

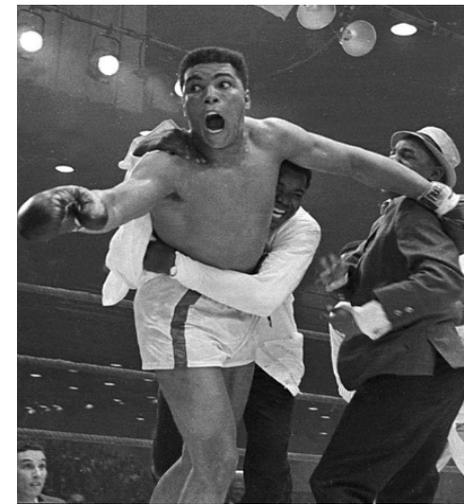
# Gospel of Matthew 18:1-

4

***“Who is the Greatest...?”***



I was always told as a child that I must not brag about my exploits or about my talents – the things I was good at. It was a shameful thing to do and a person who indulged in bragging most often made fools of themselves at some point, when they couldn't back it up or when someone turned out to be *better* than them. And then, when I was a boy of 9 -10 years old, Cassius Clay, (who would soon convert to Islam and take on the name of Mohammed Ali), was fighting for the world heavyweight boxing title against the intimidating Sonny Liston. It was a big deal – generating a lot of buzz in American society - kind of like the Super Bowl does in this day and age. After the underdog Clay roundly defeated Liston, he went on his famous animated rant about how pretty he still was because his face was unmarked after the fight, and that he was the “king”, and “the greatest of all time” – that he had “floated like a butterfly and stung like a bee”! I mean that guy was the worlds biggest motor mouth once he got going! He was the first person that I remember detesting. I was incensed that he was in front of the camera bragging himself up and taunting his opponents. It wasn't right. It violated decency, and I knew I didn't like it and I didn't like him. Yet, the media built him up into a great American hero! He was flamboyant, and flamboyancy was discovered to sell a lot more tickets, newspapers, advertising on TV, magazines, and books.



Later in his career, as his skills deteriorated with age, I was intrigued by the fact that he was finally getting “his just desserts” and a number of boxers were successful at giving him a good beating. By the time he finally retired, very belatedly by the way, his speech was noticeably slurred which is pretty common with fighters that get hit in the head a lot over the course of their careers. A decade or so after he retired, the numerous poundings he absorbed about the head took their ultimate toll and Ali contracted a major nerve disease with quickly made him lose his coordination, and then, ironically, his ability to speak. The legacy he left behind was that a great many sports figures since then, both talented and not-so-talented, tried to copy him with their own similar brand of flamboyancy, braggadocios swagger in word and deed - simply outrageous public behavior! These sports figures have actually been able to increase public interest in themselves and make a lot more money in this way! The idea is to get yourself talked about by any means possible! I still hate the egoism of it all! These insufferable people are looked up to by our children, who then seek to copy their attitudes and behavior! So big mouths are common now. Boasting is an art form. Self-aggrandizement, self-promotion, and a corresponding disrespect for others has become a way of life for an increasing percentage of the population!



I know my values are not those of the current culture, but I simply cannot celebrate this change to our American society! There have been many good changes over the years, but this has not been one of them, in my estimation. It makes people more on edge, more belligerent, more selfish and craven on the whole, and continually pits individuals and groups one against another. Obviously, this continues to add layers of danger to our interactions with each other, and to society as a whole, which, has deteriorated greatly in my lifetime! By-en-large, politeness only exists in the Midwest anymore. I feel sorry for the next generations. It will not get better, but it will most certainly continue to worsen.



But I have to say that the polite, proud, orderly society we once had was a bubble in time. No nation of the earth has ever achieved that high level of safety and civility before – not according to the historical record of civilization. Why anyone would want to disturb that hard-won safety, I cannot comprehend! It is insanity! But one has to assess that self-destruction is typically human! Sadly, we are most often *not* rational beings! Because of the curse and the fall of man in Eden, we have always been driven by **impulses, passions, reactions, instincts, hungers, and negative emotions**. Those all certainly cause *more* irrational, animal-like behaviors than the kind of behavior that comes from pure rational thought!

So, it does not surprise me that Jesus would champion a novel idea such as humility. He was always advocating against the status quo of society and insisting that His followers follow a way that inevitably runs contrary to societal norms.

While He walked this earth He saw the insufferable pride of people. It has always been that people want to stand out, to end up on top - even if they are standing on the bodies of others to be there. People like being served without having to serve, receiving deferential treatment without having to return it. We like being important but are not enthused about having to help someone else be important. Even if we resent this attitude from others in positions of power and privilege,.. if we happen to somehow achieve a similar high status, people will generally do the same thing - exhibit the same insufferable do-you-know-who-I-am haughtiness to those who are suddenly beneath them!



