**KINGDOM GREATNESS**

**(Matthew 18:1-14)**

Football fans know that a football game can often become a tale of two halves. Sometimes, a team plays well the first half and seem destined to win, but then the team comes out flat in the second half. They lose their momentum, and they end up snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

Other times, a team may play poorly the first half, but they make some significant changes to their game plan at halftime. They come out inspired the second half, mount a comeback, and emerge the victor.

Most often, the first half sets up a team for either victory or defeat, but it is in the second half that the game is either won or lost. You can’t win a game in the first half.

Life, as in football, is a story of two halves. Between the two halves, however, there is halftime, a time to identify what is working and change what is not. It is a time to make adjustments. Sometimes you have to throw away the game plan and institute an entirely new one.

This past week, OU tight end, Grant Calcaterra retired from football. Many said he would be an early first round pick in the NFL draft. Surely, he would have made an NFL roster, and he stood to make millions. In the announcement of his retirement, he said that he has had multiple concussions. Medical science has discovered that repeated trauma to the brain caused by violent hits to the head often leads to physical and mental impairment later in life. Calcaterra chose to stop playing football in the first half of his life so that he will have a greater chance of enjoying the second half of his life with, hopefully, a wife, children, and grandchildren.

What does making millions in the first half of life mean if you can’t enjoy your riches in the second half of life?

In his book *Half Time,* businessman Bob Buford claimed that during the first half of life, the goal for most is to be successful. Success is gauged in terms of advancement in your job, making a name for yourself, getting promotions, and earning lots of money.

At halftime, however, many men began to reassess what they really want in life. Many choose to realign their priorities and change their game plan. Bufford says that men change their game plan from success to significance. For them, it is no longer about the money and the acclaim. It becomes about making a positive impact upon others. He wrote, “What you ultimately leave behind will be more important that anything you could have achieved in the first half of your life.”

Where are you? Are you still in the first half, or halftime, or the second half, the two-minute warning, the waning seconds of the fourth quarter? At any point, you can call a time out, confer with your Coach and make a change.

It occurs to me that Jesus’ twelve disciples were young men. Their goal was success. They wanted to make a name for themselves. Look at the question they asked of Jesus in Matthew 18:1.

This wasn’t the last time they would concern themselves with who among them was the greatest. In Luke’s gospel, we read that right after the Last Supper, “A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was regarded as the greatest” (Luke 22:24). What terrible timing! Moments before, Jesus had washed their feet, giving them an example that they were to serve one another. Not long afterward, Jesus would be arrested, and the next day He would die on a cross, and they are arguing about which of them was the greatest.

I believe the difference between the disciples view of greatness and Jesus’ understanding of true greatness is the difference between the hunger for being successful and the desire to live a life of genuine significance.

Today, we will be looking at “Kingdom Greatness.” Our text is Matthew 18:1-14. Let’s read it.

1. **KINGDOM GREATNESS BELONGS TO THOSE WHO BECOME LIKE CHILDREN.**

How we view children today and how they were viewed in the ancient world is vastly different. Of course, there are exceptions, but for the most part, children today are idolized. They are catered to in our culture. When I was a kid, the playgrounds I played on had equipment made of metal and splintery wood. When you got on that metal slide in the middle of the summer, you would get second degree burns. I remember getting on some device made of wood and getting a quarter-inch splinter in my backside that my mom had to dig out with a needle.

Today, everything is made of plastic, and the child will land on soft rubber instead of hard-packed dirt.

When children ride a bicycle today, they look like a football player. They are wearing helmets, knee-pads, and elbow pads. As I was growing up, if you crashed you would get bruised and scraped up; so, you tried not to crash.

In the ancient world, children were not highly valued. In some language, including Greek in which the NT was written, the word child was neither masculine nor feminine. It was neuter; so, a child was neither a he nor a she but an it.

In v. 2, we are told that Jesus stood a child before His disciples. We don’t know if it was a boy or a girl. NT Wright wrote that he thinks it was a girl because seeing the weakest, the most vulnerable member of society would best illustrate the point Jesus is making. He claimed, “God’s kingdom . . . won’t be about the survival of the fittest . . . in which the strongest, the fastest, the loudest, the angriest people get to the front ahead of everyone else.”

Jesus made his point in v. 3. Many Christians think that children must become like an adult and acquire an adult intellect in order to be saved. Jesus said the opposite. Instead of children becoming like adults, adults must become like children in order to be saved. A child is trusting. A child is dependent upon his or her parents.

Instead of second-guessing Jesus, instead of formulating our own plans, we need to trust what He says and live in dependence upon Him rather than our own wisdom.

