

“Greatest of All Time”

Matthew 18:1-20

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

For those of you that follow sports, you’re very familiar with the term G.O.A.T., which stands for the “greatest of all time.” Mohammed Ali, Michael Jordan (yes that’s the only right answer), Babe Ruth, Al Unser, Dale Earnhardt, Bo Jackson, Wayne Gretzky—take your pick, and you’ll be engaged in conversation about some of the best to ever do what they do so well. But there always ends up being debate and dissent about who truly is the greatest of all time. Is it the one with the most championships or the greatest stats? The one with the most wins or the biggest blowouts? The bottom line when it comes to who is the G.O.A.T. is that it is entirely subjective. There is no standard of measure to determine the greatest player, racer, or fighter. Some believe one to be the best, and others believe it to be someone else. But that is not the case when it comes to the measure of greatness in heaven.

In our text this morning, the disciples ask Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” The Savior’s response is intriguing. He doesn’t grab a whiteboard and start breaking down statistics and measuring the level of good works that people have completed. He doesn’t point to David, Abraham, Moses, or Elijah as the example of excellence that all should strive to achieve. Instead, He calls for an infant to be brought forth and places him in their midst. That’s the word that is used in the Greek, *παιδίον*, which means an infant child. This babe has done no works that merit greatness, has no long list of accolades because of their great witness to the Lord, and has no ability (at least visibly) to show the level of praise and love they have for their Lord. And yet, having been set before the eyes of the disciples, the true “greatest of all time,” the Lord of Hosts and the one true God, declares that “whoever humbles himself like this infant is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Imagine being in that moment. These men who have followed Christ faithfully, learning at His feet, going out into the countryside healing, casting out demons, and preaching that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, are told that it is not they who are the greatest, but this little baby who can’t even feed himself, walk, or talk. All the time and effort that they’ve put into His ministry, and Jesus says this babe is greater than them. The sinful flesh is utterly confounded by this assertion from the Lord. Its constant desire is to turn you inward, to look to your own needs and works instead of to the needs of others and the work of Christ. An infant babe couldn’t possibly be greater than you who have been in the faith for years, or even decades. You’ve been a good and faithful servant

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Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (9/6/2026); Matthew 18:1-20

to the Lord, you've read your Bible, and you've said your prayers. You've done all of the things that this little child simply cannot do and you've done it for a long, long time.

That's the natural inclination of the sinful flesh of every man, woman, and child that's ever been. It's got to be all about you, right? Mankind has been fighting this battle against the sinful nature since the fall into sin by our first parents. The evil one uses it as his weapon against your faith to make you focus on what you have to do in order to be worthy of your faith. If you can't act the right way and do the right things, then there can't be anyway that God would love a sinner such as you, right? Work harder, do more, and your reward will be greater—given a higher place in the kingdom for your superior intellect and holiness. But the Old Adam in you feeds on that arrogance to the point that it even makes its way into places who claim to be purveyors of the Gospel.

And these so-called modern “churches” feed the ego of the Old Adam better than anyone else. They build him up to the point that all he has to do is sit back and let them do the work. The idolatry of the self is his true identity, and it is that sin of self-love above all that must through contrition and repentance, be killed daily with all its sins and evil desires. But the false teachers of the world want you to believe that isn't the case. They want you to believe that the holiness of God is buried deep inside of you and it's up to you to unlock it. If that were true, why would Jesus say that this baby is the greatest in His Kingdom? He can't unlock the holiness within, because he is a sinful descendant of Adam the same as every one of you. There is nothing good within you as a sinful human being. On your own, all you have is the evil of sin, and that leads to nothing more than death and condemnation. There is always hope for the poor miserable sinner, though, and that hope is the promise of redemption in Jesus Christ.

