



A young boy gathered up all the building blocks to build a tower. He worked hard to stack each block. Reaching higher each minute he finally achieved his goal. His tower, he was convinced, was the greatest toy block tower that ever had been stacked any kindergartener. He was quite proud of himself. He ran to get his parents to show them what he had built so they could shower him with praise. But when his parents came into the room they had no praise for him. Instead they began to discipline him. His proud smile faded as he lowered his head in shame. Why? In the corner nearby with tears running down his face sat his younger brother. There were no big piles of blocks around his younger brother. Only about a dozen were left for him and his tiny tower. The older brother attempts to mask his shame with silence. But this kindergarteners' selfish actions were the tallest thing in the room and hard to miss. Does this ever happen in God's family? Sometimes we might get so caught up in trying to accomplish something great that we entirely miss what really makes us great. Today we'll continue our sermon series "Family Values" as we consider what our God values as truly great: OUR FAMILY WELCOMES CHILDREN.

Jesus' disciples had been acting rather childish. Their teacher and Lord had just explained for them the second time what he had come to do. He said that he must be handed over, be killed, and rise again. Jesus was going to give his life for them. But how did they respond? They didn't understand what he was talking about and were too afraid to ask him about it. Perhaps they were too afraid to display their ignorance in front of each other. They had, after all, more important things on their mind. They were preoccupied with their own status.

It's sad how lost they were as they focused on themselves. They argued about who was the greatest disciple of Jesus. Their teacher hadn't assigned a class rank. They had to assert themselves if they were to claim the best position, right? They were so concerned with their own climb to greatness that they were oblivious to the most important things around them! Their striving for greatness made them struggle with being an even half-decent disciple of Jesus.

The struggle of the disciples, however, is a familiar one in the church. Every disciple knows what it is like to strive for higher rank. After all, who doesn't want recognition, high rank, or respect for the work they do? When one ministry leader hears how another ministry leader has a larger building program, a bigger budget, or a higher attendance they might begin to wonder, "Am I great? Is my position greater than my brother's?" They are tempted to compare statistics. They pit their ministry role over and against another's. Some strive for higher degrees in learning and consider their ministry greater if it involves a higher academic degree. Still others make the struggle for the most talented music into a sort of contest. They are always ranking churches based on their achievements in song. Churches steal members from other churches by becoming "greater" at what they do in programs, buildings, or services they offer. The temptation will always be there to assess one's rank in God's kingdom. The twelve disciples did it and church leaders still do today. Ministry becomes a struggle to get on top as the greatest, the biggest, or the smartest.

This struggle for esteem doesn't just happen to church leaders, it happens to every disciple. You may not argue with others about your rank in the congregation, but the temptation is there. The one who makes it to church every Sunday notices the one who isn't so regular in attendance. That person can be quick to conclude, "I'm really a better disciple." The church member who gives generous offerings must constantly battle the temptation to contemplate how great a disciple they are. "I probably give twice as much as others. I ought to get two votes when we make decisions around here!" Or the one who gives less feels their service is less valuable and doesn't feel qualified to speak up at meetings. Maybe another disciple looks at their personal time dedicated to serving others and then reasons, "We'll at least God sees me as greater than that other person who does nothing." Does our going to church regularly, giving more money, or going the extra mile to serve others make any difference with how great we are? Our discipleship becomes a struggle to rank ourselves higher as the most dedicated, the largest donor, or the most dutiful.

Jesus confronted his disciples, "What were you arguing about on the road." They kept silent because they were arguing about who was the greatest. Silence often masks shame. We may not often speak it out loud, but in our hearts, we are tempted to rank everyone standing in God's church. When's the last time you felt you had to compare yourself with others and felt you stood higher in God's esteem? For all the times we have contemplated our own greatness our hearts condemn us. What would you say if God were to ask, "Have you considered yourself greater than someone else?" We'd probably have to remain silent in shame more often than we might like to admit.

Jesus gives his disciples a lesson on what it means to be great. "Whoever wants to be great must be the very last and servant of all." That's what it means to be great in his family? That's backwards! Great people are served by others. Great people command the respect of others. Great people are considered the most important. But in God's church it is backwards from this world. To be great is to be the very least and to serve everyone else.

To make it clear Jesus illustrates his point. It's ironic that in all the dealings with Jesus' disciples we never see them teaching children. We only see the disciples pushing children away or ignoring them. But we do see Jesus using children to teach his disciples. He took a child among them and called his disciples around. This child must have been fairly young and small because it says Jesus took the child in his arms. Jesus embraced the child and then began to teach his disciples about who is

really great. "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me doesn't just welcome me but also the one who sent me." The best and greatest thing includes loving the smallest and least.

