

Being Great & Being Rubbish

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[0 : 00] So the reading is from Matthew 18, and we're reading verses 1 to 9. It's on page 985 of your Bibles.

So Matthew 18, verses 1 to 9, on page 985. At that time, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

He called a little child to him and placed the child among them, and he said, Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If anyone causes one of these little ones, those who believe in me, to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble. Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come. If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.

[1 : 17] It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away.

It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. Thanks, Nicola, for reading that.

Do keep it open in front of you. We're going to look at that in a minute, but allow me to pray again for us as we come and look at these words. Heavenly Father, we thank you for these hours today where we can look at your word together.

Father, for you have spoken spirit-inspired, life-giving words in the Bible that lead us to the Lord Jesus, our Savior, so we might be renewed through faith in him.

And as we've sung your praises and listened to your word, would you cause our faith in Jesus to rise again with giant power and love for him to motivate our Christian living.

[2 : 25] Your word is full of promises in the Savior. You make us strong in their power, happy in their preciousness, satisfied in their provision. And we ask it all in Jesus' name.

Amen. As I said, it's a real thrill to be here. I'm very pleased to be here with you this morning, well, this weekend as well.

When I moved down to England a number of years ago, people said to me, you'll need to slow down. You'll need to slow down. We can't understand what you're saying. So I feel I need to apologize if I'm speaking too slowly or if my accent doesn't seem quite Glaswegian enough.

I think one of the worst moments of my life was coming back to visit Glasgow. I went into one of the shops that had been local to me where I grew up in Kithgar. And the lady in the shop said, are you up here on your holidays? I couldn't say anything to her.

I just had to walk out of the shop. I'm just very sad about that. But it's great to be back around my own folk again. Today and tomorrow at the morning service, we're going to spend time looking at what I think is just one of the most wonderful passages in Matthew's gospel, listening to these words of Jesus.

[3 : 41] We're surrounded by the greats and greatness, aren't we? Earlier in the year, it was the Oscars. The greats of Hollywood were on display.

I don't know if you ever heard a couple of years back, the actor Billy Crystal once said this. Nothing takes the sting out of these tough economic times like watching a bunch of millionaires giving golden statues to each other.

You feel some sense of that, don't you? But we're still drawn to it. Those who are considered great were drawn to it. And then there's the sporting greats. It was one of my real joys living down in

England that the long-awaited English winner of Wimbledon turned out to be Scottish. It was just a very special moment. But there are great sportsmen and women. Some of them appear remarkably humble, don't they? Others seem to know they're great and they milk it. I think I put one of the quotes of this chap on the little handout. You've got Muhammad Ali. He's got some incredible things he said. If you ever dream of me, if you even dream of beating me, you better wake up and apologize.

[4 : 50] What a great line. I'm so fast. Last night I turned out my bedroom light and I was in bed before it was dark. Again, just a great line, isn't it? And then this one I think you've got on your handout.

I'm not the greatest. I'm the double greatest. Not only do I knock him out, I pick the rounds. And some of it's funny, isn't it? But there's a desire for greatness.

We're impressed by it. We're drawn to it. We like to be around it. And I think, interestingly, the Bible doesn't seem to say that's totally wrong. A desire for greatness, it seems to be wired into us.

It's just that Jesus would say we're often not very good at measuring true greatness or even really recognizing it. So we're listening to his words this morning.

And here in Matthew 18 where the whole subject of greatness comes up within the context of a church family. Now, what does it mean? What does it mean to be a great Christian?

[5 : 51] What does it mean to be a church family of which we can say, look, this is really great? And it's the question that kicks it all off.

If you've got it there in front of you, it's right there in verse 1 of chapter 18. At that time, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

And if you're wondering what Matthew means by at that time, the time in question, well, in the previous chapter, there had been the transfiguration.

Three of the disciples, Peter, James, and John, had been selected to go with Jesus up the mountain. And they'd seen him change. They'd had the most dramatic kind of spiritual experience. They'd seen Jesus change, his glory revealed. They'd seen amazing things. And you wonder if there's been talk, the three of us, we're a cut above, aren't we?

[6 : 52] We've had this kind of spiritual experience now. We must be right up there. And it's funny because while they were there with Jesus on the mountain, God the Father had spoken to them.

And he said about Jesus, this is my son whom I love. With him I am well pleased. And then he'd given them one instruction. In amongst this dramatic spiritual experience, he'd given them this instruction, which was, listen to him.

Listen to his words. And with an instruction like that ringing in your ears from God the Father, you wonder what Jesus is going to be saying. Well, shortly after, chapter 17, verse 22, Jesus is talking about his death.

And the death that will become clear in Matthew's gospel is bearing God's wrath against sin. Matthew's going to make that clear. But at this point, the disciples don't understand all of that.

