

Humility and Christ's Kingdom

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 18, starting at verse 1. In verse 1.

And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.

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

Well, good morning, everyone. Aspiring to greatness. It's a very basic human character, I think.

We have within us that basic longing, that deep longing to make a significant impact in the world we live in.

[1 : 58] We want people to notice a difference for us having been here. We want, in simple terms, to make a real difference in the world we live in.

So aspiring to greatness is a very normal, very human character. Of course, the sort of greatness a person aspires to then depends on what thinking they bring to that process.

So it may be that the desire to be great is actually the desire to be the most powerful or the most popular. And if that's the case, then you're likely to see a lifetime shaped by self-interest, a desire for recognition, perhaps inevitably expressed in obsession with pegging orders and social status, accumulating possessions, and perhaps having a reputation among your peers for being the best in your field, whichever that field is, whether it's work or play or politics or whatever.

Or your aspiration to goodness may be driven by thinking that you want to be the most useful you can be in your lifetime.

And so you might then see from that a lifetime devoted to perhaps research, where somebody spends their whole life hoping to discover some new medicine, some new treatment for some disease, a new machine, a new process perhaps that will just advance the world generally or help people in particular, in a particular area.

[3 : 34] Or indeed, you might see a lifetime of service. Some people aspire to greatness through a lifetime of service, helping the poor, the oppressed, neglected.

And we see that a lot. And of course, in that category, many of those people are actually quite selfless and unassuming. And so their tag of greatness is actually almost an unintended consequence for them.

Because that wasn't what they set out to achieve. But I think even for us more locally and immediate, for me, for you, there still is a sense in which we aspire for greatness.

Like we would say, look, I would want to be a great friend to such and such. For me, I want to be a great dad. I want to be a great husband. And now, as I'm getting older, I want to be a great grandfather.

Well, that's another stage. I don't want to take Don's position. I want to be a great grandfather. If you see, you know, I'll just move on.

[4 : 39] It wasn't like that in my notes. Or we say we want to be a nice, dependable worker, a great worker, a great grandchild, a great student, whatever. So there's just this list of things where, in our own small way, we're aspiring to greatness.

But here's the question for us this morning. Is it appropriate for us as Christians to aspire to greatness? That's certainly the focus of the passage this morning.

The disciples ask a question about greatness. Who is the greatest? Who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus' answer is confronting, at the very least.

But at the worst, it's outrageous. Because he outright rejects the question as expressed. They come and say, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

And Jesus gives them a real serve, in a sense. But here's the nuance in it, I think. That Jesus doesn't actually reject the notion of aspiring to greatness on their behalf, on their part.

[5 : 52] Rather, he redefines greatness. So it seems to me that, and we'll see the details in a few minutes, they come asking for greatness in this category. Jesus rejects that, but doesn't reject the idea of greatness, but redefines it into kingdom categories.

And kingdom greatness, we'll see this morning, is radically different to worldly greatness. Kingdom greatness is about self-sacrificing versus worldly greatness, which is often self-aggrandizing.

Anyway, we'll get to the details more. I want to do a little bit of revision, because I think to understand the teaching of 18.1-9, we need to remind ourselves of a big picture context in Matthew here.

So flick back to chapter 16, verse 13, and I'm going to walk through these texts fairly quickly. So at 16.13, the whole of that first section of Matthew's gospel leads Matthew to finally answering his first question.

The question that's been working for the first 16 chapters, who is this Jesus? And in building that picture, Matthew's reached for evidence all the way back to Abraham and right forward through all these incidents in these early chapters to Peter's confession.

[7 : 15] And here's the answer. You are God. You are Messiah. You are God's King and Savior. The long-awaited one. And with that, then, Matthew turns his attention to the second question of Jesus.

That is, what does it mean for this Jesus to be Messiah? What does Jesus come to do, and how will he do it? That, then, is Matthew's focus for the second part of his biography of Jesus.

And this is where I want you to follow me through the text. So if you look at chapter 16, verse 18 to 20, it's interesting, the very, very first thing Jesus says about what he's going to do as Messiah is, he will build his church.

