

Great Attitude

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[0 : 00] And we're going to read from verses 10 to 14. Page 985. Let me read these words.

Jesus says, What do you think?

If a man owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the 99 on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?

And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the 99 that did not wander off. In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

I will keep that open. If you've got your little handout as well, you see there's a question there. I'm slightly nervous about this one. Just to get us thinking, what makes relationships in church frustrating?

[1 : 12] Maybe just have a brief moment to chat to the people sitting beside you. You're not allowed to say you, okay, at this point. Especially if you're sitting beside your husband or wife.

It would go bad from this point onwards, wouldn't it? But just thinking in general, what do you think? There's frustrations, isn't there, in church life. What are the kind of things that can make it frustrating? Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.

Okay, let's come back and think about this. You can keep some of those thoughts in your head.

Just to keep on with the film thing, that was really exciting to hear about the films.

But I enjoy films. I enjoy getting to the cinema when I can with two little boys. It's not always easy to do that. But isn't it brilliant when experts agree with you?

[3 : 28] It makes you feel like an expert too, doesn't it? When an expert says something, you think, yeah, I think that. So you can imagine my joy when I heard in a film review once, I heard someone say, The Princess Bride is one of the best children's films ever made.

And I thought, that's what I think. I said, I think, I'm an expert. Some of you obviously know the film. You guys love it. If you don't know the film, it's about true love.

And it starts on a farm with Buttercup, the young, beautiful, if slightly superior girl. You know the kind. You know the kind. They're like that. And Wesley, the handsome but poor farm boy.

Think Martin Ayers on a good day, that kind of thing. And Buttercup is mean to him. She'll say to him, Farm boy, polish my horse's saddle.

As you wish, Wesley replies. Farm boy, fill these buckets with water. And all he says is, As you wish.

[4 : 31] And then the voiceover in the film comes in. That day, she was amazed to discover when he was saying, As you wish, what he meant was, I love you.

It's great stuff, isn't it? It's great. But it gets better. And even more amazing, the day she realized she truly loved him back.

Now, Wesley's no money for marriage. He leaves to seek his fortune across the sea. It's a very emotional time for Buttercup. I fear I'll never see you again. Of course you will, he replies.

But what if something happens to you? Hear this now. I will come for you. This is true love.

Do you think this happens every day? Now, that's a fairy tale, isn't it? It's a fairy tale. But indulge me for a moment. Because why do you think children, and even balding men in their 40s, why do you think we still smile at stories like that?

[5 : 34] Films like that that draw something out of us. And we feel like, even though we know they're fairy tales, we feel it's kind of great to have something like that.

Why do we feel like that? Because we know life is no fairy tale. And real life, even church life. It is filled with frustrations. And yet Jesus does talk about a way of living that can be great.

And he says it flows from humility. Humbly coming to him as he really is. And humbly welcoming anyone else who does the same. That's who the little ones are that we've seen.

But Jesus said, these little ones who trust him, Christians, they'll face situations that will tempt them away. Now as he continues in this passage, he just shifts slightly from talking about people who might be doing something that causes little ones to sin.

And he flags up something that begins much more internally in us. A feeling. An attitude you find rising up when you look at someone else.

[6 : 41] And remember, he's probably speaking to the 12 here. People who are intended to be leaders in the church. Initial leaders in the church. And he flags up something that would be disastrous.

It would be absolutely disastrous if it takes root in a leader. In a minister. In a music leader. In a Bible study leader.

In a children's worker. It would be disastrous there. But actually hugely damaging in any of us. And I think Jesus knows it's a genuine temptation we'll face.

Just have a look at verse 10. See what he says. See that you do not look down. Or your version might have it. See that you do not despise one of these little ones.

And you think, why would that be a temptation? Why would anyone look down on? Or despise another Christian? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor-theologian, wrote a little bit once called Life Together.

[7 : 48] And he says this at one point. He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself. Becomes the destroyer of the latter.

Even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial. I think it's a really penetrating observation when you get your head around it.

Julia and I got married 10 years ago this year. But it only took until our first Christmas for me to realize that her family did absolutely everything wrong at Christmas. They did it.

I couldn't believe it. Everything was wrong about it. They didn't know the proper time or the proper way to open presents. Obviously what you do on Christmas morning, you come downstairs and you open all your presents at once together.

So there's a big mess and there's lots of chaos going on. No, her family, her family, they wait till the afternoon. I mean, it's outrageous. And then what they do is they pick one present from under the tree and they give it to the person it's named for.

[8 : 52] And then the person, it's all daughters in her family. Then that person opens the present so unbelievably slowly. It feels like they're not just trying to save the paper.

They're trying to save the sellotape as well. So it's opened. It feels like it's been an hour and we're still on the one present. And then once they've opened it, they go around and say thank you. Not just to the person who gave it to them, but to everyone else in the room, it feels like.