Yet they're still shaken by it. And Matthew comments, the disciples were filled with grief. But that seems short-lived. And now they're back to more pressing questions.

[8 : 02] Who's the greatest? Who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus does what he often does. He sort of subverts the question. They've asked who's the greatest. And Jesus calls a little child and has him stand in front.

And then he says to them all, verse 3, Unless you change and become like little children, you'll never enter the kingdom of heaven. And this initial incident kicks off the whole conversation that follows.

It starts in 18, verse 1. It goes all the way through to 19, verses 1 and 2. We'll read when Jesus finished saying these things. But you realize the impact of how Jesus begins.

Because the question had been, who's the greatest? And then Jesus, I think in just the most delightful and delicious way, says, Oh, I wouldn't worry about being the greatest.

Because unless you change, you're not even going to get in. And you can imagine how that feels to these men who've been asking the question. I don't know if you've found this.

[9 : 09] But I think it's often the way with Jesus. You sort of come with a question. And the way he seems to answer sends you away asking slightly more questions at times. There's more to think about.

And there's kind of that going on here. Saturday morning, just to help us chat and get into things. There's a couple of questions on your handouts here. Jesus talks about the little children. In this passage quite a bit. Just with the people sitting beside you. Have a chat for a moment. Who are the little children? Just as you read through. Not just the bit we've read. But scan through up to kind of verses 35 as well.

What does Jesus mean by the little children? Being like little children. So who are the little children? And then have a think about this. What do you think it means to be like little children?

So just with the people sitting beside you. Have a chat about that for a few minutes. Okay.

[10:13] You may have had a chance to see some things there and think about that. Let me just mention a few verses. You've probably seen that. Who are the little children Jesus is talking about?

You see in verse 6. Jesus describes them as those who believe in him. These little ones are those who believe in him. Down in verse 11 which we'll see later on this morning.

He says this strange thing. Slightly strange thing. There are those whose angels see God the Father. Verse 11. If you look on to verse 14.

You'll read these words. In the same way your father is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. They're those who are cared for. Cared for deeply by God the Father.

And then the very next verse. You see what Jesus is talking about. If your brother or a guest sister sins against you. They're Christians. That's who the little ones are.

[11:12] They're Christians. And what does it mean to be like little children? I was before they went to school yesterday with my little boys because I was going away. We read the start of this chapter.

And I said I'm going up to church in Glasgow. And we're going to read this together. And we read it. And I said what do you think Jesus means by being like little children? Jack who's five said. Does he mean you're to be like people who always want to have fun all the time?

Is that what it means to be like little children? Not bad Jack. Anything else? And then I think his little brain was working. And he said something like this. Does it mean to be like little children?

Are they the ones who know they can come to Jesus anytime? And he's obviously remembered those other stories where Jesus says let the little children come to me. And I said Jack I think there's something in that.

And you'll know. He's not talking about it. It's not some kind of sentimental view of innocence or purity. But in those days they wouldn't have had much in the way of social status children.

[12:12] It's an unconcern for social status. And Jesus kind of makes it clear it's to be humble. A humility not standing in any kind of status. That's what Jesus is getting at.

So when we begin to think about how to be great. Jesus says look you've asked about greatness in God's kingdom. Let's think about getting into God's kingdom. And getting into God's kingdom relies on coming to Jesus.

And the ones who come to Jesus are the ones who change and become like little ones. The character trait that's coordinate with being in God's kingdom.

With being a disciple. With being a Christian. Was humility. It's abandoning my claim to status. Becoming a little one. Greatness if you like.

Begins when you humbly start to trust Jesus. And you think what he's been talking about in terms of the cross. And if you really welcome Jesus like this.

[13:13] Well what's the evidence? Now clearly there are certain things that you'll need to believe. Jesus makes that clear when he calls the little ones. It's those who believe in me. There's an authentic Jesus that you need to believe in.

It's not a case of making up whatever kind of Jesus you want. We might want to call that I guess confessional evidence. Or doctrinal evidence. Jesus really is someone. There's certain things that if you believe this about him it's true.

And if you start to say other things about him. It's not true. You're not believing in him. We need to believe the right things about Jesus. If we're really trusting him. But while that's true.

There's also another kind of evidence. We might want to call it character evidence. That shows itself in people who've really come to Jesus. What's the evidence. That were people who humbly welcome Jesus.

Well you see what Jesus says in verse 5. Just have a look at that. He says this. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name. Welcomes me.

[14:19] Jesus seems to be saying. It will be if you're also welcoming other little ones. See why would that follow? Well because genuinely coming to Jesus.

Requires us to abandon any status claim. And to just humbly trust him. And that way of living. It's a radical change. And if you've begun to live that way.

You'll begin to see it in the way you welcome. You show hospitality. To those who belong to Jesus. And are humbly trusting him too. There needs to be nothing else to them.

