



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION
WASHINGTON, DC

COMMON STATUS

Matthew 18:1-4

Dan Claire

February 10, 2019

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Matt. 18:1

Remember high school? As if being a teenager wasn't hard enough, there's the added pressure of the pecking order. Who's the greatest? Who's most athletic, best looking, most talented, most popular, and the most likely to succeed? And if it's not you, then why not? Are you the wrong shape? The wrong skin color? The wrong clothes? From the wrong side of town? Do you even know?

As parents, we tell our teens what our parents undoubtedly told us back in the day: "You'll graduate before you know it, and then what those kids think of you won't matter one bit."

Likewise, our teens tell us what we told our parents when we were in high school: "What they think of us may not matter years from now, but it sure does matter now."

They're absolutely right. Within the kingdom of high school, who's the greatest is a really big deal. It's hard work managing a social status that fluctuates according to the whims of fickle peers. Graduation can't come soon enough, yet the truth is that after high school, they will encounter other kingdoms, perhaps more complex and sophisticated, but ultimately quite similar in the way that social status is conferred. Whether in college, or the workplace, or wherever the road takes them, a pecking order awaits them in those kingdoms too. That's just the way it is. It's been that way ever since humanity fell into sin.

It won't stay that way forever. There's another kingdom that's altogether different, where everyone shares a common status conferred by the King himself. The pecking order has no power there, for all who enter do so by the will of the king.

Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee by proclaiming the dawn of this new kingdom. Wherever he went, he said, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." He was announcing the long-awaited renewal of all things, as promised by the Old Testament. In every village he invited people to turn away from their addictions, idols, and other allegiances, and to give their lives to God.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God is a constant refrain, starting in chapter 4 and continuing on through today's passage. However, it's important to note that when Matthew wrote about the kingdom of God, he followed the Jewish custom of substituting another word for God, out of reverence for God's name. Thus, wherever the other gospel authors wrote "kingdom of God," Matthew wrote "kingdom of *heaven*" instead. Jewish readers of the New Testament understand Matthew's usage because they're accustomed to this practice. Other readers, however, may find "kingdom of *heaven*" a little misleading, because Jesus wasn't talking about heaven. Rather, he was talking God's heavenly kingdom coming on *earth*. Whenever Jesus and the disciples spoke of "the Kingdom of God" (or in Matthew "the Kingdom of *heaven*") they were talking about God's kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

In Matthew 18:1, the disciples asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Yet they weren't asking Jesus about heaven, nor were they asking about the afterlife. They were asking about the immediate future on earth. In particular, they were wondering who would be next in line to succeed Jesus after he was gone.

Over the last few chapters, Jesus made it clear to the disciples that when they arrive in Jerusalem, the authorities will arrest him, and torture him, and kill him, and then Jesus will rise from the dead. It's unclear how much the disciples actually understood, but it does appear that they had begun to speculate about Peter becoming Jesus' successor. There were already several instances when Peter was out in front of the rest of the disciples. It was Peter who at least tried to walk on the water with Jesus. It was Peter who answered Jesus on the road to Caesarea Philippi saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." It was Peter and James and John who went up the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus and who saw his true glory. And it was Peter in the last episode whom Jesus sent fishing for a shekel, to pay the temple tax on behalf of both of them. So, after all these special moments between Jesus and Peter, it seems the other disciples had started wondering whether Jesus had tapped Peter to take charge if and when Jesus died. That's why, after Peter paid the temple tax for himself and Jesus, Matthew began 18:1 with, "*At that time...*" Then the disciples asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" They wanted to know whether Peter would be at the top of the pecking order after Jesus died.

And calling to him a child, Jesus put the child in the midst of them. Matthew 18:2

Jesus responded to the disciples question first with a visual aid. He called over a *παιδίον*, which is the Greek New Testament word for a young child, probably between 2 and 7 years old. It's the first of many references to children in Matthew 18 and 19. The Greek here is unspecific with regard to gender. It could have been a boy or a girl. The text doesn't say, so we don't know. All we know is what Matthew tells us, that Jesus set the child in the midst of them.

Then Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 18:3

Jesus' response must have shaken the disciples. They didn't ask how to *enter* God's kingdom, but rather who would be the greatest within that kingdom. Jesus answered them, saying, "Ah, but first you must *enter*. And to do so, you must turn and become like children."

