

Matthew 18:1 - 14

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- [0 : 00] God alone is great. And that's the proof that we all need to remember that God alone is great, living in a world where so many want greatness for themselves.
- But the tragedy of course is that that spirit that is found in the world cannot still be found in the church. For men and women jostle for position, wanting to be to the fore, wanting to be number one.
- And that is a problem that Christ has to confront, even from within the circle of his own disciples.
- And our passage this morning is a passage that tells us how Christ dealt with that problem when he founded Success among his own followers.
- We're told here by Matthew that the disciples came to Jesus and asked, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?
- [1 : 21] And Mark's account would suggest that they had been arguing about this among themselves. And that Jesus knew about it. Jesus knew what was in their hearts, even before they come to him with this question.
- And as Jesus looks down on his church still, he knows whether or not this spirit is found in our hearts, both as individuals and perhaps even as a congregation.
- This wanting to be great.
- And that both as individuals and as a congregation, we are what we are by the grace of God, and by the grace of God alone.
- And bearing these great truths in mind, I just want to glance with you this morning at this passage. We're not going to go into it in great detail, but there are three vitally important lessons that I would like us to learn from it as we consider it together.
- [3 : 00] As you could speak here on the subject of greatness, or should I say on the necessity of humility, so as to be truly great in the kingdom of God.
- And then we'll go on tonight to look at the rest of the chapter, where he speaks of another batch of truly being great in the kingdom of God. Namely, that we be of a forgiving spirit to one another, as those who have ourselves been forgiven so much, by God, through Jesus Christ.
- The three points that I want to look at with you this morning are as follows. Who God's little ones are, according to what Jesus says here.
- He speaks of, repeatedly, of God's little ones. Reminding us of the necessity of humility. Who are these little ones, of whom Jesus is speaking here?
- And then how we must welcome us, members of God's family, on an equal footing for ourselves, all whom he welcomes.
- [4 : 16] So we must not be down on anyone else within the family of God, or put ourselves above them in any way. So we have to welcome those whom he welcomes.
- And how we are warned against adopting a hostile attitude towards any of whose dear children.

And the last point that I want to focus on with you as we finish is the worth of each of these little ones to God. And therefore, how they should be valuable in our estimation too.

They are little ones for whom Jesus died. And if they mean so much to Jesus, they should mean so much to ourselves as well, as our brothers and sisters.

So let's ask, first of all, who are these little ones? The disciples come to Jesus and ask, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And he calls a little child.

[5 : 24] And he has to stand among them. And he says to the disciples, I tell you the truth. Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus explained there in a word that all who belong to the kingdom of heaven must become their little children.

So the little ones are ultimately all the family of God. But how do we become God's children? The Bible tells us that we must be born again of God's Spirit into his family.

The Bible tells us that we must come firstly not in ourselves, but in the provision that God has made for us in and through Jesus Christ.

The Bible speaks to us of the importance. Not of our being childish, but of our being childlike if we truly are members of his kingdom.

[6 : 47] And the great point that is being emphasized by Jesus here in particular is the necessity of humility. And of course, that great truth is highlighted for us so frequently throughout the scriptures.

There are so many passages that remind us of the necessity of humility. The wise man who wrote the book of Proverbs said this, A man's pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit James 1.

James 1. Michael tells us that what God requires of us is that we act justly and love mercy and walk humbly before our God.

James 1. James tells us that God opposes the proud and give grace to the humble. Jesus tells us, whoever exalts himself will be abased, whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

What does it mean to humble ourselves before God? It means that we recognise our own passionate unworthiness of God or of his nation.

[8 : 26] And that we receive humbly and thankfully God's provision for us in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ who humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. True humility begins in recognising who we are before God and receiving the grace that God makes freely available to each one of us on the basis solely of what he has done for us in Christ.

And unless we are humbled in that way, so as not to cling on to any righteousness of our own, so as to get credit with God, unless we are humbled to that extent, then our profession to belong to God's kingdom is questionable.

But Jesus tells us here that if we change, if we recognise that our own righteousnesses are of filthy rocks before God and receive what he has for us in Christ, becoming like little children, then we will enter the kingdom.

