

Introduction:

“A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher” (**Luke 6:40**, ESV). In context, Jesus is pointing out if we pick a bad teacher, we won’t be able to rise above it. When we follow the blind, we fall into the ditch with them. However, this principle also applies if we pick a good teacher. In fact, if we pick the Good Teacher, when we are fully trained, we will be just like Him. That is what discipleship is all about: being like Jesus. In fact, the term “Christian” got started because it means “little Christ.” As we wrap up our look in this series at discipleship, can we all admit this has been a tall order? There are so many facets to Jesus. Even the five we highlight in our Discipleship Circle can all be unpacked to reveal a whole cadre of principles and characteristics we need to pursue and follow. No doubt, some people will be better at some of the characteristics than others. So, which ones are better? Which ones matter most? All this brings up a question. If I want to be a great disciple, where should I start? If I want to be the greatest disciple, what should I work on? The answers to these questions come in Jesus’s response to an argument among the apostles. From **Mark 9:34** and **Luke 9:46**, we know on a particular trip to Capernaum, the 12 had been arguing. In Mark’s account of it, Jesus asks them what they had been discussing, they didn’t want to answer. They knew something was off about their argument. I want us to spend our time in Matthew’s account of this event. We find it beginning in **Matthew 18:1**. Somewhere in all this exchange, the disciples actually ask Jesus to weigh in on the argument: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

Discussion:

I. The disciples’ question: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

- A. We need to grasp that the disciples still don’t understand Jesus’s plan for the kingdom. They are still thinking very much in the terms of kicking the Romans out of Jerusalem, establishing a capital on Zion, ruling from David’s earthly throne, and bringing an age of peace that emanates from Jerusalem. They are thinking in terms of military might and mighty men. They are thinking of terms like we find in **2 Samuel 23:19, 23** with David’s mighty men like Abishai and Benaiah who were in the top 30 but not in the top 3. We can see how a question and argument like this might come up. After all, Jesus was singling out three of the apostles that still today we refer to as His inner circle. Peter, James, and John went with him to Jairus’s house when Jesus raised the little girl from the dead. Those three also got to go up to the Mount of Transfiguration. I can imagine Peter making a claim about some of the other fellows that, “Yes, you are renowned among the twelve, but you haven’t attained to the three.” Were they all arguing their own personal greatness or were they taking sides behind the three? I don’t know. But they are arguing about greatness.
- B. This helps us understand their question. Their question is not simply, “What makes a great disciple?” Their question is not about the characteristics of great discipleship or the personality of a great disciple. Their question is much more practical and competitive. “Which one of us is the greatest disciple?” Shockingly, when this is all said and done, Jesus has done His rebuking and correcting, and has had to do it again in **Matthew 19:13-15**, James and John still put their mother up to requesting they be considered the greatest, sitting at Jesus’s right and left hand in **Matthew 20:20-28**.
- C. I want to highlight this question because I must confess: this sermon isn’t really for you all. This sermon is for me; you just get to listen in. Because this is my question. Sadly, what we see among the apostles is how I think and act. I wish I could say that my concern is simply to be a great disciple for Jesus. But it isn’t. My concern is to be the greatest disciple. I don’t just want Jesus to say to me in the end, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” I want Him to say, “Well done, my best and most faithful servant. If only everyone had been more like you.” Had I been one of the twelve, I wouldn’t have been on the sidelines in this argument. I would have been front and center. In fact, I probably would have been James and John, chagrined after a first rebuke but assuming Jesus words didn’t really apply to me and that I was going to be so good at whatever He mentioned that I should still be on His right hand. I want us to see Jesus’s response to this question because I need to see it. I’m terrible at this. I need forgiveness and I need the help only God can give. And this has become even more important to me because of something I’ve discovered in this passage that I had never noticed until preparing for this lesson. We’ll come back to that in just a few moments.

