

True greatness

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[0 : 00] So looking at nine or so verses here, I think my structure goes a bit into verse 10 which is for someone next week.

But this is an unlikely question that comes up. Who is the greatest? It might make you smile, isn't it, if you think about, can you imagine our leaders having a little sort of walk along the road and saying, you know, I wonder who's going to be the greatest?

It sounds like a very immature and a very childish question, doesn't it? But that is where these disciples were at. But this passage will lead us through Jesus' response to their question.

And he really turns on its head what he thinks greatness is about. And then he talks about welcoming little ones and great warnings about causing, he does explain, we'll come to it, what little ones means a bit later.

But serious consequences for causing believers to stumble. It's coming our way here. And the latter bit is really about being careful that we are not stumbling or sinning ourselves.

[1 : 11] So that's where we're going. And if you'd wondered or lost track of where we were in Matthew, we've been working through it. Some months ago now you'll remember we went through the Sermon on the Mount.

You might remember it. Some of the, one or two of the lines in the Sermon on the Mount, we'll soon realize that these disciples have probably forgotten. Chapter 10 we had the sending out of the apostles as missionaries.

And you probably more recently remember some of these parables about the kingdom of heaven.

But I mention that because we are now looking at chapter 18 onwards. And this is shortly after the second time when Jesus has told his disciples about his impending suffering and death.

And they didn't know quite what to make of that, it would appear. But this is really about life together in the church. This is about how we relate. So that's where we are now.

We're starting in chapter 18, the fourth discourse of Jesus in Matthew. So we come to this question. Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is in verse 1, is it not?

[2 : 26] And you think, how could they come up with that kind of question? And what's the bit in the Sermon on the Mount that I'm probably thinking of that they've forgotten? And blessed are the poor in spirit or meek.

You know, they've forgotten all of this. And you wonder, why did this question come up? Surely they must have been in a corner. Out of the blue.

Now, there are parallel passages. And there's a little bit more of a clue in Mark. You don't need to turn to it. But in Mark 9 and verse 33, similar area.

Jesus asks his disciples, what were you arguing about on the road? So he noticed that they were arguing. What was it about? But they kept quiet. Because on the way, they had been arguing about who was the greatest.

That's exactly what they'd been talking about. And Jesus knew it. So having challenged them, as we are led to know in Mark, that prompts.

[3 : 26] So they knew that Jesus knew. And now they come up with a question. Well, who then is the greatest? Why would they argue about this? Well, possibly if you think about what's been going on recently.

I mean, Peter has maybe appeared to be more favoured. But wasn't he the one who walked on the water? And that dramatic question about, you know, you are Peter.

And on this rock, I'll statement. So if you are much of those, Peter seems to be sort of pushing ahead here. And maybe other people are feeling their nose out of joint. And had they forgotten some of these lovely truths that Jesus had been through earlier?

But anyway, the question came. Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Jesus had also said, that's off, isn't it?

He told them twice that he would soon suffer and die. There's some verses there on when, not just recently in Mark. But in Mark it tells us again.

[4 : 37] But they did not understand what he meant. And they were afraid to ask him about it. So Jesus had said, we can go back to it actually, can't we, one of those, in Matthew 16, 21.

From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and the teachers of the Lord.

And that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. So they were told, this was the leader that they were following, but it doesn't tell us in Matthew, but in Mark. They didn't understand and they were scared to ask what this meant.

And if you remember Ben speaking to us not that long ago on this passage about denying themselves and taking up a cross, they've been told that as well.

That following Jesus is not about, say, if you save your life you'll lose it. So this was all in the background. So slow learners indeed, but we don't probably feel too clever, do we? So then we are led on to Jesus' response to this question.

[5 : 53] What does he do? He actually, I've missed out a verse which I'll read. He called, this is verse 2, 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. So just keep the main thrust of that for the moment.

