

18.2 The Least is the Greatest

In **Matthew 11:11** (ESV) Jesus gave praise and perhaps criticism to his cousin, John:

¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

I have wondered who Jesus was referring to as “least in the kingdom.” When I was in college, a visiting preacher at one of our chapel services told us that the least in the kingdom had to do with status. His illustration was that the player who was least in the NFL was greater than the best in the NCAA because he was in the professional ranks, not the collegiate. There may be truth to that but I am not sure that is what Jesus is talking about. After all, both John and Jesus said that the kingdom was “at hand.” That is, it was here.

I started thinking about Jesus’ statement in **Matthew 18:1-4** (ESV):

**At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”
² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³ and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.**

One greater than John in the kingdom is often viewed as the least. Outside of kingdom thinking, how often do we look at children and lift them higher than adults? Yet, Jesus says they are the greatest in the kingdom and that would make them greater than John.

John was submissive to God and sent to prepare the way for Jesus. He was the voice of **Isaiah 40:3** (NKJV):

**³ The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the LORD;
Make straight in the desert
A highway for our God.**

The gospel writers quote the Isaiah passage in **Matthew 3:3**, **Mark 1:3**, and **John 1:23**. So, you know this is a key text.

Masses of people went out into the wilderness to hear John. Most likely because they believed he was that voice who was preparing the way for the LORD in the wilderness. In other words, they thought God was going to come from the wilderness, so they went to hear John and look for God’s arrival. The truth is, God did come by means of the wilderness as the incarnate word and Messiah. Jesus was baptized in a wilderness branch of the Jordan. He was tempted in the wilderness by Satan and came out victoriously to begin His ministry.

John did some great things in preparing the way for Jesus. He let Jesus increase and he decreased in his work and influence (**John 3:30**). He stood for the truth of God’s word and confronted Herod regarding his immorality (**Matthew 14:1-12**). But, there is someone greater than John and I believe that is the little child whom Jesus called to Himself. By the way, that little child is probably also greater than most of us as well.

What is so great about children? I’m glad you asked! Let’s consider a few things.

First, there is the “Trust Factor.” John had some doubts in wondering if Jesus was the Coming One, or the “Haba,” a term for the Messiah.

Under normal circumstances, children have absolute trust in their parents to live up to their responsibilities and to keep their word. As a child I never worried about where I would sleep; what clothes I would wear; if I would eat; or other issues. My dad was a relatively poor Enlisted Man in the Navy. My mother told me

that at one point his salary was so low that we qualified for Food Stamps. The problem with that was my dad was too proud to take them so we did without some of the better foods we could have had but we did not go hungry.

I wish I could trust my heavenly Father as much as I did my earthly parents. Now that I am no longer employed by a church and no longer receiving a regular salary, I am at times nervous about meeting my financial obligations and having “enough.” Yet God makes promises I need to trust.

I can ask myself, “What would a child do?” Not just in regard to earthly parents, but what would a child do with his or her heavenly Father? I am almost sure that children believe God so strongly that He will provide for their needs that they don’t worry. They take to heart the teachings of passages like **Matthew 6:25-34**. I want that same kind of trust in my heart. That kind of trust does not come with ease or with worry, but with stepping out by faith.

Second, children possess the quality of humility. Some believe that humility is the greatest virtue an individual can have. Do you remember the joke about the man who won the humility contest only to be disqualified when he kept wearing his crown? Children see the world through small, upturned eyes. Everyone is bigger and more powerful. That produces a humble approach to life. John didn’t always seem humble as when he called out certain Jewish leaders a “**brood of vipers**” in **Matthew 3:7**.

Do you remember that Jesus coaches us to seek the lower places rather than the higher ones, especially in social situations? In **Luke 14:10-11** (ESV) He tells us:

¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. ¹¹ For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

We could go on praising the qualities of children like how eagerly they learn, or their pure spirits. I may be mistaken about Jesus’ contrast of John and children but these child-like qualities are kingdom-centered. If we adults take on these qualities we can be great in the kingdom.

Keep The Light of Our Child-like Nature Burning!