

Matthew 18:1-14 // Little Ones to Him Belong

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[0 : 00] Well, thanks, Michael. Let me add my welcome to you. It's great to see you all this morning, and let's join together and pray and ask for God's help as we come to his word.

Father, would you help us here today have the right posture as we come to your word? To sit under it, to receive it with glad hearts.

And would your Holy Spirit please apply it to each and every one of us here today? For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, do you have ambitions for greatness for Christ?

Do you want to lead lives of significance for Jesus? Do you want to be great in your Christian life? As Donald Trump was sworn in this week as the 47th U.S. president, one of the striking things about it was the front row seats given to the big tech bros.

If we can get the slide up there. The tech titans in charge of the big corporations, Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos. They have money, they've got power, they've got influence.

[1 : 25] Known in the press as the bruligarchy and declaring themselves Ubermensch or Superman. With intergalactic ambitions and egos to match, vying to be considered the greatest person of all time.

I suppose we all want to lead lives of significance. We want to leave our mark on the world. And I suppose that's especially true if we're young and have the whole of our lives ahead of us.

But in the disciples' question there in verse 1, born out of selfish ambition, we recognize, don't we, the intense rivalry, a very human competitiveness amongst them.

Let's read it again. Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Who is the greatest? So that's what we're going to be thinking about today.

Who is the greatest in God's kingdom? What does greatness look like? I wonder, have you ever thought about this? Do you want to be great in your Christian life?

[2 : 44] I guess for many of us, we're happy to settle for mediocrity in our Christian life. We're happy just to keep on going, keep ticking along like that.

But what does greatness look like in God's kingdom? Well, Jesus' answer is that if we're to lead lives of real significance, then this will be done in community.

This will be done in the new community, in the church that Jesus himself has come to build. And it's relational. It's about people.

But before we get to that, how to relate to one another, we first need to re-evaluate ourselves.

And we've got three headings this morning, if you find that helpful, there in the notice sheet. Firstly, we're to re-evaluate yourself. You want to be great in the Christian life.

[3 : 45] Well, Jesus' answer is completely surprising. He does a sort of off-the-cuff church family focus. He brings a small child out to the front and places the child amongst the disciples.

Memorable visual aid. And he says, Right. You want to be great? We're going to have to go back to basics here, verse 3.

Unless you change. Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Entry into God's kingdom requires a complete you turn. Now, the disciples' question, as we've said, is triggered by the rivalry.

Who's the keenest? Who's the most impressive? Who's the most successful disciple? Who is Jesus' favorite? And the disciples throughout Matthew's gospel seem to be worried quite a lot about who amongst them is the greatest.

[4 : 48] Worried about their own greatness quite a lot in this gospel. So we've already seen a couple of weeks ago Peter, James, and John being set apart to witness Jesus' glory up on the Mount of Transfiguration.

In just a couple of chapters time, James and John's mum, their mum, so embarrassing, isn't it? Drags them before Jesus and requests that they should have the seats of honor at the kingdom. Jesus says, Forget about who's the greatest. At this rate, you might not even get into the kingdom. Unless you change.

Being like a child is a necessary precondition for entry into Jesus' kingdom. But what does he mean here?

Well, by saying that we have to become like little children, Jesus is not talking about innocence. He's not talking about simplicity or sinlessness or naivety.

[5 : 55] But he's talking about the humility. You see, the disciples question it's all about status. Who here is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

In our society, we sometimes idolize our children. But in the pre-modern world, children had the lowest status. And the other thing about children is that they're entirely dependent.

A child depends on others. A small child is completely helpless. They have nothing on their own. They're simply given everything. Jesus is saying, that's your starting point.

You need to change and become like little children. You need to recognize that you are entirely dependent on God's grace for entry into his kingdom.

And friends, we can contribute nothing to our own salvation. It's nothing to do with our performance. It's all to do with what Christ did for us on the cross.

[7 : 02] So it's empty-handed humility before God. That's the starting point. That's the gospel. And entry into Jesus' kingdom, therefore, requires a complete U-turn.

