

May 30, 2004 by Steve Brandon



# How to be Great in the Kingdom of Heaven

## Matthew 18:1-4

### 1. You need to get in (verses 2-3).

### 2. You need to get down (verse 4).

Not too long ago, a book was distributed to all families involved in our church. It was written by John Piper and titled, *Don't Waste Your Life*. We incorporated the reading of this book into the men's reading program. I don't know exactly what impact this book has made on each person who read it. But I know that for some of you, I have heard that this book has made a big impact on your life. You have sought to evaluate your life goals and directions and have even changed some things so as not to waste your life. For others, this book may have been read with no impact. For others, it may have the privilege of gathering dust on your book shelf. If this is the case with you, I would encourage you to read it, as it will force you to evaluate what you are doing in this life, whether or not you are wasting it.

Here are a few quotes from this book that will help give you a feel of what the message of this book is.

Oh, how many lives are wasted by people who believe that the Christian life means simply avoiding badness and providing for the family. So there is no adultery, no stealing, no killing, no embezzlement, no fraud--just lots of hard work during the day, and lots of TV and PG-13 videos in the evening (during quality family time), and lots of fun stuff on the weekend--woven around church (mostly). This is life for millions of people. Wasted life. We were created for more, far more. (p. 119)

When God saves us, He doesn't save us so that we can have a peaceful family that spends enjoyable time watching television each night. There are bigger causes in this world for which God saves us than this. Piper continues, ...

Oh, that young and old would turn off the television, take a long walk, and dream about feats of courage for a cause ten thousand times more important than American democracy--as precious as that is. [And one for which we have dedicated as a nation this entire Memorial Day weekend to remember those who have given their lives that we might enjoy our democracy.] If we would dream and if we would pray, would not God answer? Would he withhold from us a life of joyful love and mercy and sacrifice that magnifies Christ and makes people glad in God? I plead with you, as I pray for myself, set your face like flint to join Jesus on the Calvary road. 'Let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come' (Hebrews 13:13-14). When they see our sacrificial love--radiant with joy--will they not say, 'Christ is great'? (pp. 128-129)

This morning, I want you to think about your life in the broadest of terms. Are you living a wasted life? Do you have any great, over-arching goals for your life to ensure that you don't waste it? Or are your goals in life such that you are wasting your life? Let me give you one more perspective from this book.

#### An American Tragedy: How Not to Finish Your One Life

I will tell you what a tragedy is. I will show you how to waste your life. Consider a story from the February 1998 edition of *Reader's Digest*, which tells about a couple who took "early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30 foot trawler, play softball, and collect shells." At first, when I read it I thought it might be a joke. A spoof on the American Dream. But it wasn't. Tragically, this was the dream: Come to the end of your life--your one and only precious, God-given life--and let the last great work of your life, before you give an account to your Creator, be this: playing softball and collecting shells. Picture them before Christ at the great day of judgment: "Look, Lord. See my shells." That is a tragedy. And people today are spending billions of dollars to persuade you to embrace that tragic dream. Over against that, I put my protest: Don't buy it. Don't waste your life. (p.45)

In our text this morning, we will see the disciples asking one of the greatest questions in the world. It relates to the topic of not wasting your life. If you embrace their question and embrace the answer that Jesus gives, and make this your life's goal and the passion of your life, then you will not waste your life.

So, let's look carefully at Matthew 18 this morning. In verse one, we see the question being asked. They ask, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" These disciples asked a great question. In fact, this may be one of the greatest questions that you could ever ask. I encourage you to make this question (and the answer) your supreme, overriding principle in your life. Ask yourself before you do anything, "Will this make me great in the kingdom of heaven?"

The title of my sermon this morning is "How to Be Great in the Kingdom." Jesus is asked this question point blank and gives a plain and clear answer. He gives us two points. He gives us two things you need to do to be great in the kingdom of heaven. And the good news this

morning is that all of us can do this. We may not ever be the president of the United States. We may never be the CEO of a major corporation. We may never become a famous inventor of a great new device. We may never become a missionary to one of the unreached peoples of the world. But, we all may be great in the kingdom.

Here is the first thing that you need to do to be great in the kingdom:

## **1. You need to get in (verses 2-3).**

Look at verse 2,

"[Jesus] called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, 'Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.'"

