

The Greatest in the Kingdom

Devotional Reading: [Matthew 19:13–22](#)

Background Scripture: [Matthew 18:1–9](#); [Mark 10:15](#)

Matthew 18:1–9

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.

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.

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Key Text

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

—**Matthew 18:4**

Jesus Calls Us

Unit 1: Called from the Margins of Society

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Jesus' view of greatness.
2. Compare and contrast Jesus' view of greatness with that of the disciples.
3. State one way that he or she will practice childlike humility in the coming week.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

A. What a Child Wants

B. Lesson Context

I. Measure of Greatness (Matthew 18:1–5)

A. Presumptive Question (v. 1)

GOAT

B. Perplexing Example (vv. 2–3)

C. Primary Position (vv. 4–5)

Learning from Children

II. Warning of Sin (Matthew 18:6–9)

A. Regarding Little Ones (vv. 6–7)

B. Regarding the Self (vv. 8–9)

Conclusion

A. Humility and Self-Control

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

hyperbole *hahy-pur-buh-lee.*

Messiah *Meh-sigh-uh.*

Pharisees *Fair-ih-seez.*

Introduction

A. What a Child Wants

Children can't wait to grow up! They think that “growing up” means experiencing a life of unchecked freedom and complete autonomy. Ask any child how they would act as a grown-up, and their answers will reflect an expectation for freedom. For example, as a child, I anticipated that I would express my grown-up freedom by eating a container of cake frosting whenever I desired. However, I have yet to do that as an adult!

Although children want agency and power, they depend on caretakers to provide for their needs and wants. For this reason, the world does not customarily regard children as examples of greatness and power. But that did not prevent Jesus from using a child to teach his followers.

B. Lesson Context

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 transfigura-

tion 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 Messiah, 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](#).

I. Measure of Greatness

([Matthew 18:1–5](#))

A. Presumptive Question (v. 1)

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

Jesus had been teaching on the practices of “the kings of the earth” ([Matthew 17:25](#)). Although he was not teaching regarding God's kingdom, his *disciples* began considering *at that time* their own position in that promised *kingdom*. The 12 disciples had been arguing regarding *who* from among them would be the *greatest* ([Luke 9:46](#)). Their discussions and arguments regarding their position continued, even as they shared the last meal with Jesus before his arrest (see [22:24](#)). If the Messiah were to rule in the same manner as an earthly ruler, then he would require positions of lesser authority in his kingdom. The disciples assumed that they would fill such roles.

Jesus had previously shown special regard for Peter (see [Matthew 16:17–19](#)) along with James and John ([17:1](#)). At that time, the three saw Jesus transfigured before them ([17:2–13](#)). They were told to remain silent regarding what they had seen ([17:9](#)), and they obeyed ([Luke 9:36](#)). The separation of these three from the rest of the Twelve might have accelerated possible conflict among members of the entire group (compare the later episode of [Matthew 20:22–24](#)).

Had the disciples comprehended Jesus' previous teachings, they would have understood how inappropriate their question was. Jesus had

already defined the character of a person considered great in the kingdom of heaven ([Matthew 5:19–20](#); compare [11:11](#)). The disciples were unaware that this kingdom was already in their midst ([Luke 17:20–21](#)).

What Do You Think?

When is it appropriate for Christians to concern ourselves with greatness?

Digging Deeper

In what situations can a focus on greatness become a distraction or even an idol?

GOAT

Who's the goat? No, I'm not referring to the ruminant farm animal. Instead, I'm referring to the "Greatest of All Time"—the GOAT. This title is bestowed on people regarded as the greatest in their field of work or performance. Conversations regarding a GOAT in professional sports leagues can turn heated. Among sports fans, there are numerous metrics for defining who is the GOAT. However, fans acknowledge that success and the prestige it brings are necessary for an athlete to be designated the GOAT in his or her sport.

An assumption of prestige and success was central to the disciples' question. They believed that Jesus would define *greatest* in a manner consistent with the world's assumptions. Do you seek worldly measures of success and prestige so that you might be great by the world's expectations? Or, instead, can you practice faithful and humble service to the Lord who is "great ... and most worthy of praise" ([Psalm 145:3](#))?

—T. Z. S.

B. Perplexing Example (vv. 2–3)

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

Jesus did not answer the disciples' question directly. Instead, he incorporated a visual teaching aid to make his forthcoming point more vivid. During his earthly ministry, Jesus used a variety of teaching methods, including parables (examples: [Luke 15:1–16:15](#); see [lesson 1](#)) and physical illustrations (examples: [Mark 12:41–44](#); [John 13:3–17](#)). Jesus' use of these teaching methods was one reason that his hearers were "amazed" about his authoritative teaching ([Matthew 7:28–29](#)).