"This is what God considered to be great? The welcoming and care of little children? These were the disciples of the Son of God and he in giving them lessons on the importance of running a day-care? This isn't what leads to greatness!" At least that's what our hearts and the world would tell us. It is all backwards. In Jesus' society children were often considered bottom of the tier. They had little authority, little power, and little sway in society. To serve a child was considered a most lowly and humble thing.

Still today not many would consider giving attention to little children as something great. Of course, children are viewed as objects of our affection and adoration. But they are also viewed as too much work and in the way of what we really want to accomplish. That's why parents are quick to drop them off and have others care for them. Don't misunderstand me. It's not wrong to use babysitters or daycare. But it is wrong for someone to let others take the responsibility of raising children only because they consider it menial work. Many parents don't treasure the opportunity to spend time with their children. Chasing greatness, wealth, careers, is considered more meaningful and important. Stay-at-home parents are dismissed as accomplishing less in life.

Are children valued in our society? I know some must limit their family size due to health or other important reasons. Yet self-centered lifestyles, careers, even personal vanity cause many parents to reason they couldn't possibly desire more children than the average American home. We have one of the lowest rates of infant death, and one of the wealthiest rates per person in all the history in all the world. We have the best doctors and some of the safest births ever possible in human history. Yet we have one of the smallest average family sizes in the world. Does that speak to the value of children? What do we value? In the past fifty years in our nation the average house size has approached double what it once was while the average family size is approaching half as many children per household. What does our society strive after for greatness? Are we tempted to chase after the same?

Are children really valued in our society today? There's no doubt about it. The answer is a chilling "no." You only have to look at the staggering statistics of abortion (54 million since 1973, average 3000/day in USA). Killing of children is justified so that people can do greater things with their time than waste it on children. It is murder in pursuit of worldly greatness.

What about in the church? Pastors and church leaders will cater to poor attitudes regarding children. They are sometimes removed from family worship and placed under the supervision of someone else. Is this practice wrong? Not necessary. Is it the path to greatness? Not necessarily! Our church body operates over 700 combined elementary schools and early childhood centers, along with 25 high schools. But the overall trend is the support and enrollment are slowly decreasing. Do we value time, energy, and efforts to welcome children? Yes. Do we give it enough attention and support it as we ought or sometimes consider it a drain on our resources?

What does God value? "Whoever welcomes one of these little ones in my name welcomes me." To give concern, time, and attention to little children is to serve our Lord. The disciples were confronted for their self-centered attitude. They were called into account for their words of dispute and for dismissing the least among them. We too will be called into account for every time when we sought greatness in the wrong areas. We too will be called into account when we fail to serve the least among us, little children.

"Whoever wants to be great must be the very last and servant of all – including small children." Who does this? Who can say they have put themselves in the last position, even under little children? There is only one man who did. Though his Father loved him from eternity and there was no greater position, he came down from heaven. He was born to be our brother. And he never ignored the lowly. He served, lived, and loved the lowly -including little children. And so that we could be truly great he became the servant of us all. Consider that! The holy Son of God came to give us his rebellious and sinful children, special attention and love. For the times we failed to give children our love and attention, he did not. He lived perfectly for us. For us he came to not only give his time, energy, and care. He gave his life. And he lives just as he said he would. Now he who became our brother to die for our sins tells us we belong to his family as forgiven brothers.

Our greatness is found in being baptized children of God. Members of his family. Our greatness is not found in selfish attitudes. It is found in reflecting his attitude. Because he made himself the servant of all and considered the lowly important, so do we. Now, because Christ has put us first there is no concept of rank in God's family. Church workers do not have a level of superiority! The usher is just as much a servant of Christ as the pastor or church president! No Christian is greater than another. The small child singing and the most generous man giving are both offering spiritual sacrifices of praise to him who become the least to make us first. And we don't strive for greatness by making a name for ourselves. We bear his name and, in his name, serve the least.

No service is too menial or too small. When parents take the time to put down their cell phones, turn off their television, and raise their children they are doing something great! When they take the time to open up the Scriptures and read God's Word to little children, they are serving their Lord. When they give a smile to the young family and welcome them to worship, they welcome Jesus. When God's servants say, "We can do more to help out our children's ministry." They are concerned about what our God is concerned about. What makes God's family great? Our family welcomes children.