

## **A Sermon for St. Michael's Day**

### **St. Matthew: 18:1–11**

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. **4** Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. **5** “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, **6** but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. **7** “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! **8** And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. **9** And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire. **10** “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

### **I. The Soul's Response to the Knowledge of the Angels and Its Natural Conception of Greatness.**

Blessed be God, who made the angels of heaven, to serve us, his people, and to protect us from evil. No matter where we are, or what we are doing, no matter whatever secret evil waits around each dark corner of our life, we are in God's watchful care, being protected by invisible and innumerable angelic armies.

How great are the angels of God! They do not become tired. They do not become hungry. They fight valiantly and triumphantly against the armies of the devil, being lead by Christ, our Lord, the general of all the angels.

So great are the angels, that when we remember them, and diligently think upon them, we become filled with awe. It is a truly inspiring thought, that this visible world is not all that there is. It changes how we think of the world. It changes how we live our daily life. The Christian life is not an empty, mundane thing in any sense, but takes part in an invisible, cosmic battle, the scale of which we are totally incapable of comprehending.

It is right to be amazed at the angels, for they are God's creation. And all that God has created, is worthy of our admiration. But it can sometimes happen, that when we remember the angels, we overlook what actually makes them great. We become fixated upon their power, how they never hunger or thirst, how they are strong and mighty, and we conclude, that these things are what make them great.

For it is a natural impulse in man, to want to be great. And true, it is not a sin to be great: God himself is great, and we were first created in his image, and reflected his

greatness. But we seek naturally not the greatness of God, but the greatness which is according to our own terms, and fitting to our own imagination. And we seek to obtain it, not as a gift, but by our own effort and strength.

For we each seek what it is that we think will make us great in life. And this differs according to each person's unique personality. One may seek a high position in his workplace. Another might seek to excel in a hobby, or craft, or sport. Still another might seek to be smart or educated. And each one seeks to obtain his personal greatness by his own power, by his own strength, by his own diligence.

Now, it is not wrong, of course, to work diligently, and to seek advancement in one's work or hobby, or whatever it is we devote our energy to. But it is a danger, when we think that by obtaining what we work for, is what makes us ultimately and truly great. Because this is an unstable thing to set our self-assessment on. Because when we obtain what we consider great, then we might be happy; but when we fail to obtain it, then we are disappointed. And this is a dreadfully un-peaceful life for the soul.

Think of the disciples in our text. They were following the promised Christ, who was the descendent of the great king David; the one who, according to the vision of Daniel, was the great rock that would dash into pieces the powers and authorities of the world; the one who would re-establish the kingdom and throne of his father David, and rule in it forever. They believed that these promises were political ones. And that they, as the intimate disciples of Christ, would participate in the political rule of that new kingdom. And so they asked Christ, with their natural conception of greatness: "Which of us will be the greatest?" That is, "Who will have the most authority and power under you in your kingdom? Which one of us will have the largest borders in your kingdom? Which one of us will be the most honored in your kingdom?"

## **II. The Word of Christ.**

Happy the disciples would be, to obtain what they thought would be greatness in the kingdom of Christ. And yet Christ frequently foretold to his disciples, that he would soon die in Jerusalem at the hands of sinners; that he would be crucified as a common criminal; and that he had to do these things, to save people the world sin and death. And the disciples were often saddened by these words. Peter, in fact, at one time boldly opposed Christ when he said this, to which Christ said: "Get behind me, Satan."

So it is with you and me. If we do not truly understand what makes us great, then we will frequently be saddened. Because it is the nature of this life, that our personal desires are often frustrated; that our goals are never met; that our dreams are never obtained.

So Christ gives to his disciples, that which contradicts the natural thoughts of their heart. "You desire to be great in my kingdom?" He asks his disciples. "Let me show you what greatness looks like in my kingdom. Look at this little child. Humble yourself like him. Become small like him. If you do not become like him, you will never enter my kingdom. But if you do indeed do this, you will be great in my kingdom."

