

A Question of Importance

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[0 : 00] I'll be reading from Matthew chapter 18, verses 1 to 14. At that time, the disciples came to Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, 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. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.

But whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Woe to the world for temptations to sin. For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes.

[1 : 13] 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.

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven, their angels see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?

And if he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

[2 : 29] Good morning. My name is Bo. I am one of the elders of the church. I would like to welcome all the visitors in particular today. I have seen quite a number of visitors.

And you have me today because I am a regular preacher. They brought us away for holidays, so you will have me for two weeks. Today, I am using this Nebel mic for the first time.

I mean, if it is not clear, please raise up your hand so I can just use that big mic. We will see how it goes. So last week, they brought us that, as we went back into the book of Matthew, they brought us that the book of Matthew could be divided into two parts.

From chapter 1 to 16, it is about who Jesus is. And then 17 onwards, it is about what he is going to do.

And so today we come to chapter 18 of Matthew. We have done 1 to 17 last year, or the year before, some time ago. So we start from chapter 18, onwards, for the rest of this year.

[3 : 52] So chapter 18, I think, is talking about, as we know, what Jesus is going to do. In particular, he is talking about Jesus is going to build his church.

And to build his church, the first challenge that Jesus needs to face is the crucifixion. he needs to suffer and die for his people.

And subsequent to that, I think it's more challenging is what we will be dealing with in chapter 18, that is his people. This is the challenge.

How are his people going to live together as a body? As you know, in any social gatherings, there's always competitions, jealousy, resentment of not giving opportunity or something like this.

So it's not easy to put a group of people who are not really together. So today we shall, hopefully today and next week, consider a bit about how, as God's people, we should live together.

[5 : 06] Let us pray first. Almighty God, we know that it's a privilege for us to come together as the body of Christ, as your children.

we pray that as we go through chapter 18 of Matthew, you will help us to consider how we should love one another and start one another to do good works as well.

Thank you, Lord. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. So to start with, for chapter 18, it says that at that time when the disciples were asking questions.

So, we need to consider the context. What does that, what time there was, what, what does at that time point to? The word time could be, could mean a long period of time or just a short period of time.

If we take it for a long period of time, we can look back to previously to 17, say the transfiguration on the mountain. So, the disciples may be asking in the kingdom of God who was the greatest, is it Moses, Elijah, or Jesus, or someone else?

[6 : 27] Or, we can look forward because after the mountain, Jesus again told the disciples that he would be arrested and killed by people.

And so, the disciples may be thinking, after Jesus is gone, who would take over the leadership? Especially who among them would be the one succeeding Jesus?

And that, I mean, that is a relevant and important question. If you, if Christianity developed like other religions, like, if you look at the history of Islam, you will see that after Muhammad died, there was a lot of bloodshed among his followers to grab power, see who could lead the group.

And so, that question is relevant. But then, I'm not going there today. I'm, I take this at that time. The time means a short time, like, at that hour.

So, what happened just before 18? That, at the end of chapter 17, we read that Jesus, the, the, religious leader were asking Jesus' disciples, whether Jesus and the disciples would pay temple tax.

[7 : 55] And so, they came to ask Jesus. Peter said, yes, we would, but then, when they asked Jesus, Jesus said, the tax is for the ruler of this world to collect from their subjects.

But they don't collect tax from their children or from their sons in particular. And so, Jesus said, we are the sons of God and so, we don't need to pay tax, at least the temple tax.

But Jesus still paid for it, partly because Jesus, Peter said he would, they would pay, but partly also, Jesus didn't want to, I suppose, create conflicts unnecessary in this instance.

But the, what Jesus, how Jesus answered the disciples, told the disciples that they were a special community, they were the sons of God.

And so, if we put this in mind, and that's why they asked this question in this community, who is the greatest, or what is considered important in this community.

[9 : 05] And the second question they asked that we'll do next week is, what rights do I have in this community? Like, if you join the army, you would know what is considered important that you can get promotion by doing or serving?

Or, what rights you have when you are bullied or being despised in the community? And that's why, even as a church community, I think this is an important question that we should consider.

