

Who is the Greatest athlete of all time? This is a question Sports Center poses about once per year. And, they go about calculating every possible stat and angle in this pursuit. They look at accomplishments, difficulty of their craft, era in which they played, and let the resume illuminate the greatest. But maybe Sports Center is investing too much time into a process that could be settled much more easily. Maybe all they need to do to determine if an athlete is the greatest is ... ask them.

**Randy Moss** – *“I really think I am the greatest receiver to play the game.”*

**Usain Bolt** – *“I am the greatest athlete to live.”*

**Cassius Clay** – *“I am the greatest. I am the greatest that every lived. I was the greatest even before I knew I was.”*

Even if these claims are true, arrogantly claiming the title is not the way to achieve greatness. It all comes down to actions speaking louder than words, doesn't it?

It kind of makes you wonder: would anyone in the church ever claim anything like this? Does anyone here make the argument that they are the greatest of all Christ's followers? Who would ever be so concerned with image and self-promotion, so as to claim such? Well, all too often, the answer is: **The 12 Apostles!**

They were a little more subtle about it, but make no mistake, there was a level of entitlement among them and a desire to be crowned the greatest. **Luke 9:44,46** – Jesus is teaching about His death. What are the apostles arguing about? **Luke 22:22-24** – Even at the table, on the night Jesus was betrayed, the argument continued!

**Matthew 18:1** – The disciples actually asked Jesus the question: **“Who is greatest in the kingdom?”**

It should be noted that Jesus did not rebuke them for asking the question. *You see, seeking to be great for the cause of Christ and great under His rule is a noble pursuit*, but Jesus needs to teach them that such a position cannot be proven by claims, no more than the athletes above proved it with theirs.

Now, those who are familiar with this chapter are aware that Jesus answers this question in the next few verses. But consider this: Jesus doesn't stop talking to them until the next chapter (**19:1**). You see, this entire chapter is an answer to the Title Question, and reveals at least 4 different attributes of Greatness!

With all their jockeying for position and fruitless discussions and ill-timed questions, the truth is: they could be among the greatest in the Kingdom. And, so can you. We don't mean most worthy or entitled to more than others, we just mean: *an effective, influential and great servant of Jesus in His church.*  
So, from Christ's perspective, the only one that matters: Who is the Greatest?

### i. **The Humble (18:1-4)**

1. Jesus demonstrates the need for humility by telling them to become like children. What does that mean? Are children humble? How will becoming child-like help me?
  1. Children are completely dependent on their parents for everything they need. They are free from the pursuit of status or recognition, only that they are cared for.
  2. Interesting, in Bible times, children were not protected by government and given rights like they are in Western society. Look at **verse 25**, they could be sold to a slave owner just because their father owed a debt. They had no societal status at all.
2. Therein lies Jesus' true point here. You can't be doing this for yourself or to achieve some crown or to be the greatest. You have to be willing to be “nobody” in My name while here on earth. That is the quality of greatness. Jesus demonstrate this of course, when He took the “nobody” position of foot washer not long after this.
3. **Luke 17:5,10** – Folks, that is greatness! And dependency of Jesus that says, “I am unworthy of His care and yet He loves me, I will serve Him every day of my life!”
4. Example: **I Timothy 1:12-14** – Not counting accomplishments, but just thankful to be allowed by the mercy of Jesus Christ to serve in the kingdom of the Master! It is servants like this that Jesus moves from the foot of the table to the head.

### II. **The Careful (18:5-11)**

- i. This is where Humility really finds its footing. Not just in an attitude toward God, but the attitude I have toward the people of God. Too many are very lowly and humble and meek when it comes to Christ, but very entitled and self-centered when dealing with Christians!
- ii. Humility is being Careful! Being careful to make decisions that make people better. Being careful not to make decisions that are for me and to the detriment of people around me.

1. **Mark 9:34-37** – This time He doesn't tell them to be like the child. He says to receive and serve this child. If you make your choices and walk about helping this humble one be great for Christ: that is true greatness in the kingdom!
2. **Matthew 18:6** – And let's remember that Jesus is quite serious about this.  
The Truth is revealed: I am either great in the kingdom or not in it at all!
- iii. How? How do we show the right attitude and be careful in how we affect one another?
  1. Be very careful in WORDS used with others. How I talk to them and about them.
  2. Careful about my CHOICES. Christians can be incredibly defensive when it comes to things they want to do. But greatness isn't measured by what you do, but by how what you do affects the rest of the kingdom, and each soul in it.
- iv. Let me tell you: greatness in the Kingdom is never having to stand before the Lord and have Him point to a young person, family member, or fellow believer and say, *"I lost them because of what they learned from you."* Let's be careful how we affect others.

### III. The Useful (18:12-17)

- i. Certainly we want to be careful not to lead someone away FROM Jesus, but He now shows us that greatness demands that we are active in leading people TO Jesus as well.
- ii. And so Jesus continues to answer the question: Who is the Greatest?
  1. It is someone so humble, so unconcerned with status, or what people think or keeping everyone happy. Someone so consumed with just doing the will of the King and helping His sheep find safety that He will do the hard thing because it is right.
  2. Anyone can Justify, Defend, Ignore, or Gossip about the shortcomings of others. In an effort to protect self and keep status, we can "stay out of that."
  3. PSA – A girl is drowning off the end of a pier. Her friend is holding a life preserver ring, but watches and then turns and walks away. Great? NO!
- iii. **Galatians 6:1-2** - Be great like your King is great and go seek that lost soul. Empty of arrogance and pride and with a spirit of gentleness and genuine care, go to them.
  1. This requires putting relationships, status and comfort on the line. You may lose a friend or you may restore a brother, but guess what: It's not about you or me. It is about being useful to Christ and useful to this person who needs help!
  2. **2:11-12** – Remember this? Was Paul being prideful for personal status? No. He was doing the difficult thing because it was best for Peter and the Kingdom and Christ.
  3. Want to be great for Christ? Care about souls like He does and be useful in restoring them.

### IV. The Merciful (18:21-35)

- i. Notice, Peter brings up the question about forgiveness, but what is Jesus still talking about? That's right, "the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom may be compared to the parable that follows.
- ii. This man was humble enough to appreciate mercy. But he wasn't very careful in how he interacted with others. He wasn't very useful in helping the man in need. And ultimately this became apparent when he simply lacked the capacity to show even a sliver of the mercy he'd been shown.
- iii. *"To err is human, to forgive is divine"* - What a great old proverb. We are never more like Jesus, therefore never of greater importance to the Father, than when we forgive.
- iv. But this is often the part of character greatness that is lacking:
  1. **I Corinthians 5:1-2** – They finally got the humility, carefulness and usefulness in order.
  2. **II Corinthians 2:5-10** – But they forgot mercy. The need to selflessly give reprieve!
- v. And while moving on and forgetting the hurt can be difficult, it certainly helps to remember that for every one time you are asked to forgive the wrongs done to you, Jesus has forgiven you 100 times as much. And so, a reflection of Him should live through us: **Ephesians 4:31-32**
- vi. The world's definition of greatness would reject this. To forgive, to forget, to move past, to swallow pride and show mercy: the world would call this weakness. But Jesus calls it greatness!

***"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"*** That is a funny question. You see, it cannot be answered with a name. A person cannot say, "It is me." Nor would Jesus say, "It is you." It can't be answered, only shown, measured, lived by those who are great for Jesus and therefore greatest in the kingdom of heaven. So I will not ask you if you are great. I will ask you: **Are you Humble? Careful? Useful? Merciful?** You are encouraged, not to claim greatness, but simply be great for Jesus. Is this your moment of greatness?