Jesus goes on to drop another bombshell. He goes on, Whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Humility. Humility. That's where we need to begin in the Christian life.

And it's also where we need to keep going in the Christian life. Humility. It's an upside-down kingdom. The world's values are completely flipped and turned on their head.

What makes a Christian great in the eyes of God is whoever humbles himself before God. Now, Jesus doesn't deny, does he, that there's such a thing as greatness in his kingdom.

[8 : 07] Nor is it wrong for his disciples to desire this. But all too often, we can import the world's values into the church.

And all too often, we can esteem the self-confident or the self-assured or the outwardly impressive. There is a godly way to be ambitious, to want to be great for Jesus.

But Jesus has a different set of values. In God's kingdom, it's all reversed. The last will be first and the first will be last.

Because God really values humility. And it's not a one-off act of humility at the outset of the Christian life.

But an ongoing characteristic throughout your Christian lives. Now, Henri Nguyen was a theologian who rose to academic greatness, holding professorships at Ivy League universities.

[9 : 18] But at the height of his academic achievements, he felt called to go and live amongst a community of adults with severe learning disabilities. And in his own words, he went from being with the best and the brightest to men and women who had few or no words and were considered, at best, marginal to the needs of society.

Well, it was there in that environment, serving amongst these vulnerable and beloved people in the name of Jesus, that humility was thrust upon him.

And he would reflect later on about this, that this was one of the most profound experiences of his whole life. He wrote, He went from academic greatness to being a little one.

Stripped back from all his achievements, he rediscovered the profound truth that Jesus loves us, not because of us, not because of what we do, not because of our accomplishments, but because he made us and he redeemed us.

And that's the essence of humility. As Charles Spurgeon famously puts it, humility is the proper estimate of oneself.

[10 : 49] Not false humility, not humble pride, but the right assessment of ourselves as spiritual wretches before a holy God.

Do you want to be great in your Christian life? Well, Christian life, greatness starts with our own humility, picking up your cross and following Jesus.

Well, secondly, we need to learn to relate rightly to each other. And it's only when we get a right view of ourselves that we're able to relate rightly to one another.

And Jesus gives us now three very practical things that we can all be working on if we're going to get on well with each other. And relationships obviously are key in the new community that Jesus is building.

So firstly, we need to welcome each other. Verse 5. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

[11:57] Now, we all know how important it is to be made to feel at home, to be made to feel welcome. And it can be seriously daunting, as opposed to come into a new environment with unfamiliar faces, whether it's a new school or a new university, a new job, a new church.

What a difference it makes if somebody goes out of their way to make you feel at home, to make you feel welcomed. Jesus is saying that in this new community, in his new community, that should be one of the defining marks of the church, a welcome to other Christians.

In fact, so close is the connection between Jesus and the individual believer that to welcome another Christian is equivalent to welcoming Jesus himself.

And there's a book that I've been reading, dipping into, a secular book by Jeff Ram called *Celebrity Service*. And it's about fine-tuning the level of service your business provides.

And the premise of the book is that in business, lots of people already think they're giving the best kind of service. They already think that they're delivering a very high level of service out doing all the competition.

[13:19] But what, he asks, if a celebrity turns up, and you can think of an A-list celebrity, a Hollywood superstar, you'd treat them differently.

Everything about what you do, everything you do in the way that you provide your service to them would change. And the author tells a story, speaking with one business owner who already believes that she's doing the very best that she can, already believes that she's giving a five-star service. He says, picture the scene. Picture the scene. George Clooney is in town, and he decides to come into your business. He comes into your store.

How would you react? How would you improve? How would you do things differently? Well, she came up with six ideas in 30 seconds. Just before she said that she couldn't do anything any better, she couldn't do anything better like that in terms of her service, in 30 seconds she came up with six ideas just like that.

Well, never mind George Clooney, imagine if Jesus Christ came knocking on your door. That's how we're to welcome other believers. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

[14:38] And if you've ever visited a church and nobody speaks to you before the service or after the service, it can be a really off-putting experience. And St. Silas, we want to be going out of our way to make the visitor, make the newcomer feel at home straight away.