Other than that they love Jesus. If you're part of this church family. Whether you're very new to it. You've been here for years. Years. Why should you be treated with respect?

Why should you be valued? Is it because you've achieved some status? You've got some position here. Which gives you certain rights? No. It's because you belong to Jesus.

[15:18] That's all the status you need here. And it's only a little thing. I used to work with UCCF. The University and Colleges Christian Fellowship. And then as a student worker.

From my church in Sheffield. We'd often put on meals for the students. At various times of the year. At the beginning of term. Christmas. That kind of thing. And there'd be one right at the start of term. When we had in our church in Sheffield.

Quite a lot of medical students at the church. And I'd love sitting at the table. With some of the first years. Because towards the end of the meal. It would happen time and again. And one of them would see something through the hatch.

Into the kitchen where we'd have the meal. And I'd hear them whispering to the other medics. Guys. Is that Mr. Stanley? I think that's Mr. Stanley in the kitchen.

And it can be confusing can't it? Seeing someone that's out of context. Julia and I lived in London for a while. You know what it's like? You see someone in a shop. That you recognize. You say hi to them. And Julia was I think in John Lewis.

[16:21] In one of the big shopping centers. In London. She saw someone that she knew. And she said hi. How you doing? And the lady totally blanked her. Like really ignored her.

And what you might think was a rude way. And what passed. And Julia thought. Oh that's not very nice. And then she realized why. It was Emma Thompson. The actress. The reason Julia recognized her.

Is because she's seen her on TV. And films like that. Just so. Oh that's somebody I know. I would say hello. Emma Thompson. Obviously didn't know Julia at all. Thought some crazy lady was talking to her. But it's weird when you see someone out of context.

Isn't it? You think. I can't place you. It throws you for a bit. And you're trying to place them. Then you realize. Oh it's you. What are you doing here? And the thing that threw the new medical students. Is that most of them would have met Mr. Stanley.

But in a very different context. Because he's a senior consultant orthopedic surgeon. And he's really well respected in his field. And he teaches at the Sheffield Teaching Hospital.

[17:20] And you can almost hear the gear change in the student's head. Someone who's significantly senior to me. Is now washing dirty plates for me.

Smiling. I see him in the kitchen. It's a real shock isn't it? Why would somebody who's up here. End up serving somebody who's down here.

Except it isn't a shock is it? Not when you remember the gospel. Not when you remember the one who was up here. Came to serve those who were down here.

Through his death on the cross. Julia and our two boys. As you've heard. We've embarked on a new kind of life last week. The four of us together. Became dog owners.

And all that comes with that. The food and the baskets. The chewing of things already. The wheeze on the floor. It's all started in just one week. And I've left for the weekend.

[18:20] We guessed what it would be like. And we guessed that. Because a dog is a certain kind of thing. Life with a dog is always going to be lived a certain kind of way.

We understood that. You would understand that as well. And so you understand this too. Because Jesus. Because the good news about him is a certain kind of thing.

Life trusting Jesus. Life knowing the real Jesus. Should always look a certain kind of way.

What kind of thing is the Christian message? What kind of thing is the gospel of Jesus? It's a glorious thing, isn't it?

It's merciful love. It's extravagant forgiveness. It's humble, gracious, other person centered care. So it's no surprise at all, is it?

[19 : 24] To see a consultant orthopedic surgeon. Washing the dishes. For a bunch of first year students. Not if he really knows a savior.

It just begins to look like little ones. Being welcomed. Being welcomed. By another little one. Do you think about serving in that kind of way?

Church family here. At St. Silas's. Jesus says. If we want to think about being great. This is where you need to begin.

You think about being great. You think about being great. You think about this. What jobs are beneath you? What are the things you look to avoid? Hugh, who used to be my vicar at my church in Sheffield, used to say, Look, as the vicar, if I spend all my time in the kitchen, I won't be doing my job properly.

But if I'm never willing to spend any time in the kitchen, I probably shouldn't have this job. What jobs are beneath you?

[20 : 31] Which people are beneath you? We'd never say that, would we? It'd be outrageous to say something like that out loud. It's just they never get invited round.

Or I'll end up avoiding them after the service. I just want to talk with my friends. You want to think about being great. Well, Jesus says, this is the area to begin in.

Well, that's how to be great. And here's the second thing. Jesus is barely given the positive aspect of treating these little ones. Before he makes clear, there is a darker way they'll end up being treated.

You read on into verses 6 and 7. And you discover he's saying there will be people who will cause little ones to sin. And people who cause Christians to sin.

It's an arresting statement, I think, when you read it in Acts. You remember Paul on the road to Damascus in Acts chapter 9. He's been persecuting the church.

[21 : 30] And he's on his way to that city of Damascus to continue his persecution. And he's confronted by Jesus who says to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

And it takes a moment for you to get your head around what Jesus is saying. But to persecute a Christian is to persecute Jesus. And that almost incidental little line opens up a huge truth.