But Jesus is saying here and he's emphasising the negative that if that change does not take place, then no matter what we may profess, suppose we even be disciples of Jesus as these men were, we really have no part in the kingdom of heaven.

[10 : 18] And Jesus is ensuring that his disciples will re-examine themselves in the light of the unseemingly the attitude that they have adopted in order to find out again whether or not they truly are members of his family.

And Jesus is here telling us that this principle applies to everyone who belongs to him. Whoever humbles himself, like this child he says, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Now he's not saying this, that some people are greater than others in the kingdom of heaven. But he's answering the question that he's being asked. And he's saying, if you want to be great in the kingdom of God, this is how to be great in the kingdom of God, by becoming one of God's little ones.

By accepting salvation on his terms. By learning through humility before him. So that's the first great point Jesus is making.

And we might ask ourselves in the light of that point, well, am I one of these children? Am I a member of the kingdom of heaven? Have I been humbled by God's grace?

[11 : 44] So as to take the place I ought to take before him. Have I been so humbled by God's grace as to receive with thankfulness the mercy, the undeserved goodness of God offered to me fully and freely on the basis on the basis of what his son has done on the cross.

The next great point Jesus is making here is that if we belong to God's family, we must welcome our brothers and sisters, our fellow little ones, all whom he welcome and we are warned against putting any stumbling blocks in the path or showing any animosity or negative attitudes towards him.

Listen to what Jesus says. Verse 5, And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.

The disciples at times were prone to perhaps consider themselves a cut above others and imagine that they had arrived whereas others might not quite be there yet.

And sometimes that danger remains with God's church that we can on occasion be guilty of putting ourselves before others, of imagining that we are a step ahead and of even looking down on some because they might not match up to the standards that we think they ought to match up to as God's little children.

[13 : 51] Well, thank God our standing as the little children doesn't depend on the standards that we attain to. Our standing as God's children depends on God's welcomingness, on God's receivingness, on God's ownness measure, of God's demonstrating and the self-favor towards us.

And Jesus is saying here, you must welcome all those whom he welcomes and you must not forbid anyone whom he precedes because in welcoming in my name you are welcoming me.

your attitude towards my children will reveal much about your attitude towards myself. And ultimately it's our attitude towards him, towards Jesus that matters more than anything else in all the world.

but how are we to gauge what our attitude towards Jesus' life by looking at the attitude we adopt towards his people, towards those whom he welcomes.

Do we receive them? Do we recognize them? And do we thank God that they are saved by the same grace by which we have been saved?

[15 : 32] Or do we adopt a non-Christian attitude towards them and an attitude that suggests that we imagine that we are better than them or more worthy of being accepted by God than they are?

Do we do anything to discourage anyone to go God's way do we put stumbling locks in their paths? Do we trip them up?

Do we try to put them up? Do we demonstrate such attitudes towards them? It's possible that we might. The disciples on occasion may have been guilty of that.

Remember how we told elsewhere that they brought little children to Jesus that he might touch them. And they were forbidden by those who should have known better.

But Jesus said do not forbid them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Even among the disciples there was this why should Jesus be bothered with them kind of mindset.

[16 : 47] And we cannot touch the guilty of adopting that same mindset when Jesus receives people that we might never even have conceived of as being potential Christians let alone real actual Christians.

And we may even unwittingly on occasion be judging others and be guilty of complaining that he received those whom we might possibly not be all that came to receive.

And we might also be guilty of attempting to pour cold water on the field that some of these little ones of God might show.

And Jesus is here warning us against that kind of attitude. Verse 6 But if anyone causes one of these little ones to believe in me to sin it would be better for him to have a large will soon hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Now you think that's awful language coming from Jesus. But Jesus is just referring here to one of the methods of capital punishment that was in place at the time.

[18 : 08] And he said it would be better for somebody to suffer that awful though it is than for him to be guilty of causing even one of these little ones who believe in me to sin.

He's telling us, he's reminding us of the enormity of the sin, of showing hostility, or of leading other believers astray.

and he's speaking to us in this way, in order that we might ensure that by grace we will never be guilty of such sin.