That's the first thing. Second practical thing, don't cause anyone to stumble. Verse six, 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.

So this isn't simply about committing individual sins here, but behavior that imperils a believer's relationship with God.

literally causes the downfall of one of these little ones, leaving their entry into God's kingdom in question. So Jesus is realistic.

Temptations are always going to be in the world, but if we are the cause of those things that make people stumble, then woe to us. In all that we say or do or watch, we need to be thinking, not just about, is this okay for me to be doing this, but how does this affect my brother and sister in Christ?

[15:58] The millstone that Jesus is talking about is literally a donkey stone, a stone so big that it took a donkey to move it. That would be a horrible way to go, being dragged down to the depths of the ocean like that.

Jesus says even that would be better than the judgment coming to anyone who causes one of God's little ones to stumble. You think about a mother with a newborn child, and we've got a few of these at St. Silas.

A mother is fiercely protective of her little ones. Jesus is saying, do you think I care any less about my little ones?

Third practical thing, guard your own soul, verse eight. If your hand or your foot or your eye causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.

It's better for you to enter life maimed or crippled or blind than to be thrown into eternal fire of hell. Jesus has just talked about the dangers of causing someone else to stumble.

[17 : 13] Now he's talking about the dangers of stumbling full stop. In the context, we need to recognize that our personal sins are never isolated. They're never isolated, but affect the whole church community, the whole gospel community.

Jesus is saying we need to get serious about dealing with sin. We need to get surgical. Now he doesn't mean it literally. Origen, who was one of the early leaders in the church, did take it seriously, and he castrated himself upon reading these verses.

Don't do that. Jesus is exaggerating to emphasize the serious nature of his point. We're to deal radically with sin.

And drastic action is required. And you can maybe think of examples in your own life of habits or lifestyle choices, perhaps that deep down you know you need to be addressing, addressing perhaps things that you've tended to sweep under the carpet over this past while.

It might be worldly aspirations or your use of the internet. It might be a particular person or those nights that always seem to lead to regret.

[18 : 30] Anything that competes with Christ. Anything that gets in the way of your relationship with Jesus. Jesus is saying that it's like gangrene.

If you don't deal with it, sin will run amok. It will spread and it will get worse. And just as a parent wants to protect their little ones from germs and illnesses, it's because Jesus loves you that he wants to protect you from the ravages and the consequences of sin in your life.

So Jesus is saying, don't flirt with sin. Cut it out. And cut it out from your lives. When Christ's metric, greatness begins with our own humility, it continues with our humility in the context of our Christian community.

Finally, we're to share in Christ's pastoral heart and restore the wayward. So the disciples' presenting question was, who is the greatest in God's kingdom?

And Jesus has been teaching them that the true greatness demands humility. And putting others first is what counts as greatness in the community that Christ is building.

[19 : 53] He now gives us a warning in verse 10 that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

What exactly is Jesus referring to when he's talking about these angels in heaven? And that's led to quite a lot of speculation over the years. It might be that in the same way that we've been reminded in the evening service, that each of the churches that Jesus is writing to has its own angel.

Some people understand this verse to mean that the same applies to individual believers. Others hold that the angels of the little ones are the spirits of believers after death, and they always see the Father's face.

There's not actually an awful lot of data to go on, but it doesn't actually make an awful lot of difference in the end. The main point is clear. If God himself is so concerned with these little ones, then we also should be similarly concerned for our fellow Christians.

God cares about each and every one who believes in Jesus. And that's what the parable of verse 12 so vividly describes for us. If a man owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine and go look for the one that wandered off?

[21 : 25] And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that didn't wander off. Well, a shepherd knows his flock.

A shepherd knows his sheep individually, immediately knows which one is not there at the end of the day. And the parable is very realistic.

It recognizes our sheep-like tendency, our tendency to wander off, our tendency to get ourselves into bother, to get ourselves into danger, slip into patterns of sin.