Which is another picture of God's kingdom, God's rule in the hearts and minds of his people. And then verse 21, 23 of verse 16, Jesus says this will require him to deal with sin.

That is, to go to Jerusalem to die and be resurrected. It's interesting, isn't it, that his first statement is a corporate statement. He has come to establish the church.

[8 : 27] And the means of establishing the church is that he will die to save people individually into the church. Through apparent defeat, he would be shown to be God's triumphant, successful king and savior.

Chapter 16, verse 24 to 27. As for king and savior, so for his disciples. All in commitment from Jesus, including his death.

All in commitment from his disciples. Described here as dying to self. All in loyalty to Jesus. All in commitment. 17 verses 1 to 13.

The transfiguration story. Jesus is up to the task. We get God's stamping of Jesus with his authority again.

He's all powerful. He's all sufficient. He'll do what Moses and Elijah were unable to do. That is, deal with sin and renew God's people. And victoriously, then, he will ultimately return to the glory for which he's set aside while he's in this world.

[9 : 47] He will return to that glory. But the pathway to glory is one of suffering and death. And then 17, 14 to 27 that we looked at last week.

We come down to the harsh reality. The bottom of the mountain in the valley again. The pathway to glory is a hard, costly, spiritual battle. It means, verse 14 through 21, it means engaging with Satan's kingdom and Satan's power.

And freeing God's people from the ravages of sin. And to do that requires all in faith in the all-sufficiency of Jesus.

It means Jesus again. Going to the cross. Going to the cross. Consciously sacrificing himself to deal with Satan's kingdom and Satan's power and the issues of sin.

And finally, in verse 24 through 27, it means dismantling the old Jewish system of worship. It was focused on the temple and sacrifice.

[10 : 55] And Jesus is now going to reestablish a completely new order that's focused on him, a new community. He'll be the place where people find acceptance with God.

He'll be the place where people go for forgiveness of sin. He'll be the place where people go to worship. And this new community will actually be family.

It will mean an emergence of a totally new community gathered around Jesus. New family identity in Jesus. New family obligations to Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Now, with that, we can see chapter 18 then, 19 and 20, starts to spell out in detail the character of this new community.

And this is why all this revision was important. That these verses can't be seen just as little moral do-goody things. It's actually Jesus starting to spell out the character of this new salvation community, the one he's come to establish.

[12 : 03] It's a community of died for people, the church. And once again, the principle is the same. As for the king, so for his people.

In other words, in summary here, therefore, we are to reflect King Jesus in our attitudes and actions. We're to live in the light of the all-sufficiency of Jesus.

We're to think and act selflessly. We're to be loving. And in that love, we're to extend grace to those around us, especially brothers and sisters in Christ.

We're to extend compassion, mercy to the helpless. And we're to hate any expression of sin in our actions. So with that, I want to jump into the detail now of chapter 18.

And the question, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Well, of course, it's hard. Well, it's actually impossible to know what the disciples had in mind when they asked that question.

[13 : 22] Were they thinking about who was the most powerful? Who was the most useful? Who was the most popular? Who was the most privileged?

Who was the most important? It's impossible to say exactly what is in their mind. But the question at least suggests rivalry, jealousy, resentment, self-interested focus on status and pecking order among the disciples.

And it's not hard, just reading the context of this, chapters 16, 17, and 18, it's not hard to read the context and think, well, perhaps Peter and James and John started to think that they had a very privileged position because, after all, they were the ones that Jesus took up the mountain and experienced the transfiguration.

Perhaps they even started to fancy themselves as being of the sort of importance as an Elijah and a Moses. Or perhaps Peter then wanted to separate himself to another level because maybe he thought that he was extra special, even higher up again than James and John's because, after all, when Jesus talked about establishing the church in chapter 16, it was Peter's mention, Peter's name that was mentioned.

It was Peter who was associated as a foundation of the church. And then, just immediately prior to these verses, Jesus paid the temple tax for Peter only.