We can be guilty of it personally, and we can be guilty of it collectively. So we have to examine ourselves individually as to whether or not there are things in our lives that might put other people off.

Or that might put other people away from God and to ask the same question about ourselves as a fellowship. Is there anything that pertains to us as a fellowship that would cause others to stumble, that would cause even one of these little ones whom the Lord loves to sin?

[19 : 36] See, the world has enough in it to cause people to sin. There's enough in the world already that would lead people astray. And Jesus says that, woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin.

This world has a lot to answer to. There are many whom it entices away from God, whom it leads astray. Woe to the world, Jesus is saying.

Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come. So, he's saying, do make sure that individuals, do make sure that you are personally not guilty of causing anyone to sin.

Don't be guilty of putting anyone off coming to Jesus. Don't be guilty of putting anyone off following Jesus fully. God. Don't get in between anyone and the Lord.

Remember that if you do, and it's possible even for believers to be guilty of that sin, remember Jesus says, woe to you.

[20 : 45] Remember Jesus says, it would be better for you to be drowned in this way, than to be guilty before God of that. And Jesus wants us to examine ourselves passionately, so as to make sure that there's nothing in our own lives that would lead us astray as well.

And he says this, knowing that there's tragedy in all of our hearts and in all of our lives that would lead us astray but for grace. Listen to what he says, and if this doesn't humble us, nothing will.

If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter a life maimed or crippled and to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.

And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away, it is better for you to enter a life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

Now we don't need to go into the details, but teaching is clear. And the teaching is simply this, that we must all be intolerant of anything that we find in our own hearts and lives that would lead us to sin.

[22 : 12] And we must deal with it by grace. As Jesus commends, here we deal with it. We must be done with it. no matter how dear it may be to us, no matter how enticing, no matter how it appeals to the flesh, grace must overcome.

And it's only when God's grace works in this way, in our own hearts and lives, that we will then demonstrate grace towards others in the family of God.

we see this all tonight in relation to forgiveness, that it's only as we ourselves experience God's forgiveness through Christ, that we can truly adopt a God-like forgiving spirit towards others.

And it's the same principle that we have here. Sin must be dealt with in our own hearts, so that we're not then going to lead others into sin as well.

But why is it so important that we take these great truths to heart? Because of the third great point that I believe Jesus is making in this passage.

[23 : 35] Jesus is here speaking of the value and worth of each of these little ones to God. and he's saying that if God himself thinks of his little ones in that way, how can we who name his name not think of them in similar terms?

There are two points Jesus makes here in order to drive this message home that I want to look at before we finish this morning.

The first of these points is in verse 10. What is sweet, if I can put it this way, of God's paternal care for his little ones?

See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that the angels in heaven always see the face of my father in heaven.

Every single one of his little ones is precious to God because he's their father. God's word speaks of the angels as ministry spirits to those who are the ears of salvation.

[24 : 58] This verse doesn't teach that every individual Christian has an individual guardian angel. it's commonly misunderstood in that sense.

This verse teaches something far more precious than that. And all the angels are ministering spirits whom God uses to care for every single one of his little ones.

It's not a guardian angel that we have. we have all the unfallen angels of God ready to minister to our needs at his behest.

And here we're being reminded of this great truth that our Father in heaven chairs for us. And that even through the ministry of his angels to us, mysterious will mention of that is, his paternal care and concern is made known.

And why is Jesus making this point? It's in order that he says in this verse that we do not look down on one of these movements.

[26 : 22] God doesn't look down on anything other than in love and in care. he certainly doesn't look down on them in the sense that at times we must be tempted to look down on others.

And in the light of the fact that God's paternal care for each of these little ones has shown in this way, Jesus is saying that we should adopt the same paternal care, the one for the other as well, within his family.

And as you find yourself in an ongoing situation of vacancy, it's of such vital importance that you adopt a fatherly fear and concern for all the little ones who may adopt his flock in this place.

They're precious to him. Therefore, they ought each and every one of them to be precious to us. Jesus further drives home this point by use of a parable, the parable of the lost sheep.