And that's one present done. And then they didn't have the starter that I liked for Christmas dinner. It just wasn't quite right. They ruined Christmas.

This isn't recorded, is it? They ruined. This would be a very different bit of the talk just now if Julia was here. We joked about this. But it's funny, isn't it?

It's funny how sometimes we make preferences. Have you noticed that? Personal preferences. We can make them into absolute rights and wrongs. It's funny how when people do things that mess with your plans, how frustrating it becomes.

[9 : 55] What makes relationships in church so frustrating? And you understand what Bonhoeffer's getting at. It's possible to have an amazing idea of what the church family should be. It's so obvious to me it should be like this.

To love that idea, to have a fairy tale in mind, and then to be terrifically frustrated with people within it when they spoil what you're hoping for. And you realize what might be going on there.

It's not other Christians I really love. It's my own ideas that I really love. But who would ever say that? It just comes out in frustrations all the time.

There's something I want to do, and it would be really great, but these people. So why would other Christians bring that out in you? Why would you? Why could you look down on or despise other little ones?

So I wonder if the parable Jesus tells helps us understand the specific problem he's flagging up. You see verse 12? What do you think if a man owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders

away?

[11 : 01] He tells a little story of a sheep owner with a wandering sheep. Now the way you imagine the story, I think, affects how you think about it. So if you imagine this is happening on a warm, sunny day in a lush field on a hill near Lough Lomond, and there's a little lamb, you can imagine, gambling away from the flock, and you've got to give chase and bring it back.

That's not so bad. That's quite nice. I wouldn't mind spending an afternoon doing that. But if you're thinking you're tired at the end of the day, it's tipping down with rain, the surrounding terrain is pretty treacherous, and the animal in question is a repeat woolly wanderer who doesn't even contribute much to the flock anyway, see, I imagine you're feeling less favorably disposed towards this particular pile of lamb chops.

And as you know it's a parable, and you're racing ahead to figure out who the missing mutton is, you're not surprised when you hear Jesus say in verse 14, in the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that one of these little ones should be lost, should perish.

And you realize Jesus is still talking about the same little ones, Christians, those who've, they're not in because they were massively intellectual or glamorous or massively gifted, they're just trusting him.

At some point they trusted him. They're welcomed in. And Jesus is told us, look, they'll face temptations in this world. Remember verse 7, such things must come.

[12 : 29] But here he wants us to realize something else about the reality of Christian life, about the reality of Christian communities, about the reality of church life, about the reality of St. Silas'. It's not just that little ones will face temptations, but that some little ones will be prone to wander.

You will be. You will be. The people next to you will be. You'll be prone to wander. They'll not just be tempted to sin, they'll wander off in it.

Church life isn't a fairy tale. Why are people in church so frustrating? And you understand what this means for church life, what it means for some of our plans.

Well, it means at times they'll be distracted, won't they? Time has to be spent going after wanderers. And you understand what this means about the things you'll have to deal with.

They're going to be messy at times. Some of you all know much better than me, the hurt caused by sin, relationships damaged. The times when someone has behaved really badly, they've just done the wrong thing.

[13 : 46] They've said something that is outrageous, rude, cruel, acting in a way, or just in the way they've conducted relationships.

They've done things that are really wrong. And when you try to help, the response is hostility, misrepresenting your motives.

And it can be a real drain for people trying to help, wondering if they're doing the right thing. You'll know that if you try to help someone, you say something, they react badly, and you think, have I done the right thing? I just don't know.

Have I made it worse? It's a drain, and when it carries on, it's understandably getting frustrated. And you think of the times you'll go through this with the same people.

They can be multiple. For some of us, our struggles are not one-offs. They're more deep-seated. They've become almost character traits. We become repeat offenders, and it's into this kind of church life, Jesus says, see that you do not look down on, see that you do not despise one of these little ones.

[15 : 02] It's not that you'll never cross. It's not that you'll never discipline. We'll see that later on this afternoon. It's not that leaders don't have to lead. It's not that you'll never have strong words, but you don't look down on them.

Do you ever find yourself thinking, it's all a bit much? The kind of hassle we've been through, I'm not sure I want to have that kind of hassle.

The stuff we've had to put up with, the way we've been treated, the evenings that have been ruined. Do you ever feel that Jesus is asking too much? I think I've certainly felt like that and acted like that. Why can't these people just be as good as, well, as good as me, as good as some of the other people that I got on with much better, and whenever I do, I've got Jesus' words from back in verse three ringing in my ears.

I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. And I discover, never mind the others, I view as serial wanderers.

[16:13] I'm someone who needs to change. And in these verses, let me show you two things Jesus tells us about his father and our father. He just wants to give a vision of, how do you deal with these kind of stuff?

And Jesus says, let me tell you what God's like. God the Son telling you about God the Father. Let me tell you what he's like. And it'll help you.