Before Jesus gets to the heart of the question (which He does in verse 4), Jesus answers a more foundational question. In order to be great in the kingdom, you first need to get into the kingdom! It's difficult to be a great basketball player if you never get in the game! It's difficult to be a great violinist if you never get to play your instrument in the concerts! It's difficult to be a great businessman if you never go into business. It's impossible to be great in the kingdom without ever being in the kingdom. So, Jesus tells us how to enter the kingdom.

And as He often does, He uses an object lesson. There were times when Jesus instructed us to look at the birds. There were times when Jesus gave parables about plants, seeds and weeds. There were times when Jesus spoke about the weather. And so, here, Jesus takes a little child and has this child set before them as an object lesson.

He says, "If you want to enter the kingdom, you need to be like this child." The question naturally arises, "in what ways am I to be like a child?" Now, I'm not an expert in children. But I do have four of them and have come to observe a bit of what they are like. Certainly, I know that there are things that children do that will keep you out of the kingdom. The Bible says that foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child (Proverbs 22:15). There are times that children demonstrate their foolishness when they are extremely selfish, filled with complaining, or not too helpful around the house. Children are prone to being too loud at the wrong time, saying impolite things, attempting daring maneuvers on the playground. Sometimes, children can be quite violent, especially when someone else takes a toy of theirs. I have first-hand experience with all of these things; many of them happened this week. You aren't supposed to be like a child in every way. Being "childish" is not what will get you into the kingdom of heaven. Christ calls us to be "childlike." There are some qualities of children that are utterly commendable. I'm not going to be exhaustive, but let me mention a few of these qualities, several of which I have witnessed this week, which Jesus informs us elsewhere is necessary to entering the kingdom.

### **a) Children are Helpless (Matt. 5:3)**

When children come into this world, they are at the mercy of everyone. They are not like many animals, that come out of the womb running so as to flee danger. A baby needs to be fed, dressed, put to bed, and picked up in the morning. At my home, we have a nine month old, and so I am very aware of these things. She can't prepare her own food. She can't put her food in her mouth. She can't dress herself. We choose when she goes to bed at night. We choose what time she gets up in the morning (well, most of the time). We choose how many naps she needs. Even a young child is helpless as well. A young child can't earn enough income to support himself or herself. A child needs a mother and a father to provide financially for him. A young child cannot provide clothes, buy food, or provide for his or her many needs.

This is a characteristic of those who enter the kingdom of heaven: they enter helpless. People enter the kingdom as beggars, needing help. This is entirely scriptural. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). We come into the kingdom of heaven bringing nothing in our hands. We come into the kingdom, poor and destitute and in need of everything, just like children. If you think you are going to get into the kingdom based on your merits or worthiness, you are so wrong! When you come into the kingdom, you must come like a child, totally helpless and in need of everything.

### **b) Not concerned (Matt. 6:33)**

There is a precious innocence in many children. Food has been provided for them forever. Clothing has been provided for them. There isn't much anxiety about how these things will be provided in the future. They simply trust their parents in these matters. They aren't overly concerned about these things, as we parents might be. In our home we witnessed this phenomenon this past week. My son, SR, lost his tooth on Thursday morning. Now, he has no front teeth. The tradition at our house is that you put your tooth under your pillow at night and the tooth fairy will come and place some money underneath your pillow. Our children are often pretty excited about this. Well, SR, wasn't. I asked him on Friday afternoon whether or not the tooth fairy had come yet. (Whenever I bring up the topic of the tooth fairy, my kids always say, "Dad, there isn't a tooth fairy." So, we went around this deal for a little bit.) He had even forgotten to place his tooth underneath his pillow. Finally, I said, "Well, do you have any money underneath your pillow?" He said, "I don't know." I said, "Well, maybe you had better check." He instantly turned and ran upstairs to check. And sure enough, he found some money underneath his pillow. But the point of this story is that he was entirely unconcerned about money. This is a characteristic of those who enter the kingdom of heaven--they are not overly concerned with worldly things.

In Matthew 6, Jesus told His disciples to look at the birds--they don't sow or reap or gather into barns, but they are fed. He told them to look at the lilies of the field--they don't toil or spin, and yet, they are clothed with beauty greater than beauty of Solomon! Then, Jesus turns to His disciples and says, "Do not be anxious, then, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'With what shall we cloth ourselves?' For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt. 6:31-33). Jesus presents a contrast between the Gentiles, who are out of the kingdom, with those who are in the kingdom. The Gentiles were overly concerned with the most basic matters of life, but this is not so with the child of God, who has a heavenly Father who cares for him.