Paul and others will speak of it when they explain that when Jesus saves someone, they'll talk about Christians being united to Christ. Theologians sometimes talk about faith union with Christ. When someone puts their faith in Jesus, God unites them with him. Martin Luther, the reformer, wrote about it like this. He said, The third incomparable grace of faith is this, that it unites the soul to Christ as the wife to the husband.

And human marriages are but feeble types of this one great marriage. But it follows that all they have becomes theirs in common. As well good things as evil things.

[22 : 44] So that whatsoever Christ possesses, that the believing soul may take to itself and boast of as its own. And whatever belongs to the soul, that Christ claims is his.

All that Jesus is, he shares with you. All that you are, he takes to himself. When someone becomes a Christian, they're united with Jesus.

And all that's his is shared with them. John Murray wrote this, And it's not something that only pops out in Acts or with Paul.

It's here in this passage, again, just with the people sitting beside you. Have a look again at verses 5 to 9. And just have a think with the person beside you. How intensely does Jesus identify with his people?

And just have a chat, just for a minute or so. Just have a look at those verses again. Hello. Okay.

[24 : 00] Maybe seen some things there. You begin to see what we've been told. The idea of being united with Christ. It's not some cold Bible doctrine.

You can't help but read these words and understand that Jesus really feels it in a personal way.

Verse 5. Welcoming the little ones is to welcome Jesus.

You as a Christian, if someone welcomes you, Jesus feels welcomed as well. If you are treated in an unwelcome way, Jesus says, he's not been welcomed either. He identifies with his people.

And in verse 7, little ones are going to face things that will tempt them to sin. The word used here, it sort of means to stumble. The world we live in, it is going to be at some level hostile to Christians.

Tim Farron found that hostility the other week, didn't he? Hounded by the press. Asking questions. What his views are. And you can't help but feel he's stumbled in some way over this.

[25 : 09] I don't envy him. I wouldn't like to be in that position. Jesus takes it seriously. Lots of Christians face it. Even in church structures, don't they?

Scoundrels in leadership distorting the message and causing confusion. Christians beginning to stumble. Jesus says it in a strange way. Such things must come.

The Bible won't let us begin to imagine that the world is ever out of control. No, God is sovereign. And he'll oversee even evil actions and intentions in the end for his own good purposes.

But not in a way that means that the people who do them are not responsible. Not in a way that those who act are not responsible for what they do. No, woe to the man through whom they come. And you see, Jesus takes those things really seriously. And if you get all of that, then I think verses 8 and 9 come into sharper focus. Because Jesus shifts from talking about the world and people in general and starts talking to the disciples again.

[26 : 11] And you follow the logic through verse 6. If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, to sin. And when Jesus says, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.

If your foot, if your eye. And one of the points is, is not just sins in general here. Although that's true. This is, if you are doing anything that causes one of these little ones to stumble in following Jesus. If you cause them to sin, that is being really rubbish. That's opposed to kingdom greatness. And you better take radical action before you find yourself on the wrong side of Jesus.

And you think back to the opening discussion the disciples were having. This group of men wanting to establish who was the greatest.

Provoking each other to start playing the status game. Encouraging each other not to come humbly to Jesus. Enjoying the benefits of being united with Him.

[27 : 21] But instead of looking to have their own status, they could establish and stand on. And Jesus says to that, be careful. You don't cause someone to stumble in that way.

Causing a little one to sin. That's the road to hell. So take radical action now. How to be great. How to be rubbish. It's a wonderful encouragement. Like coming to Jesus, humbly trusting Him. This says He is intensely committed to you.

He identifies Himself with you. He takes how you are treated seriously. And He says He loves you. And that is the only status you need through trusting Him.

And it's a helpful warning, isn't it? We're to watch out for playing any kind of status game. Think we're better because of these things instead of just trusting Jesus.

[28 : 32] Jesus, here's where you begin. Unless you change and become like little children. I wonder if you hear these words and begin to think about them.

You think, yeah, there's areas I might need to change in. I'm going to stop there. I'm going to pray for us. And then we've got a little bit of time before coffee.

You'll see there's some discussion questions. Martin, shall we do that now for a little bit? There's some things just to think about. Just to maybe apply it a bit more deeply to our own lives. And then there's a question for you personally to think about as well.

But let me pray for us. And then why not chat for a few minutes and Martin will tell us when it's time for coffee. Let me pray. Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for these words you've given us.

That even as you're correcting your disciples, even as you're straightening out your thinking, you do it in a way that reassures them that you love them and care for them.

[29 : 43] And that trusting you alone is always the right thing to do. Thank you that so often as you warn us, you encourage us at the same time.

And because you care deeply about us. Thank you for that. Amen. Take a moment to chat. Martin will tell us when it's coffee. Thank you.