

Perspective – Seeing Jesus, Jesus’ Way / The Humble Kingdom



THE HUMBLE KINGDOM

Matthew 17:24-8:4(5)

Sermon – Greg Holmes – 3 April 2022

Introduction

This week in the media we have been treated to:

Two Hollywood greats involved in a physical fracas in front of the whole world. AND... a cricket great lauded and praised and celebrated by the media to an extraordinary extent.

But what is ‘greatness’ in our world? What is TRUE greatness?

Is it the Will Smiths and Shane Warnes of our world? Or is it more Lady Gaga assisting Liza Minelli through her role on the Oscars? Or that other cricket great, Rod Marsh, who died not many days before Shane Warne without the same degree of fanfare?

We live in a world of influencers, ‘experts’, ‘celebrities’ - people gifted in one area (often sporting or media - film/video) who are then seen as being experts in all sorts of areas... and many seem to assume it is so.

We live in a world where those with power (related to money, influence, political connections, media savvy, looks) exercise it over and over again with little regard to others. In the Christian context we have seen high profile leaders, again and again, exposed as having used their influence, their position, their power ‘inappropriately’ in regard to harassment, bullying and abuse.

Are these things greatness?

You don’t have to be doing the wrong thing to mis-apply greatness; you simply need to use it ‘selfishly’ – perhaps even to

Perspective – Seeing Jesus, Jesus’ Way / The Humble Kingdom good ends. And, of course, we have this new of idea of the GOAT – Greatest of All Time – applied often to sportsmen who sometimes better represent the word rather than the acronym. Human societies have always treated questions of rank very seriously; how then are they to be treated in God’s society? The disciples in Jesus’ time often seemed to struggle with the idea of ‘who is the greatest’ – as in our passage at the beginning of Matthew 18. We will look at this first and come back to the end of chapter 17 as we seek to look further into the idea of seeing Jesus, Jesus’ way.

Body

So Matthew 18:1-4 first...

18:1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

Here at the commencement of chapter 18 the disciples are having what seems to be a common sort of argument for them – who is the greatest? So how does Jesus answer?

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

From among the ‘hangers on’ Jesus singles out a small child whom he places before himself and the disciples. And he expounds his ‘object’ lesson.

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

These adults around Jesus - the gruff fishermen, a tax collector, a would be insurgent and others - are told that they are to, first, change (what they are won’t cut it) and second, become like a little child. What could Jesus mean?

Perspective – Seeing Jesus, Jesus’ Way / The Humble Kingdom

Wilkins - In the ancient world, children were valued primarily for the benefit that they brought to the family by enhancing the workforce, adding to the defensive power, and guaranteeing the future glory of the house. But they had no rights or significance apart from their future value to the family and were powerless in society.

To be part of the Kingdom they are to become dependent people.

This is most probably a youngish child – a hanger on from one of the families around Jesus – we can imagine it as a young girl who was regarded as even more useless.

They are to become dependent people... dependent of Jesus... dependent of their Heavenly Father and his Son. Without this sort of attitude not only won't they be greatest, they won't even enter the Kingdom!

Jesus elaborates and answers the disciples' question...

⁴ Therefore, whoever (humbles himself like) takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

They are to be humble (NIV (2011), I think unhelpfully, has 'takes the lowly position of'.) What does it mean to be HUMBLE? I want us to spend some time thinking about this for it is most important.

Calvin and Augustine before him said something like the fact that Christian living is about three things. The first is, be humble; the second is, be humble and (you guessed it) the third is, be humble!

Let's look at the last bit of Chapter 17 as an example

17:24 After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma temple tax came to Peter and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?"

Perspective – Seeing Jesus, Jesus’ Way / The Humble Kingdom

The wandering Rabbi and his followers arrive ‘home’... or at least to the place they call home... or a base. Some tax collectors want to know if this Rabbi is up to date with his obligations to the temple. The ‘two drachma’ tax was an obligation of every Jewish adult male to support the construction and maintenance of the temple in Jerusalem and its services. It would appear to be about the equivalent of one days’ wages for a common labourer.

Peter full of his usual confidence replies that of course he does.

25 *“Yes, he does,” he replied.*

When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. “What do you think, Simon?” he asked. “From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes - from their own children or from others?”