3a. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change

To *change* in this verse does not refer to a person's conversion to salvation. Instead, Jesus was teaching of a general conversion of thought: a person's process of changing his or her consideration on a matter. The underlying Greek word occurs some two dozen times in the New Testament, and it is almost always translated as some variation of the word "turn" (examples: [Matthew 5:39](#); [7:6](#)); that is the sense here.

3b. "and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus did not imply that his followers should *become* like immature or naïve *little children* (compare [Matthew 10:16](#); [1 Corinthians 13:11](#); [14:20](#)). Rather, what is implied is having a sense of being guileless and without pretense. The world's definitions of power and acclaim do not apply to God's kingdom (compare [Mark 10:31](#)).

What Do You Think?

What positions of status or influence do you hold? If following Jesus required you to renounce them, how would you do it?

Digging Deeper

What would leadership look like based on being childlike?

C. Primary Position (vv. 4–5)

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

The disciples desired that Jesus would indicate who among them would be greatest. Jesus, however, responded with a teaching applicable to everyone. *Whoever* lived in the manner that Jesus prescribed would find prestige in the kingdom. To humble themselves and each become as a little *child* meant the disciples would need to take on an attitude of trust and dependence. Children demonstrate humility by trusting others for their survival and flourishing. They can do little for themselves in this regard.

Jesus demonstrated a life of humility during his time on earth (see [Mark 10:45](#); [Philippians 2:5–8](#); [1 Peter 2:23](#)). Because of his humility, he received exaltation from his heavenly Father (see [Acts 5:30–31](#); [Philippians 2:9–11](#)). He yet today commands followers to humble themselves (see [Matthew 11:29–30](#); [Luke 14:7–11](#); [John 13:12–17](#)).

When followers of Jesus live with humility, they will be lifted and considered *greatest in the kingdom of heaven* (compare [James 4:10](#)). Such people may not meet the world’s standards of power, celebrity, status, or influence. But when believers live with humility, they will receive a greatness beyond what the world can provide (see [Proverbs 3:34](#); [Luke 1:52](#); [James 4:6](#); [1 Peter 5:6](#)). The disciples needed to change their assumptions of greatness from the world’s criteria to that of God’s kingdom.

Learning from Children

Laughs and giggles drew my attention to a nearby playground where a grandfather and his two young grandchildren were playing. The grandchildren adored their grandfather, and he loved spending time with them. When I asked the grandfather if he was having fun, he responded with a toothy grin, “I sure am!” I mentioned my own grandchildren and the joy they provide our family. He and I agreed that we don’t need to pretend to be great for our grandchildren. Instead, the main things that grandchildren want from their grandparents are love and attention.

Though the world considers children insignificant, they can reveal to adults the power of love and humility. How will you be attentive to how children reveal the attitudes that God requires of his people?

—C. R. B.

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

One such child does not likely refer to an actual child, but a believer who shows the required childlike innocence. When Jesus’ followers welcome others through practices of hospitality, they demonstrate the required life of humility. Although this verse teaches hospitality toward other believers, God’s people are to show hospitality toward all people (see [Romans 12:13](#); [Hebrews 13:2](#); [1 Peter 4:9](#)). Believers receive their reward through humbling and hospitable acts that indicate the presence of genuine faith (see [Matthew 10:40–42](#); [Luke 14:12–14](#); compare [Matthew 16:27](#)). The resulting reward does not consist of worldly acclaim or wealth, but of Christ and the life that he offers (see [1 John 5:12](#)).

II. Warning of Sin (Matthew 18:6–9)

A. Regarding Little Ones (vv. 6–7)

6a. “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble,

The subject of this verse (*anyone*) is a parallel to the “you” of [Matthew 18:4](#) (above). Jesus continued with a universally applicable teaching.

The phrase *causes ... to stumble* translates a Greek word from which we derive our word *scandal*. It can refer to something that causes a person to trip, as in a “stumbling block” ([Romans 11:9](#)). However, it can also refer to something more serious: an obstacle that breaks fellowship and causes sin (see [Matthew 13:41](#)).

The offense that causes another to stumble is not a mere difficulty or dislike, nor a response of disgust, as one might respond to a bad odor or foul language. Rather, Jesus meant this in a much stronger sense: something that results in another person’s transgressing God’s law.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus uses the phrase *little ones* when speaking of his followers (here and in [Matthew 10:42](#); [18:10](#), [14](#)). Two possibilities exist regarding the identity of *these* little ones. They could be other believers in general (see commentary on [18:5](#), above), or they may specifically describe believers in less powerful positions. Jesus’ warning works for both possibilities.

6b. “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.

Jesus illustrated his teaching by referring to an item that his audience would easily recognize: *a large millstone*. These stones were critical to turn grain into usable flour (compare [Matthew 24:41](#)). Such stones

varied in size. Some could be held in a hand, while other larger stones could only be moved by beasts of burden.

