The Greatest: Matthew 18

**Intro**: Back in the early 1960’s Cassius Clay burst to international celebrity by winning the Olympic gold medal for boxing in the light heavyweight class. Soon after that he turned pro and quickly attained the world heavyweight championship, then changing his name to Muhammad Ali, and more brashly than any athlete before him boasting that he was The Greatest.

There is something in us that demands comparison, to know how we rank against peers, pecking order; we need to know who is the Champ, the best all-time. That’s why Major League baseball has the World Series and pro football created the Super Bowl, and college basketball the March Madness. Somebody has to be #1 and the world has to know. Film industry: the Oscars.

But when we hear the disciples ask, Who is the Greatest?, that strikes us as improper. When we think carefully about it, it is obvious that desire to be seen as better than anyone around us arises from a sinful self-centeredness, from our sin-cursed outer man, something completely contrary to the grace of Christianity, completely contrary to Grace itself.

**Xit**: When the disciples asked Jesus about who was The Greatest in His Kingdom, His answer pointed in a very different direction than the Muhammad Ali school of greatness.

1. He begins his answer with a stinging rebuke. They asked, Who is Greatest (v. 1)? Before uttering a word He presented a child (v. 2) and basically said, Your question betrays a value system utterly opposite to mine in my Kingdom. They were still thinking the same way as the world: completely fleshly, straight out of their sin-cursed outer man. Then the Lord’s first words (v. 3) are, Unless you change! “Unless you convert and become like this child, you will not enter.” We have been seeking our whole lives to grow into mature adulthood, to put childishness far behind us. Now he says we have to go back to that.

But in what ways are we to revert to childishness?   
There are two key clues: v. 4 humble (“whoever humbles himself”), opposite of pride;   
v. 6 believe (“one of these who believe in me”).   
Simple child-like faith with no pretense of personal greatness.

1 Pet 5:5-6: “Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.”

Notice how that Greatness and Pride are directed toward others. They are always in comparison to something, resulting in a sense of either superiority or inferiority.

We all believe. That is a starting point for being part of the Church. We all have Faith, and must constantly cultivate that Faith: help one another keep trusting. It is the very nature of Faith to be humble. Yet there is still a pride that resides in our sin-cursed outer man, our Flesh.

Pride and Competition are always about ‘Me first’; and if necessary will seek to cause a brother to stumble. We don’t really want to hurt someone. But that ugly Pride in us will rise up and take over. It’s that impulse we outgrew long ago: when a rival is walking or running by to stick out a foot and make them tumble. That’s what verses 6-9 are about: causing a brother to stumble. He says we may need to take drastic steps to prevent ourselves from being able to do that. He is actually saying we need to be minded toward the opposite: using our hands & feet to care for a brother, to help a brother not to fall. At that point we are getting close to “Greatness in the Kingdom.”

2. Next the Lord says that Greatness takes no pleasure when a fellow sheep goes astray. Our Shepherd loves every last one of us, and so must we.

***Read vv. 12-14 (NIV)***  
“*What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? 13 And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. 14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.*”

This parable is quite transparent: it says that every individual is valued. This is the Heavenly Father’s value system. He knows each and every one; and He loves and cares for every one. And we are also to be like this Shepherd. If we are going to have any place at all in the Kingdom of the Heavenly Father (the King)—let alone be accounted as ‘great’ or ‘greatest’—we must cherish each one of our fellow sheep; we must be committed to ‘search and rescue.’ Thank goodness for a Shepherd who cares enough to seek the wanderer; “to seek and to save that which was lost.”

3. The next paragraph is the passage commonly known as instructions for Church Discipline: how to handle the case of a sinning brother.

***Read vv. 15,17 (NIV)****“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.*

*16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' [a quote out of Deuteronomy]*

*17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*

*18 I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*

*19 Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.*

*20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”*

While the 100 sheep story taken by itself seems to say, restore/redeem any member that wanders off, at all cost; this following teaching indicates that there is a time that the right course of action is to banish/disown one we have regarded as a ‘brother,’ ‘one of us.’