Jesus' love for his own is not in doubt. The question is, do we share in his pastoral heart for other believers?

It would have been about 12, 13 years ago, I would have think, down in the Mull of Kintyre. We were down in the Mull of Kintyre there with a few friends, including my future wife, Alice.

[22 : 24] And we were driving along this road, the Learside Road, which is a kind of roller coaster of our roads over Rolling Hills, single track, and about as hilly as it comes. And I remember pointing

out this absolutely stunning view out the window across to the Isle of Arn.

And I remember thinking, Alice is in the back of the car. She was looking out the opposite window. And that struck me as odd. But her gaze was fixated on something in the distance.

Well, suddenly she cries out, stop the car! So we slam on the brakes and perform an emergency stop. What is it? What's happened? It's a sheep, she says.

I remember thinking, you better be kidding me. Of course it's a sheep. The field's full of hundreds of them. But Alice had noticed a sheep in distress. Somehow, and to this day, I don't quite know how, but Alice had seen way in the distance this poor sheep, this sort of microscopic fluffball in the distance.

And so we got out of the car and as we made our way over the hills and to the sheep, sure enough, we discovered a sheep that had been caught up in the thorns and unable to disentangle itself from it.

[23 : 37] So we were able to free the sheep. But this gives us a picture, doesn't it, of the kind of pastoral heart that all of us should be aiming for. Pastoral heart for people, not for sheep, I should add.

Alice saw the sheep. She noticed it was in distress, it was in danger, and she resolved to take action, to go and help it.

It's the kind of attitude we're to have for our brothers and sisters who go astray. In closing, there's a particular application here, I think, if you're the leader of a small group, if you're a leader of a roots group or a growth group or one of our serving teams or a kids' own leader.

You see, the flock in the parable is 100 sheep. And sociologists point out that it's hard to relate effectively to groups of more than 150 people.

What if the flock has grown to the size of 400 or 500 people? When you're significantly larger than 150 people, like we're now at St. Silas, in order to ensure that we're providing the very best and the most effective pastoral care that we can, we break it down into smaller ministry units, which are these midweek groups.

[25 : 03] They're so essential for the well-being of the flock as a whole. A dozen or so people meeting regularly to study the Bible together, to pray over one another's needs, to provide accountability for one another, and to share in one another's life's ups and downs.

The leadership of these groups is just a brilliant way of ensuring that the basic pattern of pastoral care is provided within a church of this size.

And we need to be raising up more leaders. We can always do with more leaders, servant-hearted leaders, with God's pastoral heart for the sheep. So maybe that's something the Lord is calling you to.

Maybe you've had a good experience of midweek groups at previous churches. Or maybe you're a parent here today and you're concerned for your own little one, concerned for your child who's gone astray.

Don't lose hope and don't give up on them. Cling to the truth that your Father in Heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

[26 : 21] And as a church family, we need to be praying our prodigal's home. Or maybe you're here today and you are wandering away. Maybe you're perhaps wandering away already from Christ's path and onto the world's path and maybe you're thinking about it.

For many years, I trudged that path myself. Well, all I would say is save yourself the bother. If you belong to God, then He's coming to get you sooner or later.

So save yourself the bother. It's futile to escape the clutches of God's love. Turn and become like little children. Receive God's grace.

He will rejoice over you as you run into His loving arms. It's humbling. But it's also the most extraordinary thing. It's where greatness lies.

To be beloved, to be valued, to be precious in the eyes of God. That's how God views you, little ones.

[27 : 29] So let's ensure that that's how we regard one another too. Shall we pray? Lord God Almighty, we don't want to settle for mediocrity in our Christian lives.

We want to live lives of real significance for the glory of Christ. Please would you make us great. Please would you therefore humble us.

Please help us to remember that you love each and every one of us. Please help us to love and serve one another. Please make us like the one who was truly humble, our Lord Jesus. And please, Father, please bring home those we love who have strayed from your love. For we ask you in the name of our shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.