

# Matthew 18:1-6

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] I wonder what's behind that question. Have you ever thought that when posed a seemingly innocent question? I think parents are well accustomed to being posed questions, and you're thinking, well, hang on a minute, what's behind that question? And not just parents, husbands and wives and partners, no doubt, have experience of being posed a question and being left wondering, okay, but what's behind the question? Sometimes we need to question the question. Why are you asking me that? I'm sure many of you have been there and can relate to that. The disciples have a question for Jesus, and the question that they pose does rather beg that kind of response. What's behind the question? The question is simple enough. Well, I say it's simple enough. We'll hopefully discover whether it is or isn't in the course of the sermon, but the question is there before us in verse 1 of Matthew chapter 18. Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? That's the question. But what's behind the question? Matthew doesn't tell us what's behind the question, but Mark does. He certainly gives us the backdrop, the background to the question that is posed. And let's just read what Mark tells us about this same occasion. In Mark chapter 9 and verses 33 and 34, it was from Mark's account that we said something to the children a few moments ago. Mark chapter 9 and verse 33, they came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, that is when Jesus was in the house, he asked them, the disciples, what were you arguing about on the road? But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued they had argued about who was the greatest. So that's what's been going on. And it is in that context that the disciples then pose the question to Jesus. Of course, as we see the background, we find another question. And it is a question posed by Jesus to the disciples. What were you arguing about on the road? And in order to perhaps better locate ourselves as we launch into thinking about the question itself, which is our primary concern, let's just try and recreate the scene as we have it or on the basis of the information we've been given. The disciples were told had been arguing on the road, and we presume that this was the road that would have led from Mount Hermon, or in any case the vicinity of Mount Hermon, where the transfiguration had taken place, or generally that's what's understood. At the foot of that mountain, there'd been the incident with the demon-possessed boy. The disciples had been unable to cast out the demon, but Jesus had done so, and He gave them the teaching on the need for faith, even a tiny amount of faith in God, and that that was what they needed, and that was what they lacked. And then they make their way south to Capernaum, and it is on that road that the arguing takes place. And what were they arguing about?

Well, might it have been? We know it wasn't, but you wonder. Might they not have taken the opportunity, Peter, James, and John, to share with the others the marvelous experience that had been theirs on the Mount of Transfiguration? That would have been a good thing to talk about. Or maybe they would have done well to use the time on the road to reflect on their failure to cast out the demon from that poor boy.

And what Jesus had said to them, and how He had taught them concerning the need for faith in God, even as small as a mustard seed. That would have been a worthwhile topic of conversation for the disciples as they made their way to Capernaum. But no, they weren't talking about that. That's just too dull and boring. They were arguing about who of the disciples was the greatest. Now, what is that all about? Where does that come from? I think what we need to understand is that the disciples are increasingly coming to the persuasion that Jesus is the Messiah. Now, their conception of what that meant may have been limited, but nonetheless, as they had spent these nearly three years with Jesus, it becomes ever clearer to them that Jesus is very special, that He is the promised Messiah, and that soon, imminently, He will be establishing the Messianic Kingdom. Now, this is a kingdom that they envision in very material terms, a geographic kingdom where power is enjoyed and exercised over the nation of Israel. And of course, as they are coming to that conclusion, however vaguely or tentatively, the exciting part is that their friend, Jesus, is going to be the King. And the disciples are jockeying for position in the first cabinet of this soon-to-be-established kingdom. Peter has set his heart on being prime minister. Judas reckons he's a shoo-in for chancellor of the exchequer. James and John also have an idea that maybe they should occupy the most important position in the cabinet, or worst case scenario, well, home secretary or foreign secretary, but one of the plum jobs. Of course, the other disciples, they too reckon that they have a claim on an important position of power and influence in the kingdom that is to be established. Of one thing, they are all certain, their status and position will depend on their relative greatness. It's important to establish who is the greatest, because on that basis, the jobs will be handed out. Their greatness will secure greatness in the kingdom. It's interesting that in Matthew's account, it speaks of, or it describes, sorry, in Mark's account, it describes the disciples arguing about who is the greatest. When Luke relates the same incident, he has a slight difference. He speaks about the disciples arguing about who will be the greatest, and no doubt they were doing both. You see, deciding who was the greatest would then determine who will be the greatest in the kingdom that is to be established. What are they like, these disciples? What are we like? Are we so different as we jockey for position, as we look to stand out? It happens at home between siblings. You see it in the playground, in the park. It's there in the office and the staff room. In Aberdeen at the moment, there is a lot of jockeying for position.