[14 : 57] So it wouldn't be too hard to think, well, Peter thought, well, hey, maybe I'm the favorite. I'm Jesus' favorite. Or at least I'm further up the pegging order than you guys are. Not too hard to imagine all that at all, but we don't really know.

We don't know their precise thinking, but Jesus did, obviously. And in response to the thinking, Jesus delivered an incredibly strong response. Greatness in my kingdom is not about competing with others for social status in a self-indulgent pegging order.

Greatness in my kingdom is seen in attitude to Jesus. It doesn't sound like very much, does it?

It doesn't catch our attention. We associate greatness with great things, great actions, great endeavors, years of effort. Jesus said, well, greatness is first and foremost about an attitude to Jesus.

Now, there's something that jars in the text here as I was preparing this week because just, I don't know, hours, maybe a couple of days, maybe a week earlier, the disciples, at least three of them, had seen the glory of Jesus in transfiguration.

[16 : 23] Certainly it would have been a talking point among the disciples for all that time. And certainly they would have gotten the message that Jesus' pathway to glory was through suffering and death.

But it would seem like the disciples are still determined to pursue their own glory in a form of worldly greatness.

They were going to carve out their own pathway to glory through status and privilege and reputation. And in response to all of that, Jesus puts a little child in the center of a group as an illustration of greatness in the salvation community, the church.

And he speaks about childlike humility. Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Not will become, but is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

[17 : 36] So what is this childlike humility? I think it's actually quite simple. I think it's an attitude of littleness and insignificance.

That's certainly how children were viewed in the ancient world. And you have to think about that. If you think about children these days, they're not little and insignificant.

They rule the roost far too often. But in Jesus' day, children were viewed as little and insignificant. And in many ways they still are.

Because children in the end, in spite of what they might think, they're unable to care for themselves. They're certainly unable to care for themselves properly. And Jesus' point here is that in sharp contrast to the subtle self-promotion of the disciples, the little child doesn't consider himself or herself to command the attention of Jesus.

The little child's just happy to be in the middle there and have the focus of Jesus' attention on them. So greatness in the kingdom begins, therefore, with an attitude of honest realization about ourselves.

[18 : 59] What is that realization? That there's nothing in us to command God's attention. Command God's attention, sorry. To command God's recognition.

And that we have God's attention, we have God's love and care is a matter of grace. And then it's an attitude, I think, of trustful dependence.

And children just look to their parents to care for them, to provide for them. They expect their parents to dispel their fears. They expect their parents to fix whatever needs to be fixed.

It's just that sort of all-in dependence on mom and dad. Well, I think it's almost exactly the same, Jesus' point here.

Greatness in mind, you died for community, will be characterized by total dependence, unembarrassed dependence on Christ's goodness and care and provision and blessing.

[20 : 12] Not their own abilities. Now, those two things aren't too hard to describe. But gosh, they're a lot harder to live out, aren't they? Very hard to live out.

And that's the other point I think Jesus is making here. He says, you need to turn unless you turn. this sort of attitude, this childlike humility is not natural to us.

It requires a conscious turning away from how the world thinks of greatness and a conscious commitment to Jesus' pathway to greatness.

But put simply, humility is not natural to us in our sinful state. I cannot consciously strive to secure my own glory or greatness through what I do and at the same time consciously strive to express childlike humility towards Jesus and other died for people in this community.

The two just don't mix. We can convince ourselves they do, but they don't truly mix. One will, it's like oil and water, one will settle on top of the other.

[21 : 42] We need to consciously turn. So, it seems to me that greatness in the church is a real paradox.

It actually is the unintended consequence of an all-in commitment to thinking and acting with childlike humility.

So, as we go about serving Jesus in that attitude of trustful dependence and that attitude of insignificance living in the light of grace and having our identity from Jesus, it's as we're doing that that we're actually declared by Jesus to be great.

And it's not a conscious thing we're pursuing. And there's the paradox. Our world offers greatness through self-achievement, self-aggrandizing.

