

*The **GREATEST*** *in the Kingdom of Heaven*

Matthew 18:1-4

Pastor Jim Rademaker

“When Tom Brady and the New England Patriots came away with a last-second victory over the Seattle Seahawks in Super Bowl 49, I was ready to proclaim Brady the greatest quarterback of all time. ... On Sunday, Brady has a great chance to get his fifth Lombardi trophy and fourth Super Bowl MVP award.” (John Clayton - ESPN Senior Writer - January 30, 2017)

“Jerry Rice is far and away the greatest overall player in league history. Look at his numbers and the impact he had on his teams. He completely revolutionized the wide receiver position, while setting mind-bending records. To do that and sustain a level of dominance for as long as Rice did, I think it's hard for anyone to argue they've seen a better overall player.”

“No. That title belongs to former Packers split end Don Hutson, who led the league in receiving touchdowns in nine of his 11 seasons. In Hutson's time with Green Bay, the Packers won three championships, and he also played defense and was their primary kicker.”

“Who’s the greatest of all time? Who’s the greatest to ever play the game?” That’s the question the disciples were asking Jesus. They wanted to know who was the greatest, not in football or basketball or baseball, but in the kingdom of God? Who’s the greatest? Number one! The MVP of heaven?

Who would you put at the top of the Kingdom hall of fame? The Apostle Paul? Mother Teresa? Billy Graham? C.S. Lewis? Martin Luther? Where might *you* be on that list? Maybe not at the top. But as sure as there are many *above* you, there’ve got to be a lot of people *below* you.

And calling to him a child, [Jesus] put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Out of everyone in the kingdom of God, the disciples want to know who’s the greatest of them all, the greatest of all time, specifically, who of them is at the top of God’s list. And how does Jesus respond? Jesus responds to what’s going on in their hearts, what’s going on in *your* heart. What’s behind their question?

Mark 9 ... *And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.*

Luke 9 ... *An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great."*

The least, humblest.

Ever compare yourself to others?
We do it all the time, all day long.
It's part of our human nature. It's part of our identity. It's a question we're always asking ourselves.
"Who AM I?" Compared to what?
Compared to others. And we're always concluding what? We're not as good as some and where certainly better than others.

So we, like the disciples, really end up asking the same question.
"Who are we, compared to others?
How do we stack up? Who's greater, which implies what?
Who's lesser. Who's the greatest?
Who's the least?"

And when we're comparing ourselves to others, how do we measure greatness? Who's smarter? Who's prettier? Who's stronger? Who's faster? Who's wealthier? We look at all these characteristics and conclude what? Whoever's got the *most*, is the greatest, right?

The disciples couldn't agree. And so, they appealed to Jesus. "Jesus, when you look at us and all of our characteristics, who's the greatest in the kingdom of God? Who's got the most?" And Jesus responds how? Not by concluding which of them was most qualified, but by wanting them to conclude if *any* of them was qualified at all!

Not, who's on top, but who's even getting in. It's like they're thinking they're Aaron Rodgers and Jesus is saying they might now even make the practice squad.

They're wondering which of them is going to make the front of Sports Illustrated, when there's a good chance they won't even make the team. How do you get into the kingdom of God? By realizing you don't have a chance of making the high school third string. No matter how hard you try, you'll never have what it takes.

Thinking too much of yourself.
Comparing yourself to those below you and thinking you're better than

them. Is there anyone you think you're better than, who's certainly not getting into heaven, and you've got a better chance than them? Who is it that you're better than? The unbeliever? The one who never comes to church? Never reads their Bible? Isn't interested in God in the least?

Who's the greatest in the kingdom of God? *"Truly, I say to you, unless you **turn**. Unless you repent. Turn from pride. Turn from comparing yourself to *others* and compare yourself to *Jesus* instead. Turn from self. Admit your false identity as someone with worth only because there are less worthy people. Turn from thinking you're better than others.*

"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Greatness in the kingdom of heaven is just the opposite of greatness in our earthly kingdoms. Greatness in the kingdom of God is not realizing you have the most, that you're most qualified, but that you have the least, you are least qualified. Not comparing yourself to others, but comparing yourself to God.

“How loving am I, compared to God?” “How good am I, compared to God?” “How giving of heart am I, compared to God?” “How faithful am I, compared to God?” “How much do I consider the needs of others, compared to God?” “How GREAT am I, compared to God?” *“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

What does Jesus mean? *Whoever **humbles** himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”*

The characteristic of children that Jesus emphasizes is not their innocence, but their lowliness, their neediness, their vulnerability. “The smaller we grow in our own estimation, the greater we become in the sight of God.” (Ylvisaker, pg. 421)

The first shall be last and the last shall be first. How can that be? How will the last ever be first? It’s not something they can ever earn. Rather, it’s something that must be given. God declares us great, not in ourselves, but in Christ.

*Finally, my brothers, rejoice **in the Lord**. ... For we ... glory **in Christ Jesus** and put no confidence in the flesh - though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. ... circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of*

*Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews;
as to the law, a Pharisee; as to
zeal, a persecutor of the church; as
to righteousness under the law,
blameless.*

*But whatever gain I had, I counted
as loss for the sake of Christ.
Indeed, I count everything as loss
because of the surpassing worth of
knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For
his sake I have suffered the loss of
all things and count them as
rubbish, in order that I may gain
Christ and be found in him, not
having a righteousness of my own
that comes from the law, but that
which comes through faith in Christ
... (Philippians 3)*

God declares us great, not in
ourselves, but in Christ. In His
death and resurrection, His love,
His faithfulness, His goodness, His
putting others before Himself. His
greatness is our greatness. Turn.
Turn from yourself, to Christ

*... who emptied himself, by taking
the form of a servant, being born
in the likeness of men. And being
found in human form, he humbled
himself by becoming obedient to
the point of death, even death on a
cross. Therefore God has highly
exalted him and bestowed on him
the name that is above every name
... (Philippians 2)*

Who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Those who turn from themselves to Christ. For in Christ, those who have nothing are given everything!

When we're young, what do we dream about? Growing up. Getting bigger! The secret of growing big in God's Kingdom is to continue growing small and dependent on God for everything.

"In our human lives, growing up involves the gradual shift from dependence to independence. But the reverse is true for us as we grow spiritually. On our journey, we become more and more dependent on Christ for everything.

We don't proceed from childhood to adulthood; we move forward into spiritual childhood as we grow in faith and become people of prayer. And so, Jesus tells us to become as little children to receive our full royal inheritance as sons and daughters of God." (John Kleinig)

The power of Christ is made perfect in our weakness.