Maybe your job depends on how well you jockey for position. 15% are going to go. Will you be in that 15%? How do you make sure that you keep your job and somebody else loses their job? People are busy jockeying for position, looking to show to those who have the power to decide that they are the greatest, or if not the greatest, certainly good enough to continue in employment. That's the way it is. Let me give you an example of jockeying for ascendancy and doing what needs to be done to stop others getting ahead of us in the pecking order. This was just last week. I was taking Joseph to his training out at Balgownie at the university pitches there, and we were a little bit early. And so I was just waiting in the car, and we saw a lad with his father who was speaking to the coach. And we didn't recognize this boy, but he'd obviously come to participate in the training.

And so Joseph says, ah, he's a trialist. And I said, all right, well, that's okay. And then he said to me, we'll give him a hard time. And I says, you know, what's that about? He says, oh, yeah, you always give trialists a hard time. You don't pass on the ball. You give them a hard time. And I says, well, why did you do that? Oh, come on. If they get in, one of us goes out. So, you know, that's just the way it is. You give them a hard time so that they don't do well, and they don't impress. And we can smile, but does that not reflect the way we operate? We jockey for position. We want to stand out. We want to be better than the others. Well, the disciples are doing that. They are arguing about who is the greatest. That's the background to this question that they pose to Jesus. This petty squabbling of the disciples fueled by a presumption of greatness and a thirst for the rewards of greatness. These are the men who pose the question, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? The question, of course, is posed so politely in a futile attempt to mask their real concern. You see, if you only had the question, you would say, well, that's okay. That's a perfectly legitimate question that they're posing. And of course, they pose it in that way. They're not going to go up to Jesus and say, who do you think is the greatest of us? Oh, no, that would be far too rude. So they put it in this very polite way.

[ 10 : 28 ] But of course, their concern is to know who Jesus thinks is the greatest and, of course, the implications of that when he establishes his kingdom. But regardless of the unworthy motivation, the question does provide Jesus an opportunity to teach his disciples some important truths concerning the kingdom of heaven. What we need to do is we need to do two things. We need to try and understand the question, and we need to try and understand the answer that Jesus gives. And we'll begin with the question. When I was doing exams, and that was not yesterday, and going right back to school, one of the things, well, the teachers always said this, but I remember my mom always used to say this as well. I was going out, maybe I had an O grade or higher, and she would say to me, always read the question. Read the question before you launch into trying to answer it. Of course, that is sound advice, and we need to read the question. We need to understand the question.

And in trying to understand the question, perhaps the most critical thing for us is to establish what the kingdom of heaven is. The question is, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? But what do we make of this language of the kingdom of heaven? What is that? And notice that Jesus answers the question on the basis of what the kingdom of heaven really is, not on the basis of the disciples' mistaken conception. And that's important to be clear. So what is the kingdom of heaven?

We've already noticed what the disciples imagined it to be, an earthly messianic kingdom to be established by Jesus. But they were wrong. So what is it? Well, let me highlight four truths concerning the kingdom of heaven that should serve to establish sufficiently for our purposes what it is. So this isn't an exhaustive description, but I think four truths that if we have them in our mind will give us a good idea of what the kingdom of heaven is. The first thing to be aware of or to note is that this phrase, kingdom of heaven, is equivalent to kingdom of God. We find both phrases used in the Gospels, and they're not different kingdoms. This is the same kingdom. Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience, and he tends to favor, not exclusively, but he tends to favor the expression kingdom of heaven, possibly because it avoided the name of God, which was something devout Jews tended to do. So rather than use the name of God, replace it with heaven. That was thought to be more respectful. And Matthew goes along with that notion. So it's the kingdom of heaven is simply the kingdom of God. But that doesn't take us very far. What can we say about the kingdom of God? Well, the second thing I want to say is this, is that the kingdom of God is equivalent to the rule of God. So not a kingdom with borders and a capital city, but the rule of God in the world. That is the kingdom of God. It is God's rule in the world.