Jesus said that those who are citizens of His Kingdom must successfully fight against this tendency! We must not seek greatness. We must seek to please God! We will seek to serve, to give, to uplift, to put others before ourselves and seek their advantage/advancement before our own. Basically it boils down to Christ's instruction that as His follower, we will LOVE and care about other people – ***ALL OF THEM!*** We/I will do it as God's representative on earth, and HE loves them all, and I am ***commanded*** love them as He does! There is no one, not even my enemies, that qualify as an exception to this Law of Christ.

Now,.. my enemies will not usually accept love from me, so my options are limited. I will probably have to wait for an opportunity to show my enemy that I leave the door open. I will be nice even when they are nasty. But it doesn't mean I cave on my principles! I am allowed to stand my ground so that evil does not ride roughshod right over me and on over the next person! Sometimes the loving thing to do is to stop evil by standing up to it with courage and stubbornness!

There are exceptions. An abusive spouse is one of them. You cannot hate them – that is not allowed the followers of Christ. But you can keep your distance if you know that doing a kindness to them, treating them gently, will leave the wrong impression that perhaps you are inviting them back into your life. There may be other exceptions. You don't have to lovingly wait for a serial killer to kill you, or welcome an incurable pedophile into your home.



But enough of the exceptions. That is not what this is about today. It is just smart to leave your pride, resentments, hatreds, biases, and vengefulness at the foot of the cross and ask Jesus to be relieved of the heavy and painful burden of them. A follower of Christ cannot breathe if there is pride, resentment, hatred, and unforgiveness in them. All connection with the Spirit of God begins to shut down! The Spirit cannot/will not coddle or condone these passions in the followers of Jesus within whom He resides! He doesn't say "*Awww, you poor thing. You've had it so hard. I'll make an exception for you. You can harbor and exhibit pride, resentment, hatred, malice, impatience, and unforgiveness*" No, these fallen human qualities are too costly to the objectives of the Kingdom of God! They always discredit us and in so doing, discredit Jesus. We've told others, and *each other*, that Jesus is our Savior, so people generally get their impression of Jesus through their impression of us! But if the ungodly passions hang on to us like rot, these passions give the Devil a foothold from which he gains entrance into our mind and heart to use us ***against*** the purposes of Jesus!

18:1 – So the disciples of Jesus came to Him with a question. “*Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?*” It showed that they were really concerned about this issue. They must have been talking it over amongst themselves, maybe even arguing, and decided they would settle this once and for all by approaching the Master and getting it straight from His mouth. Again, they thought the “Kingdom” was going to happen when the interests of Jesus shifted radically and became political. At that time He would use His great power to ascend the throne of Israel, replacing the Herodian dynasty, with His own government, and from there He would use His great power to take over the world! It was **this** kingdom that they were debating about. Who were going to be Jesus’ closest advisors in **THIS** Kingdom? Was it going to be Peter, or James, or John, or Andrew, Matthew, Judas, etc... What should be the pecking order among the 12 and who of their number, was going to be at the top – and who was going to be on the bottom? Can you imagine the disciples of Jesus arguing about this issue,.. especially knowing how Jesus would respond? I mean, this mattered to them!



It is a teaching moment for Jesus. They don't get it now but they will. *"The greatest in MY Kingdom must be as this little child"*

Why does Jesus pick out a child here as an example of this quality of humility? Children are at the center of attention in our look-at-me culture. Many families do not discipline their children and do not teach them not interrupt, or to wait their turn, or that they should put others first. But in that day, all children were taught, sometimes severely, that they were last in the pecking order of society. They were taught to respect authority and to obey. They did not get to do as they pleased.



So Jesus pulls a child out of the crowd and says "Look you have it all wrong. You are arguing over who gets to be on top - who gets the most authority and deference, who will be my closest lieutenant. But I won't trust anyone who seeks supremacy. **Supremacy** is at the root of original sin! I need people who do not feel entitled. True humility is a required trait of the citizens of my Kingdom, and it is certainly a required trait of the leaders who can be trusted to lead in my Kingdom!

I have not met many leaders that I actually would want to be friends with. It is only the humble ones that I care for. But I also have to watch out, because there are many who wear a false humility, a surface thing that can vanish under the right circumstances, usually stressful ones, which lets the beast, hiding just underneath the surface, off the leash! I don't want to hang around those types of people. They are not safe people to be around. If they turn and are willing to bare their fangs to someone, they will eventually do that to me. That doesn't mean I can't love and appreciate them. We can be friends, but we won't be close friends. They have not learned this critical aspect of Christ-following. I have to be able to trust someone that I offer all of my heart to in friendship! I'm guessing that you are the same way. Jesus certainly was.

*“Unless you change, you cannot be a part of my Kingdom”*

**Lift Him Up**