- II. Jesus's unexpected answer: "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."
- A. There's a great scene in Steve Martin's version of "Cheaper by the Dozen." One of the kids has masterminded a fantastic prank against the oldest sister's boyfriend. He had fled the house chased by every dog in the neighborhood. Hilarious. Steve Martin's character, Tom Baker, lines up the children in the hallway to figure out which one was ultimately behind the prank. He holds his hand above the line of them pretending that it is a mischief detector. Over each child he emits a beeping sound, as he gets to the one he is certain planned this prank, the beeps get closer and closer and louder and louder. In my mind, I almost envision the apostles expecting some kind of scene like this. Jesus will line them up, maybe telling them who wins the bronze, then the silver, and finally the gold medal as the greatest of His disciples. Will it be Peter? Will it be John? Will it be James? Who knows? Maybe He'll go outside the inner circle and pick Judas. After all, Judas is considered great enough to hold the money bag. Who will it be?
 - B. Jesus does something completely unexpected. He doesn't point to one of the twelve at all. Rather, He sees a child nearby. He calls the child to Him, sets the child in the midst of the twelve, and says, "You see this kid. He's the greatest. Well, anyone who becomes like him is the greatest."
 - 1. However, let us be careful not to take Jesus's object lesson beyond what He intended. Many have speculated what is so great about children. Jesus is not saying everything about children is great. He is not saying we should be childish or immature. Don't forget that on another occasion, Jesus used children as a negative example, something not to be like. In **Matthew 11:16-19**, Jesus rebuked the generation because of their childlike behavior. The generation was like children who got mad at other kids because they wouldn't play the game by their rules.
 - 2. Jesus isn't praising everything about children or setting up every aspect about children as the model in **Matthew 18:4**. In fact, He isn't establishing just any characteristic of children as the model. He doesn't say whoever trusts like this child, believes like this child, loves like this child, submits like this child (though all of these things will proceed from the characteristic He does highlight). He says, "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."
 - C. Humility. That's the key. Humility. But why choose the child? Are children especially humble? Are all children by nature full of humility, learning pride and arrogance as they grow up? Is there some kind of universal humility among children? I don't know. It doesn't seem so to me. Kids come out of the womb demanding to be the center of everyone's attention and must be trained otherwise. So, what is the point here?
 - D. I think Jesus's point might be simpler and yet more profound than we often think. We don't have to become child psychologists to uncover the aspect of humility in children that Jesus is highlighting. Rather, we can ask a simple question. What is going on with the disciples in this very moment? They are competing. Who is the greatest? How would you measure that? What competition would let them know who was the greatest? Jesus calls to them the person nearest them who wouldn't, who couldn't, win any of their competitions. This child wouldn't be the strongest, the smartest, the wealthiest, the holiest, the most righteous, the most attractive, the most influential, the most important, the most faithful, the most anything. There is nothing this child would have the most of, be the best at, have achieved the greatest goal in. He wouldn't even be the best at checkers. No matter what competition you choose, the children will be the least, the last, and the lowliest. To humble yourself like a little child would be to have to leave all that competition behind. In fact, to my knowledge, the one universal competition kids engage in that they grow out of is who's got the best dad. "My dad's stronger than your dad." "My dad's smarter than your dad." "My dad is more important than your dad." If there is any aspect of the humility of kids that Jesus is highlighting it is, perhaps, that one. For the child, the competition isn't about the child. The child knows his own importance, her own greatness is wrapped up in the importance and greatness of the Father.
 - E. As we get to this point, we recognize there was something we overlooked in the disciples' question. They didn't ask who was the greatest disciple in the kingdom, servant in the kingdom, soldier in the kingdom? They simply asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors, Who is the real answer to that question? Isn't the real answer that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the King of Heaven? Why is this even a question? But the disciples have gotten so caught up in their competition between themselves, they've lost sight of this massively important point. When it comes to greatness in the kingdom, we are all just kids. God is the Father. What makes us great is not how great we are in the kingdom, but Whose kingdom we're in.
 - F. The humility Jesus is talking about is the humility that remembers, I'm just a kid. This kingdom isn't about me. It isn't about what I accomplish. It isn't about how great I am. It's about my King. It's about my Father.