So these two together, set back-to-back, speak of the counterbalance that exists and must be maintained between the interests of the individual and the interests of the group. We are, after all, one body.

In the OT we see God seriously concerned to purge His people of contaminating influences. In Num 15 he directed the nation to stone to death a man who defied God’s Sabbath Law; and in Num 16 He consumed Korah and his followers by causing the ground to open up and swallow them. In Acts 5 God struck Ananias and his wife dead *in church* for lying to the church about their generous gift.

To condone sin in the community of the people of God is to despise the preciousness of the purity, the holiness of the body of Messiah. And thus it is to despise the holiness of Christ our head. When a church lets that happen, it becomes what was threatened toward the church at Ephesus in Rev 2: an empty shell of a church; its candlestick has been removed. It becomes like the Jerusalem temple in Ezekiel 8-11: the glory departed.

You see the point here? Our Lord, the King, is informing us of how it is in His Kingdom today. Just as there are two kinds of people in this world, so there are also two kinds of people who wander away from the flock: true sheep and false. There are some who do belong, but slip off into error, and whom we should make heroic efforts to restore. And there are others who never did belong, in spite of the fact that they said the right words.

Wasn’t it Abraham Lincoln who said: “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can not fool all of the people all of the time.”?

Not everyone who says to Him, “Lord, Lord,” has actually bowed in his heart. While profession of faith—*“I believe in Jesus, King of all*”—is essential (Rom 10:9), it is possible to lie. We who are true believers, innocent ones, pure, simple, perhaps naïve, may find it hard to conceive of any rational reason for doing so. Perhaps there is a vicious, evil intent to disrupt and destroy King Jesus’s program by infiltrating and contaminating His church. Whatever the reason, there is considerable evidence both biblically and historically that this happens. One of the most serious duties of shepherds is to protect the flock from predators. It is dangerous for a flock to have naïve shepherds.

In this statement in vv. 15-20, the Lord seems to be saying that we must consider that to be a real possibility. It happens. It has happened. It will happen again. And in time we will likely encounter it.

Two possible outcomes  
If they stubbornly refuse to repent

4. The final part of the Lord’s answer is the largest segment of the chapter (15 of the 35 verses) and the heaviest idea. When they heard the teaching about forgiving and restoring a brother who sinned, Peter realized that introduced a problem. OK, but what if he does it again … and again? Peter was basically saying, I can see forgiving him once, maybe twice. But surely at some point we have to say, Enough is enough. Surely six rounds of this is an absolute limit. If he does it a seventh time, not even we or you should be expected to forgive again. At some point don’t we who forgive become complicit and enablers of his sinning?

The parable Jesus speaks in response is simple enough. A King makes a decision to demand immediate repayment of a debt. The debtor is like so many people in that day, a servant of some sort. In this exaggerated story we are told the man had run up a debt of 10,000 talents. When the King threatened to throw the man and his family into debtors prison, the man flung himself on the King’s mercy and pleaded for time, promising to repay the debt in full. Scholars tell us it would take about 200,000 years for the average laborer of that day to earn 10,000 talents (or 1M years to repay).[[1]](#endnote--1) The King was compassionately touched and ordered that the debt simply be cancelled. The man was free without any repayment. Don’t you wish that was the end of the story? However in the story we follow that man back where he meets one of his fellow servants who owes him about four months wages. That fellow’s response was exactly the same as the first man’s plea to the King had been: give me time, I will repay you. Sadly, as you already know, the first servant exhibited the opposite response of his King: he insisted his fellow servant be locked up.

Then it says other servants learned and were deeply saddened, and reported the facts to the King.   
Reading from v. 32: “[The King] said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ And his lord, moved with anger [previous moved with pity, 27], handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.” (Matt. 18:32-34 NAU)

There are several lessons we can learn about Forgiveness. Let me just point to a couple.

First: Every one of us has been so deep in debt to the King of Heaven we have no chance whatsoever of paying it off.   
The King-lender here is God, who has every right to demand recompense. But he also has the prerogative to extend mercy, which he does freely.  
We Kingdom citizens have all had commuted a sentence of life in prison, or worse … which we deserved.  
Being forgiven is at once the greatest experience of ***relief*** and the greatest experience of ***humiliation***: I escaped that which I deserved.

