

THE CONDITIONS FOR GREATNESS

MATHEW 18:01–04

Introduction – Greatness

The disciples argued over who should hold the highest positions in the kingdom of God. This conflict arose on several occasions (see Mt. 20:20-28; Mk. 9:33-37; Lk. 22:24-30). Their desire was for recognition and honour in an earthly kingdom. Jesus had to re-educate their thinking. The disciples' struggle for position and power should not surprise us, for all men have the same needs, the needs for...

- some recognition
- some authority
- some position
- some esteem
- some prestige
- some challenge
- some money
- some physical satisfaction

There is nothing wrong with these needs. They are human and legitimate needs and they must be met. But men allow their hearts to be overtaken with *selfishness* and begin to want more and more to the point of lusting and consuming and hoarding. They become prideful, covetous, worldly, ambitious, envious and hurtful even to the point of destroying and killing.

What Christ sets out to do is to change the lives of men and re-educate men in their concept of greatness.

- I. Two true assumptions (vv. 1-2).
- II. Condition 1: conversion (v. 3).
- III. Condition 2: humility (v. 4).

I. *Mathew 18:01–02 Two True Assumptions*

Note the two true assumptions in the question of the disciples. First, a person is great if he is in the Kingdom of Heaven. Second, there are degrees of greatness.

Christ did not refute or deny these assumptions. On the contrary, He taught both: a person is great if he is in the Kingdom of Heaven. Everything and everyone in heaven is great, even perfected. As Christ says, a person can be *the greatest* in the Kingdom of Heaven (v. 4. See scripture and notes, Mt. 13:8, 23; 25:20-30; Lk. 12:41-48; 16:10-12; 19:15-23). The question is not “who is the greatest” but how does one become *great* in God's kingdom? How does one prove that he is trustworthy and responsible before God? How does one show God that he can be trusted and depended upon and should be rewarded with responsibility in heaven (see notes, Mt. 25:20; Lk. 19:15; 22:28-29)?

Note several things about the question asked by the disciples.

1. Note what they meant. By “the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” they did not mean the greatest in quality or character, but in name and position. They were thinking in terms of power, fame, wealth, position and name (see notes, Mt. 1:1; *Christ, Messiah*,
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Mt. 1:18; *Baptism of Jesus and John the Baptist*, Mt. 3:11; notes, Mt. 11:1-6; Mt. 11:2-3; *Prophecy Fulfilled*, Mt. 11:5; *Messiah, Judgement*, Mt. 11:6; *Jesus, No Publicity*, Mt. 12:16; note, Lk. 7:21-23 for a picture of their concept of the Messiah).

2. Note the reasons why they asked the question.
 - a. They sensed that Christ was about to set up His kingdom, that He was about to assume His throne. They were looking forward to becoming chiefs of state in His kingdom.
 - b. They had seen three of them honoured in special ways (Peter, James and John, Mt. 17:1-13), and one of them in particular had been distinguished (Peter, Mt. 16:17-19). Who were the leaders to be in the Lord's kingdom? They were apparently gripped with jealousy, envy, ambition and some rivalry.
 - c. They had just been arguing among themselves about who the greatest was going to be. Mark says that the argument had begun immediately after Christ began to intensify His teaching on His death and resurrection (Mk. 9:33-34; see 9:30-37). They misinterpreted what He was saying, spiritualizing it instead of taking His Word at face value (see note, Mt. 17:22). Apparently they connected the thought of *rising from the dead* with the setting up of His kingdom, and began to argue over the top positions of leadership.
3. Note: they did not yet understand what the Kingdom of Heaven is. They still saw an earthly, temporal kingdom and not a spiritual, eternal kingdom. It is interesting what Christ said in v. 3. He was speaking to the disciples, and He *actually said* that they would not enter the kingdom of heaven unless they became as little children.

Christ gave a living demonstration of greatness. He “called a little child and had him stand among them.” The child was not an infant, for he was personally *called* to come to Christ. Note how the child immediately demonstrated several traits of children. He *trusted* Christ enough to respond (trustfulness) and did what Christ requested (submission, humility and obedience).

This says something about the nature and character of Christ as well. He demonstrated enough warmth and openness for the child to feel free to respond and to enter a group of adults who were sitting together in a formal session.

Thought 1. The thoughts of the average person focus upon appearance, personal image, self-esteem, possessions, privileges, position and glory, and he spends much time in thinking of these things. He imagines and fancies himself to be the centre of attention, the *hero* of the game or play, the main attraction, the one considered most honourable and esteemed. It is such thoughts and ambitions that Christ wants to change. Our thoughts and minds are to be centred on Christ and others and upon things that are true, not on self (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 10:5; Ph. 4:8).

Thought 2. How often we think in terms of *earthly and fleshly greatness*. If we are asked who are the *greatest* people in a city or country, we answer by naming the

famous, the prestigious, the wealthy, the powerful and the educated. We think little, if any, of those who serve and minister.