- III. Jesus's frightening answer: "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."
- A. I said earlier that there was something very important that I discovered while studying this passage for this lesson that has made this lesson all the more urgent to me. We find that important part in the statement I skipped earlier. Jesus did not answer their initial question with His first statement. He didn't get to the direct answer for their question until the second statement. But notice the first thing He said. My goal is not to frighten you, but I admit Jesus's first statement frightens me.
- B. Do you see the grammatical difference between the first statement and the second? In the second statement, He uses a relative pronoun: whoever. In that second statement, He is talking about a class of people. Anyone could be that person. We are just looking for qualifications and asking if we meet them. But Jesus's first statement isn't general and relative; it is specific. It isn't a relative pronoun; it is a personal pronoun: you. And Jesus makes it very emphatic.
1. "Truly," He says. This is important, He says. "Amen," I say. That is, "This is the way it is."
 2. "I say to you," He says. "I'm talking to you now. I'm saying this to you. I'm not talking in general. I'm not talking about everyone else out there. I'm talking to you."
 3. "Unless you turn and become like children." Unless who becomes like children? The disciples. The disciples to whom Jesus is speaking need to do this. They haven't already done it. In fact, the whole reason they are having the debate is because they haven't done this.
 4. "You will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Wait! What? Who's not entering the kingdom? Who's not presently qualified? The disciples. But they're the disciples? They're the twelve?
 5. The last time Jesus said anything like this was in **Matthew 5:20**. He was speaking to the crowds. "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (ESV). But now Jesus is talking to His disciples, not only that, His apostles. They have been arguing about which one of them would be the greatest in Jesus's kingdom and Jesus says to them, "Unless you straighten up and cease this nonsense, not a single one of you is even going to be in My kingdom, let alone be the greatest in it."
- C. Do you see why this is frightening to me?
1. In 1896, Andrew Murray, a missionary for the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa wrote short book simply entitled "Humility: The Beauty of Holiness." As he considered humility and moments like these interactions with the disciples, he said the first and most important lesson we could learn about humility is this: "How much there may be of earnest and active religion while humility is still sadly wanting."¹ When Bethany House Publishers updated his work with more modern structure trying to make it easier for modern simpletons like me to understand, they updated it this way: "First, is the fact that there may be the enthusiastic and active practice of Christianity while humility is still sadly lacking."²
 2. The Bethany House version goes on to say:

"The disciples had a fervent attachment to Jesus. They had forsaken all to follow Him. The Father had revealed to them that He was the Christ of God. They believed in Him, they loved Him, and they obeyed His commandments. When others fell away, they remained faithful to Him. They were ready to die with Him. But deeper than all of this devotion was the existence of an inner power of sin and selfishness. This power had to be dealt with before they could be witnesses of the power of Jesus to save. It is so with all of us. We may find professors and ministers, evangelists and Christian workers, missionaries and teachers, in whom the gifts of the Spirit are many and manifest, and who are the channels of blessing to multitudes, but of whom, when tested, or close interpersonal relationships reveal their true characters, it is only too evident that the grace of humility, as an abiding characteristic, is rarely to be seen."³
 3. I might quibble with some of the wording of Murray's statement. But even with that quibbling, I think Jesus's statement to the apostles is even stronger than Murray's. When Jesus called them, Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew all immediately abandoned their jobs and followed Him. They had travelled with Him. They listened to Him. They believed better than anyone around exactly who Jesus was. Peter has already made the good confession and the apostles chimed in with Him. And Jesus looks at those men and says, "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." My brothers and sisters, we can play at church. We can hammer out the pattern of worship and work exactly. We can travel land and sea to make disciples. We might even be Bible class teachers, shepherds, deacons,

¹ Murray, Andrew, Humility: The Beauty of Holiness, James Nisbet and Co, London, 1896, p 38.

