

9/27/26

Sermon Title: Who Is Great in the Kingdom of Heaven?

Preacher: Pastor Kim Soonbae

Scripture Passage: Matthew 18:1-14

The Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven

¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

² He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them.

³ And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵ And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Causing to Stumble

⁶ “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

⁷ Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!

⁸ If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.

⁹ And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

The Parable of the Wandering Sheep

¹⁰ “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

[11]

¹² “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?

¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.

¹⁴ In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

As Jesus continued His earthly ministry, He was increasingly rejected by the Jewish leaders, including the Pharisees, priests, and scribes.

At first, when they witnessed the signs and miracles Jesus performed, some of them wondered whether He might be the Messiah they had been waiting for for so long.

But as they continued to listen to His teachings and observe His actions, they came to realize that Jesus was not the kind of Messiah they had expected.

As a result, they rejected Him and began to persecute Him.

Yet Jesus continued to carry out the work He had come to do.

He devoted Himself to training His disciples, who would continue His ministry after He ascended into heaven.

When Peter confessed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus told His disciples that He would suffer and be put to death, but that He would rise again on the third day.

From that point on, Jesus focused even more intensely on training His disciples. He taught them what it meant to follow Him as His disciples.

Yet the disciples still did not understand the true nature of Jesus’ ministry.

They thought that the Kingdom of God—the Kingdom of Heaven of which Jesus spoke—was an earthly kingdom that would be established in this world.

And they believed that when that kingdom was established, each of them would be given a position of honor and authority.

So they began a fierce competition among themselves, carefully watching one another and wondering who would receive the highest position.

This happened while Jesus and His disciples were staying together in a house in Capernaum.

Even though Jesus had told His disciples twice that He would suffer and be put to death, they seemed to pay no attention to what He had said.

Instead, they came to Jesus and asked Him, “Who, then, is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?”

18 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

“At that time” refers to the occasion when Jesus told Peter to go fishing and pay the temple tax for both of them with the one-shekel coin he would find in the mouth of a fish.

The temple tax was paid each year around the fifteenth day of the month of Adar, which corresponds roughly to February or March on the solar calendar.

Therefore, this event took place about a month before Jesus was crucified and died—around the time of Passover, on the fourteenth day of Nisan, which corresponds roughly to March or April on the solar calendar.

Mark records that, as the disciples were traveling to Capernaum, they had been engaged in a heated discussion about who was the greatest among them.

When they arrived at the house in Capernaum, Jesus asked them what they had been discussing along the way, but they remained silent.

(Mark 9:33) They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’

(Mark 9:34) But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

According to Luke, however, Jesus already knew what the disciples had been thinking.

(Luke 9:46) An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest.

(Luke 9:47) Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him.

But why were the disciples arguing along the road to Capernaum about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?

What had fueled their struggle for positions of power and influence?

It was Jesus' teaching about the temple tax.

Jesus had explained that, as the Son of God and the Lord of the temple, He was not obligated to pay the temple tax.

Yet He said that He would pay it so that He would not cause others to stumble.

When the disciples heard these words, they apparently thought that Jesus, the Son of the living God, would soon enter Jerusalem, conquer the city, and become King.

And once His kingdom was established, they believed that they would occupy positions of authority and rule over the people in that kingdom.

Even at this point, the disciples still thought that the Kingdom of God—the Kingdom of Heaven of which Jesus spoke—was an earthly kingdom that would be established in this world.

And as they anticipated that kingdom, they began to desire positions of greater honor and authority than the other disciples.

Even though Jesus had already told them twice that He would suffer and be put to death on the cross, they not only failed to understand what He meant; they were not even interested in understanding it.

This ignorance and misunderstanding continued until Jesus was crucified, raised from the dead, and ascended into heaven.

Jesus then called a little child who was standing there and used the child to teach these disciples a profound lesson.

² He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them.

³ And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵ And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

In the time of Jesus, women and children were not treated with the same dignity and respect that they receive today.

They were often not regarded as full members of society and were even excluded when people were being counted.

Yet Jesus suddenly called a little child and declared that unless they became like little children, they could not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus was not saying that children are inherently good while adults are inherently evil.

Both children and adults are, by nature, sinners.

Rather, Jesus had in mind the humility of a child who depends entirely on his or her parents, absolute obedience to them, a sincerity that is not driven by calculation or self-interest, and the honesty and openness of a child.

The disciples were completely focused on the question of who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

But Jesus directed their attention to the qualifications for entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

He was teaching them that only those who possess the humility to depend entirely on God, those who receive His teaching with a sincere heart, and those who absolutely trust and obey God and His Word can enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus' words put an immediate end to the disciples' pointless argument about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus continued speaking.

⁶ "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

⁷ Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!

Here, the expression "these little ones" does not refer only to children.

It refers to those who are weak, those who are often ignored or looked down upon, and those who have little or no power in society.