II. *Mathew 18: 03 Greatness Requires Conversion*

The first condition for greatness is conversion. The word *conversion* or *change* (*straphete*) means to turn, to turn around; to be converted; to turn from one thing to something else (1 Th. 1:9, “how you turned to God from idols”). (See repentance for the same idea.)

The meaning here is that the disciples must *turn* they must turn completely around. Christ warned them: “Unless you turn.” Turn from what? Their sins were many, sins that are so common to men as they walk in selfishness day by day.

Note that they were possessed by a selfish desire for...

- position • fame • power
- wealth • prestige • fleshly stimulation

Note that they were possessed by a spirit of...

- pride • worldliness • covetousness • envy
- ambition • rivalry • jealousy

Conversion or change is one of the great subjects of the Bible. The reason is made clear by Christ: “Unless you change [be converted]...you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3). Whether or not a person is changed (converted) determines his eternal destiny.

1. How is a person converted or changed? By turning and becoming as a little child. What does it mean “to become like a little child”? When Christ *called* the child to Him, the child demonstrated exactly what Christ meant.
 - a. The child *trusted Christ*. The child responded to the call of Christ. He sensed the openness, warmth, tenderness, care and love of Christ; so he felt free to respond and to trust Christ’s call.
 - b. The child *surrendered* himself to Christ. He was willing to give up what he was doing and go to Christ, willing to surrender whatever it was that was occupying his thoughts and behaviour.
 - c. The child was *obedient* to Christ. He obeyed and did exactly what Christ requested, and it was probably difficult to do so. There were at least thirteen adult men standing or sitting there, and the child was being asked to walk into the midst of these men. Note that he obeyed despite the difficulty and obeyed simply because Christ asked him.
 - d. The child was *humble* before Christ. All the above traits show humility. However, there is something often overlooked and abused by the adult world. Little children do not push themselves forward. They are not interested in prominence, fame, power,

wealth or position. They do not want to be placed in the midst of a group of adults, for they prefer to be in the background, away from staring, gawking eyes. Such embarrasses them and makes them feel self-conscious. Therefore, they prefer to be left in their obscure world. They are by nature humble, knowing little if anything of the competitive world that surrounds them; that is, they know little of it until they are brought into it by adults.

2. Why is a person to be converted or changed? Because not changing brings rejection and loss of greatness. Note that the warning is severe: “Unless you change [be converted]...you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” And Christ is speaking to the disciples. “Unless they are converted and become as little children, they will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

If the disciples were warned, how much more are we and everyone else warned! The absolute necessity of conversion or change is hereby stressed.

Mat 18:3 And he said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Acts 3:19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.

James 5:19-20 My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Psa 51:12-13 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.

Psa 19:7 The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

Isa 55:7 Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

Ezek 18:21 “But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die.

Thought 1. Note that the very traits possessed by a child are the essentials for conversion or salvation: trust, surrender, obedience, and humility.

Thought 2. What Christ is after is the total conversion or change of a person, a change that is complete and thorough: a change of heart, life, and thoughts. Our thoughts make us what we are. And, oh, how they are centred on self, making ourselves the centre of attention.

Psa 131:1-2 My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.

Acts 8:22 Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart.

2 Cor 10:5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

III. Mathew 18:04 Greatness Requires Humility

The second condition for greatness is humility.

1. How does a person become humble? By living as a child. The child had humbled himself to come to Christ. Christ said so.
 - a. The child had given up what he was doing. Whatever it was that was occupying his thought and time, he walked away from it. He humbled himself in order to come to Christ.
 - b. The child had obeyed Christ. He went to Christ. Obedience always demands humility, a humbling of oneself (thoughts, energy, time, effort) in order to do whatever another asks.
 - c. The child overcame feelings he had in order to respond to Christ. Because of the twelve men surrounding Christ, there was bound to be some hesitation, dread, apprehension or fear; yet he humbled himself and went to Christ despite all. Humility has always been one of the most *insignificant* traits among men, yet it determines whether a man enters heaven or not. It is of critical importance.
2. The result of humility is greatness. The greatest persons in the Kingdom of Heaven will be the persons who have been converted (changed) and walked the humblest among men. 1 Cor. 13 says exactly what Christ is demonstrating.

1 Cor 13:4-7, 13 Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres....And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Thought 1. Men fear humility. They feel that *humility* is a sign of weakness and cowardice. They fear humility will make them the object of contempt and abuse. They fear humility may cause them to be passed over, but the very opposite is true. Humility leads a person to Christ and to conversion. It leads a person to realize his full potential. It causes a person to evaluate himself and to work at improving himself. It leads a person to become all that he can and should be. It also leads to better and more healthy relationships and to a stronger and more productive community and world.

When men consider others (humble themselves), they win friends and influence people. They build and strengthen everyone and everything involved.

Mat 18:4 *“Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”*

Luke 22:26 *“But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.”*

Rom 12:3 *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*

Phil 2:3-4 *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

James 4:10 *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*

1 Pet 5:5 *Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” ■*