² Murray, Andrew, Humility: The Journey Toward Holiness, Bethany House, Minneapolis, 2001, p. 46. (This is a version of the previous book that has been "updated for today's reader")

³ Ibid.

and even preachers in churches, but unless we turn and become like children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. If we lack this humility, we will be told, "Depart from Me, I do not know you."

4. Here is the struggle. Go back to the first sentence in the quoted paragraph: "First, is the fact that there may be the enthusiastic and active practice of Christianity while humility is still sadly lacking." If we are not careful, it is the enthusiastic and active practice of Christianity that costs us our humility. We do exactly what Peter did. One of Peter's first interactions with Jesus is found in **Luke 5**, as that interaction winds up, Peter says, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (**Luke 5:8**, ESV). Look at the humility. Yet, now three years later, he doesn't think Jesus should depart from him. He thinks Jesus should pick him as his right-hand man. When we humbly recognize who the Savior is and what He has done for us, how can we do anything but enthusiastically submit to Him and actively practice His ways? We must, however, take care that somewhere along the way we do not lose sight of who is the important and significant one in this.
 5. A passage that is helping me maintain this is from Paul in **1 Corinthians 15:10**. He says, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (ESV). We are but children. What strength we have has been given by God. What resources we've gained have been given by God. What opportunities we've experienced have been given by God. What do we have that we haven't received? (**1 Corinthians 4:7**).
- D. We've preached on a lot of things. We've studied a lot of things. But perhaps the most urgent and the most important is this humility. If we get this one right, the rest will follow. If we get so much else right, but miss this one, we've lost it all, including our place in the kingdom.

IV. Jesus's litmus test: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me."

- A. On the one hand, I think in a very real way we can say that the only way we can have this kind of humility is by begging God to break our pride and arrogance, to crush it and grind it up as Moses did the golden calf of Israel's pride, and build in us the kind of humility we need to have. Walking in this kind of humility is a work of grace in our lives. In **Matthew 19:25**, the disciples in shock will ask Jesus, "Who then can be saved?" And Jesus will respond in **Matthew 19:26**: "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." With man, this kind of humility is impossible, but with God all things are possible.
- B. On the other hand, do not miss that Jesus told the apostles the greatest in the kingdom was "whoever humbles himself." Yes, walking in this kind of humility is a work of God's grace in our lives. But so was Peter walking on the water. He still had to get out of the boat. If we will humble ourselves, opening up our hearts for the work of God's grace to humble us, we must get out of the boat, if you will. How do we do that?
- C. Matthew actually provides the answer to this for at least the next chapter and a half, at least up to **19:13-15** when he brings this issue of the kingdom belonging to children again. No doubt, we could write multiple sermons on these vignettes and teachings. No doubt, there are many things we can learn from these passages in addition to how they fit in this overall point about humility. However, I think it is clear that with the inclusion of **19:13-15**, we are to read each of these teachings and passages in light of this principle of humility. For the purpose of this lesson, I'd like to summarize the litmus tests of humility these teachings represent. These represent us stepping out of the boat. If we obediently step out of the boat Jesus will walk us in humility. If we won't step out of the boat with these, we must not deceive ourselves that we are humble.
 1. *Receive, don't despise, the least, last, and lowly (Matthew 18:5-11)*: Receiving here does not refer simply to allowing the least, the last, and the lowliest to be members of our congregation. The humble receive, they welcome, they accept to themselves the least, the last, the lowliest. The competitive don't want to be seen with the least, the last, and the lowly lest their humiliation rub off on us. The competitive despise the least, the last and the lowly. The humble recognize when we receive, when we welcome, when we hang out with the least, the last, and the lowly, we are actually doing so with Jesus, the greatest of all. If we think we are too important to associate with and hang out with those little ones who humbly receive Jesus, we must not deceive ourselves that we are humble like children.
 2. *Forgive sinners (Matthew 18:12-35)*: But what if one of these little ones, these humble ones who have received Jesus have sinned and are trapped in sin. Surely, at that point it is time to cut them loose. But Jesus says like a good shepherd He would leave the 99 in the fold and chase down the one who has been kidnapped by the devil. We are all forgiven sinners. We are not too good for sinners who need forgiveness. Rather, we do all we can to bring them to forgiveness. Granted, if they refuse, we cannot simply allow them to remain in our fellowship. But our goal is to win them back, to cover their multitude of sins. And we do that even if they have sinned against us 77 times. If we hold grudges or simply ignore those

