character of Christ****Matthew 18:2 - And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them.**

Why a child? Out of all the illustrations He could have chosen, why does Jesus place a child in the middle of the disciples' debate? He could have pointed to Himself. He could have said, "I am the greatest, follow my example." That would have been true! But instead, He silently calls a child over, places that child in the center, and says, "Look here. This is the picture."

Another thing that I've never considered before is—what was the kid thinking during all this? Why would they come when Jesus called them? Why wouldn't they say, "Stranger, danger!" kick Him in the shins, and run away? The fact that the child came when Jesus called tells us something about His character. Like a child, He was approachable. Children aren't drawn to harsh, intimidating people. They are drawn to those who are gentle, safe, and kind. Jesus must have been the kind of person children loved to be near. The King of heaven, the Creator of the universe, was so approachable that little children ran to Him. That's humility on display. Another way Jesus can "be like a child" is through His honesty. If you've ever played a board game or card game with a kid who needs to keep their cards hidden, you'll know that kids are NOT masters of deception. They will try to hide things, but usually they're caught quickly. Their honesty reflects the character of Christ, who is "the Truth." When we live with integrity, without masks or manipulation, we reflect Jesus. Another way Jesus can "be like a child" is that He was unconcerned with status. Kids don't care how much their parents make when they are making friends at the park. Status doesn't matter to children. In the same way, Jesus never worried about His "rank." He ate with tax collectors and sinners, He touched lepers, He welcomed outcasts. Humility refuses to play the social ladder game. I could keep going, pointing out similarities. These are just some of the reasons why I think Jesus chose to use a child as an example. He wasn't just giving them an object lesson—He was showing them His own heart. Jesus lived out what He taught.

So here's the question: If humility is the very character of Christ, and if we are His disciples, how much do our lives reflect His humility? Do people find us approachable? Or do we do our best to keep them at arm's length, to protect ourselves? Do we live honestly and transparently? Or do we cover up and pretend? Do we care more about status, recognition, and image? Or are we content with the lowest place? Do we depend daily on the Father? Or do we live as if we are in control? Being childlike means taking on the very character of Jesus. And if He Himself was humble, how can we not be?

Let me paint you a mental image. Imagine two scenes: In one, picture a celebrity out for dinner. They are surrounded by cameras, flashing lights, fans screaming, and everyone clamouring for their



attention. In the other, picture a mother softly kneeling down, licking her thumb, to gently wipe her toddler's face after they made a mess while eating something. Which one is greater in the kingdom? Jesus would say the mother. Quiet, unnoticed service—that's humility in action. That's greatness.

It means we don't use our gifts to elevate ourselves, but to lift others up. It means we stop asking, "Who notices me?" and start asking, "How can I reflect Jesus to others?" The disciples were asking, "Who is the greatest?" And Jesus answered by pointing to a child, because they already missed the true answer to the question—who was standing right in front of them. The person they were asking the question to—Jesus. The epitome of a humble, lowly, servant-hearted person. The disciples' question was rooted in our natural desire for recognition, for significance, for glory. And Jesus answers in a way that flips everything upside down. They wanted thrones, titles, crowns. Jesus gave them a child. They wanted glory. Jesus gave them humility. They wanted to climb higher. Jesus told them to go lower. Without humility, we cannot even enter the kingdom. Pride will lead to our eternal death. This is not just about "being nice." Jesus isn't telling us to put on a fake smile and act humble while secretly wanting to be noticed. False humility is sickening. True humility is attractive. Real humility flows out of a heart transformed by Christ. It's not a show; it's a posture before God.

So let's ask ourselves: What kind of greatness are we pursuing? The world's greatness—climbing ladders, gaining recognition, standing in the spotlight? Or Christ's greatness—stooping low, serving others, stepping out of the spotlight so that Jesus can be seen more clearly? Jesus did not come riding on warhorses. He came on a donkey. That's greatness. That is humility. That's our King. And that's the paradox of His kingdom. When you humble yourself, you will be exalted. You don't have to fight for recognition. You don't have to demand attention. God Himself will honour those who take the lowest place.

Are you walking in humility daily? Or has pride started to creep back in? Maybe you've been comparing yourself to others. Maybe you've been craving recognition, quietly resenting when others get the spotlight. Jesus is calling you back to the childlike posture of humility. To stop competing. To stop climbing. To rest in His love and to serve in His strength. The disciples asked, "Who is the greatest?" Jesus said, "Be like children." So let's humble ourselves. Let's depend on our Father. Let's reflect the character of Christ. Because in God's kingdom, the way up is always down.