They're thinking which of us is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And now they're being warned, unless you change and become like a child, you're not even going to get in. So he's turning things on their head.

And if you're just interested in some of the detail, I think the child is quite small, but Mark actually adds that the child who seemingly stood before the disciples at some point is taken into Jesus' arms as he carried on.

So have you ever regretted asking a question? And these people must, as they were faced with a child, and asked to consider being like a child.

[7 : 06] So we'll come in verse 5 to the idea of humility, which is probably the main idea here, about a loneliness. But just take it as face value at the moment, to become like a child.

So it got me thinking, what are some of the qualities of children that we spiritually might do well to admire? Because there are some. There are quite a few.

And some of us, as adults, we become much more complicated. We hide things. We present masks. We make out that all is well when it's not. Children have very refreshingly different things. You'll probably be able to think of some things not on my list. But one thing occurred to me, that they trust very deeply. I suppose not if their parents are unusually horrible, but they trust very deeply.

They depend on mum and dad. You can probably picture, even remember, playing some of these games. I think I even remember stories.

[8 : 09] It's not quite the photo here of a long landing on a first floor. And children who live running and jumping off the end of the stairs. As long as daddy's down there. And the utter trust of the child launching himself off.

And if daddy sort of suddenly forgets or takes a call on his phone, there could be some dire consequences. But the utter trust of children is well worthy of note.

They are teachable, by and large. Teachable. They are authentic. What do I mean by that?

You tend... I mean, adults learn to hide things and put masks up. You tend to get what's really going on with children. If they're not happy, you know it. So there's a reality.

If they're struggling, you know it. It seems like the whole world's caving in. But there is something real. So you know how they are. You don't have to spend a lot of time working it out.

[9 : 16] They're imitators. They copy things. They copy parents. Parents who we hope are good influences. But they do. They learn and look and copy. And it's interesting to notice that, I mean, compared to a lot of other animals in the natural world, the period that children spend with their parents is really quite a long time, quite a large proportion of their life that they are overlapping with parents.

And they have a sense of wonder, don't they? That we lose something when we... Even a small example, a three-year-old, two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter we have who's just looking at the moon.

Because she's not often been out at night. But the moon. And it's, you know, wow. It's absolutely wonderful. So I don't need to labor over those too much.

But if you can think about this as you're considering a relationship with God, that these are in themselves, before we get to just the idea of humility and what that might mean, I mean, there are some lessons here about how we should be totally trusting in God, teachable, real with him, real with one another.

Yeah? Be careful when people ask you how you are and if you really aren't well. Don't say you're fine. You don't have to hang out all the dirty washing, but you could just give a clue that things aren't quite right, couldn't you?

[10:53] So let's move on. So it says, and I didn't touch really on the change word, change or convert. But, you know, the idea is here that these disciples had to recognize that they weren't in the right place and they had to change.

That in itself is a humbling thing. We need help from God. Anyway, we move on. And this is in verses 2 and 4.

Unless you change or become like a little child, you'll never enter the kingdom of God. Whoever humbles himself like this child, I think this is verse 5, isn't it?

Sorry, no, verse 4. New NIV says, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. So this really is turning everything on the head for them.

Who's the greatest? Whoever takes the lowly position of a child. A few other verses that just remind us about what humility is.

[12:02] You know these well, I'm sure. Philippians 2 and verses 3 and 4. Do nothing out of selfish ambition. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves.

Does that sound easy? Really stop and think. Valuing others. You know, you almost want to say you must be joking. But that's what's here.

Value others above yourselves. Not looking to your own interests, but those of others. There's a lovely verse in 2 Corinthians about weakness.

But he said to me, my grace is sufficient to you. This is when Paul had his thorn in the flesh. My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. Now, he had understood something there. That actually, when we are weak, we are strong.

[13:05] I put a picture in here. I found a cartoon book that Wendy has given for Christmas.