who have sinned instead of pursuing them and seeking their restoration, we must not think we have turned and become humble like children.

3. *Serve, don't lord and abuse (Matthew 19:1-12)*: I know this one is the oddest for us. It doesn't seem to fit in this mold of humility. No doubt, as we piece this passage together with other passages discussing marriage, divorce, and remarriage, we learn God's law about the permanence of marriage. However, it seems to me that Matthew includes in this subsection that begins and ends with the idea of the kingdom belonging to those who are humble as children this passage. What can we learn from this about humility? Have you noticed that Matthew's account only talks about husbands divorcing their wives? Certainly, we know as we connect with **Mark 10:12** that the teaching about marriage law itself also applies to women who divorce their husbands. But in Matthew's account, that possibility isn't even mentioned. I suggest that is because we are to see this issue of divorce as someone in authority, the head of the home if you will, learning humility. Rather than abusing authority and demanding rights, rather than running roughshod over those who are under your headship and leadership, the humble serve and submit themselves. Jesus will actually come back to this very point when James and John ask to be at His right and left hands in **Matthew 20:25-28**. Rulers among the Gentiles lord authority over their subordinates. But we are the humble. We serve those who are in a submissive role to us. That is exactly what Jesus did as He ransomed His life for us. If we will lord our authority and demand our rights
 4. *Sacrifice for these little ones (Matthew 18:5-19:12)*: Throughout all these vignettes there is an undercurrent of sacrifice. As Jesus taught about who could accept His teaching on marriage, He talked about those who were eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom. While I don't believe He was referring to men literally making themselves eunuchs, but rather demonstrating that some for sake of the kingdom sacrificed being married, we see a sacrifice to serve others. The message on forgiveness certainly showed a sacrifice. After all, if I forgive you a debt of \$100, it has cost me \$100. If I'm going to be like Jesus and leave the 99 in the fold and search for the 1 who has gone missing, that is going to be a sacrifice of time and effort. But perhaps the greatest demonstration is in the section about stumbling blocks. Smack in the middle of that teaching, Jesus switches gears. He was talking about how awful it would be to cause one of these little ones to stumble and what judgment we would deserve if we despised them so much as to cause them to stumble. But then he switches to talking about our own hands and feet causing us to sin. We are told to cut them off and throw them away. It is possible Jesus is commenting on how we should view ourselves as these little ones. But in the flow, may I suggest, Jesus's point is that anything we value more than Jesus's least, last, and lowliest little ones, we need to get rid of. If our hand or our foot would cause us to be a stumbling block to one of these little ones, we should get rid of it. We should sacrifice.
- D. Keep in mind the apostles themselves were falling short on these things. Let us not think we are so amazing as to be above these shortcomings. Let us perform a fearless and thorough moral inventory on humility. Let us not deceive ourselves; let us instead humble ourselves.

Conclusion:

Brothers and sisters, we can all be great disciples. However, that can only happen if we give up on the notion of being the greatest disciple. Jesus is the greatest in the kingdom. We are but children. Let us empty ourselves of ourselves that Jesus might be our all and our everything. May our every action be to shine His light and shine the light on Him. And may we humble ourselves to be just as happy when someone else is shining the light of Jesus because it is about Him and not about us. May we turn and become like children: the least, the last, the lowly, the humble.