It'll help changes. Let me just mention two things. The father's plan and the father's joy. Here's the first one. The father's gracious plan. Here's the reason we're not to despise one of these little ones. Verse 10. Jesus says, For I tell you that there are angels in heaven always see the face of my father in heaven. It's one of those strange verses in the Bible, isn't it? You read it and you think, well, that's a strange thing.

What does it mean? I'm not totally sure. There's a couple of options, as I've read about it. Some people kind of think angelic representation. Some think Jesus is describing, that Christians have some kind of angelic representation in heaven, that God the Father cares so deeply about his little ones, he's made sure they're always being represented in heaven.

[17:25] Some people think, that's what Jesus is meaning here. Then there's some who think Jesus is speaking about the future that Christians are heading towards. And he's using this phrase, there are angels in heaven, as a way of describing the spirits of Christians, if you like, in the future in heaven.

Which is it? Well, you pay your money, you make your choices. I'm kind of persuaded it's probably the second. Jesus is describing the Father's plan for his little ones.

It's not really the way we talk, is that there are angels in heaven. But Jesus will speak a little bit like this, even later in Matthew's gospel, when asked about marriage and the resurrection, he describes people as being like the angels in heaven.

And if that's true, you understand what he's saying. Look, don't look down on these little ones. Don't despise little ones, other Christians. Do you know the Father's plan for them?

That they would enjoy the unshielded presence of God's glory. God's plan for his people as that they would be face to face with him.

[18:38] The atheist writer, John Gray, if you ever come across any of his work, he's a cheery chap. He's got a somewhat different view of life and people. One of his books, he says this, science has supplanted religion as the chief source of authority, but at the cost of making human life accidental and insignificant.

It makes you wonder why he gets up in the morning. Jesus says, they'll always see the face of my Father in heaven. Or here's Daniel Dennett commenting on Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection.

Darwin's great accomplishment was to reduce the design of the universe to a product of purposeless, meaningless matter in motion. Have you noticed how you think about people?

The way you think about people greatly affects how you treat them. I think wrongly about people. I'll start treating them wrongly. I don't know. I guess we'll find out tomorrow morning.

I don't know if any of you will be welcoming on the door on Sunday mornings when people come in. I imagine there might be someone welcoming people as they come in. If you are doing that, what are you thinking as people arrive?

[19:54] Adults chatting as they walk through the door. Some arriving late. The repeat offenders always showing up. We can start now. They're here. You see them coming in late. Maybe people you know have been mucking around, but they're coming in.

The children running in, laughing, being too noisy. What are we to think? If you're on the door, welcoming people, is this what you think?

Well, here they come. Purposeless, meaningless, matter in motion. Here they are. That's all they are. These little ones. Matter in motion, running around. See, not a bit of it.

That's not who people are. That's not what they were made for. No, the Father has a plan for these little ones, that they will be brought to himself. The plan of the triune God, these little ones who are prone to wander.

I mean, it's just an incredible plan, isn't it? That these wandering ones will be saved by the Son, sealed with the Spirit, brought to the Father, so they might enjoy the boundless, the boundless goodness, glory, and joy of God forever.

[21 : 06] Is that not something? C.S. Lewis, I'm sure you might have heard it before, puts it like this, there are no ordinary people. You've never talked to a mere mortal.

Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations, these are mortal, and their life is to ours is the life of a nat, but it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.

Immortal horrors are everlasting splendors. Do you know that for yourself? It's who you're made to be. And for the frustrating ones, who've made things difficult again, see that you do not despise one of these little ones, because of the Father's plan.

And what about the Father's joy? Jules and I, as I've told you, we live in a house with two young boys, which means we've become used to the kind of noises they make.

You know the kind of noises little boys make? No, again, please, can you leave the room if you're going to make that noise again? You can imagine all sorts of the noise.

[22 : 19] Some of the noises they make are not very pleasant, but some of them are. And one that we love erupts from time to time from our youngest. It just sort of erupts out of him, this particular noise.

And it is so loud. It's so loud when it happens. I've got a little study upstairs. I can hear it. I can hear it from all the way downstairs. The noise in question is his most incredible belly laugh.

It explodes with almost a shriek of laughter from nowhere, and it trails off into a giggle. And we all come in to see what's going on.

We love it because our youngest son is many ways, he's more of an introvert. Our eldest starts the day talking constantly. He'll walk into our room and say, could you fly a rocket to the sun?

As we wake up, could you land there? Would it be possible? No, it's too hot, Jamie. It's too hot. But what have you had a special suit on? You couldn't do it. It's half past six. He starts the day like that.

[23 : 22] Jack walks into our bedroom and does a face plant on our duvet and just stands like that for a few minutes. But his words are few. His thoughts are often kept inside.