And often that comes at the expense of manipulating others around us. So, if I set myself to be great in this congregation, then I'm going to have to barge through others that might stop in my way.

[23 : 00] Or I might see others as useful to me toward the end of me looking great. And so, I'll manipulate them, I'll use them. And if they get in the way, I'll skittle them.

That's what our world offers as greatness. Jesus says, the most inconsequential Christian who is faithful and loyal to Christ will be the one deemed greatest in heaven.

It's a very different pathway, isn't it? imagine if local church families like ours, all around Australia, all around the world, could get a grasp of that.

It would just immediately rid church of all the politics that is so grubby, even in churches. churches. It would rid churches of so many, probably not all, so many of the conflicts, so many that ended up in broken relationships or strained relationships.

It would literally be life-changing. Then moving on, verses 5 through to 9, greatness is seen in attitude to sin. Verse 5 is a bridge. It's a bridge from verses 1 to 4, obviously, through to the severe warnings of Jesus in verses 6 to 9.

[24 : 38] And these verses, if you came here hoping for a warm, fuzzy sermon this morning, they're going to really disappoint you because they're harsh. These are confronting verses.

Extreme. And again, once again, we see the principle of as for the king, so for his people. Greatness in Jesus died for people also means reflecting Jesus' character and attitude towards sin.

What was his character and attitude towards sin? He saw it so awful, so much the cause of the broken relationship between God and his people that he is prepared to sacrifice himself to deal with it.

he didn't spare anything to deal with sin and free God's people from its ravages. And in verse 4 and 5, you get that notion of not being able to separate Jesus from his people, from his died for people.

very, very simple connection, but it's very, very powerful and profound. The way we treat other believers is a clear indication of how we ourselves believe we are saved and acceptable to God.

[26 : 11] all believers are died for people. That's what Jesus came, go back to that summary again, that's what Jesus came to achieve.

He came to achieve, to establish his church, and he did that by dying for it. All, therefore, are part of God's kingdom on the same basis, grace alone.

All, therefore, are precious to Christ, regardless of how insignificant they are in the world's terms. So what does that mean for us in practice?

What does that look like in practice? Well, I think very, very simply in this context it means that we should never be competing with other believers.

Never should we be competing with other believers, especially not for social status or reputation or recognition. Because to do that in the church is to say that, well, when Jesus died for his people, he was actually establishing some new but equally horrible pegging order.

[27 : 28] Not quite the same as the world, but in some ways it's like the world. against that and contrast that, because of shared identity in Christ, we should have the same all in love for and commitment to our brothers and sisters, our fellow died for people.

We should love and commit to them as Christ loves and commits to them. And that's greatness.

Practically, that means these last three verses, practically that means doing anything we can to avoid causing little ones or other believers to sin.

verse 6. It would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Now, apparently, the Jews had a protocol of taking the worst of criminals out to sea, tying a millstone around their necks, chucking them overboard, drowning them.

[28 : 55] Why? Because the nature of their crime was so awful, they wanted to remove them, as it were, from existence. They wanted to deprive them of a proper burial.

Their crimes are so horrendous. And they believed the awfulness of that crime required such an extreme response. Jesus is saying here that the worst possible death imaginable is actually preferable to causing one of his died-for people to sin.

Now, I have to say, I got stuck on this this week, because that's such a huge call. Well, it's a huge call in terms of the challenge for how I relate to and treat my fellow believers.

Greatness in Christ's new community, the church, is seen in loving what Christ loves and hating what he hates. And that means, again, practically, being as ruthless on yourself as necessary to guard other believers.

Now, look at those verses again. Woe to the world for temptation to sin, for it's necessary or it's inevitable that temptations will come.

[30 : 38] But woe to the one by whom the temptation comes. And then here it is. If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.

Now, that's extreme language, isn't it? It's picture language, but it's still an extreme picture language. Why? It is better for you to enter life crippled or maimed than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.

fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It's better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

That picture language is in the context of the temptation or causing little ones to sin. sin. It's picture language to describe how severely and passionately we must hold ourselves to account.