These stones would come in pairs (see [Deuteronomy 24:6](#)). The upper stone would rotate on the lower, stationary stone. Grains like barley or wheat would be poured between the stones. As the upper stone rotated over the lower stone, it would crush and grind the grains into usable flour.

One can imagine the horror on the disciples' faces as they imagined one of the larger millstones tied around a person's *neck*. The image of being *in the depths of the sea* with this "necklace" implied certain death by drowning. A dramatic point resulted from the illustration: causing entrapment and sin in others would lead to swift and unavoidable judgment. Followers of Jesus should not cause other believers to sin, and they should not abuse any authority that they might have. Either would lead to swift and certain judgment.

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!"

In the Old Testament, a statement of woe was proclaimed for several situations and several kinds of audiences. First, it was a lament for sin (example: [Lamentations 5:16](#)). Second, it warned people who had turned their backs on God and his commands (examples: [Isaiah 10:1–2](#); [Hosea 7:13](#)). Matthew's Gospel directs most of its proclamations of woe toward the teachers of the law and Pharisees regarding their hypocrisy (examples: [Matthew 23:13–36](#)).

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees were not the intended audience of this particular teaching. Instead, Jesus' first *woe* was directed at *the world*, the present evil age that leads people to stumble and sin (see

Galatians 1:4; 1 John 2:15–16). Jesus’ followers must not be tempted to adopt a position of worldly greatness and disregard the world’s abuses. Even so, such abuses and offenses would continue to *come* and “wage war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:11).

Jesus’ second *woe* is not directed at a specific *person*. Rather, he was directing the *woe* to any person who would cause another to stumble into sin. While evil is unavoidable, a person has no excuse for causing another to sin.

What Do You Think?

When you stumble, what steps can you take to mitigate the offense that you caused to others?

Digging Deeper

What Scripture passages give insight into the stakes of *not* taking care when you might cause offense?

B. Regarding the Self (vv. 8–9)

8a. “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.

Jesus did not state the kinds of actions that would cause a person to *stumble*—to sin. However, the inclusion of multiple body parts indicates various possibilities that might lead to sin.

A person’s *hand* or hands might grasp something that is not theirs to take (Exodus 20:15), create idols (2 Chronicles 32:19), or shed innocent blood (Proverbs 6:17). On *foot*, a person might walk from God’s will (2 Kings 21:22) and step toward deceit (Job 31:5) or evil (Proverbs 4:27).

Jesus’ command to *cut ... off* any offending body parts is a metaphor

and hyperbole. Although a pointed command, he was not advocating for physical self-mutilation. After all, sin can still be committed in one's heart when the physical opportunity or ability to do so is absent ([Matthew 5:27–28](#)). Jesus used exaggerated language to impress on his listeners the seriousness of sin. He wanted his followers to remove and *throw ... away* the things that would cause it.

What Do You Think?

What radical life changes might help you live a more Christ-centered life?

Digging Deeper

What barriers prevent you from making either radical or minute changes for the sake of Christ?

8b. “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.

Matthew's Gospel elsewhere describes fire as a form of punishment ([Matthew 3:10, 12; 5:22; 7:19; 13:40, 42, 49–50; 18:9](#)). Matthew uses this imagery more than any other New Testament book besides Revelation. However, this verse is only one of three uses in the New Testament of the Greek phrase translated as *eternal fire* (see also [25:41; Jude 7](#)). It would be *better for people to experience life maimed or crippled*, and without the things that cause sin, than to suffer eternal punishment (also [Matthew 5:29–30](#)). Part of this punishment includes separation from the Lord's presence and his power (see [2 Thessalonians 1:9](#)).

Jesus desired that his followers evaluate whether their actions (or inactions) cause sin in themselves or others (compare [Romans 14:19–21; 1 Corinthians 8:9–13](#)). If such actions are continual and willful, then judgment will occur.

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.”

With the *eye*, a person might commit lust ([Matthew 5:28](#); [1 John 2:16](#)), show malicious intentions ([Psalm 35:19](#)), or refuse to look on a person in need ([Proverbs 28:27](#)). Eyes and vision are a means for temptation (see [Genesis 3:6](#); [Matthew 4:8–9](#)). Jesus’ inclusion of an eye with a hand and foot highlights the numerous ways that a person might sin—intentionally or unintentionally ([Luke 12:47–48](#); [John 9:41](#); [James 4:17](#)).

Matthew’s Gospel uses the words *eye* and *eyes* more than any other New Testament text. Frequently, Matthew describes the healing of physical eyes (examples: [Matthew 9:29](#); [20:33–34](#)). However, his Gospel also shows greater concern for spiritual sight to see Jesus’ work in the world (examples: [13:15–16](#); [15:14](#)). People’s spiritual vision and their spiritual health are connected (see [6:22–23](#)).