Jesus further elaborated in v. 4. We get into heaven by becoming like a child, but we become the greatest in His kingdom by displaying humility. A child doesn’t have framed, educational degrees. And he doesn’t have office walls on which to hang them if he did. A child doesn’t have any business cards to hand out, and he doesn’t have any potential business clients to impress.

It occurs to me that the goal of a child is not to impress people he doesn’t know. He may say often to his mom or dad, “Watch this,” and then he jumps six inches and the parents praise him, but unlike adults, for the most part, a child does not obsess about how other people view him. Boys and girls are more interested in living life in the moment and enjoying it. Have you ever noticed how often children laugh compared to how often adults laugh? Adults pay money and buy tickets to a venue to get someone to make them laugh. Children make others and themselves laugh for free, and they don’t have to get all dressed up and go somewhere to do it.

What does it mean to humble ourselves? I once heard it explained that the humble person is not the one who thinks badly of himself or who thinks he is small; it is the one who doesn’t think of himself at all. He is focused on helping the other person not promoting himself.

Wiersbe wrote, “All great saints have been humble saints.”

We assume that God gives children parents to teach those children to become adults. Just maybe that assumption is incorrect. Maybe, God gives children to parents to teach those adults how to become children again.

Mark Buchanan wrote:

Adulthood is mostly about getting things done. Past a certain age, our existence is consumed by obligation. Deadlines loom. Responsibilities are mountainous. Chores are piling up. There’s a list, always, of things to do . . . So, one of the first things to die in adults is playfulness. We are . . . a grim bunch generally: stern and mirthless, bent beneath huge, invisible weights. Most grown-ups—and an increasing number of youth and children—feel that life is all work and no play. Play feels irresponsible.

He added:

If God works all things together for good for those who love him and are called to his purposes, you can relax. If He doesn’t, start worrying. If God can take any mess, any mishap, any wastage, any wreckage, any anything, and choreograph beauty and meaning from it, then you can take a day off. If He can’t, get busy. Either God’s always at work, watching the city, building the house, or you need to try harder. Either God is good and in control, or it all depends on you.

Pastor Dan Meyer said:

Humble yourself today and play. Get down on the floor with the children. Roll on the ground with the dog. Tumble in the hay with your spouse. Kneel down in the garden with the flowers. Let go and let God be God, and remember that you are not. And that that is OK.

One thing we adults are to do is found in v. 5. We are to receive children in Jesus’ name. That means we are to treat children the way Jesus treated them. Jesus was counter-cultural in that Jesus gave time and attention to children. Look at what Jesus does in the next chapter of Matthew. Look at Matthew 19:13-15. Jesus always had time for children.

Years ago, I heard about an African-American church in Pennsylvania that always has a special worship service between Christmas and New Year’s. At that service they honor their college students who are home for the holidays. One year, in his message that Sunday, the pastor shocked everyone when he looked at those students and said:

Children, you’re going to die! You may not think you’re going to die, but you are going to die. One of these days, they’re going to take you out to the cemetery, drop you in a hole, throw some dirt in your face, and go back to the church to eat potato salad.

When you were born you alone were crying and everybody else was happy. The important question I want to ask is this: When you die are you alone going to be happy, leaving everybody else crying? The answer depends on whether you live to get titles or you live to get testimonies. When you lay in the grave, are people going to stand around reciting fancy titles you earned, or are they going to stand around giving testimonies of the good things you did for them? Will they list your degrees and awards, or will they tell about what a blessing you were to them? Will you leave behind a newspaper column telling people how important you were, or will you leave behind crying people who give testimonies of how they’ve lost the best friend they ever had? There’s nothing wrong with titles. Titles are good things to have. But if it ever comes down to a choice between a title or a testimony—go for the testimony.

That is the difference between success and significance. If we are going to become great in the Kingdom of heaven, it will not be because of the things we achieved or because of the grandness of our accomplishments. Kingdom greatness belongs to those who become like children.

1. **KINGDOM GREATNESS BELONGS TO THOSE WHO MAKE WAR ON THEIR SIN.**

In v. 6, Jesus tells us what is the opposite of receiving children in His name. The opposite is mistreating children and causing them to sin.

I have a friend who had a mean, alcoholic father who never showed him any kind of affection. He once said to that nicest thing his father ever said to him was when he was in a play at school. After the play, his father said to him, “Well, that wasn’t so bad.” That was the nicest thing his father ever said to him.

He grew up longing for the affection of dad which he never received. As a young boy he was raped by an older brother. These things led him into a lifetime of homosexual feelings and activity. He had to keep those things a secret because he was also in church ministry. He led a double life. Publicly, he was a devoted husband, father, and church leader. In his own private world, he still longed for the male affection he never received from his dad.