The third thing to be clear on is the identity of the king. Now, Matthew, from the beginning of his Gospel, has been careful to introduce Jesus as the king. At the very beginning, he makes it very clear, and at the very end, and on many occasions in between. But we'll stick with the beginning and the end. Let's just notice in Matthew chapter 2, and in verse 2, Matthew records for us the visit of the Magi. And what is it that we read there? Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his start in the east and have come to worship him. So from the very beginning, Matthew is concerned to present Jesus as the king. And that continues throughout the Gospel. If we turn towards the end of the Gospel in Matthew 21, verses 4 to 5, the triumphal entry, something that occurred just a little after the incident we're looking at this morning. This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet, say to the daughter of Zion, see your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Again, a concern to make it clear that the king of this kingdom is Jesus. Right at the very end of the Gospel, Jesus himself acknowledges the kingly authority that he enjoys. Verse 18 of the final chapter in chapter 28, in introducing the words of the Great Commission, then Jesus came to them and said, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Now, the words of Jesus remind us that this kingship is in a sense shared between the Father and the Son. We can speak of the Son as King Jesus, as he is often described, but we can also identify the Father as King. There is a shared kingship that is exercised over this kingdom. Jesus himself often spoke about my Father's kingdom, where he identifies his Father as the king. So, the identity of the king. But then the fourth thing to be clear on, and it flows on from what we've already said, is this, that the kingdom is made up of those who acknowledge and submit to the rule of King Jesus. They are the citizens of this kingdom, those who acknowledge Jesus to be king and those who submit to Jesus as king. So, that is the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God. Now, who is the greatest in the kingdom? That's the question. Well, the disciples have a flawed understanding both of what the kingdom is and what constitutes greatness in the kingdom. For them, greatness is about capacity. It's about giftedness. It's about success. It leads to power and prestige and position.

[ 17 : 00 ] That's their conception. And there is, of course, a rich irony inherent in the very question, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? For surely the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the king. And you would have thought that was fairly obvious, and yet the question is posed, who is the greatest? Maybe if we're trying to be fair to the disciples, they take it as a given that they're thinking about who is the greatest citizen in the kingdom of heaven. So, that's the question. It's about the kingdom of heaven that we've tried to sketch in terms of what it is, and it's about the question of greatness within that kingdom. But what about the answer? What answer does Jesus give?

And Jesus' answer to the question, or in any case, the first part of his answer that occupies verses two to four, deals with two aspects of kingdom citizenship. It deals with becoming a member of the kingdom, and it deals with belonging as a citizen of the kingdom. Notice how there is that distinction. In verse three, and he said, I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. So, his first concern is about becoming a citizen, about entering the kingdom. But then he moves on, almost seamlessly, to speak about belonging in the kingdom. Because then he goes on to say in verse four, therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. So, he's speaking about those who are already in the kingdom, who belong to the kingdom, who are citizens of the kingdom, and this is how they are to behave.

This is what is to characterize those who belong in the kingdom. So, there's these two aspects, becoming and belonging. We think about becoming. The disciples hadn't asked about becoming a citizen of the kingdom. Why didn't they ask that? Well, because they presumed that they already were.

There was no need to ask about how to become a citizen of the kingdom. They were already on the inside. They were friends of Jesus. They knew the king. Of course, they were already on the inside.

They were jockeying for positions in the cabinet, not about determining if they even had citizenship. So, they don't even imagine that it would be necessary to ask about how to enter the kingdom of heaven. And the first thing that Jesus does in answering their question is to warn them against a dangerous presumption. They presume that they're in the kingdom.

[ 19 : 48 ] They presume that they're citizens. And he says, well, just hang on a moment. Let's just take a step back. Before we discuss greatness in the kingdom, let's just establish if you're even in the kingdom.

And so, that's what he deals with. He deals with the matter of entering into the kingdom of heaven. Now, if Jesus pauses and takes this step back in dealing with his disciples, this inner circle, is it not sensible and prudent for us to also pause for a moment? What about you? Are you a citizen of the kingdom of heaven? Before we discuss or determine what constitutes greatness in the kingdom, are you even in the kingdom? Are you even a citizen at all? Are you a Christian? There are only really, I think, three answers to that question. Yes, I am a Christian. By the grace of God, I am a Christian.

