

Matthew 18A

- This week's lesson is a "Part 2" to the teaching we began last week
 - Jesus has been explaining to His disciples that in the near future, the Messiah would suffer and die and then resurrect from the dead
 - But for those men, the thought of their Messiah dying was simply too hard to accept
 - And as we taught last week, their struggle came from confusion over two foundational points of Christian theology
 - They didn't fully appreciate the incarnation (God becoming man), and the self-sacrificial nature of God's love
 - And without an understanding of these two concepts, they could not possibly appreciate why their Messiah would die
 - But they must understand these truths, because the Gospel and the Church itself will be built upon them
 - So Matthew chose to record two scenes that took place between Jesus and His disciples shortly after Jesus' statement about His death
 - In each of these moments, Jesus uses the circumstance of the moment to correct the disciples' ignorance
 - We studied the first of these moments last week as Jesus exposed Peter's lack of understanding of the incarnation
 - Tax collectors came calling to Peter's home to collect the temple tax from Jesus
 - And Peter thoughtlessly committed Jesus to paying the tax without first considering the implications of Jesus' identity as God
 - So when Peter re-entered his house, Jesus pointed out that Peter had misjudged Jesus by not considering His deity
 - And if Peter had understood Jesus is God, he wouldn't have expected Jesus to pay a tax that God Himself collects

- The incarnation of God – God becoming man and taking our place to receive the penalty for our sin – is at the core of the Gospel and our faith
 - This understand is what Peter was lacking
 - In fact, if it were not for the need to die in our place, Jesus would never have taken on flesh in the first place

2Cor. 5:21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

- Jesus become a man so that He could live the life we could not and so that He could die the death we dared not
- But as Peter and the other disciples looked upon Jesus in His lowly and humble form, they overlooked Jesus' divine nature
- And because they didn't appreciate the significance of Christ's divinity, they couldn't understand the purpose of His death
- But there is a second lesson these men needed to learn before they could fully appreciate Jesus' death
 - This second lesson will be on God's self-sacrificial love, and it comes in the next scene that opens Matthew's 18th chapter

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

- Matthew says at that same time, another interaction took place between Jesus and the disciples
 - And in typical form, Matthew dives in without much background so we need to fill in the gaps a little first

Mark 9:31 For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later."

Mark 9:32 But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.

Mark 9:33 They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, "What were you discussing on the way?"

[Mark 9:34](#) But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest.

[Mark 9:35](#) Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."

- Mark shows us more clearly how the earlier moment when Jesus told the disciples He was going to die is connected to this moment
 - As we saw last week, the men were confused when Jesus told them He would die and they were afraid to ask questions
 - So instead of dwelling on that bad news, they changed the subject to a discussion of the kingdom
 - And specifically, they began debating which disciple would be elevated to the highest position in the Kingdom
- This topic wasn't entirely inappropriate, since we know Jesus will assign His disciples positions of authority in the Kingdom
 - And our positions of authority will be based on merit
 - Our work for Christ and our faithfulness to Him in this age will play a part in determining how we are rewarded in the Kingdom
- But the timing of their conversation was inappropriate, coming on the heels of Jesus' statement that He would suffer and die
 - Although they didn't understand what Jesus meant, they should have at least appreciated the seriousness of it
 - And we can see that they knew that their timing was wrong in v. 34 of Mark 9
 - Because when Jesus asks them to share what they were talking about, they suddenly go quiet and refuse to answer
- But more than simply being insensitive, their conversation shows they understood nothing of how honor in the Kingdom works
 - Matthew says they were discussing which of them would be the greatest in the Kingdom
 - And we can safely assume how each disciple was making the case for himself

- Peter probably said “Jesus called me rock, so I must be the most important disciple”
- And then maybe James responded, “Jesus meant you’re as dumb as a rock, Peter. I’m going to be the greatest in the Kingdom.”
- Then John countered with, “But I’m the one whom Jesus loves”
- And perhaps someone else says I’m oldest or I’m the strongest or I’m the most courageous, etc.
- Whatever they were saying, we know by Jesus’ response that they were measuring greatness in terms of personal power, achievement or status
 - And that’s a very human way of thinking about honor
 - In our way of thinking, whoever obtains the most accolades in this world will be the one most honored by God in the next
- But God’s ways are not man’s ways
 - And Jesus gives us the way God measures greatest in Mark 9:35
 - He says that the one who desires to be first in the Kingdom must seek to be the last in this world and the servant of everyone
- The terms “first” and “last” are Jesus’ way of referring to worldly achievement, worldly status, worldly honor
 - And we know what it means to be first this world, don’t we? In fact, the world teaches us from a young age the value of being first
 - Receiving the most recognition, obtaining the most possessions, wielding the most power, being the best in every way...that’s being first in this world
 - From our earliest years, you strive to be first in your class, first to raise your hand with the answer, first to be picked for the kickball team
 - At work we want to be first to be promoted, first to have a private office, first to become vice president
 - And in life in general, everyone wants to be first and to have the most
 - We want to be first in line, first with the new phone, first to see the new movie