And I think I've got somewhere in this, I think I've got some credits on who it's from. But can you read that? It's in handwriting. Where have you been all your... When have you been at your...

Yes, that's it. Yeah. Ask the boy. When I have dared to show my weakness. Yes, sorry. I've probably put the next one coming up.

Let me just go. I'll come back to this. Hang on. No, I won't. I might have lost the... I might have lost my credit to it, but it's Charles Mackesy. It's a book. Some of these cartoons.

It's got a slight digression. There's a horse who is big, strong and gentle. A fox who's quiet.

Probably a bit ruined by life and had hard times. A little mole and a boy.

[14:07] And there's conversations and sketches. But I just thought it was relevant, so I threw it in. So what is humility? Humility is not thinking less of yourself.

This is C.S. Lewis. It is thinking of yourself less. Well, that's an easy way of understanding it. Because don't forget, if you're thinking a humble person thinks they're a doormat.

I mean, we're reminded this morning, weren't we? We're made in the image of God. There is a dignity there. So it's not thinking that you are not worth anything. But it is not thinking.

It's thinking of yourself less and thinking of others more. I'll give you some slightly more humorous examples of things that have a touch of humility to them.

Our middle granddaughter, Amy, who is seven years old. She likes ballet. At the end of the year, we often have to go to a little show. So we have this little photo at home of Amy.

[15:12] And when she comes around, we say to her, look, it's the famous ballet dancer. She says, it's not a famous ballet dancer. It's me, she says.

But it always makes us laugh. So we go through this every time, you see. She's not a famous ballet dancer. It's me. But there's something in a child's response there.

And I still remember, it's probably back in days when I was at Bristol, studying in a church there in a youth club team. Someone, we're going a little sports expedition, and they had a motto that they've introduced to these young people.

Have you heard this one before? It's hard to be humble when you're as great as we are. Hard to be humble when you're as great as we are. That's what the young people were all getting geared up by.

But it does leave us, it is, the truth is, it is hard to be humble. So are you, are you the best person to know?

[16:19] Whether you are? You might not be. At a very basic level, those of us who are Christians have learned to understand, well, we know that we're mortal, even whether we're Christians or not.

I think we know that we die. But we don't all agree with God's assessment that we're sinful. Do you understand that you are mortal and sinful, whereas God is eternal and holy?

Just to spend a moment there is humbling in a healthy way. And the barrier that people don't agree with God's assessment is part of the reason that there are so few humble people in the world.

Some of these are just random things, but they do speak of humility. Are you the sort of person that's willing to ask for help when you need it?

Some people are quite good at that, but you know, some people find it quite hard. There's another picture. What is the bravest thing that you've ever done?

[17:30] Ask the boy. Ask for help, yeah, said the horse. Bravest thing he's ever done, ask for help. But do you, you know? It's not, are you grateful for what you have?

It's very important. I mean, you know many of the scriptures, don't you, that remind us of the importance of being grateful. But what's the opposite of this? Do you know people that are always moaning, always complaining?

And the opposite of that is if you've learned to be thankful for what you have, and you don't have a right to all the things you dream about, you're not able to stand back and say, God should have done this, he should have given me this.

Are you grateful for what you have? Here's a hard one. Do you spend time listening to others? In conversations?

Do you actually like listening to people? Or when you're in little conversations, are you kind of just itching for the bit where you can chip in because you want to say what's on your mind?

[18:39] It's not a skill that comes easily, but if you are really putting into practice what we were touching on earlier, about putting the interests of others first, it starts to come more naturally, that you will listen, you're interested in what other people have to say.

Do you seek feedback from others on your impact on them? Who would you ask? Husbands and wives, well, you can ask each other, can't you?

Do you? But other people. But sometimes we just assume, we must be absolutely fine to relate to, you know, we must be easy, you know, but are we?

Maybe there are things that we need to discover and think about and change. So there's a little about humility and challenging to think Jesus is telling us, standing things on our heads, to become like a child, trusting, humble.

