

GREAT IN THE KINGDOM

Matthew 18:1-5; Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48
Yeshua §93

This week I received a very special book celebrating 50 years of AWANA at my home church, Grace Baptist Church, in Santa Maria, California. Of the many who are highlighted, one stands out to me: Pam Elwell has served as the AWANA secretary for 50 years. She was the secretary when I was a clubber.

Have you ever heard of Pam Elwell? She is an unknown. Apart from her highlight in this book, she probably hasn't received much in the way of recognition.

But there is coming a day when the One Who knows her will reward her faithful service and declare her greatness in His Kingdom. We tend not to think about the Messianic Kingdom and our status in it. But for the disciples, it was such an important issue they argued about it.

This argument erupted among the disciples most probably because of recent events. Most recently, Jesus paid the temple tax for Peter and Himself, but not for the other disciples. Prior to that, Peter, James and John had been selected to accompany Jesus on the mountain where they experienced the Transfiguration. Having returned to Capernaum, this argument broke out among the disciples; they were arguing over who, amongst them, was going to be the greatest in the Messianic Kingdom.

We pick up this episode of our series, Yeshua Messiah King, in Matthew 18:1-5.

MATTHEW 18:1-5 (ESV)

1 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,

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The disciples had been arguing about this amongst themselves, apart from Jesus (Luke 9:46). When they joined Jesus, He asked them about it, but they were too embarrassed to answer Him (Mark 9:33-34). Finally, they asked Jesus: who of the disciples will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

Mark tells us they were in a house when the disciples fessed up (9:33). Capernaum was Peter's hometown (Luke 4:31, 38). Perhaps the house and the little child were his. Mark tells us Jesus took the little one into His arms (9:36). Then He told the disciples that unless they become like this little one, they wouldn't even enter the Messianic Kingdom let alone be the greatest!¹

What characteristic of the little child was Jesus keying on? It was not the child's humility because a child that young has no capacity for pride or for humility. It seems to me that the quality Jesus had in mind is the little child's complete lack of interest in or awareness of *status*. A little child will wet the lap of a rich man as readily as he'll wet the lap of a poor man. A little child will fall asleep in the arms of a princess as readily as she'll fall asleep in the arms of a prostitute. A little child in arms doesn't think in terms of rich or poor, powerful or weak, president or plumber, greater or lesser. A little child in arms doesn't think in categories and has no means of comparing one person to another. They don't care about labels or status.

This is the attitude Jesus insists in His disciples. They/we, are to serve Jesus without regard to status; free from comparison and competition.

Ironically, serving Jesus without regard to status is what will gain us the status of greatness in the Kingdom. Greatness in the Kingdom is not achieved by besting other believers; it's achieved by faithfully serving Jesus. Greatness based on competition and comparison can only be achieved by the few; there is only one Super Bowl Champion team, there is only one National Spelling Bee champion, there is only one CEO of a company. There is a place for this kind of competition and achievement. But this is not the way greatness in the Kingdom is achieved.

Greatness in the Messianic Kingdom is achievable for all followers of Christ. It is based, not on competition, but on faithfulness. You and I will not be compared to other Christians, but we will be rewarded based on our faithful service to Christ in

¹ This is a strong warning introduced by the Greek word "amen" which means, "Listen up, this is the way things really are!" I believe Jesus might be using hyperbole to emphasize the serious need for them to repent of their pride. To not enter the kingdom is juxtaposed with being the greatest in the kingdom which is a mixing of categories. Elsewhere Jesus uses hyperbole to emphasize the seriousness of His point (e.g. cut off your hand, gouge out your eye etc.).

our marriages, in our parenting, in our work ethic, in our stewarding of God's resources, in using our spiritual gifts, in our loving of others, in our sharing Christ.

This was the Apostle Paul's perspective as he anticipated his death.

2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8 (ESV)

6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

The New Testament reveals five crowns that will be rewarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Four of these crowns are achievable by all believers. And, no, you will not be throwing down these crowns at the feet of Jesus (Rev. 4:9-11) unless you are one of the 24 Elders seated around the throne of Jesus during the Great Tribulation! These crowns come with authority to lead in the Millennial Kingdom. Christians often dismiss the reality and the pursuit of these crowns by quoting Revelation 4:9-11. But these crowns are real and they are to motivate our service. Else why are they in the Scriptures?

The five crowns are:

The Imperishable Crown (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

This crown is given to those believers who exercise self-control and gain victory over the old man.

The Crown of Boasting (1 Thessalonians 2:17-19)

This crown is for those who do the work of evangelism and win souls for Jesus.

The Crown of Righteousness (2 Timothy 4:6-8)

This crown is for those who have kept the faith doctrinally and morally in spite of adversity.

The Crown of Life (James 1:12, Revelation 2:10)

This crown is for those who endure trials and martyrdom.

The Crown of Glory (1 Peter 5:2-4)

This crown is for Elders who faithfully care for the church.

We want to serve Jesus here without comparing ourselves to one another or worrying about status. But we should be encouraged that Jesus, in His grace and

goodness, is going to reward our faithful service in the future. We all can attain greatness in the Kingdom by our faithful service here.

I am so blessed to serve in a church family where there is no competition or concern with status. This creates an atmosphere of trust and freedom. Thank you to all who so faithfully serve Jesus in your homes, in your workplace, at school and here with your church family.

Those who serve faithfully will be called great in the Kingdom!