- We celebrate those who have the most likes on Instagram, the most views on YouTube
- The most tools, the most shoes, the most attention at the party, the most sales awards at the office
- We're impressed by the biggest truck, the most expensive purse, the skinniest waist, the largest biceps, etc. etc. etc.
- It's pride and ego and me, me, me, and it's the way the world assigns value and bestows honor...and in the words of Solomon, it's all vanity
 - But Jesus says if you want to be first in the Kingdom, you will need to live by a different standard
 - And you DO want to be first in the Kingdom, because if there was ever a place to be first, it's that place to come
- Being first in the Kingdom means receiving the best of what God has to offer and enjoying it in a guilt-free, sin-free environment
 - It means enjoying it in a place where no one can take it and nothing will destroy it and doing so for 1,000 years and longer
 - If you think being first in this fallen, corrupt and dying world feels good, wait until you see how being first in the Kingdom feels
 - The Lord is holding out that opportunity for anyone who desires it, and to have it you need only do one thing, Jesus says
- To receive the most honor in the Kingdom, you only need to seek to be last in this world
 - And we also know what being "last" here means, don't we?
 - Being last in this world means being willing to set aside your pursuit of being first according to the world's way of thinking
 - It means giving up your place in line to someone else who needs it or desires it more
 - It's allowing others to step on you as they climb the corporate ladder
 - It's leaving others to try to win the rat race, while you focus on finishing your race for the eternal prize of Christ's reward

- Making yourself a servant of everyone else will probably mean fewer accolades, less business or social success, a smaller bank account
 - It will challenge you to learn how to be content with watching others achieving or possessing more than you
 - It means putting the needs of Christ ahead of your personal career or financial goals
 - It will mean teaching your kids why they can't have everything other kids have
 - Being last means loving God and others more than you love yourself, which requires turning the world's priorities upside down
- Here's the most interesting thing about this formula...which is easier? To be first in this world or to be last?
 - Is it harder to be first in line or to be last in line?
 - Is it harder to let go of pursuing the American Dream or to achieve the American Dream?
 - My point is that Jesus isn't asking us to do the hard thing...He's freeing us by asking us to do the easier thing
 - And then He's offering to reward us for being willing to do so
- And just to be clear, Jesus is demanding self-deprivation...this isn't a pursuit of piety or poverty...it's a pursuit of others over self
 - Which means we may possess nice things and achieve significant things and receive honor while in this world
 - Jesus' point is not to make the pursuit of those things our goal at the expense of pleasing Christ and obtaining the Kingdom
 - On the contrary, Jesus says if we make those things our priorities today, we are putting our reward in the Kingdom at risk
 - It's a choice of having your reward now or having it later
 - And even more than that, it's a matter of cultivating the love of God inside ourselves
 - Because when you love like God loves, you naturally seek for the things God seeks

- Someone who loves like God loves desires for someone else to be first, someone else to receive more
- The one who loves like God sees two donuts left on the tray...one perfect and the other smashed
 - And then chooses the smashed one for himself leaving the nicer one for the next person
 - The one who loves like God leaves the closer parking spot for the next person rather than taking it for themselves
 - The one who loves like God turns the other cheek, blesses those who curse you, forgives his enemies, and so on
- If the disciples had the correct understanding of greatness in the Kingdom, they would have been discussing who was the greatest servant now
 - And more importantly, they would have understood why Jesus said He came to suffer and die on a cross
 - If you understand how God loves, you instantly appreciate why God called His Son to suffer on the cross
 - You recognize Jesus' death as the ultimate display of being last, of serving others, the ultimate example of agape love

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

- John 3:16 tells us that the Father's willingness to put His Son to death for our sake was a display of His love for the world
 - That's the main point of that famous verse of Scripture...the emphasis of John 3:16 is not on our belief but on God's love
 - Because without the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf, there would be nothing for us to believe in
 - Our salvation starts with God loving us before we ever thought about Him
- In fact, later in his first letter, John says that the definition of love is not how we feel about God but what God did for us

1John 4:8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

[1John 4:9](#) By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him.