But this is something he can't keep on the inside. It's a delight to see. It explodes out of him like that. And we've spent enough time with him. We know what brings it out of him.

We'll try and generate it from him. We'll try and provoke it from him because we love it. If you spend any time with him, you'd find out too. The things that provoke this kind of joy from him.

And it's infectious. And I don't know if you've spotted, but Jesus in this parable is doing a delightful thing for us. Because in a much more profound way, he's wanting to tell you and me about a significant thing that provokes really deep, bottom of your belly, joy in someone he has spent a long, long time with.

Do you see the way Jesus describes the shepherd when he finds his lost sheep? Verse 13. And I tell you, and if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the 99 that did not wander off.

[24 : 37] Then Jesus makes his point in verse 14. In the same way, your father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. Jesus.

God the son who has spent eternity with his father knows what he's like. And he's wanting you to know what makes him happy. What brings him joy.

It's a very special thing this, isn't it? To get to know someone deeply like that. To be told things like this. They're intimate, but Jesus wants us to know what the father's like. He says, what makes God happy is when one of his little ones who've wandered away in sin are brought back home in forgiveness to a close relationship with their heavenly father.

And if you get to know God, you'll get to know this is what brings joy to him. What's God's attitude to Christians who've wandered into sin?

Look, there's complexities, isn't there? He never condones it. He never condones when we do something wrong. He may be in the right fatherly way angry.

[25 : 53] He might discipline us, but he's always concerned. He's greatly concerned, and his plan is that in the future, they'll be with him. And his joy is in bringing his wandering ones back through forgiveness.

You think about that for a moment, and you begin to think again, well, what does that mean for us? In the Princess Bride, again, if you've not seen it, do watch it, but in the Princess Bride, Wesley didn't reach his destination.

His ship's attacked by the dread pirate Roberts, who never leaves captives alive. Buttercup hears the news, and she's distraught. And she eventually agrees to marry the prince, who is the villain.

He's the baddie. But before she does, Wesley comes for her, and he says, I told you I would come. Why didn't you wait for me?

[27 : 00] And she says, well, you were dead. It's quite a good answer. And he replies, death cannot stop true love.

All it can do is delay it for a while. That's a good line in a fairy tale, isn't it? My friends, my brothers and sisters, that is a fairy tale, and you and me, we are no beautiful princesses deserving to be rescued.

But the gospel is better than a fairy tale, because it is about a heavenly father who loves his little ones more than a shepherd loves their sheep, and is not willing for any to be lost.

And so he sent his own son to go through death for them, and his death didn't delay his relationship with us.

It's how he guaranteed it. What does that mean for us as a church family? A church family, I think, that is beginning to be great in this way will be one that works hard at always remembering the Father's plan for people, and prays that they'll grow in the same joy the Father has in seeing even the most frustrating wanderers being brought home.

[28 : 33] A church like that, I think Jesus would begin to say, that that's a church with a great attitude.

A church that thinks that way about the Father's plan, a church that enjoys and celebrates those kind of things. Jesus would say, whatever else you're doing, that's a church with a great attitude. And I suppose one other thing might be to say, I suppose as well, you might be here, I don't know most of you, you might be here this morning, and actually you realize you're one of those wandering little ones.

And you know, maybe other people don't know, but in your own heart, you know you've been heading away from God. Maybe it's to do with relationships, maybe it's just bad behavior, maybe you've been disobedient in some way.

Maybe nobody else even knows about it, but you've been growing cold towards God, maybe critical towards others, and you feel it.

[29 : 43] And maybe you started to think, even things like, I don't imagine God would want me back now. Well, it's not true.

Maybe he's even sent other Christians trying to help, and you've ignored them or pushed them away. And yet now again, even here on a Saturday morning, the Lord Jesus is saying to you, the Father is not willing that any of his little ones would be lost.

Maybe you've not thought about yourself that way, that the Father views you as his little ones, and his plan for you is a wonderful one, and his joy would be in bringing you home.

So it might even be this morning, you want to say sorry to God, and ask for his forgiveness again through Jesus, and give thanks that he welcomes you home.

I'm going to pray for us, and again, we've got a couple of questions before we have lunch, just in groups to think about together. Let me pray.

[31 : 02] Lord Jesus, you are so kind in the way you speak to us. We see it modeled in the way you answered these disciples who were going to be leaders, talking about what greatness looks like.

And you say to them, Christians are going to struggle with sin. And in that day, you've got to go after them, because that's what the Father is like. And many of us have felt that.

We know what it's like to wander off, to do wrong and silly things. We've no one to blame but ourselves, and yet you've come after us time and again.

And we want to pray that we would become a church family like that, that shares your joy in seeing others come home, to stop wandering and come back and trust you.

Thank you for the way you speak to us about these things, and help us in our conversations now to think about it a little bit more. We ask you in Jesus' name. Amen.

[32 : 07] Amen.