Or no, I'm not. Or maybe for some, it's, well, I don't know. I'm not sure. What is your answer? For those of you who answered no or don't know, well, just pause or hang on a minute. Jesus has news for you on that front. But for those who answered yes, just pause for a moment and consider if you might be prey to a false presumption. I'm not advocating morbid introspection or the glorification of doubt. I'm simply picking up on Jesus' concern to take a step back and deal with this very basic issue of belonging or entering into his kingdom. It's important for us to be clear if we are indeed those who have come in to the kingdom of heaven, if we are indeed those who acknowledge Jesus as king and submit to him as our king. Well, how do you? How does anybody get into the kingdom of heaven?

Well, what does Jesus say? Well, Jesus says that what you need to do is to change and become like little children. He called a little child and had him stand among them, and he said, I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

How do you get in? How do you enter? How do you become a citizen? Well, you need to change and become like little children. The picture painted by Jesus is of a radical and decisive change and involves becoming like a little child. But what does that mean? In what sense are we to become like a little child? It's tempting to quickly imagine that Jesus has in mind a child's character, but I think that would be to miss the main point that Jesus is making, which has to do with a child's status, particularly in the context, the cultural context in which Jesus finds himself in first century Palestine. In Jesus' day, a child was considered insignificant, powerless and resourceless, and consequently wholly dependent. Why was a child dependent? Because of the child's insignificance, because the child had no power, because the child had no say, no voice, no resources.

[ 23 : 13 ] The child was entirely dependent on others, principally his appearance. I think this is the reality of a child that Jesus is particularly concerned to emphasize. Now, it may be that Jesus also has in mind certain aspects of a child's character, but only insofar as they have to do with the child's status.

A child who is wholly dependent on his parents will, in turn, depend on and trust in his parents for his every need. Entering into the kingdom of heaven or becoming a Christian involves becoming like a little child in the sense indicated. It involves becoming insignificant and wholly dependent. It requires us to acknowledge that we are nothing and have nothing to bring to the table. You need to depend entirely and absolutely and wholly on the God who invites you and who has opened up a way for you to enter his kingdom. And that way that he has provided is by trusting in Jesus as your Savior and submitting to Jesus as your King. The picture that Jesus is using here really is very similar to the picture that he employs in another occasion when he states that no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.

They're really parallel pictures that Jesus is employing. Let me just illustrate this with a current hot topic that is being debated endlessly on the news and in current affairs programs. Immigration policy and requirements to enter the United Kingdom. To the nationalists among us, I use the United Kingdom because it's convenient because it has the word kingdom in it. You know there's a lot of debate about what determines whether somebody can come in and be part of our kingdom. I'm sure you've heard politicians proposing a points-based system. I won't name the politicians who often speak about that but they'll point to Australia and Canada and they'll say we need a points-based system to determine who can get in.

And of course what that is grounded on is the idea of what can the immigrant bring, the one who wants to be part of this kingdom, what can they bring to the table, what particular skill do they have that is missing, that there's a shortage of in our country, what financial resources can they demonstrate, what level of education do they enjoy, and they accumulate all these points and they come and they say look at all these points I've got. Of course you'd want me to be part of your kingdom.

And we say well yes we we'd like you to come because you have all this to offer. That's the the idea. No points, no passport, or no visa in any case. How different, how completely and radically different in the matter of entry into the kingdom of heaven. For entry into the kingdom of heaven having nothing is the requirement. If you come with something to offer imagining that you deserve to be part of it, that you have much to give, and you say well of course you would want me to be part of your kingdom God because look at me and you can't get in. Those who get in are those who acknowledge that they have nothing to offer and that they depend entirely on God and on what God has provided that we might be brought in to his kingdom. In the words of the hymn, just as I am without one plea but that thy blood was shed for me and that thou bidst me come to thee O Lamb of God I come. Nothing to bring to the table, nothing to offer, no negotiation to be entered into, simply to believe that God has invited us and that God has provided the way, that God has provided a savior who can deal with our sin and all that would separate us from God and would make us unable to come into his kingdom and to trust in what

[ 27 : 48 ] God has done, to receive what God has done on our behalf. Will you change and become like a little child? If you don't, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. You will spend this life and eternity outside without hope and without God.