But then we go on in verse 5. Verse 5 and 6, I think they do sort of go together as two sides of an idea here.

[19:58] Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. And you're probably, in the way the story has gone so far, you are picturing Jesus holding the child.

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. But then just to go into verse 6, which is coming, if anyone causes one of these little ones, and he clarifies, sorry, I will just put that image up, talking about welcoming children.

I'm so small, but still you make a huge difference. Yeah. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Mark actually tells us a little stage further, if you welcome Jesus, not just welcoming him, but you're welcoming who sent Jesus as well. So who are these little ones? Verse 6, giving you the answer there.

But you know it, I think. If anyone causes any of these little ones, those who believe in me, to sin, it would be better for them, and you remember the stories about a grim end.

[21 : 07] But the little ones, if you're only thinking about little children at the moment, I think you can still keep thinking about them. If you're thinking about parents influencing children, all these qualities, especially if you're trying to bring them up to know God, you can still think like that.

And it's very important how we welcome little ones. But it's very clear as we move on here, that Jesus is talking about believers. All of us, as you look around, we are little ones. And whoever might cause one of us to stumble, severe consequences are coming up, aren't they? So the welcoming is contrasted.

Welcoming in verse 5 is contrasted with causing to stumble. In verse 6, and if we go back even to how we were opening and thinking about the prayer, Jesus and his father are present in believers. We know that. He's promised to give us his spirit. So God is feeling it personally when believers are welcomed. Little ones are welcomed. And he's also feeling it personally when believers are caused to stumble.

[22 : 21] So if people think they're just, oh, it's just a child or just someone who's young and not very experienced and I haven't really got time. If you dismiss, rebuff, these are serious things.

God is dwelling in some of these young lives. And God takes it very seriously. So then we move on to this idea of causing people to stumble.

Let's just read these verses. 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 be drowned in the depths of the sea.

There's a typical donkey millstone. And I think they are talking about one of these. You see the big cylinder, a bit like a large polo mint, but very heavy, that a donkey would have rolled around treading the crown.

That's the type of millstone that we're talking about. Imagine the severity of what Jesus is saying here. It would be better to have one of those around your neck and be thrown into the sea to drown.

[23 : 30] It says, Woe to the world. This is verse 7. Because of the things that cause people to stumble, such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come.

Stumble is a word, it does actually mean to cause to sin or to fall. Stumble is pretty obvious. It probably means falling. It means falling. So, we're invited to think, aren't we, about each other as believers and to consider how to avoid causing people to stumble.

So, is that easy? We need to avoid things if we are to take heed of this. I've got some ideas here. I might not have got all of the ones that you could think of. But we need to avoid tempting people to sin. Of course, you wouldn't think deliberately of doing that, would you? But in ways that you might not be thinking this will cause a problem, you probably can tempt people to sin.

How you dress, gossip, hurtful words that just come out, which are probably inviting revengeful thoughts.

[24 : 57] I mean, this is a short, I could go on, couldn't it? But, we can tempt people to sin. Not necessarily, I don't suppose many of us would knowingly do it, but just in the pressure of life you react to things, you choose things.

And it has an impact on people. And we must avoid tempting people to sin. What about setting a bad example?

And I wonder how many people are thinking, oh, who's looking at me? Who's looking at my life or taking me very seriously? And I just put down there, especially to some of us who are older, more people watch you than you may realise, especially the children, teenagers.

Do you remember being a teenager? And can you still probably picture some key people who you noticed quite a lot? So, how you live, people notice, not, even before you've opened your mouth, but just noticing how you're reacting.

We can set a bad example or a good one, but just be aware that more people watch you than you may realise. And what about flaunting freedom?

[26 : 17] What could I mean by that? Perhaps even, I could pick one easy example, might be just an attitude to alcohol.

I think there may be some here who would never want to take it. There might be some, I don't know, who have had a problem with it in the past and for that reason never want to take it, but perhaps many of us would be happy to take some but not to excess.