According to Jesus, that father and that older brother would be better off to be dropped into a deep sea with a two-ton millstone fastened around their neck than to receive the judgment that is awaiting them (v.6).

In vv. 7-9 Jesus makes the case that we need to take our sin seriously. Jesus is not advocating that we practice self-mutilation. He is not recommending that we lop off parts of our body. What is He saying?

He is saying that since hell is a reality for those who live a life of sin, we need to wage a war against sin and do whatever has to be done to win that war.

In Romans 7, Paul said that this war is actually a civil war. It is going on inside your heart and mind. He said that what he wants to do he doesn’t do, and what he doesn’t want to do he ends up doing. He asks, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24)

Someone suggest that Paul must have been a golfer. All golfers often have the experience of knowing where they want to hit that little white ball, and they don’t succeed in hitting it there. They also know where they don’t want to hit the ball, and that is exactly where the ball goes.

He answers his own question in the next verse: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

If we want to win the war, we have to turn to Jesus. He has won the victory on our behalf.

We can’t be nonchalant about sin and achieve greatness in the Christian life. We must fight against it.

The evangelist Billy Sunday famously said:

Listen, I’m against sin. I’ll kick it as long as I’ve got a foot, I’ll fight it as long as I’ve got a fist, I’ll butt it as long as I’ve got a head, and I’ll bite it as long as I’ve got a tooth. And when I’m old, fistless, footless, and toothless, I’ll gum it till I go home to glory and it goes home to perdition.

Our greatest fight is not against the sin of others or against sin in society. Our real battle is against the sin in our lives.

1. **KINGDOM GREATNESS BELONGS TO THOSE WHO PROTECT GOD’S**

**CHILDREN.**

Look at vv. 10-14. When Jesus uses the term “little ones,” I don’t think He limits His meaning to children. In v. 6, Jesus referred to the “little ones who believe in me.” If you believe in Jesus, you are one of God’s little ones. You are His child. You are cared for by an angel who has privileged access to God. Your angel can approach God’s throne on your behalf.

Jesus tells a parable in v. 11 about the owner of a sheep. He has 100 sheep, but one of them goes missing. That lone sheep wanders off. What does he say? Does he say, “I still have 99. What’s one sheep? The coyotes got to eat, too.”

No. He leaves the 99 with the shepherds, and the owner goes out in search of his one, lost sheep until he finds it. He brings it back safely to the fold and rejoices along the way.

We are to have the same concern for God’s little ones that He has. According to our text, we are not to offend them or lead them into sin. We are not to despise them or think they are not worth the effort of searching for them. Just like the Father, it is not our will that any of God’s little ones would perish; so, we will look for them until they are found.

What is your attitude toward those who are wandering? I am afraid that many of us subscribe to the Little Bo Peep philosophy of church ministry. You remember the nursery rhyme.

Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep

And doesn’t know where to find them.

Leave them alone, and they’ll come home,

Wagging their tails behind them.

That is precisely what we most often do with wandering church members. We leave them alone. We presume that somehow, someway, at some time, they will find their way home. So, we wait, and we wait. And guess what? Many, if not most, never may it back on their own. Lost sheep have to be searched for. If they are going to make it back to the fold, someone has to go looking for them, find them, and bring them back.

Sheep need protection. Sometimes they need protection from an enemy, and sometimes they need protection from themselves. Sheep are adept at wandering off, getting lost, and not knowing how to return.

Look at the last two verses of James’ epistle (5:19-20).

Author Bill Donahue told a story from his time as a part-time youth pastor while still in seminary. He was visiting a farm where two of his students lived, and their father, Tom, decided to teach Bill a lesson.

He asked Bill to help call in the sheep. Bill readily agreed. As they stood at the pasture fence, watching 25 sheep graze, Tom said, “Go ahead. Call them in.”

Bill asked, “What do you say?”

“I just say, ‘Hey, sheep! C’mon in!”

Bill began in a normal speaking voice, but Tom interrupted. “You are 75 yards away, down-wind, and they have their backs to you. Yell! Use your diaphragm, like they teach you in preaching class.”

Bill took a deep breath and put every inch of stomach muscle into a yell that revival preachers around the world would envy: “Hey, sheep! C’mon in!” Those sheep didn't move an inch. They didn’t even turn an ear.

Tom smiled. “Do they teach you the Bible in that seminary? Have you ever read, ‘My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me’?” Tom Raised his voice only slightly, and said: “Hey, sheep! C’mon in!” All 25 sheep turned and ambled toward them. Tom seized this teachable moment.

“Now, don’t you ever forget,” he said. “You are the shepherd to my kids.”

For whom are you the shepherd? Who will hear and respond to your voice? Use it. Call them in to God’s fold.

That is what people of significance do.