Just as children are not concerned with many of the details of life, so also those who get into the kingdom are not concerned with many of the

detail of life.

#### c) Eager (Matt. 7:21-27)

I have a box in my hand. It is a present and I want to give it to you. If you want to have this present, raise your hand to volunteer. Who raises their hands? It's the children! There is something within a child that makes him eager to do anything. There is an eagerness with children, that adults have simply lost. If you say to children, "Ok, guys, line up because we're going to do an activity." The faces of the children line up and they willingly stand together in a line, ready to do whatever is asked. Do you know what I'm talking about? Children often express an eagerness to obey.

Eager obedience is the key to entering the kingdom of heaven. In Matthew 7, we read about those who enter the kingdom. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). There are many people who will say to Jesus on that day, "Lord, Lord, let me into your kingdom," who will find themselves on the outside of the kingdom. It's because they didn't do the will of God. Oh, they were involved with religious activity, but they weren't eager to obey what God had said. They heard the commands of God, and analyzed them and did their own thing, which God calls lawlessness, rather than eagerly doing what they were told.

In Matthew 7, Jesus told a story of two houses. One was built upon the rock, and when the rains came down and the floods came up, what happened? It stood firm. The other house was built on the sand, and when the rains came down and the floods came up, what happened? The house on the sand went "smash!!" Jesus said that the one "who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them" is like the house built on the rock (Matt. 7:24). Jesus said that the one "who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them" is like the house built on the sand (Matt. 7:26). And often within children, there is an eagerness to do what they are told.

Often with children, there is an eagerness to do what they are told. Do you want to enter the kingdom? You need to be eager to obey as a child often is.

#### d) Trusting (Matt. 8:10-13)

My children are at an age such that I can tell my children anything and they will believe me. (Except the tooth fairy.) This past week, my children were swinging on our swing set in our back yard. As they were swinging, they loosened their shoes, so that they could kick them off of their feet. They recorded how far their shoes had gone and tried to make them go as far as possible. As I watched them, I thought of another idea of something that they might try. Rather than kicking their shoe so that it goes a long way into the yard, I suggested that they try to kick their shoe way high into the air. In fact, I told them to kick their shoes backwards over the swing set, and try to catch their shoe when they swing back. And then I said, "Yeah, when I was a little boy, I used to catch my shoe like that all the time! When I would catch my shoe, I would put it back on and do it all over again!" At first, they believed me. And then, after thinking about it for a while, they became skeptical and said, "Did you really do that dad?" Well, of course I didn't! I know that as they get older, they will believe me less and less. It is their childlikeness that they will lose.

We are supposed to be like children and believe. Now obviously, we aren't to believe everything that we are told, for the Proverbs speak very strongly against the simple (or naïve) child (Prov. 1:4). And yet, there is something very God-honoring when you take God's word and believe it, like a child does. For example, children don't have difficulty believing the miracles in the Bible. We adults have the difficulty. To get into the kingdom, you need to be trusting God's word, like children are so good at doing.

The Bible often tells us that the way into the kingdom is through faith. In Matthew 8, Jesus encountered a centurion, whose servant was paralyzed (Matt. 8:5). He came to entreat Jesus to heal His servant (Matt. 8:6). Jesus said, "I will come and heal him" (Matt. 8:7). And the centurion said, "Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed" (Matt. 8:8). Jesus marveled at the faith of this man (Matt. 8:10). He then went on to tell of the many who will come and feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, implying that this man will be one of them, because of his great faith (Matt. 8:11). But, the "sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness," because of their unbelief (Matt. 8:12). It is faith that gets you into the kingdom of heaven. Time and time and time again, this is the message of the Bible. This is the message of the most famous verse of the Bible: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believe in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

What do you need to do to be great in the kingdom? First, you need to get in. To get in, you need to become like a child (verse 3). Children are helpless, not concerned, eager, and trusting. There are many other commendable characteristics of children that I could have used to illustrate this point. I thought about how forgiving children often can be. Your willingness to forgive others is crucial to your entering the kingdom (see Matt. 18:21-35). I thought about how loving children often are. This is one of the reasons why children are so much of a joy! Love is crucial to entering the kingdom. Jesus said that it is our love for one another that identifies us as children of God (John 13:35). <sup>[1]</sup>