Now, we know that this parable is found in Luke chapter 15, along with the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the prodigious son. And we know that there the particular emphasis is on his care for the lost, his concern for the lost, that the lost might be found.

[27 : 54] And if, as some manuscripts suggest, Jesus refers here as well before going on to speak about the parable of the fact that the son of man came to save what was lost, then certainly the parable here can be applied in that same way.

But I believe that in the context of the passage that we're looking at this morning, it is also acceptable for us to understand this parable in this particular context as referring to what God thinks of his children who might wander away from him and of how he goes after them to bring them back.

Is it not the case that all of us as God's children go astray? All we that sheep have gone astray. Psalm 23 speaks of God restoring our souls and making his walk in the paths of righteousness for whose name is safe.

It's impossible to be a Christian even without being conscious of how you need to be restored again and again to our right walk with God.

See at times we might possibly become so presumptuous in our Christian walk as to lose sight of this and adopt a parable attitude towards others and imagine that because we're not going astray openly, us some are, and because we are outwardly maintaining a proper relationship with God and his church, then that we are a cut above them that we are better than others.

[29 : 45] But Jesus is here reminding us that all of us can go astray and that when even one of us wonders, God cares for us so much that he goes after us until he finds us.

Now there's a very subtle difference between, and this is the last main point that I'm making this morning, between the parable here and the parable of we have it in Luke.

In Luke 15, it seems that Jesus is saying that when the shepherd goes after the sheep, he will find it. There's no doubt about that, according to the words put in Luke.

Other sheep I have, them also I must bring. He will find the lost, and he loves to find them through his people, through the church.

church. But in our passage this morning it seems less certain, because at the beginning of verse 13 we read, and if he finds it, and if we taste it that Jesus is here speaking in particular to those who profess to be God's people, then he might be saved, that for as long as we adopt an attitude that suggests that we are better than others, we must really ask ourselves the question, have we been found of God at all?

[31 : 16] And he may possibly be saying too, that for as long as we adopt the I am better than others, I am the greatest approach, suggesting that for as long as there is no real humility to be found in our hearts, then we still let sheep astray and perhaps in danger of being lost, because we were never truly changed in our hearts by God.

But the main point that he's making is that if the sheep is found, that if the wanderer is brought back, that if our attitudes change, change, as he's told the disciples earlier, they must change unless you change, but he's saying here that if that happens, if he tries, if he turns around, then there will be rejoicing, and he will be happier above that one sheep that is recovered, than above the 99 that is not wandered off.

But at the end of the day, the main truth that Jesus is teaching, and that comes across in the last verse here, in verse 18, is the worth and value of each one of these little ones to himself.

in the same way your father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. They're all precious to him.

The great shepherd sheds his blood for his sheep, and we need, by God's grace, to have the same regard for each of these little ones as he himself has.

[33 : 14] And when we wonder, and when we see others wonder, our prayer ought to be that our testimony must be perverse and foolish of thy trade, but yet in love he sought him, and on his shoulders gently laid and home rejoicing brought him.

I mentioned Kaji's clay, Mohammed Alice, at the beginning of the sermon. I am the greatest, so he said.

I mentioned how the disciples gathered among themselves and asked the question, who is the greatest in the kingdom of God? Have you looked at the way Jesus answered that question?

We must ask ourselves today, do we belong to his little ones? Are we adopting a welcoming attitude shepherd, towards all whom he works, or are we putting stumbling blocks in their path?

And do we have the same idea of the value and worth of each of these little ones as he himself has? Are we little children?

[34 : 32] Somebody put it this way, make me, O Lord, a child again, so tender, frail, and small, in self-possessing nothing, and in thee possessing all.

O Saviour, make me small once more, that downward I may grow, and in this heart of mine restore the faith of long ago. With thee may I be crucified, no longer I that loom.

O Saviour, crush my sinful pride, by grace which pardon gives, make me, O Lord, a child again, obedient to thy call, in self-possessing nothing, and in thee possessing all.

Put on humility. By God's grace, tonight we'll go on to see what he says about the importance of putting on her did.

May he be glorified.