So, and I think even Jesus says a glass of wine is good for this and that, but the idea is that to take our alcohol is not inherently wrong, but what about if you're with a weaker brother or sister who has a problem and it doesn't do you any harm, you don't think it's wrong, but actually for that person who has a problem with alcohol, you might be better to deny yourself on this for their benefit. That's the idea, isn't it? And I think there are probably other examples of Paul talking about different meats that you could eat and he thinks they're all okay, but some you might refrain from. So, you know, some things may be okay for you, but they may cause someone else to stumble even if they're not inherently wrong, but if we're taking this idea seriously, we will consider these as well, won't we?

[27 : 43] And then the last bit of this is about not stumbling ourselves and we have these harsh words. If your hand or foot causes you to stumble, cut it off, throw it away.

Similar things about your eye. Far better to be maimed going into life than with all your attributes and thrown into the fires.

Now, this is a very strong words, but I think we must be aware this is not an invitation to violent self-harm, but before we dismiss it or move on, it is meant to make us think about taking some pretty drastic action on anything that causes us to sin.

So, two-stage process, isn't it, that we might miss, but we need to think and reflect on the things that do cause us to sin.

What are they? Whether you need to write them down yourself somewhere, I don't know, but in your head, what are the things that frequently cause me to sin and just think, how can I avoid these situations?

[29 : 11] I mean, there will be different things. I mean, some people might have a problem spending and shopping, so what are you going to do about that one? Go to the shops?

I mean, or be careful, you know, you might, yeah, I mean, some people give them some money and they don't know how to hang on to it, they just get, you know, but there can be areas where you know you have a weakness, you can be looking on the computer, looking at things that are not good on the computer, it can be, you know, am I going to look at this website or that, and you just have to say, look, I know, I've got to be careful and think about how to avoid these situations.

So we've covered most of the passage and I just want to come back and summarise, I don't think, I think you'll agree that what is being said here is not hard to understand in our minds, but as we just go through these headings again, just think these are difficult things.

We are not to seek greatness unless we redefine it the way Jesus did, we are to change and become like children, not in every way, but you can picture the ways that a child reacts and behaves that is a fine example for us, spiritually trusting, teachable, real, taking a lowly position, they don't have, you know, what is it about children, if you find out they don't know something, they're not embarrassed, you know, they are.

And Mark 9 adds that on the same sentiment really as in Matthew, anyone who wants to be first must be the very last and the servant of all. And then there's this idea of really guarding other believers, looking out for, and it's worth looking around the room, isn't it?

[31 : 16] You have a responsibility not to cause your brothers and sisters to stumble, how are you going to do it? You know, you're not going to end up going mad inside thinking about all the silly things that might, but it's well worth being aware.

Is there something I'm doing that might have an impact on someone that might cause them a problem? Are we welcoming to other believers? Perhaps if there is a, thinking about the little ones, perhaps particularly to those young in the faith, who might be around for a while and suddenly they might be put off and they might seem to be coming near to the faith but be put off.

How welcoming are we? How seriously do we take the way that young ones develop? Not to put obstacles in their path, trying to make the truth of God's word relevant to them in the current culture they live in, guarding other beliefs, not causing them to stumble.

And ourselves to take drastic action to avoid sin. So that is, and there's just one verse I want to finish with but otherwise let's just be quiet to take it in before we sing a last song.

It did come up when Ben was preaching recently, whoever wants to be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. It is very telling, isn't it, that shortly after Jesus had been talking about the fact that he was going to suffer and die, done it twice and they weren't really quite getting their head around it, but really some of this stuff that is coming through about how we're going to relate together in the church is hard.

[33 : 01] It's not just live in your own ivory tower and everyone will work it all out. This is about being thoughtful about each other. So there we are.

And then we'll come back and we'll sing before we have communion. 8.04■