What did Jesus mean by this? There are lots of things that could be said about children. What, in particular, did Jesus have in mind?

Despite the horrific evil of abortion, Western culture has a relatively positive view of children. In our day, if a professor or teacher were to bring a little child into class as a visual aid, there would likely be a lot of smiles in the room. We tend to see children as trusting, playful, innocent, pure, etc. Not so in the ancient world. Children were valued primarily according to their economic potential, i.e. how they might be of help with the livestock, or the cooking, or other duties. In that day, when Jesus set a child before his disciples, they probably weren't smiling. Instead, it's likely that they folded their arms and frowned, guessing that with this child, Jesus was answering their question about status. They had wanted to know who ranked the highest within their group. Jesus had responded by showing them a person of the lowest possible status, without any authority whatsoever. It's as if Jesus was saying, "Do you see this peasant child, without rank or stature? Unless you turn and become like this little one, you won't even get in to the kingdom, much less have authority within it."

Let that sink in.

The wonderful promise of God's kingdom come is that we will be delivered from the tyranny of the pecking order. Yet with that good news comes some really hard news for all of us who have spent our lives trying to move up in the rankings. We're moving to a kingdom where those things no longer matter. When we come to Jesus' kingdom, we have to leave our achievements and accolades at the gate, and enter his kingdom naked and unadorned.

During the early Twentieth Century there was a huge wave of single Irish women who immigrated to the United States in search of husbands and jobs. They came over on ships, often bringing only the clothes they were wearing. They came adorned with all they had, in order to make the best possible impression on the people they would meet here. But when they got to Ellis Island, they were forced to strip completely naked and be hosed down like cattle before they enter the country. Then they were given simple gowns to wear until their clothes were disinfected. Eventually they got them back, but only after entering the country without wearing anything at all.

King Jesus doesn't want to humiliate us, but he does want humility. We can't hang on to our spots in the pecking order as we enter his kingdom. All of our adornments are of no benefit there, where we share a common status. So we must turn and become like children, and enter Jesus' kingdom naked and unadorned.

How do we turn and become like children? It's like rewinding the tape of your life, all the way back, back before tenure, before getting hired, before defending the dissertation, before writing the book, before getting your letter of admission, before making the team, before getting your braces off, before you learned to read, before you could tie your shoes or tell time or use the potty or feed yourself. Rewind it back to when you weren't self-sufficient, when you couldn't make it on your own, and if someone didn't come and take care of you, then you would die. That's how we turn and become like children.

Jesus said almost the same words to Nicodemus, the leader of the Pharisees, when he said, "Truly I say to you, unless you're born again, you won't see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). This is what it means to be born again: to rewind the tape back to the beginning, to the point where none of our achievements or accolades count. Back to naked and empty handed. Back to our common status, where we have nothing to bring to God except ourselves.

Here in this place of pure receptivity we discover that we're not alone. The one who comes to take care of us is the one who went before us. Jesus did this first! Even though he was divine, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. Instead, he emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, and was born as a human baby. He came to us, not in power, but in humility, like a little child, naked and empty handed.

Then, being human, he humbled himself further by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that he is the greatest in the kingdom of God. (Adapted from Philippians 2.)

First, you must enter. Have you done it? Or are you still holding out hope of making it to the top of the pecking order? Don't you know that you can't stay there? Sooner or later somebody else will come along and knock you off. There's a way to break free of this nonsense once and for all. Turn and become like a child. "Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up" (James 4:10).

"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 18:4

Jesus never scolded the disciples for seeking to be greatest in his kingdom. He just turned their world upside down by equating greatness with the little child. Then, by becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross, he demonstrated this greatness. Yet death couldn't hold him. After three days he was raised from the dead and was enthroned forever as the greatest in the kingdom.

First we enter the kingdom, then we learn humility from the master. But how? Remember that in Jesus' kingdom, there's no pecking order. Sure, there's differentiation. We're one body with many parts. Our roles and responsibilities differ. But everyone shares the same common status,

from the Archbishop to the kids in the nursery; everyone has the same rank in Jesus' kingdom. We all enter by his grace, through his free gift of love. So there are no more homecoming kings and queens, VIPs or MVPs. There's no need for competition or comparison or vanity of any kind. All the energy that we used to give to such things gets redirected toward bearing the fruit of the Spirit. In so doing, we come to look more and more like Jesus the humble and truly great king.