What Were They Thinking?

Tuesday Night Bible Study
Matthew 18:1-5; Mark 9:33b-37; Luke 9:46-48

Whoa! Talk About Missing the Point

Remember, in Matthew 16, the disciples declare Jesus as the "Christ, the Son of the living God" for the first time (16:16). Then, immediately after, Jesus tells them that "He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day" (16:21). And you would think this would have a profound effect on them. But, if you did, you'd be mistaken. Read it for yourself.

So, in Matthew 17, Jesus cranks it up a notch and allows them to witness His transfiguration and hear, with their own ears, the literal voice of the Father and see Moses and Elijah for themselves. And again, you might assume this would be a life-changing moment for them, but it didn't seem to have that desired effect.

After coming down from the mountain, Jesus heals a demon-possessed boy and, for the second time, tells His disciples the future in advance.

> Now while they were staying in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him, and the third day He will be raised up." And they were exceedingly sorrowful - Matthew 17:22-23.

And, as we shall quickly see, they still didn't get it. They have declared Jesus as Lord and King, and He has revealed to them about His upcoming betrayal, torture, death, and resurrection. But by the time we get to Matthew 18, all they care about is not their Lord, but which of them would be first in line to lord it over the others.

What a sad state of affairs. Especially when you realize they would have the same argument among themselves about who was top dog on the night of His betrayal and after He said to them, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). Talk about missing the point. Geez.

Rivalry Among the Ranks

Let's look at the combined passage together. And remember, they are in Capernaum (Mark 9:33a), possibly at Peter's house.

> (MT) **At that time the disciples came to Jesus**, (MK) **when He was in the house** (after His conversation with Peter about paying the temple tax in Matt. 17:24-27), (MT) **saying**, "**Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven**?"

This almost seems like the end of a longer conversation they must have been having. And it appears they wanted Jesus to resolve their dispute by choosing one of them. But, as was His way, He would have none of it. Mark fills in some of the details.

> (MT) **Then Jesus** (MK) **asked them**, "**What was it you disputed** (to have a heated discussion, to reflect, reason, consider) **among yourselves on the road**?" **But they kept silent** (maybe out of embarrassment or conviction), **for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest** (probably among themselves)."

The implication is that they were not having a theological discussion about the traits of Christ one needed to incorporate into one's life to be of the most service to Him and His kingdom. No, it appears this was a professional, yet petty, rivalry or one-upmanship. Note also, Mark is the only gospel writer who records this, and he received most of his information from Peter. Does that fact expand your understanding of this passage?

First His Teaching, Then An Unforgettable Example

Jesus first answered their question with a brief teaching. But they didn't seem to comprehend what He was saying, or they might have been so self-focused that His words had little effect. So, He finished with an example that should have shamed them to their core (and it should shame us also).

Let's begin with the general teaching. Jesus once again uses His *if/then* format.

> (MK) **And He sat down**, **called the twelve**, **and said to them**, "**If** (condition) **anyone** (one, someone, a certain one) **desires** (wish, will, want strongly, implying active volition and purpose) **to be first** (foremost, preeminent, to rank about others), (then) **he shall be** (to have the quality of being, to come into existence or to become) **last** (extreme, most remote, coming after all others or being the only one remaining) **of all** (*pás*) **and servant** (*diákonos* - one who labors in the dust, a person working in the service of another, waiter, attendant) **of all** (*pás*)."
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> > How does what Jesus said make you feel? Are you willing to be a follower, or will you only be satisfied as a leader? And again, it seems greatness in His kingdom comes from the bottom up.
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> > > "I want (or God has called me) to be a leader among leaders." I'll tell you more about this actual statement made by a friend of ours on Tuesday night.

Next, His unforgettable example… right before their eyes.