Jesus says that if we cause one of them to stumble, it would be better to have a large millstone hung around our neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea. In other words, Jesus is saying that it would be better to die than to cause one of these little ones to stumble.

Even those who may appear small or insignificant are believers and belong to God's people.

Therefore, Jesus commands us to respect and honor them.

Jesus also warns His disciples not to sin by cutting off evil thoughts at their very root.

⁸ If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.

⁹ And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

“To be thrown into the eternal fire” refers to being cast into hell.

Jesus is teaching His disciples that even those who may appear weak, insignificant, or powerless in the eyes of the world are of immeasurable value to God.

Every one of God’s people is under His personal care and attention.

Therefore, they must not look down on such people or treat them as insignificant. Instead, they are to honor and respect them, recognizing their great value in the sight of God.

¹⁰ “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

[11]

Verse 11 is marked as being absent in many modern translations.

The reason is that this verse is not found in the earliest and most widely recognized manuscripts, but it appears in some later manuscripts.

Verse 11 reads, “For the Son of Man came to save the lost.”

There are thirteen places in the New Testament where a verse or passage is similarly marked as being absent or omitted in some manuscripts.

The original manuscripts of the Bible are no longer extant.

What we have today are copies of those original manuscripts.

These surviving manuscripts have been carefully evaluated according to their age, textual quality, and other factors.

In this particular case, the verse is absent from highly regarded manuscripts such as the Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Vaticanus, while it is found in some later manuscripts.

The phrase, “Their angels in heaven,” also gives us a glimpse of God’s special care for His people.

Even those who may appear small and insignificant to the world are precious to God, and He assigns angels to serve and watch over His people.

Jesus is revealing to His disciples the heart of God toward the little ones.

¹² “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?

¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.

God looks with compassion upon those who are considered insignificant and powerless in the eyes of the world.

The words, “if he finds it,” suggest that among the sheep that have wandered away, there may be one that does not respond to the shepherd’s call.

If a lost sheep refuses to listen to its owner’s voice and stubbornly continues to go its own way, there is only so much the owner can do.

Even so, the owner will do everything possible to search for that sheep and bring it back.

When Jesus says that the shepherd rejoices more over that one sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not wander away, it does not mean that God loves the one lost sheep more than the ninety-nine who remained.

Rather, it means that God is deeply concerned for the lost sheep, fearing that something might happen to it, and that He rejoices when He finally finds and restores it.

It is much like a parent who is especially concerned about a child who is struggling or has gone astray.

God's desire is that everyone would receive eternal life.

¹⁴ In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

Therefore, causing even one of these little ones to stumble is a serious sin because it goes against the will of God.

Beloved members of Church of Godly Dreams,

The disciples asked Jesus, "Who, then, is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" Their attention was still focused on position, power, and becoming greater than others.

But Jesus placed a little child among them and completely redirected their attention.

Greatness in the Kingdom of God is not found in being exalted.

Rather, it is found in humbling ourselves.

The person who lays down the desire to prove himself and, like a little child, humbly depends completely on God is the one who is great in the Kingdom of God.

And Jesus tells us that with that same humble heart, we are to value even "one of these little ones."

The world values efficiency.

It favors those who have power and influence.

And it often ignores those who are small and weak.

But the Kingdom of God is different.

Even those who may appear small and insignificant in the eyes of the world are precious to God.

There is no one whom God is willing to give up on.

The heart of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep in the open country and goes in search of the one sheep that has wandered away—that is the heart of God toward every single soul.

For that one person whom we may casually pass by, Jesus gave everything He had—even His life on the cross.

We, too, must have the heart of Jesus Christ.

The world tells us that greatness means rising above others.

But the Kingdom of God tells us that greatness is found in humbling ourselves.

The world tells us that success means climbing to a position higher than others.

But Jesus teaches us that the life of the Kingdom of God is found in serving others, embracing the weak and vulnerable, and going in search of the one lost soul.

Dear brothers and sisters,

At this moment, I want you to quietly place your hand over your heart and ask yourself:

What am I living for?

Am I living like the disciples, competing and struggling to rise above others in this world?

Or am I living like Jesus, humbling myself and serving others?

Let us take deeply to heart the words of Jesus that one soul is more precious than the whole world.

Let us be careful in our words and actions so that we do not cause even one of these little ones to stumble.

Let us not be people who become stumbling blocks to others. Instead, let us be people who help them draw closer to Jesus.

Let us not be people who condemn others and push them away.

Instead, let us be people who embrace them, encourage them, and help them stand again.

And let us joyfully take part in God's work of seeking and finding lost souls.

Let us live our lives in such a way that, through us, the little ones may experience the love of God, those who are wounded may receive comfort, and those who have lost their way may find their way back to the Lord.

And when the day comes when we stand before the Lord, may you and I hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

May we live in such a way that we will receive that commendation from our Lord. I bless you all in the name of Jesus Christ.