[1John 4:10](#) In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

- In other words, love is not a noun...that is, it's not an emotion or a feeling or a state of being
- Though we often speak of love in that way, that's not the love of God because it's self-centered love
- When we say I love you, the emphasis is on us and our feelings
- But John says that God's love is actually a verb, it's a self-sacrificial action on behalf of another
 - Love is God sending His Son to receive wrath we deserved
 - And His love sets the standard for how we are to love as well

[1John 4:11](#) Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

- If you're struggling to understand how this love looks in day-to-day life, Jesus says you only need to look at the way a child thinks and lives

[Matt. 18:2](#) And He called a child to Himself and set him before them,

[Matt. 18:3](#) and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

[Matt. 18:4](#) "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

- In making His point, Jesus calls over a child who must have been playing nearby and sets the child before the disciples
 - And then Jesus says unless you are converted and become like a child, you will not enter the kingdom of Heaven
 - Jesus is speaking of how salvation enters the heart of any person so He can draw a comparison to our behavior after salvation
- So how does salvation come to any person in the beginning? Well, as Jesus says in John 3, it's like being born again

- We are made new in our spirit by the power of the Holy Spirit, being brought first to repentance and then to faith in Jesus
- And as the Spirit does that work in a person's heart, how does it impact the person?
 - First, it humbles us, causing us to see our sins as God sees them, and as we do, we are mortified by what we discover
 - And as a result, we throw ourselves on God's mercy seeking His forgiveness in Christ
 - And in that moment, we are not first in anything...we are last and we know it
 - That experience is exactly the opposite of what you find in the hearts of unbelievers, those who think they deserve to be "first" with God
 - People who believe that their piety will impress God expect that God will grant them entry to Heaven because they deserve it
 - And Jesus told a story in Luke to illustrate the difference between being first and being last

Luke 18:10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

Luke 18:11 "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

Luke 18:12 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

Luke 18:13 "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'

Luke 18:14 "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

- A true salvation experience, Jesus says, is always associated with humility, with being last in your own heart before God, which Jesus says is being like a child
 - Because young children (properly raised) live in a state of humility
 - They make no decisions, they have no authority

- They are usually doing something wrong and so they are always receiving correction
- They are servants of everyone and first in nothing, and that's what Jesus is talking about
 - Entering into the Kingdom by faith is very much like being born a child in a home
 - We enter because of a father's love, we start that new life humbly, bringing nothing of our own and contributing nothing
- Then Jesus turns to His main point in v.4 saying we must not only be born again in humility but also live like as a child – humbly
 - We must remain humble, under authority and submitted to the Lord
 - Not seeking to be first either among your brothers or with God but realizing that true obedience means seeking to be last
 - And whoever succeeds at being last and serving others will be exalted the most by God in the Kingdom
 - Just as Jesus became last among all Creation to obtain the greatest name and the most glory in His Kingdom
- Now you see why these men were struggling so much to appreciate the need for Jesus to die
 - Every time Jesus said He would die, they were confused
 - They probably asked themselves, if Jesus knew His death was coming, why didn't He do something to avoid it?
- But what they failed to consider was that Jesus intended to die...that He was willing to die as a sacrifice for them
 - That's what it means to be last, that's agape love...and it's entirely incomprehensible to the world
 - But that's exactly why Jesus rewards those who adopt this kind of approach to ministry
 - Our most powerful witness to the world is showing the love of God through our actions to one another and to the world

- Making sacrifices for other people, becoming a servant to everyone, putting others before ourselves
- Do that consistently and genuinely and you are mirroring God's love and it's a powerful tool
 - We will never make a stronger case for Christ in someone's life than when we serve them sacrificially
 - It's such a shock to find someone in this world who isn't self-absorbed and focused on themselves at the expense of others
 - When we encounter a heart of humility, a heart to serve, we get a taste of God's love, and once we do, we often want more
 - It's out of those moments that we get our best opportunities to share the Gospel
- So we have the disciples arguing over who would be first right after Jesus was explaining how He would be the last for their sake
 - Their ignorance of God's love and the incarnation of God prevented them from appreciating Jesus sacrificial death
 - If we do the same, we negate our opportunities to share the Gospel
 - If we can't explain why God became man or if we fail to demonstrate His self-sacrificial love, we make obscure the Gospel
- The writer of Hebrews explains how the two concepts of the incarnation and God's self-sacrificial love work together in one verse

[Heb. 2:9](#) But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with **glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.**

- The writer says that Jesus was made lower than angels, that is He was made man, for a time
- And He took this humble form so that He might suffer death for all of us
- The incarnation of God was necessary so that Jesus could taste death for all of us

- And why would God be willing to humble Himself in this way?
Because of His grace and love for us
- And what did Jesus gain from having acted with such humility?
The writer says He will be crowned with glory and honor
- So if Jesus is crowned with glory and honor for humbling Himself in this way, then we will receive honor for doing the same
- As a church body, we talk at times about our mission to reach people with the truth of the Gospel, and I hope you appreciate the privilege we have to do so
 - But just as much I hope we understand how we are supposed to do so
 - Just as God's plan for our salvation began with His self-sacrificial love for us, our mission begins with showing agape love
 - Not the noun...the verb...not a feeling, but an action
 - And that action is living like a child, in humility, seeking to be last in this world, allowing others to chase after being first
 - And as we make sacrifices for others, you can expect the Lord to do two things
 - You can expect Him to use your humility and love to prompt curiosity in others for the Gospel so that you may introduce them to Jesus
 - And secondly, you can expect Jesus to take notice of your service and reward you in the Kingdom
 - If ever there was a win-win proposition, that's it