

The Greatest in the Kingdom



*Matthew 18:1-10; Mark
9:30-37; Luke 9:43-48*

Year B Proper 20

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3	4	5
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	▲		▲		
▲	Andrew - the younger brother of Peter, one of the youngest disciples	▲		▲		
■	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	▲	▲	▲	●	▲
●	Matthew - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples	●		▲		
▲	Man - a man in the crowd		▲		●	
▲	Woman - a woman in the crowd		▲		●	
■	Jesus		▲		▲	■
●	Mary Magdalene - a 'fallen woman' who became the first female disciple, the humblest member of the group due to her shame about her past		▲			
●	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus					▲
▲	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room					▲
●	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples					▲
●	Phillip - one of the youngest disciples, always well-meaning and honestly curious, sometimes lacking in confidence					▲

Scene 1

Andrew , James , Judas , Matthew

{Some of the disciples discuss Jesus' latest pronouncements.}

James *[happily]* The rabbi is going to Jerusalem! And we're going to stand by his side in glory when he comes into his Kingdom. Or some of us, anyway.

Andrew You talk like you're going to be one of the some. Does that mean you're planning to stay well away from the front lines?

James Hey, I'll be the first one into the breach. But the rabbi wasn't talking about mere survival. You think just anybody who happens to survive will sit at his right hand and his left?

Judas So you think you're going to be one of the *two*?

Andrew Of course he does. He had his mommy ask the rabbi.

James She came on her own! I had nothing to do with it. But still, I *was* one of the first people to recognize him for what he was. And I've been the most loyal.

Matthew You? The most loyal?

James Well, okay, you've been pretty strong, too, but the others have been a disgrace at times! Questioning the rabbi, disagreeing with him, criticizing him...

Judas That's what good followers do! They don't just follow blindly. They *contribute*. By that criteria, it should be me and Joanna.

James Joanna???

Matthew A woman?

Judas If it weren't for her money and my organizing work, this group wouldn't even exist.

Andrew *[scornfully]* You think the rabbi is going to look at it like any of you have? He doesn't care about loyalty or money or organizational skills! I think it's going to be the ones who love him most, the ones who are most devoted to him, who couldn't live without him.

James *[incredulously]* And you think that's you???

Andrew No! I'm not an egomaniac like some people in this conversation. But I think it could be our brothers.

Matthew *[thoughtfully]* Peter and John. I like that.

Judas Or maybe Mary, if we're talking about pure devotion.

Matthew "Pure" devotion?

James *[sarcastically]* Sure, it'll be her and Joanna, sitting on the left and right hand of the Messiah, the Son of David, the Root of Jesse whose reign will never end. Yeah, there's nothing wrong with *that* picture.

Scene 2

Jesus , Judas , Man , Mary , Woman

{Jesus sits and speaks casually with a small gathering of inquirers.}

Man No, no, what I'm getting at is: what are the requirements? What do I have to do to get into the kingdom?

Woman It's not like anybody's going to be able to get in, right?

Jesus Ah, now I understand! Mary? Mary! Could you come sit by me for a moment?

Mary Me?

Judas *[encouragingly]* You heard the boss.

Man "The boss"? You have women in your group?

Judas *[matter of factly]* We have two, at the moment. We've had more at other times.

Woman But I heard she was...they must have been pulling my leg, but...they said she was...

Judas *[cheerfully]* A prostitute? You seem to have a very good source of information.

Jesus Mary, I'd like you to answer this question. What are the requirements for entering the Kingdom?

Mary But - but I don't know.

Jesus You know better than anybody.

Man Is this some kind of joke?

Judas It could be, but if it is, I'd advise you to pay very close attention to the punch line.

Jesus Go ahead, Mary.

Mary Well...I don't know what the requirements are because I'm sure I haven't done anything to deserve it. I just asked to be let in.

Woman That's all it takes? And it doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman?

Man *[to Jesus and Judas]* Okay, I can understand that, but surely it must matter what kind of person you were - you know, before you got in. There must be different levels of honor or power; surely someone like her -

Jesus *[interrupting]* You're asking the wrong person. Mary is currently in charge of the lesson. Ask *her*.

Man Uh, um...