The command to *gouge ... out one’s eye and throw it away* was not a command requiring forced blindness. As in the previous verse, Jesus taught his followers to take strong measures to remove temptation. The psalmist reflected a similar feeling: “I will not look with approval on anything that is vile” ([Psalm 101:3](#)). If willful and unrepentant sin continued, then people would experience eternal punishment in the *fire of hell* (see also [Mark 9:47–48](#); compare [Isaiah 66:24](#)). Jesus’ language is almost identical to his teaching found in [Matthew 5:29](#).

What Do You Think?

How do you discern not just what is sinful for you to see but what is not beneficial to you ([1 Corinthians 10:23](#))?

Digging Deeper

What role does your responsibility toward other believers play in deciding where you will rest your gaze?

Conclusion

A. Humility and Self-Control

Most people, at some time or another, desire to have power and be seen as great by the world. We are bombarded with messages and images that celebrate people who appear powerful, prestigious, and famous—great by the standards of the world.

The response to these messages requires that believers immerse themselves in Jesus' teaching regarding the required attitudes toward greatness. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, followers of Jesus must learn to embrace Jesus' definition of greatness—it must include childlike humility.

Visual for [Lesson 2](#). Pose this question for silent reflection after discussing the questions associated with [verse 3](#) and before moving to [verse 4](#).

Further, followers of Jesus must remove those things that would cause themselves or others to stumble in sin. This includes disregarding the world's messages of greatness, power, and prestige. Believers should also remove the temptations to sin in the things that they see, hear, and do. These are the parts that make up a believer's actions and habits. Do your actions shape you to desire the world's definition of power and status? Do your habits lead you to sin or cause others to sin? If so, remove those causes of sin and adjust your habits!

Finally, followers of Jesus must embrace an attitude of humility and

trust. This is not a sense of naivety, but confidence that God will provide for his people and show mercy consistent with his nature. When we embrace this attitude, we will likely not receive worldly glory. Instead, we will share in the promised—and far superior—glory from God ([Romans 8:17](#)).

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, transform our hearts and minds so that we will continue to seek the kind of greatness that is required in your kingdom. Orient our hearts toward the actions and habits that mark citizens of your kingdom. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

True greatness results from a life of humility and self-control.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Write the word *CHILDLIKE* in the middle of the board, and invite the whole group to share what words or phrases (good or bad) that come to mind when they see this word. Write their responses around the main

word.

Alternative. Divide participants into three groups. Distribute copies of the “What to Remove” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have groups work to complete as indicated.

After either activity, lead into the Bible study by saying, “Being ‘like a child’ can mean different things. In today’s text from Matthew, we consider which of these ideas Jesus meant when he was teaching his followers.”

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read [Matthew 18:1–5](#). If you used the first activity above, have the class identify the words on the board that most closely connect with what they believe Jesus meant in these verses. If you didn’t use the activity, ask students to name some childlike qualities that Jesus values, and write them on the board. Invite clarification, if needed, for words or phrases. Invite participants to discuss and explain how these descriptions or behaviors should look in a person who comes to Jesus.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Like a Child” exercise from the activity page. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated. Instruct that not all boxes need to have entries.

After either alternative ask: 1—Why do you think Jesus values these qualities? 2—How are they relevant to the disciples’ question on who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?

Ask another volunteer to read [Matthew 18:6–7](#). Divide learners into pairs. Point out that in several games, the strategy is to block, stump, or trick an opponent—to cause them to stumble and eventually lose the game. Have pairs discuss real-life ways that people can be blocked, stumped, or tricked—and that can keep them from putting their trust in

Jesus.

Ask a third volunteer to read [Matthew 18:8–9](#). Point out how in the previous verses the enemy is an outside person, but in these verses the enemy is ourselves. Give participants blank sheets of paper and ask them to draw a line down the middle of the page. Ask learners to write five things in the left-hand column that they do and that cause them to stumble in their walk with the Lord. In the right-hand column, ask them to write five things they do that strengthen their walk with the Lord.

Into Life

Write on the board *Childlike Humility* as a header. Underneath the header write the subheads *To Do* and *To Avoid*. Conduct a whole-class brainstorming session, encouraging learners to suggest ways to show childlike faith and humility to others. Then ask participants to choose one way of living childlike faith that they want to practice and strengthen in the coming week. Divide learners into pairs. Encourage partners to talk together about what will be practiced, as well as how to lovingly hold each other accountable to their plans. Invite pairs to spend time in prayer for each other, encouraging them to display the childlike qualities that Jesus desires, to embolden others who are trying to follow Jesus, and to get rid of things that cause them to stumble.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Humble Behavior” activity from the activity page. Have learners complete it individually (in a minute or less) before dividing into pairs. Give pairs time to pray for each other’s plan to show humility throughout the week.

At the beginning of the next lesson, ask volunteers to share what happened when they practiced humble behavior during the week.