That is, we hold ourselves to account. So, it says here, it's not that we can stop sin altogether because it's inevitable, verse 7, that temptations will come. Sin is everywhere around us and in everything around us.

[31 : 56] So, it's inevitable. But we can take ourselves to account. And this is the extreme length where we hold ourselves to account. Our thinking, our attitudes, our actions.

And we've got to be so passionate about those that we'll take whatever action it is within our will to do and our ability to do rather than possibly cause a fellow brother or sister in Christ to get tripped into sin.

So, it's not a sinless perfection Jesus is talking about here. Because even as believers, we know the reality of sin at every point in our being. But what he's talking about here is taking responsibility for ourselves, holding ourselves to account for how our actions, our thinking, our words impact on those around us, other died for people.

And Jesus said here, we need to struggle with every ounce of our ability and being to ensure our impact on other believers reflects our identity in Jesus.

Jesus. Now, I was trying to work out, well, how do you unpack these things in application?

[33 : 28] And I honestly came to the conclusion I didn't know how. And I wasn't sure even if I needed to because the words themselves are so painfully obvious. But I thought, well, okay, I'll give it one go anyway.

So how might we cause other believers to stumble? In Greek, the word is scandalize. So how might we scandalize other believers?

I think in the context here, in these verses, it will be thinking about church competitively and evaluating one another on performance.

because. And we hear it all the time, don't we? I am more important than others because. I have more influence than you because.

I am more useful in this church than you because. I am more godly than you because. And so the list could go on and on.

[34 : 36] Now, of course, we might not hear such thoughts expressed openly because I think even for our own ears, and sometimes our ears are rather dull to these awful things, but even to our own ears to express that openly would be a step too far.

But I suspect it's there lurking in the back of our minds and driving us nonetheless. I don't think I need to spell it out to you.

I think if you've been around churches for any length of time, you've seen it. you've experienced it. You've probably dished it out. And together we see its destructive impact.

So here's the challenge. Are you able to say, honestly, in your mind before the Lord this morning, are you able to say that you're so concerned to avoid causing others to stumble into sin or to be disheartened in their service of Christ, that you would restrict any freedom that's rightfully yours as a believer, that you would curb any opinion legitimately held as a believer, that you would back down on any issues that you might legitimately be passionate about in order to avoid causing somebody else in this church family here to stumble into sin?

That's a big call, isn't it? I think that's what the text asks us to do. That's exactly what Christ calls us to do. Now the question is, do you see why?

[36 : 21] these disciples were so determined to advance their own position and rank that they were prepared to wound other believers in the process instead of guarding them and encouraging them.

And after all that, these disciples had missed the mark anyway because the evidence of greatness in Christ's kingdom is treating all believers as carefully and lovingly and sacrificially.

as Christ does. So friends, let's look right back to my start. Greatness is a great thing to aspire to.

I think it's an honourable thing to say I want to be a great Christian. I want to be a great follower of Christ. I want to be known as a great follower of Christ.

But here's the rub. You need to choose then whether you chase greatness in the self-seeking categories of the world, position, power, reputation, status, or whether you'll pursue greatness, kingdom greatness, self-giving, self-sacrificing humility, total dependence on the all-sufficiency of Christ, and a ruthless determination to avoid anything that might cause another believer in this church family to sin.

[37 : 55] As always, it's your choice. But make a choice you must because the two can't fit together. Pray with me, please.

Lord, these are hard words, but they're your words, Lord, spoken in love for the good of your people. So help us to hear them.

Help us, Lord, to hear them without defensiveness. Help us to hear them with a heart of repentance. For each of us know only too well, Lord, how we've sought to carve our own little empires in a church family like this.

We want to be noticed. We want to be recognized. We want to be considered to be important. We want our statements to be considered valued, valuable. And so the list goes on.

Lord, help us to be truly childlike in our humility. Help us to be those who are most noticeable for our dependence on Jesus.

[39 : 15] Help us, we pray, Lord, in Jesus' name I pray. Amen.