In order to get in, you need to be like this. And so, I ask, "Are you?" I don't hesitate at all to ask you this question point blank. Jesus asked this to His disciples. (We don't know exactly which of his disciples heard this. There are times when Jesus addressed His disciples, which probably included more than the twelve (i.e. Matt. 5:1). It may have been only the twelve. Peter may not have been present, as Jesus had sent him fishing (Matt. 17:27), and said these things "at the same hour" (verse 1). However, by verse 21, Peter is back with them.)

At any rate, Jesus was pressing this upon His disciples. We ought to continually ask ourselves these sorts of question. Do you have a childlike **helplessness** that is entirely dependent upon God? Are you coming to God, bankrupt of soul and spirit, looking only to the righteousness of Christ as your only hope? Do you have a childlike **unconcern** for the things in the world? I'm not talking about irresponsibility. I'm talking about a perspective that has little fear of the future, because you know that God will provide for all your needs. Do you have a childlike **eagerness** and a readiness to obey God? When God tells you to jump, do you ask, "How high?" The Bible says, "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). Do you have a childlike **trust** in God? When God says it, do you believe it? Or, do you need more proof? Are you always questioning? Are you continually skeptic?

For some of you, you might look at these qualities and say, "That's not me at all!" In order to be these things, you might need to undergo a

huge transformation! This is what Jesus said in the phrase that I skipped in verse 3. Jesus said, "you must be 'converted,'" This word translated "converted" simply means, "to be turned." Your translation might say that you need to "change" (NIV). Or, it might say that you need to "turn" (ESV). In any case, the idea is much the same. To enter the kingdom, you need to be radically changed.

We are all prone to be unlike children. We are prone to be self-sufficient and in need of nobody (including God). We are prone to be consumed by the world (that there is no place for God), disinterested in God's word (that we don't obey God), and skeptical regarding the promises of God (so we don't trust). We all need a radical transformation. The Bible mentions this over and over again. Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be "born from above" (John 3:7). Paul described this process as being "regenerated by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). Paul spoke about the one who is in Christ is a "new creature" (2 Cor. 5:17). Ezekiel described the process as God performing open heart surgery, taking out your stony heart and giving you a soft heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). Jeremiah describes it as God writing His law within our hearts (Jer. 31:33). And so, I ask, have you been changed? Have you been converted? Are you childlike?

At Rock Valley Bible Church, we need to be those who come before God like children. We need to be helpless; we need to be not concerned; we need to be eager; and we need to be trusting. If you aren't like this, you won't enter the kingdom of heaven.

To be great in the kingdom of heaven, you first need to get in. In verse four, Jesus presents a second thing you need to do to be great in the kingdom.

## **2. You need to get down (verse 4).**

In verse 4, we get to the heart of the question that Jesus was asked. "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." The key word here is the word, "humble." The idea is that of "making low." That's why I called this point, "getting down." The direction to being great is not up, it's down.

I want for you to think about the kingdom of heaven for a bit. Imagine it in your mind. You should probably be visualizing one person who will stand out as prominent above all others. There is one person who will be the greatest of all. He will be easy to identify, as He will be on the throne. All will be bowing to Him. He will be worshiped. Who is it? It is Jesus. And why will Jesus be so much greater than all who are in the kingdom? Precisely because Jesus humbled Himself greater than all.

Philippians chapter 2 describes the humiliation of Jesus like no other passage of Scripture does. Here was Jesus, He was God of very God. He was the creator, and not created. Yet, as Philippians 2 tells us, He humbled Himself. Look at verse 6, "although He existed in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself by taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of man" (Phil. 2:7). This was a great act of humility. In order to become a man, there were attributes of His deity which must be stripped. No longer would Jesus be omnipresent. He would be contained within a body. No longer would Jesus be on the throne in the palace. He would live in the dusty streets of Nazareth. No longer would Jesus be worshiped continually by those in heaven. Jesus willingly descended from God to man. This was a great act of humility.