The matter of becoming is what Jesus first deals with but then he does move on to the matter of belonging. He moves on to deal with that aspect and the important thing to note is that the requirement for becoming and for belonging is one in the same. Becoming like a child or humbling oneself like a little child. He deals with two aspects, becoming and belonging, but for both the condition is the same.

To change and become like a child or to humble yourself like a child. And again, this is not Jesus saying that a child is marked by innocence and humility and that we must be innocent and humble like children. Children are neither innocent nor humble. I know what I'm talking about because I was once a child and I have raised three children. And I'm sure many of you can warm to that reality and that experience.

This is about the status of a child as one who was deemed. Now we are in a different cultural context and we might find this a little bit difficult to get our heads around, but a child who was deemed to be unimportant and insignificant. A child didn't give orders, a child had to obey orders that were made to him.

Indeed, the very child that Jesus is using as a visual aid, he does what he's told. Jesus calls him and the child comes because that's what children do. Well, not always. As citizens of the kingdom, as those who belong in the kingdom, as citizens of the kingdom, we are to be like children in this sense. We are to humble ourselves and not to seek prominence or privilege or position. The very thing the disciples were dreaming about. We are to serve others and not seek to be served by others. In Mark's account of this discussion, this is brought out perhaps even more clearly than in Matthew's record. In Mark chapter 9 and verse 35, we read, sitting down, Jesus called the twelve and said, if anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all. And so there, as we draw what Mark records with what is found in Matthew, it just confirms that this picture of a child has to do not so much with character but with status. We are to be like a child, unimportant, insignificant, serving others, not being served by others. Now, does this not sound like somebody we know?

[ 30 : 55 ] It sounds like the attitude and conduct of the king of the kingdom of heaven, our servant king. And we're back to where we went to last week when we were thinking really on a similar theme in the context of the temple text. We go back to what Paul writes as he writes his letter to the Philippians in chapter 2 and in verse 5, 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. Note that the very same language used of Jesus, he humbled himself, is used by Jesus in challenging his disciples that they, if they are to be long in the kingdom of heaven, they must humble themselves as he humbled himself that he might serve others. So those who live and serve are, Jesus assures us, the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

The insignificant gain significance in Christ and in Christ-likeness. What does that look like as we live our daily lives? Well, we turn to what Paul says in that same passage to the Philippians.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. You should not look only to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

What does it look like in the real world when it's about passing the ball to the triathlete? It's about helping your rival at work and taking on that task that nobody wants and doing that chore that nobody sees and nobody will thank you for or give you any reward for doing.

[ 33 : 07 ] Let me give you some homework for the week that's begun. It doesn't have to be the whole week. Let's just think of tomorrow. Spend tomorrow, or even part of tomorrow. You probably don't need the whole day for this to work. Spend part of tomorrow examining everything you say and do by asking the question, why did I do or say that? And be honest as you try and answer the question, well, why did I say that?

Why did I express myself in that way? Why did I do that? Was it out of self-interest or was it motivated by seeking the welfare and good of the other? And it's quite a sobering exercise if you do it with even a measure of rigor and honesty. But let me give you one final task for right now.

Try and imagine the impact on an outsider, on one who is not part of the kingdom, who comes into a community of believers, citizens of the kingdom, who behave in the manner described by Jesus, seeking not their own interests, but the interests of others, seeking not to be served, but to serve.

Would such a man or woman not discover a community that is not only radically different, but irresistibly attractive? What do you think as you ponder on that circumstance?

I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for your son, Jesus.

[ 34 : 57 ] We thank you for the manner in which he teaches us concerning these great matters of eternal significance, what is involved in becoming a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, of how we are to live and behave as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. We do pray that you would be the one who would help us to become like children, to not insist on our own importance and prominence and position, but that our concern would be the concern of Jesus, the one who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself as nothing, taking the form of a servant who humbled himself and humbled himself even unto death and death and a cross, that we might in some measure seek to be and become ever more like him. And these things we pray in his name. Amen.

Amen.