Paul adds another element of the Truth in Romans 5 when he states, While we were sinners, Messiah, the King’s Son, died for us. The King absorbed the loss of the assets by paying the debt Himself.

So for one of us who is supposedly one of His subjects to refuse to forgive a fellow slave is to despise the King whose throne is grace. We cannot call ourselves subjects and sons of the King of Grace and Forgiveness if we harden our hearts and refuse to forgive. Worse than that, He does not call such a one ‘son.’

Second: it is so contrary to our nature, human nature, what some call our “sin nature,” to forgive this way; this kind of forgiveness can only be delivered by a new nature. This is not a function of a certain personality type. Nobody—no ‘son of Adam’—is inclined to “let it go.” Not in this way such that - though we remember the offense - we extend grace and refuse to bring it up … ever! That’s not just hard: that’s impossible for the human soul that is not transformed by the forgiving grace of this King. But when the grace of God has truly touched us and we truly appreciate the gift of forgiveness, it is now our new nature to be humble, to be mindful that we have been pardoned of far greater offenses. We are just so glad to forgive and resume that normal and warm, loving fellowship we yearn for.

When a brother sins against you, don’t ever forget that you are—*were*—just as guilty as that one is—*was*.  
You have done the same or worse, and will again. And the only reason you still live is you have been forgiven, for no reason other than the King’s mercy, grace.

**Concl**: Nowhere in the chapter do we read the word ‘love.’ Nowhere does it say ‘one another.’ But that is what the whole chapter is about: Loving one another. And that is the Church’s answer to the world’s concern to settle, Who is the greatest? The Church’s message is that Jesus is the Greatest. And ‘greatness’ is loving one another.

There is no place in the Church for pride or a sense of superiority or ‘competitive sanctification.’ We are all Kings—co-equal—in His Kingdom. We have been chosen by *the* King to populate His eternal Kingdom and to share in His rule over that New Creation. That is our hope, our destiny, individually and collectively.

In this world, this broken world, we are still old creation. We are destined for glory, but we are still broken ourselves. We are the people blessed by the King with forgiveness. We must humbly fight the inner temptation to try to knock others off a perceived higher station so that we might take it over and be seen as ‘Greatest.’ And we must be abundantly compassionate when a brother or sister strays, repents, asks for forgiving mercy.

When we look further in the Gospels records we read in Matt 20 (20-28) of James’ and John’s mother asking Jesus to grant in His Kingdom to her sons the two most honored thrones next to His. Then in Luke 22, just after the Last Supper, it says, “there arose a dispute … the greatest.” They seem to have been slow learners.

Twice in the NT we read of Paul handing individuals over to Satan.

OT and NT examples: (1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20 – 3 indivs Paul “handed over to Satan”; 2 Thes 3:6,14; Acts 5; Korah, Num 16; *Yom Kippur* scapegoat)

What we see in this section is the Church-age counterpart. God does not seem to have servants on the order of Moses or the apostles today, and so the process is, what, more measured? Involving shepherd-types. And the Church is not a nation, as Israel, and so does not itself execute capital punishment. But there is still a common principle.

Speaking just opinion here, not based on particular scriptures or research: it seems to me that some Christians might tend to be unbalanced toward the ‘seeking #100’ side, reluctant to follow through on the banishing the contaminating influence; while others would be the reverse. And I suppose that like individuals, whole churches may also tend to be unbalanced, tending either in favor of seeking and welcoming one and all, or toward quick and harsh rejecting of anyone that is ‘different.’

Since we are all broken, we are all bent toward hurting one another. So we must be prepared to confront and be confronted, to forgive and be forgiven. We must see how wicked it is to injure one another and be prepared to seek to reconcile.

1. They say one talent was about the equivalent of 6000 denarii, what one would earn in 6000 days of work. Ballpark, that’s 20-ish years. So 10,000 talents = 200,000 years. If we allow that such a person might be able to live on 80% and save 20% of his servant wages, it would take 1,000,000 years to repay the debt principal. [↑](#endnote-ref--1)