But, it goes further than that. Paul tells us that "He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death" (Phil. 2:8). When Jesus walked this earth, He was a hated man. Rather than being worshiped by angels, He was "despised and forsaken of men," just as Isaiah 53 had predicted. John tells us that Jesus "came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). Jesus created the world, and the world rejected Him. He was rejected by Israel, His chosen people. Of all the people of the earth, Israel was the country that God loved and blessed, even when they didn't deserve it. Yet, they didn't receive Him. Rather, they hated Him. Jesus was hated so much that He was killed.

It was an act of humility for God to become a man. It was a greater act of humility that this God would die. But the form of His death makes His humility even greater. His death was a despicable death. The Jews despised crucifixion. It was the most debasing and humiliating of deaths. Even the law pronounced a curse upon you if you hung on a tree (Deut. 21:23).

Why is Jesus the greatest in the kingdom? Because He humbled Himself greater than anyone has ever humbled themselves before. Nobody will ever be able to duplicate the depth of His humility again in the future. We see the greatness of Jesus in verse 9 of Philippians 2. It begins with "Therefore." In other words, "[because of the great extent to which Christ humbled Himself,] therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father" (Phil. 2:9-11). As Jesus was humbled far lower than any other. So also, was Jesus lifted higher than all others. This is how it works in the kingdom of heaven.

Do you want to become great? You must first become low, and allow God to exalt you high. This principle is taught many times throughout the Bible. There was a time in which Jesus was invited into the house of one of the leading Pharisees to have dinner. While he was there, "He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table" (Luke 14:7). He noticed how everyone was wanting to sit in the best seats. So, Jesus told them a parable. He said,

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, and he who invited you both shall come and say to you, 'Give place to this man,' and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted." (Luke 14:8-11)

Jesus says, when you have an opportunity, take the low road, and let others exalt you. Because, this is how it is in the kingdom. If you humble yourself now, and you take the low road now, God will exalt you in the kingdom. If you exalt yourself now, you will be least in the

kingdom, supposing you even make it into the kingdom. This isn't a new teaching that Jesus is expounding. Listen to Proverbs 25:6, 7.

"Do not claim honor in the presence of the king, and do not stand in the place of great men; For it is better that it be said to you, 'Come up here,' than that you should be put lower in the presence of the prince, whom your eyes have seen."

I remember when I was in high school and in college, I would frequently ride in a car, driven by one of my friends. Before a bunch of us would pile into the car, somebody would inevitably shout out, "Shotgun!" Which means, "I'm going to sit in the front, because that's the best seat." That attitude is not a humble one. The humble one will ride in the back and will always choose to ride in the back, until someone else says, "come up here, ride in front with me." You humble yourself, and let God exalt you.

This teaching is all over the Bible. James says it like this, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. ... Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you" (James 4:6, 10). Peter says it like this, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time" (1 Pet. 5:6).

It's easy to talk about humility in general terms. It's hard to actually think humbly about yourself. In 1 Cor. 4, Paul gives a great model of humility when he spoke of his own ministry.

"Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ. ... To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the **scum** of the world, the **dregs** of all things, [even] until now."

Paul considered himself to be "the scum of the world." I want you to think about your garbage cans. You take your kitchen waste and dump it in your garbage cans, which eventually make their way out to the curb. There are times, when your garbage bag from your kitchen leaks, and this stuff oozes out of them and falls to the bottom of the garbage can. The next week, your garbage is thrown out, but the stuff is still in the bottom of the garbage can. Do you know what I'm talking about? In the summertime, it gets worse, because that stuff bakes everyday in your hot, stuffy garage. For me, I go at this stuff every summer about two or three times. I take some Lysol and pour it thick into the garbage can and let it soak a while. Then, I will often climb half-way into the garbage (if I can stand the smell) to clean it out. **The stuff around the bottom of your garbage can is the scum that Paul is talking about.** He said, "I'm that scum!" He said, "I'm the dregs of all things." The idea is the same. "I'm the type of stuff that needs to be wiped out of the bottom of a container." That, my friends, is humility. But, that is the path to greatness.

In a few chapters (chapter 20), we are going to see this theme repeated again. The context is almost exactly the same. The disciples were looking for greatness in the kingdom. Jesus said, ...

