

## **Becoming Like a Child at Christmas**

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 18:1-5

The disciples come to Jesus and they ask, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” That’s a question they seem to ask a lot. Most of the time they didn’t ask Jesus about it; most of the time they fought about who would be the greatest. We see that all the time in the Bible. Jesus would be walking through Galilee, and his disciples would be walking behind him bickering amongst themselves, arguing about who Jesus liked best, jostling to be the one who got to walk right next to the master. In our passage, it’s not clear if they were fighting. There’s nothing that says there was an argument. The disciples just ask a question about who is the greatest, but still: it shows that they have greatness on the brain. It shows how they were constantly looking at each other and wondering who was the most important. It shows that they were still looking at each other and sizing each other up to see where they stood in the rankings.

Who is the greatest? It’s not just the disciples who are obsessed with the idea of greatness, we are too! We modern people are always talking about greatness. The end of the year is upon us. As the year comes to a close, what do we see a lot of in the media? Top Ten lists. At the end of the year magazines and newspapers come out with all their lists of the year’s greatest stuff: The greatest movies of the year. The greatest books of the year, the top songs of the year. The top ten podcasts. The top ten TV shows. Every year, Time magazine even declares the person of the year, a person who has had the greatest influence on the year’s events. This year the person of the year was Taylor Swift. If you want to know more about that, ask Larry. He was very excited. We love ranking things. We love thinking about who is the greatest.

And when we think about greatness, how do we measure it? What do we and the disciples count as great? One way to figure this out is to look at people in history whom we called ‘great.’ In history there have been a few people who were given the title “The Great.” Why did we give them that title? One of the most famous of those was Alexander the Great. Why was Alexander called “the great?” Well, he was a great warrior and general. He led the Macedonian armies all over the world and created a great empire. He conquered Egypt and Persia and Israel and Turkey. His Empire went all the way to India! He was rich and powerful. Alexander was called great because he was a strong man who conquered, who showed his power and made others bend the knee before him.

Another person who was called “the greatest” was Muhammed Ali. For the sake of you younger folk, Muhammed Ali was a boxer and a very, very good one, the most famous boxer who ever lived. He was called the greatest because he became the champion and stayed champion for a long time. He was also called that because he was good at other things too. He was a great talker; reporters loved to get quotes from him because he would always say something interesting. He was also really smart: he knew things about politics and society so people respected him for that. Muhammed Ali wasn’t afraid to boast a little. He used to say “I am the greatest! I float like a butterfly and sting like a bee! I am the greatest!” He said it enough that people started to call him that.

Another person who was called the great was Wayne Gretzky. Wayne Gretzky was a hockey player. A really good hockey player. He was probably the best hockey player who ever lived. He still holds the record for the most goals by a professional player and the most assists. 212. He was so good people gave him a nickname. They called him: The Great One.

So those are some examples of people who we call great. What do you notice about them? What is it about them that made us call them great? What do we count as great? One is strength. The greatest is someone who shows strength. When someone is really good at something, sports, or singing, or business, or if he’s a really good general or warrior, or if someone is super-smart we recognize strength and we call that great.

It’s not just strength though. In our world, to be called the greatest we also want you to win. Greatness is about competition. If you are strong you are good; but if you win then you’re great. And if you win a lot you’re the GOAT. In our world greatness involves competition and winning. If your building is the tallest, if you scored the most goals or caught the most passes, if your book sells the most copies, if you have the biggest

business that's when we really call you great. So the way most people do greatness: greatness is not just about strength and power and money and smarts, it's about comparison. It's about being ranked. It's about being stronger and smarter than others.

If that's the way you define greatness, if that's what counts for greatness, thinking about greatness isn't always good. It wasn't good for the disciples. It made them fight, because they were always comparing and competing! You can imagine how that might go. One apostle, say Andrew, would look over at Thaddeus and Bartholomew, two of the disciples you don't hear much about and he would think, "Well I'm obviously more important than them. They hardly ever say anything, they just walk around and listen." He would look at them and feel all proud and superior. But then when he looked at Peter, James and John, he would feel small and unimportant, "Jesus sometimes takes them on special trips. He never takes me. Why not me? What's the matter with me?" One moment you're proud, the next moment you're jealous, and all the time you're miserable. That's what all that comparing does to people. When greatness is about your social ranking, you will feel miserable about other people's success, and you will feel good about other people's failure. It's messed up.

Nevertheless, that's the game the disciples are playing, and they decide to ask Jesus for help. Maybe Jesus can give them some tips as they climb their way to the top. "In the Kingdom of heaven, who is the greatest?" they ask. "How do I rise to the top of the kingdom hierarchy?" How does Jesus answer them? Jesus blows up the whole question. Jesus takes a 5-year-old child, he stands her up in the middle of the disciples, and he says, "Unless you change and become like this child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." "Unless you change." All this comparison, all the fixation of strength and winning and attention; it's got to stop. It's making everyone miserable. It's not about who is the strongest and the biggest and the best; it's about becoming like this child. No more comparing yourself to others to see who's winning and who's losing; think about becoming like this child. Here's your new kingdom standard: a child. Unless you become like a child...What does Jesus mean!? What specifically does it mean to become like a child?