26 *“From others,” Peter answered.*

“Then the children are exempt,” Jesus said to him.

Jesus wants Peter to think about the nature of these obligations. His illustration is along the lines of the fact that the children of a royal household do not, generally, pay taxes to that jurisdiction. Jesus seems to be claiming he could be exempt from the tax as God’s son. However...

27 *“But so that we may not cause offense, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.”*

Jesus, in order at this stage not to cause unnecessary trouble, makes provision for the tax. Peter who has been called to be a fisher of men actually, here, become a fisher of money. Note that Jesus provides both for his tax and for Peter’s.

Perspective – Seeing Jesus, Jesus' Way / The Humble Kingdom

Not long before this the glory of who Jesus actually is has been revealed on the mountain; he is the Son of God, the Son of Yahweh whose earthly 'home' is the temple. He need not pay the tax! But in humility he does.

Here is Jesus' humility demonstrated. He had the power... he was the Son of God but, no, he uses his power for the common good... and removes possible controversy and conflict. And you, with the insights provided by the Transfiguration, will see other examples as we work through the Gospel of Matthew... the greatest of course being the Cross.

As Paul writes to the Philippians...

Philippians 2:5-8

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Conclusion

So Jesus calls on us to be humble like a little child. The Scriptures commend and command humility.

Philippians 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,

Colossians 3:12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Perspective – Seeing Jesus, Jesus’ Way / The Humble Kingdom

1Peter 5:5b ... All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.”

James 3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

So what does humility look like.

I have recently read an interesting book by John Dickson, recommended by Aiden and mentioned in our Weekly News this week, called ‘Humilitas’ – which, if you want to follow up on this concept is a good, easy to digest read. Dickson defines Humility as “... the noble choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself. More simply, you could say the humble person is marked by a willingness to hold power in service of others.

And he gives this example (he has lots – I have chosen this one): Three young men hopped on a bus in Detroit in the 1930s and try to pick a fight with a lone man sitting at the back of the vehicle. They insulted him. He didn’t respond. They turned up the heat of the insults. He said nothing. eventually the stranger stood up. He was bigger than they estimated from his seated position - much bigger. He reached in his pocket and handed them his business card and walked off the bus and then on his way. As the bus drove on the young men gathered around the card to read the words: Joe Louis, Boxer. They had just tried to pick a fight with a man who would be the heavyweight boxing champion of the world from 1937 to 1949... the number one boxer of all time according to the International Boxing Research Organisation (second on the list is Mohammed Ali). They apparently said of

Perspective – Seeing Jesus, Jesus' Way / The Humble Kingdom

Lewis that he could knock out a horse with one punch. I struggle to think how he got that reputation but the point is simple. Here is a man of immense power and skill, capable of defending his honour with a single devastating blow. Yet he chooses to forget his status and hold his power for others... in this case, for some very fortunate young men.

C.S. Lewis says *True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.*"

How do you become humble? First step...

C.S. Lewis – *"If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realise that one is proud... and it's a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed."*

The first thing is admit that you are proud.

Proverbs 11:2 When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.

The next step to becoming truly humble, I truly believe, is to take a good look at the revealed creator of the Universe and at his Son, Jesus, and then consider your status before him

Before God we are, first and foremost, condemned sinners destined for eternal judgement... but this same God, who creates and sustains us, has sent his Son, Jesus, to die on a cross to take that punishment for us and to account Jesus' righteousness to us.

If we are in Christ, if we have submitted ourselves to his Kingship and seek to live his way, we are saved by God's grace; nothing we have done or can do can save us. We are in right relationship with God only through the actions of God himself.

Perspective – Seeing Jesus, Jesus’ Way / The Humble Kingdom

And yet through Jesus’ death we are made sons of God – brothers and sisters of Jesus. To be truly humble we need to see how great God is, how great his salvation through Jesus is and how dependent we are on him. That should produce in us humility. Be humble!

The Third Step... First admit that you are still proud. And so it goes. So note what Jesus says in 18:2

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

We need to change and that takes conscious action

So I leave you with the words from C.S. Lewis we mentioned briefly above and further words from Paul in Philippians

True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.”

So let us resolve to spend this week thinking less about ourselves and more about others.

Philippians 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves...