

Brave

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Preacher: Mike Royal

[0 : 00] Jesus Christ, our living hope. Well, how do I follow Jim's story? I kind of feel like he's already done the talk this morning.

You know, I get to speak in lots of different churches. Yesterday I had the privilege of speaking actually to 300 Methodists in Birmingham at a Methodist conference.

And you never quite know how what you're saying, whether it's getting through or how it's going down. Today I learned that it's all about God and what he does in people's hearts.

And actually very little about what I say or what I don't say. This morning, very briefly, I want to just encourage you as a church really to keep doing what you're already doing.

And there's a sense in which I feel like I'm speaking to the converted. But I think what I also want to say is that the work of TLG, the work of just spending that hour with a child, with a young person, just a week.

[1 : 11] Just coaching, just listening, you know, having an opportunity to play and do life together for that moment.

It isn't just something that those who are on the front line and doing that are involved in. But it's something that all of us as a church can get behind.

And so my reading is taken from Matthew 18. I'm going to read the first six verses and also verse 10 to 14 as well. At that time, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

He called a child and had him stand among them. And he said, 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. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.

[2 : 23] But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Verse 10. See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my father in heaven.

What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?

And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way, your father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

There are aspects of this chapter that can be implied in two ways. Firstly, it is primarily about children, but it's also about the vulnerable and particularly those who are near or new to the kingdom of God.

[3 : 46] And of course, for us at TLG, children being at the heart of church is really our heart. And we think also it's God's heart.

And for those of us who don't know TLG's story, it was an ordinary church, probably about the size of the church here in Cleveland.

And just began to work with young people on a Friday night. They'd come to youth club and on a Saturday night, they would come to a sort of a burger bar that we'd set up and they'd eat their chips and their burgers and they'd have fellowship.

On a Sunday, sometimes night, they'd be throwing stones at the church window as kids do. And Monday morning, everyone would breathe a sigh of relief. They're going to school, except lots of them weren't.

And so we began a journey of providing schooling for some of those children. There was no blueprint at that time on how to do it. We just made it up as we went along.

[4 : 56] And by about 2004, we'd become probably the foremost alternative education provider in the city of Bradford, as it was then, and took a decision to begin to think about replicating that in other places.

And began, you know, firstly in London, then in Birmingham, then in Manchester. And slowly we began to replicate around the country. We got to about 2010.

And Rachel Morphin, who leads early intervention, was just banging a drum behind the scene and saying, guys, you're waiting way too late.

You know, why are you waiting until they're 11, you know, 12, 13? We know that they're slipping through the gaps, kind of in primary school. And so as a result, we gathered some people together. We did some thinking. And early intervention was born. And I'm pleased to say that today we have over 100 early intervention centres up and down the UK in partnership with churches of all different kinds of shapes and sizes, making a difference to young people's lives.

[6 : 10] And we are so excited that that journey continues. And it's great to come back, to have spoken a year ago with yourselves, and come back a year later and just see how things have progressed.

You have, I believe, 22 people trained as coaches, and most of those engaged on a weekly basis working with young people.

When we look at this chapter, there's three things I want to quickly home in on. Firstly, we are called to welcome children.

If we look at verse 5, it says, and whoever welcomes a little child in my name welcomes me. That is a powerful verse.

If we welcome a child, we are welcoming Jesus. You know, that is what Jesus said there. And I think that being a Jesus-centred church, and I know that you're a Jesus-centred church, is actually synonymous with being a child-centred church.

[7 : 20] It was just lovely to see the children at the front, and the bubbles going up in the air, and them waving their flags, and feeling that this is a safe place where they can express their worship to God.

Being a child-centred church is being a Jesus-centred church as well. And I do go to churches where they are lamenting. I sat in a meeting yesterday with leaders of churches who were lamenting that there was no longer any children's work, and no longer any young people's work. It is precious what we have. Let's bring children. Let's continue to bring children right to the centre of church life. I love the African Proverbs.

I'm married to a Ghanaian. I'm of Jamaican heritage. We were both born here. We spend quite a bit of time in Africa, and there's a wonderful proverb that simply says, it takes a village to raise a child. And for children, we can see the local congregation as a village where they can thrive, where they can develop, where they can have freedom, and where they can prosper.

[8 : 37] And those children will bring a life to a local church that only children can bring. And there's something intangible about that life. But it's the work of the Spirit.

And that's why Jesus said, you need to be like one of these children if you want to enter into the kingdom of heaven. The second point I want to make is in verse 6 and 7.

We are called to support them if they stumble. Verse 6 says, But if anyone causes these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea.

If young people stumble, we're not called to punish them. We're not called to say, I told you so. We are called to support them.

We are called to get alongside them. And that's what Jim and the team are doing. They are getting alongside young people who, for whatever reason, are just not thriving in mainstream school.

[9 : 55] And often, my experience is that it's often traumatic experiences that young people have, whether it's bullying in the playground, whether it's perhaps not fully understanding some of the work that's being given.

Perhaps they've got an unidentified learning difficulty. And actually, their behaviour is a scream for help, but that's not been fully identified by the school.

Sometimes there could have been traumatic experience at home, perhaps a bereavement of an auntie, an uncle, a parent. Maybe it's been a breakup in the family situation.

There can be a host of reasons why a child or a young person isn't thriving in school. But the Bible says that young people, we are called to get alongside them and to support them if they are stumbling and if they are falling.

And the final point I want to make is in verses 10 to 14. But we are called to find them if they lose their way.

[11 : 13] And here, of course, Jesus tells the story of the farmer who leaves the 99 cheap in search of that one.

You know, early intervention is all about the one. It is a one-to-one programme. We could have created a group programme, but we chose to do a one-to-one programme.

And this scripture bears out the kingdom emphasis on the one. Because it says that God is more happy to find the one that has lost their way than with the 99 who have never left the fold.

You know, one of the things that I've discovered is that sin comes in many forms, not just in personal sin. And of course, as Christians, all of us have come to that place where we've recognised that we need Jesus as our saviour and as our Lord.

But there can be systems that sin against people. There can be systems that sin against young people. And I sometimes think that the school system can sin against young people.

[12 : 29] Not deliberately, but it's just that it does that. And I say that having been grown up as the son of a deputy headteacher and married to a teacher.

So I'm absolutely for teachers, by the way. But it's not the teacher's fault. It is the system. Some 318,000 fixed-term exclusions were given to children and young people last year in the UK.

And something about that that just says that's wrong, that education is a basic human right. And we know that if a child is not educated, then their outcomes and life chances are hugely reduced.

And the likelihood of that child or young person ending up in prison or a youth offending institute just goes up hugely. I'm also just one day a week a mental health chaplain.

And I work with young men in a mental health clinic. And, you know, I look at some of the young men that I work with and you begin to talk to them and you realise, actually, it went wrong in their primary school years.

[13 : 49] It went wrong in their teenage years. And if they had just had someone alongside them giving that hour of attention, perhaps they never would have got to where they got to.

The Gospel's all about a second chance. And I love the fact that TLG is about giving young people a second chance. John 3, 17 says, God did not come into the world to condemn the world, that the world through him might be saved, might be rescued.

That's the literal meaning of the word saved. We are rescuing children from adverse childhood experiences.

We are rescuing children from trauma. And in the meantime, we are giving them a hope and a future. This morning, in conclusion, our focus, our theme has been being brave.

You're listening to the news like I am and you're hearing the stories of the increase in knife crime. I'm dealing with that firsthand in Birmingham.

[15 : 00] I can tell you it's affecting every single community in Birmingham. I can take you to Alum Rock and to Washwood Heath and it's affecting, the youth violence is affecting predominantly the South Asian community.

I can take you to Winston Green and I can take you to Erdington in North Birmingham and I can tell you there it's affecting the black community. I can take you to the edge of the city and take you to Northfield and to Longbridge where they used to make the Rovers and there I can tell you it's affecting the white community.

And I'm working with others on this issue. And you'll hear all over, you know, stuff all over the news, what we need to do. Well, we need more police and, you know, and we need stop and search and we need this and we need that.

I tell you what we need. We need a church to step up and be brave. We need to not recoil from young people but lean into this agenda. We need to go upstream as you are as a church.

Not waiting to young people are 13, 14, 15, but go upstream at primary school level and stop what's going on happening.

[16 : 19] And if we do that, then we will see young people saved from a life where they are abused to, quite honestly, by people who are older and used to ship drugs out to towns, outside local city, county lines.

That's the thing that's kind of going on. It's drugs often that is driving this and it plays out on the street often, although not exclusively of our inner cities.

And so we're all involved in this. You are involved in making a difference to these children's lives.

And if you're here this morning and you're thinking, well, how can I get involved?

My encouragement is to lean in and make a difference, just as Jim did. and God will bless and bring fruit to your ministry.