Before I say anything about what I think being childlike is all about, let me say one more thing about greatness. While Jesus tells us to stop worrying about being the greatest, that doesn't mean we should stop trying to do great things. Christians are supposed to forget about being the greatest, but they are not supposed to stop working to do great things. Jesus isn't telling us to pursue mediocrity. If a student writes a really good essay for class, it's OK for the teacher to give that student an 'A' and write "Great job!" at the top. If a student puts in no effort and writes a sloppy essay at the last minute, it's OK for a teacher to give that student a 'D' and write "Not great" at the top. Comparing things like English essays is fine. We have to measure the relative goodness and effectiveness of things that we make and do. That's how we improve and grow. It's comparing people that's dangerous, and the disciples ask WHO is the greatest in the kingdom, not what is the greatest in the kingdom. It's the 'who' part of the question that concerns Jesus. They're comparing each other's relative worth and standing.

With that out of the way we can go back to the original question: what does it mean to change and become like children? When Jesus asks us to be like children, what's he looking for? Maybe he means that he wants us to be like children in our faith. Children are more trusting than adults. When a Dad says to his daughter on the side of the pool, "Jump! I'll catch you!" She jumps. If a 19-year-old says to his 19-year-old friend on the side of the pool, "Jump! I'll catch you!" the friend says, "Yeah Right!" Children are trusting. They can fall into their father's arms more easily. So that may be part of what Jesus means.

Maybe Jesus wants us to be spontaneous like children? Kids are better at letting themselves go in public. They will dance and sing in front of others without much embarrassment. When I was 7, at a wedding, I sang Jesus loves me in front of a room full of adults. You couldn't pay me enough money to do that now. Adults become reserved and self-conscious, they bury their joy and their emotions and that's not always good. Maybe that's part of what Jesus wants from us when he calls us to be children; he wants more joyful spontaneity.

Certainly Jesus wants us to be humble like a child. He specifically mentions that. Children know that they are dependent creatures. They know they can't take care of themselves. They have no illusions of self-sufficiency. They know they rely on the grace and care of others.

All of these things are possible; Jesus wants us to be expressive and trusting. But I think that when Jesus calls us to become like children he means something different again. Ultimately becoming like children is not about what the disciples need to do, it's about who the disciples are. If all Jesus means to tell them is a new

thing to do, he won't really have ended the greatness game. It used to be that being the greatest was about being the biggest and the strongest, but now it would be about being the most trusting and the most spontaneous. You change the standards of the competition but it would still be a competition to be on top. Andrew would still be looking at James and thinking: "I'm way more spontaneous than James, and I'm more trusting too! I'm winning! I am just like a child! I am the greatest!"

When Jesus calls them to be great like children, he's reminding them of an entirely different way to be great. What is it that makes a child great? Those children who come forward for the children's message, those babies we baptize, we think they're great. I think they're great and judging by the looks on most of your faces, you think they're great too. Why do we think that? What makes them great? Is it what they do? Do we think they're great because of their skill? Do we think they're great because to their Math skills, or because they are so smart? NO. Is it because of their singing skills? When the littles come up here and sing, that's the one time you can pretty much count on applause from the congregation. Maybe it's their singing skills that make us think they're great. NO. Children are great not because of what they do, but because of who they are. Children are great because they are created by God, made in his image, and loved by him. Kids, your greatness isn't something you achieve by your own strength and power. It's a gift of God's grace. All you can do is receive that gift and live in the joy of it.

And all of us are great that way. All of us are great not because of what we do and achieve, we are great and beautiful and worthy because God has given us a gift. The gift of life. The gift of salvation. He has poured his love out on us. "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith – and this is not your own doing, it is a gift of God. Not by works so that no one can boast." In Christ, greatness isn't an accomplishment that you attain in strength; it's a gift you receive in weakness. What makes you great is not what you've done; it's the fact that you are God's handiwork, fearfully and wonderfully made. You are great because you are incredibly valuable to him. How valuable? He sent his son to die for you!

When you start measuring greatness that way, it changes the way you see the world. Do you know the name Paul Brand? Paul Brand was an accomplished doctor who worked all over the world. His specialty was Hansen's disease; the disease we used to call leprosy. When he worked in India he became interested in helping people who struggled with the disease because people who got the disease were shunned in that society. Brand gave his life to helping those people. He didn't see them as untouchable; he saw them as valuable and beloved of God. For his work, Brand received many accolades: awards from medical associations, accolades from politicians; he was given the order of the British empire by Queen Elizabeth.

Those awards are great, but the story which gets me is a story told by Philip Yancey. Yancey went to visit Brand at a leprosy clinic he ran in Louisiana. In addition to treating patients and studying the disease, he would hold a weekly worship service and Brand would preach at that service. When Yancey visited he saw firsthand how hard Brand worked on those services. He spent hours praying over his text and working on his words. When the service came, said Yancey, there were only a handful of people in the pews, many of them half-deaf from their disease. Nevertheless, Dr. Brand proceeded to give them a message worthy of Westminster Abbey. I think that's a story of someone who's learned to see greatness the way Jesus sees it.

People of God, as you move forward into the year, I'm sure you have many things you want to accomplish, many things you want to achieve and do, I know I do. But today remember the source of the greatness that's in you and that's all around you. In Jesus Christ you are beloved children of God, and that's not just a good thing: that's the greatest.

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