> (MK) **Then He**, (LK) **perceiving** (to become aware of) **the thought of their heart**, (MK) t**ook a little child** (young child, either recently born, a baby, or an infant) **and set him** (LK) **by Him** (MK) **in the midst of them**. **And when He had taken him in His arms**, **He said to them**, (MT) "**Assuredly** (truth, certainly, or "what I am about to say to you is true, and you can take it to the bank"), **I say to you**, **unless** (condition) **you are converted** (to turn about, to change, to undergo a transformation or a change of position and action) **and become** (to begin to be, to come into existence, the position you are converted to) **as** (not like) **little children** (same word for recently born, a baby, or an infant), **you will** (result) **by no means** (implies a dependent and conditional negative, or "it ain't never gonna happen") **enter the kingdom of heaven**."
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> > Note, Jesus did not use a child around the age of 5 or 6 or even older. He used in this example a child no older (according to the Greek) than an infant. Have you ever wondered why? Was this the only child available? Or did He choose a child of this age for a reason?
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> > Do you know the difference between conversion ("unless you are converted") and regeneration (John 3:3-8; Titus 3:5; Eph. 2:4-5; 2 Cor. 5:17)? If not, the profound implications of this teaching may slip past you and you might find yourself suffering the consequences in your life now, and much later. We will talk more about this on Tuesday.
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> > And does "enter the kingdom of heaven" mean salvation? Or does it mean something else other than salvation?

His Conclusion

Jesus concludes with His "therefore":

> (MT) **Therefore whoever** (anyone, someone, open to everyone) **humbles** (to bring low, to voluntarily abase) **himself** (their action, a choice, not something done by the Holy Spirit to passive recipients) **as this little child** (again, same word for recently born, a baby, or an infant) **is** (present tense) **the greatest** (not great, but greatest, meaning significant, important) **in the kingdom of heaven**. **Whoever** (anyone, someone, open to everyone) **receives** (to take to oneself what is presented or brought by another, to willingly permit access to oneself) **one little child** (recently born, a baby, or an infant) **like this** (the baby being held in His arms) **in My name** (or in My authority, or for the sake of My name) **receives Me** (Jesus always identifies with His children, since they are united together with Him, see Luke 10:16; Acts 9:4), (MK) **and whoever receives Me**, **receives not Me but Him who sent Me**. (LK) **For he who is least among you all will be great**."

So it appears there are both great and small in the kingdom of heaven, or at least greatest and something less than greatest. What does that mean, and what are the implications? How does making yourself humble or of no reputation somehow make you not just great but the greatest? How is that possible?

The phrase “humbles himself as this little child” does not mean “humbles himself as this little child humbles himself,” but “humbles himself until he becomes like this little child.” Let that thought sink in for a moment.

John MacArthur said (and I love this): A little child makes no claims of worthiness or greatness. He simply submits to the care of his parents and others who love him, relying on them for all that he needs. He knows he cannot meet his own needs and has no resources to stay alive. That is the kind of humble submissiveness that results in greatness in God’s eyes and in His kingdom.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Since the disciples of Jesus struggled with jealousy and rivalry, we can assume those in His church could do the same today. So, what can we do to stand against selfish rivalry with the body of Christ? How can we become masters of our own human nature, insecurity, and lack of spiritual maturity that would cause us to put down others to make us feel better about ourselves? What traits or characteristics of Jesus can we incorporate into our lives to safeguard against the self-preoccupation of the disciples?

Let me list just a few:

1. Cultivate a spirit and life of humility, no matter how hard this may seem.
2. Focus on God’s approval and not the approval of man. Live for an audience of One.
3. Embrace a servant’s heart. Look for opportunities to serve without recognition.
4. Practice living in total contentment by being thrilled by what you already have.
5. Celebrate the success of others, even when it eclipses your own.
6. Meditate on the example of humility in Christ - see Philippians 2:5-7.
7. Examine your own motives, and do this every time you pray.
8. Strive for unity within the body of Christ, and make this personal for yourself.

And we will talk more about these on Tuesday.