Christ shows his disciples that greatness in God's kingdom does not consist in political power, in strength, in our own human effort. For these things are possessed even by wicked people, who oppose God and his kingdom. Not only the good angels are strong and powerful, but also the evil angels. The story of history is one of both good men who were powerful, but also of evil men who were powerful. So it cannot be that power and strength are what makes one great in the kingdom of heaven.

"Let go, then" Christ says to his disciples, "of this idea you have about greatness. To become great, you must become small. To be lifted up, you must first be lowered down. To receive glory, you must first receive humility."

So it is for you and for me. If we are to become great in the kingdom of Christ, we must become children.

### **III. The Soul's Response to Christ. Christ's Response to the Soul.**

But why must we become like a child to enter the kingdom? Why must we be small, if we are to be great, O Christ?

Because if we strive for greatness in Christ's kingdom by our own power, we will never obtain it. This is the great mistake of our natural thoughts. We see that we obtain things in this natural, physical world by our own efforts. We see that we succeed if we diligently labor. And we think that this is surely how things also work in Christ's kingdom. But this is not the case.

For the natural powers of man are so bound by sin, that there is nothing he can do to attain greatness in the sight of God. God does not observe the mere appearance of man, how he looks on the outside and externally, but he searches deeply and inscrutably the invisible thoughts and movements of the heart. And that heart is only great in God's sight, which is totally and completely aligned to his holy will. And such a heart, no man has by himself.

This is what makes the angels great, and this is what makes the angels' power and might good things: the fact that their will is completely aligned to the will of their creator. There is never a thought that enters their mind that opposes God. There is never a moment where they are not eager and happy to do his will. There is never a moment, as Christ says at the end of their text, where they do not behold the face of God, in holy and ceaseless worship.

And this is why it is that one must become a child to enter the kingdom. For the heart of a child trusts the loving authorities placed above it. The child believes that he is safe with his parents or guardians. He trusts the words they say. "Become a child," Christ says. That is, "Humble yourself before, and trust in your heavenly Father. Believe what he says and obey him. And in this way your heart and your will, will be aligned to his."

But how is this possible? I cannot even understand the thoughts of my heart. I find that I am often a slave to passion, like a flag in the wind, being carried about by the

uncontrollable movements of life. If I cannot even control my heart, how is it that I can become a child?

“What is impossible with man, is possible with God. The humility which you must possess, is not one that you produce by your own power. It is a something that I work in you, by the preaching of my law. You are lost without me. You have nothing but sin and death without me. There is nothing in you, by which you can bring yourself to me. That knowledge is the humility which I give to you.”

“Likewise the trust that I give to you, is not the fruit of your own labor, but my gift, by my promise, through my Spirit. Trust is not a powerful virtue, earning God’s pleasure: but it is the work of God, given to you, to join you to myself, so that you might receive what I won for you.”

“For what I obtained for you, by my living, and by my dying, and by my rising to life again, I promise to give to you freely: the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. Believe my word. Look to your Baptism: there is my seal upon you, assuring you of this. And look to my body and blood, in the bread and wine: there am I myself, to give you total confidence that these things are true, and ever shall be true, for you and your salvation.”

“Trust these things: and you shall be great in my kingdom. Not because of yourself: but because of me, who have saved you.”

It is good to be amazed by the angels. What blessed creatures of God: his servants, who protect us, the children of God, simply because he loves us. But my beloved in Christ, remember what it is that makes one great in the kingdom, and seek it diligently: *trust* in Christ’s promises, by which we are joined to him by the power of the Holy Spirit, the one who is Lord and prince of all the angels, even Christ, the Son of God the Father, our Lord and Savior.

Therefore, whether you succeed or fail in this earthly life; whether you have joy or sadness; whether your dreams come true, or do not; remember: what makes you great, and what makes your life great, has nothing to do with you, or what you have done. Your greatness is in Christ. Everything that your innermost soul needs to make you happy and satisfy you, is found in him alone. It is he who died for you, to rescue you from sin and from death. And when he comes back, to establish his kingdom in the new heaven and the new earth, he will give you eternal joy and all the desires of your heart. Does not that truly sound great? And can there be anything more great?

Dearly beloved, become children: humble yourselves, and trust the promises of Christ. And thus, you will be great. For Christ your Lord and Savior is great. Amen.