

# THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL GREATNESS

(Matthew 18:1-5)

1.16.21

**Description:** *Jesus describes to His disciples - and to us - what truly constitutes “greatness.”*

## INTRODUCTION

Last week we presented a fish story. This week, believe it or not, we’re going to present a “goat” story. Now I watch a lot of sports — games, ESPN, stuff like that. So, I often hear references to the “GOAT.” No, not that goat. That GOAT — GOAT being an acronym meaning “Greatest Of All Time.”

Sports seem to breed the most “GOAT” stories. Who was, or is, the greatest of all time in a particular sport? Now some sports are easier to deal with this idea than others. In baseball, Babe Ruth would get an awful lot of consideration — nobody quite like him before or since. And in boxing, Muhammad Ali made it easy: He told us who the greatest of all time was. And in hockey, my favorite sport, Wayne Gretzky would be both the beginning and the end of most “GOAT” conversations in that sport.

In football, especially in the Super Bowl era, it usually comes down to either Tom Brady, who by himself has won more Super Bowls than any one team, or Joe Montana — who never lost a Super Bowl.

But if your sport is basketball, then the possibilities start to add up pretty quick: Wilt or Kareem or maybe Hakeem, Michael or Kobe or “Dr. J.,” Larry or Magic, LeBron or Steph — or somebody else. Funny thing, basketball’s not even my sport, but I know those names because our culture and our media keeps them alive. You can watch their highlights on YouTube like they just happened. And notice I didn’t even have to mention their last names; just their first names are enough for many people to know exactly who I mean.

The funny thing is, none of these are famous as doctors or politicians or philosophers or scientists or artists, making discoveries or finding cures or creating possibilities that make our lives better or more productive. They play a game, maybe better than anybody else, but still, a game. But they also benefit from a sports entertainment, TV-saturated culture that gives them an incredible platform on which to perform. I mean, think about it: When was the last time you heard an argument about who’s the greatest plumber, or the greatest auto mechanic or maybe the greatest sheet-rocker? Not quite the same, is it?

But one day, 2,000 years ago, our “Radical Rabbi” was asked this same basic question: “Jesus, who do you think is the GOAT, the greatest of all time?” His answer is incredibly important to understanding what character traits Jesus is hoping to find in all His followers. Now this is going to be a very harmonized story; our main source will be Matthew 18:1-5, but we’re also going to be borrowing generously from Mark 9:33-37 and Luke 9:46-48. So, as we turn to this “great” topic, **let’s begin by bowing in prayer before our “great” God and King.**

## TEXT

We’re going to start this story in Luke’s gospel: ***An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest — Luke 9:46.***

The ancient world of which the disciples were a part was built on hierarchies — top-down structures where the greater ruled the lesser. You had the emperor in Rome, the governor of a province, the sons of Herod doing their thing — and people like the disciples underneath it all. To be considered

“great” in the ancient world was a very enviable position. And, even in their own culture, the idea of a “messiah” meant a liberating political, earthly leader who would be likewise ruling a “top-down” kingdom. The “messiah” was going to be somebody great, at least according to a lot of people, and the disciples were still caught up in that model of what the “messiah” would truly mean, so it would make sense that they would be trying to position themselves to be in the most favorable place possible in that kind of kingdom.

However, in the context of this particular moment, the disciples were kind of “blindfolded from the inside” when it came to a couple of important realities:

- 1) Jesus had been consistently preaching and teaching a kingdom where the idea of “greatness” was flipped totally upside down — a kingdom where you turned the other cheek, a kingdom where you loved your enemies and even prayed for them, a kingdom where forgiveness of others was a foundational principle, a kingdom where the meek and the merciful and the peacemakers were the truly “great” ones, the ones whom God would reward.
- 2) Jesus had just given these disciples of His their second, very specific “heads-up” on what the future held, a future that was fast approaching — that, as Mark reported Jesus telling them, ***“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill Him, and after three days He will rise” - Jesus Christ, Mark 9:31.***

Now whatever their responses to those words — grief, inability to understand, whatever — it didn’t stop them from having this argument.

***They came to Capernaum. When He was in the house, He asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest — Mark 9:33-34.***

Some more context, more specific to this particular moment: The disciples along with Jesus had been in the north of Galilee where Jesus had been transfigured and where He had healed a demonically-possessed boy. Now as they were getting back into their home territory, so to speak, passing through Galilee on their way to Capernaum, He was continuing to teach them and, in fact, it was during this part of their journey that the Bible says that Jesus didn’t want anybody to even know where they were because He wanted this “alone time” to accomplish His teaching. But there had apparently been some time along the way for this argument about greatness to take place. But as they returned to Capernaum, they very quickly realized that Jesus knew all about their argument — as if they could have ever kept anything from Him in the first place. So, when He asked, “OK, guys; what were you all arguing about back there,” they realized they’re busted — He knew all about it. So whether out of shame or guilt or embarrassment, they initially chose to keep quiet.

But eventually, they brought it up: ***At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” — Matthew 18:1.***

I picture a moment of silence as Jesus eyed His guys. They had been with Him for the better part of three years by this point, they are on their way to Jerusalem to be witnesses to their Master being absolutely slaughtered (which He has specifically told them) — and this was their big takeaway: “Which one of us should be the greatest?” Exactly what kingdom did they think Jesus represented?

***Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all” — Mark 9:35.***

What an incredibly important teaching moment this was — and Jesus by sitting down assumed the traditional posture as well as the role of a rabbi. But let’s be clear: The very future of ministry is at stake here. How in the world can the church Jesus envisions be established if the only thing its members are focused on is taking care of No.1? So, Jesus laid it out in very clear, unmistakable

terms: If anybody's greatest desire is to be first, if that is truly the goal of their life, to be considered "the greatest in the kingdom of heaven," the only way that can happen is if that person puts themselves at the very bottom, the very lowest of the low, the position of serving everybody else. You want to know who the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is? That guy! Jesus turns the idea of kingdom greatness upside down.

Here's the deal: In the world's kingdoms, greatness is tied into getting, either through aggressiveness or privilege. In God's kingdom, greatness is tied into giving. And what job would better position somebody to be a giver than to be a servant? Also, in the world's kingdoms, greatness may be reserved for the few fortunate enough to be especially gifted or privileged but, in God's kingdom, greatness is offered to anybody who has the desire to serve.

And what does that person look like? Jesus gives them a very vivid, personal picture.

***He called a little child to Him, and placed the child among them. . . . Taking the child in His arms, He [spoke] to them — Matthew 18:2, Mark 9:36b.***

So, Jesus brought a very little child into the mix — an infant or, at most, a toddler. So why did Jesus do this? To imprint on His ambitious crew a very vivid image. So, here's the deal: Children were at the very bottom of the social scale. They were seen as contributing absolutely nothing to the world in which they lived. They had such little value that, if you remember from Jesus' feeding of the 5,000, they weren't even counted. Yes, they were loved and well-treated but, due to the high infant mortality at this time in human history, there was very little consideration of a child until they had cleared their first few years of life. They were not seen as much more than a father's property, some of his assets. Yet it is one of these very little uncounted, helpless, almost meaningless ones around which Jesus very tenderly wrapped his arms, and then he explained his meaning.

***"Truly I tell you, unless you change (Gr., "strepho," reverse course, convert) and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" — Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:3-4.***

Jesus was saying something very startling — that, if His disciples didn't completely overhaul their viewpoint of the kingdom and what God values, they wouldn't have to worry about any position in the kingdom because they wouldn't have any. No position, no place, no part. The disciples were exhibiting two of the greatest detriments to the church: Ambition and insecurity. Ambition means it's on me to carve out my place in the world. Insecurity means it's on me to hold onto everything I have.

And back of both of those is pride. Pride means I am thinking more of myself than I ought. Pride means what's mine is mine — period. But Jesus is telling His disciples that pride will have no place in His kingdom. Rather it's the humility of a child that would be His kingdom's most outstanding character trait. Paul explained this viewpoint very well: ***Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others — Paul, Philippians 2:3-4.***

And then Christ goes on to say: ***And whoever welcomes one such child in My name welcomes Me . . . and whoever welcomes Me does not welcome Me but the one who sent Me" — Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:5; Mark 9:37b.***

Kingdoms in the ancient world famously welcomed the high and mighty with grand spectacles and celebrations; most of the common people would be lucky to catch even the slightest glimpse of such pageantry. Not so Christ's kingdom: in Christ's kingdom, they would be welcoming the humble and the lowly in exactly the same way in which they would welcome Jesus Himself. In fact, they should

be that kind of welcoming because Jesus was that kind of welcoming to them. And, by doing so, they are not only welcoming God the Son, but God the Father as well.

And then, just in case somebody was missing the meaning, He closed this teaching session with a very concise summary: ***“For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest” — Jesus Christ, Luke 9:48b.*** The greatest among you will be the least among you.

## APPLICATION

Two critical points here: First, three words that Jesus spoke in Matthew 18:3: ***“Unless you change.”*** When God speaks — through His Son, through His Word, through the Holy Spirit — are we willing to change? Is having a life pleasing to God more important than having a life pleasing to ourselves? Are we willing to be changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ? He expressed that to His disciples as a matter of absolute necessity. ***Unless you change***, the kingdom of heaven is not in your future. If you want a church life that doesn't impose any difficulties, then find a church that only shares one or two verses of scripture and recites prayers out of a book instead of sharing prayers from a heart. That's not what we say we believe here. Instead, we say that the Bible tells us that church is a living, breathing, growing entity based solely on the life of Christ, and that we live for one single, solitary goal: being daily changed into the image of the very Son of God. It's a relationship. And since, this side of heaven, I am never perfect, being changed needs to be a daily occurrence. I need to be constantly seeking after God: “What needs to change? How can I be pleasing to you in this moment, and then in the moment after that, and then in the moment after that? How was I wrong? Please make me right.” Are we willing to see ourselves that way, in constant need of the grace and forgiveness of God, and willing to be so broken in His presence that being made right by Him is the greatest reality of the day?

That's the challenge that Jesus was laying before His disciples: “Unless you change.” If being changed into the image of Christ is what pleases God the most, then that should be one of the greatest features to be seen in our lives — to be so surrendered to His life that to be changed for the sake of His life is the greatest source of joy in our lives.

## CONCLUSION

And secondly, as we close, ultimately, at the end of the day, this is a “faith” story. And why would I say that? Because for both ambition and insecurity, those occur because the feeling is strongest that I can't trust Jesus to place me in the right spot or at the right level. I need to ensure that I am taken care of; I'm the only one who can take care of me. But, for the child of God, faith directs me to the same place that the apostle Paul realized: ***I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.*** [And what was Paul's “secret of being content?” He would tell us in the very next verse.] ***I can do all this through Him who gives me strength — Paul, Philippians 4:11b-13.***

It would continue to be a struggle for the disciples to learn this valuable lesson. It is just as valuable for us, but we are blessed by having the disciples to learn from. Our lives, our paths, are directed by God's perfect hands — and we can live in peace knowing that the plans He has for us are always better than anything we could ever have in mind. Let's pray!