Mary *[earnestly to the man]* I don't know the answer to your question, but I hope you're right, I hope there *are* degrees, because I know I don't deserve any high place, and it would be a terrible thing if I were equal to everybody else.

{There's a pause as everyone digests this.}

Judas Rabbi, I have a follow-up question. What about the other end of the scale, the very top? Who'll be the greatest in the kingdom?

Jesus Another excellent question! I'll answer this one - but stay right here, Mary. Joanna! Could you find the boy we were talking to this morning and bring him over here?

Man *[skeptically]* Is he going to have a child give the next answer?

Woman I wouldn't be surprised. Did you see him before the talk with the children of the village? He was wonderful with them.

{Joanna enters along with the child.}

Jesus Zachary! Come sit on my lap. I need your help with something. Joanna, you come, too, and sit right here beside us.

Judas *[to himself]* Mary on his left, and Joanna on his right. And a child in his lap! *[calling out]* James! Get over here! You've got to see this!

Jesus *[to the crowd]* And now here's your answer. This child is the greatest in the Kingdom!

Judas James! Come on! You've got to *hear* this!

Man This *is* a joke!

Woman No, wait. Maybe he knows something about the child. [*to Jesus*] Is that it? Is this child destined to grow up to be a great man?

Jesus Almost certainly! But that's not the lesson. [*to the crowd*] Hear the lesson! Unless you become just like this child, you won't even *see* the Kingdom of Heaven! And it is the humblest and lowliest among you, those of you who are the most child-like in your attitude to God and to each other, who will be greatest in the world to come.

Scene 3

Andrew , James , Judas , Matthew

{Judas reports back to the others about what Jesus said.}

Matthew The most child-like, he said?

Judas Yup.

Andrew Well, that's rules out all of us. I guess it rules out Peter, too, but I'll still keep my bet on John. And move my Peter money to Judas' Mary.

James [*painfully*] They were really sitting on his left and his right?

Judas Yup.

James Well, that doesn't necessarily mean anything. They just happened to be sitting there.

Judas He was pretty intentional about calling them up and asking them to stay.

Matthew But he didn't say anything specifically about their place in the Kingdom, right? He only talked about the boy.

Judas True.

Andrew He was definitely sending a message, though. It's too big a coincidence! We were just talking about who would sit by his side, and boom! he has the women sit by his side even though he only needed the kid to make his point.

James But he didn't know we were talking that way. *[to Judas]* You didn't tell him, did you?

Judas All I did was ask, in as neutral a way as possible, who would be greatest in the kingdom.

Matthew I do like his answer. It's not far from what I said: those who were the most devoted to him.

James It's *nothing* like what you said! Children can be the least devoted creatures on earth! I've got a couple of nephews who give me nothing but lip.

Andrew It doesn't sound like they're particularly humble, either!

James That they are not!

Matthew Are you suggesting the rabbi is wrong about children?

Judas No, no. He's not saying they're all these humble child-like creatures all the time. Or even most of the time. In fact, they don't have to be that way at all for his lesson to be perfectly valid.

Andrew How so?

Judas He's just referencing the common mythology about children. He's just saying: this thing that we believe about children? This is what you should be like. Whether or not any actual child is ever that way.

James Now you're making it sound like the rabbi is lying.

Judas Not at all. But weren't you the one who claimed that kids aren't the way he said they are in the first place?

James Actually, my nephews are okay. I actually like how brash they are.

Andrew *[to James]* If *that* were the criteria for being greatest in the Kingdom, then I have to admit it: you'd stand a good chance of being top dog.

James *[genuinely honored]* Thanks, man!

Matthew *[generously to Andrew]* And your brother, too, probably.

Andrew *[pleased]* Could be!

Judas *[in a sugary voice]* So I guess we have a happy ending after -

{Judas is interrupted by a loud commotion coming from the crowd.}

Matthew Hey, something's happening!

Andrew Is that the rabbi?

James Come on!

{They all run off to see what's happening.}

Scene 4

Jesus , Judas , Man , Woman

Jesus *[shouting angrily]* Woe to you! Woe to the world! You think he's your possession, to do with what you will? I tell you: he is a child of the Kingdom, and you are merely stewards of the King! Hear me!

Judas What's happening? What's he yelling about?