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and [their] great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:25-28)

The path to greatness is to give yourself to the service of others, and allow the God, who sees you in secret, to exalt you in the kingdom. Do you get it? Do you really understand humility? I'm not talking about words. I'm talking about genuine, heart-felt humility. Humility is knowing your unworthiness because we **are** unworthy. Humility is realizing yourself to be a sinner, because you **are** a sinner. Humility is delighting in the accomplishments of another. Humility is having no lofty thoughts of yourself. Humility is having no self-conceit. Humility prefers to take the job that goes unnoticed. Sadly, these disciples didn't understand. On the very night in which Jesus was betrayed, they were arguing as to who among them should be regarded to be the greatest (Luke 22:24). Sadly many of us don't understand it, either.

This isn't an easy lesson. But, it's a lesson that we must learn. Do you want to keep from wasting your life? Do you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven? Then you need to get in like a child, and get down in humility.

As I conclude my message this morning, I want to give you a perspective of what being great in the world is all about. **It's empty!** There are a great many people in this world seeking to be great in this world. There are athletes who give themselves to being the best basketball player or football player. There are business men who work long and hard, that they might achieve greatness in the financial world. There are musicians who practice for long hours to be great. These people often lose sight of everything on their path to greatness. They neglect their family. They neglect their friends. Their fame and fortune become the only thing to them that mattered. Sadly, when they reach the top, they often find it empty.

I want for you to think about what they achieve. Suppose that you work very hard to achieve your greatness. If you have achieved a measure of fame, the world looks up to you for a few years, anyway. But after a generation, you are most likely forgotten.

Have you heard of **Austin Corbin**? He passed away in 1896, a well-known name in the United States. His obituary was on the front page of the New York Times. He was so famous, that his accomplishments in this life weren't even mentioned until well into his obituary. He built the Manhattan Beach Railroad and three resort hotels: The Manhattan Beach Hotel, The Oriental, and The Argyle. He was as famous as Sam Walton is in our day. He was a great man, who a hundred years after his death is now forgotten. Have you heard of **Charles Fairbanks**? He was only the vice-president of the United States of America under Theodore Roosevelt (1905-1909). He served in the United States senate for 10 years before he became vice-president. He was a great man, who is now forgotten. More recently, there was a man by the name of **Arnold Beckman**. Have you ever heard of him? He died last week (May 18, 2004). He was born in central Illinois and made his fortune

selling scientific equipment. He was the inventor of the pH meter. Over his lifetime, he only gave \$270 million to support scientific research, including a \$40 million donation to the University of Illinois in the mid-1980's. Even more recently, have you ever heard of **John Howard**? He's only the prime minister of Australia today. He has served in the federal office as an elected official since 1974. He was elected in 1996 and leads 19 million people for eight years. Greatness in this world is still obscurity. You can give away a quarter of a billion dollars and still die in obscurity. You can be the prime minister of an entire nation and still be relatively unknown.

Suppose that you achieve greatness in wealth. After working very hard for a number of years, you have a few years to enjoy it. Those who retire at 65, might have 15 years to enjoy their retirement, before their health begins to deteriorate. Those who strike it rich while they are young, may have 35 years of retirement to look forward to. Big deal. Soon it will be past. What are you going to do with a neat shell collection? What will it profit you to be a pretty good golfer? All of your pleasure was yesterday. You can't enjoy it today. As the poem says, "Only one life 'twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last!"

But, it's an entirely different thing to be great in the kingdom. In the kingdom, you will enjoy your greatness forever! This is the promise of Psalm 16, "In Your presence is the fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever." In the kingdom, 100 years passes by like the snap of a finger. It is like a fleeting breath. And your greatness will never be taken away from you. As they hymn writer said, "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, We've no less days to sing God's praise, than when we'd first begun." Your humility here will bring a greatness in the kingdom that will last forever.

I exhort you, loved ones at Rock Valley Bible Church, to work hard at being great in the kingdom. First, you need to get in by converting and becoming like a child. You need to get down by lowering yourself in humility.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on May 30, 2004 by Steve Brandon.  
For more information see [www.rvbc.cc](http://www.rvbc.cc).

---

[1] - After the service on Sunday, someone noticed how my daughter (who I set before the congregation like Jesus did) was clinging to me, and identified it as another characteristic of children: they cling to their parents. So also do Christians cling to their heavenly father. There are certainly and endless number of other possibilities that I could have used. My list of four is far from exhaustive. Children are also gentle, sincere, joyful, ...