The child set before the disciples in our text is the example that all should turn to when trying to “figure out” how to be a great Christian. It isn't about fighting harder for the faith and trying to be a better person like the false teachers of the world have long taught it to be. Even in Jesus' time, the Pharisees and Sadducees were doing the exact same thing. Keep the Law perfectly, and you will receive your just reward. But this baby can't keep the Law, nor can it even know the Law which it must keep in order to be saved by their standard. Yet, the Lord Jesus says that only with the same faith as this little child will anyone be considered the greatest in the kingdom. That faith belongs to all of you, no matter the perceived “strength” of your faith that may lead you to think you are lesser among your brothers and sisters in Christ. All of you come before the Lord with the faith of a babe because of the common grace that you share in Jesus.

And that grace comes to each and every one of you in the waters of your Baptism. The Lord says, “See that you do not despise one of these little ones.” Do not allow yourselves to neglect their every need, more specifically their spiritual needs. They are given the gift of faith at the font, and that is exactly the protection that the Lord speaks of giving to them. By giving your children the gift of Holy Baptism, the Lord is ensuring that they can withstand the temptations to sin that the world throws their way. In faith, all of you walk as children of the Most High, those who have been claimed as His own in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus says that those with the faith of an infant are the greatest, so who is anyone to say that the omniscient Lord of all is wrong? Or, as Paul would say, “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor (Rom. 11:34)?” Just like the little ones that are brought to the font, who have done no works that merit justification and faith, you were brought with the same lack of works, and still bear the same status.

It doesn’t matter if you’ve done enough good or worked hard enough, because the work has already been done for you. You stand before the Father justified by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ alone. There is no greater joy for the Christian than to know that the work of Jesus upon the cross has made you righteous for His sake alone. There isn’t a hard day’s work ahead of you if you seek to make it to heaven. There is no making sure you are worshiping “hard enough” and with enough fervor so that God knows how thankful you are. You worship in praise and thanksgiving, knowing that by the blood Jesus shed for you at Calvary, you have been washed clean of the stain of sin, and that sin no longer condemns you to hell. By taking the burden of your sin, He has made you to be like that little one—one who dwells in faith in Christ that is of no merit of your own.

Just as a child receives everything from its mother and father, you come here to receive the spiritual food of life from Jesus that sustains you in that faith. 1 Peter 2:2-3, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—for indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” In the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ and Him crucified, you hear that your sins are forgiven for His sake. The Father has given you grace for the sake of His own Son, showing you to be His adopted son who receives all good things from Him alone. And He gives you the pinnacle of those good things in the very body and blood of Jesus, where you receive the real medicine of immortality that brings with it forgiveness, life, and salvation. In the Sacrament of the Altar, Jesus is present here with you to bring you the greatest gift of all. You partake of that meal side by side with your fellow saints, those here with you and those who have gone before. They eat of the Lord’s Table from the side of heaven, while

you partake of the same food of life in expectation of the fullness of the Lamb's high feast that awaits.

There is no way for you to make yourself the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. If left to make yourself great, you would never be good enough to reach the end goal of everlasting life in the presence of God Almighty. But it is not the will of the Father in heaven that any one of you little ones should perish. Because of His will, He sent His Son into the world to die the death that you deserve and gives you His righteousness that makes you the "greatest of all time." Despite the sinful flesh that would make you unworthy of His grace, He gives it to you anyway out of His great love for you. There's no work for you to do in order to receive it from Him, only to have the faith of an infant which receives it. The love of God in Christ Jesus comes to you through His means of grace, His gifts of grace for His Church, and the forgiveness of sins that comes through those means is the gift that all receive who have faith in Him.

That is the comfort of the believer in Christ. You don't have to stack up a bunch of wins, statistics, and have a fan club that praises your every work. You have Christ who has done all the work of bringing you into His kingdom on your behalf. By His blood shed for you, Jesus has made you righteous in the sight of His Father. He has made you the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, because, according to His humanity, you are equal to Him who is indeed the greatest. The grace of God belongs to you by faith, having received forgiveness for your sins, being washed clean in the blood of the Lamb that was slain. And because of that glorious truth, you will dwell in the presence of the greatness of the Lord, not as one who is least among the saints, but one who, along with all those who have gone before, stand as the greatest in the kingdom. Amen.