Woman Oh, it was terrible! Just terrible!

Judas What?

Man Remember the boy he had on his lap? The parents showed up just now and dragged him off. And I mean *literally*. You know how some parents are? Yelling at their kids and yanking them by the arm?

Judas And that's when the rabbi blew up?

Woman Yes, and I don't blame him a bit! Parents like that should be arrested!

Jesus Hear me! Anyone who welcomes one of these little ones, welcomes me! But if anyone causes one of them to stumble - it would be better for him to have a millstone hung around his neck and be thrown into the sea!

Man Amen, rabbi! Now you're talking!

Woman Bless you, rabbi! Bless you!

Scene 5

Jesus , Joanna , John , Judas , Peter , Phillip

{Some of the disciples discuss the sermon with Jesus at the end of the day.}

Joanna Rabbi, that was the best sermon you ever preached! I was never more proud of you, or happy to be your follower.

Peter I just wish those cowards had stuck around to take their medicine.

John I hope the boy will be okay. Sometimes, when parents like that are scolded for how they treat their children, they take it out on the children.

Phillip *[to Jesus]* That won't happen, will it? *[to everybody]* I'm sure he wouldn't have yelled at them if they were going to react that way.

Jesus I don't honestly know, Phillip. But if they do, it will be on my head. I lost my temper and spoke without thinking.

Peter There's no way it's going to be your fault! For one thing, they were bad parents who probably hit their kid before they ever met you. For another thing, they'd probably keep on hitting him even if they never met you!

Jesus True enough, but that doesn't absolve me. Even when it's inevitable that some evil must occur, you can still choose whether you'll be the one *through whom* it occurs.

Joanna Then you should get the credit if your words cause those people to reform their ways and become better parents. Which could happen.

Jesus Let us pray fervently for that outcome.

Phillip Judas, you haven't said a word all evening. What did you think of what went down today?

Judas *[reluctantly]* Well...I was happy to see those people get told off, of course. And the crowd loved it, which was great for our buzz.

{He stops abruptly, and there's a short pause.}

Peter But?

Judas But...I was a little concerned about how the message of the day shifted. *[to Jesus]* You started off talking about the kingdom, and had people wondering what it would take for them to become a part of it, and how they would rate if they did. And that was all good. But then, the theme of the day suddenly changed, to how we should treat children. And while I thought what you said was great, it wasn't really on topic, and I suspect everybody forgot all about the real subject - the kingdom - in the excitement of the shouting match.

John I'm not sure I agree. The kingdom won't just be a political or military revolution, but a spiritual one. How we treat each other - and especially how we treat the weakest among us - is very much on topic. *[to Jesus]* Isn't that right?

Jesus What do you others think?

Joanna I agree with John. It's important how we treat people. If there were people in this group like those horrible parents, I would probably never have joined.

Peter Well I'm with Judas. The most important thing is to win the kingdom. Then we can worry about what kind of kingdom it'll be. Plus, there's no way to be nice and win a war. We're not going to be yelling at kids, but we're going to be doing much worse things to their parents.

Phillip I don't know which side I'm on. *[to Jesus]* What do you say?

Jesus What I say...is that my mission is...complicated.

{There's a long silence while everybody absorbs this.}

Judas Okay, but what does that mean?

Jesus My mission involves many things. There's almost nothing that it doesn't include.

Judas *[suspiciously]* But the liberation of Israel is the highest priority, right?

{There's another silence as Jesus doesn't reply.}

John I'm sure it is. That goes without saying.

Judas *[drily]* I'd still like to hear it said. *[firmly to Jesus]* Is our primary mission the liberation of Israel, or isn't it?

Jesus *[solemnly after a pause]* John, Joanna, Phillip, Judas: listen to me now as if I were talking only to each of you, and take my words into your minds and your hearts. There are certain things that must happen, certain evils that must occur. For the world is a complicated place, and not every path is straight. *[with increasing emotion]* But even if an evil is inevitable, beware the temptation to be the one through whom it occurs! It would be better for you to cut off a hand rather than let it act on that temptation. It would be better to pluck out an eye rather than let it show you the possibility! It would be better to go through life blind and lame, than to commit the offense that would have happened even without you, and to end up in the fires of Hell!

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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