And so, today, I would consider, the title of the sermon today is, a question of importance. So, this is an important question, but also about how do we become important in this community?

How do we gain our identity? So, next week, we'll talk about the question of rights. What rights do we have as a church?

So, we will consider in this 14 verses of chapter 18, three things. The first one is, our need to be important.

[10 : 23] It's not only what is important, it's the need that we need to be important. So, that is our great need. The second one is, how this need of importance causes a temer to sin.

Because we want to be important, so it's likely that we'll do something, and something that would be considered sinful. sinful. And so, the second part of it is our great sin.

And so, the need for importance, and then when we try to achieve the importance, we tend to sin. So, we are in a dilemma. And so, the third part of it is, how can we be delivered out of this dilemma?

And that is our great savior. Okay, for the first part, the disciples ask, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

Or who is the most important person in the kingdom of heaven? This question just reveals the deep needs that we all have to be someone important.

[11 : 31] We need to be somebody. You can, if you're new to a church in particular, and nobody say hello to you, or greet you, how do you feel? that's not what we would like to experience because we want to be considered important.

And that is natural for each of us. And the way the world knows that one is important is to be great, to be successful, or to be better than other people.

We can see that in President Trump's slogan, to make America great again. It's named what he's driving to. And that is the drive not only America, all of us will have.

We want to be considered somebody significant and not be despised or looked down by people. And that's why they asked this question. and they have been also perplexed by the way Jesus conducts himself. Because for the great people of the world, they will have many followers or supporters, or they are influential.

[12 : 51] But when they followed Jesus, they did not see Jesus try to be such. like when Jesus teach, he tend to teach in parables.

And that parables that a lot of people didn't understand. It didn't seem to try to attract more people. Even when Jesus healed people, cast out demons, he told those people not to tell other people about what happened to them.

He said Jesus is not there to be more famous. the disciples were hoping that, because a lot of the disciples, as we know, they are uneducated.

They did not have any position in society, or status in society. And so they were hoping that by following Jesus, they can become somebody great.

And they are willing to die for that if Jesus would lead them to do something great. But then until now, Jesus has been talking about he will be arrested, he will be killed.

[14 : 00] So the disciples were a bit uncertain how this kingdom of heaven works, what is considered important in this kingdom of heaven.

And I think we all can identify with that, because from young, we have learned to do a lot of things just to increase our own importance in school, at work, or even in church gatherings.

Many things that we do, even though it may not be the only motive, but part of it will be how we can be more acceptable or approved by other people.

And so the disciples were surprised when Jesus showed them a child and said that you can't even enter the kingdom of heaven unless you turn and like this child.

I mean, don't mention about being important in the kingdom of heaven, you can't even enter into it if you are not like this child. And what characteristic of the child that Jesus is referring to, he's not saying that we need to be childish, we need to be ignorant, but he's saying that you should be like a child in his humility.

[15 : 27] And what is humility? Humility is when a person is not thinking so much about himself, herself, and because he's like a child whose identity is in the parents.

A child does not have a personality yet or individuality but he refers to the parents as their identity. A few weeks ago, Leanne and I went to Hobart with our grandson, Thomas, he was 20 months old.

And that was because his father was there for a conference. We went there and when we went up with them and when the other tourists saw Thomas, they usually would say hello to him.

And I'm quite amazed to see Thomas straight away point to the parents, daddy, mommy. He didn't point to himself, daddy, mommy. Is that what you see?

[16 : 40] His identity is holy in the parents, at least at this stage. And so that is what it means to be humble. Humble does not mean that I feel humble.

We can, from television, we can see that when somebody gets an award or something and the person will usually say, I'm humbled by this award or something.

But he's not humble. He's actually proud of that. But he just wants to know, he knows that if he says, I'm proud, nobody will like him. So he will have to say, I'm humble. But someone is humble, he won't say, I am, he'll just say, I'm thankful for this award and I'm thankful for those who have contributed to it, all these things, but not about himself.

That is humanity. And so Jesus is saying that in the kingdom of God, you will not find someone who is boasting about himself or herself.

And because in the kingdom of God, everyone is deferring himself, herself to Jesus as their identity.

And if we know that we need to refer to Jesus or identify ourselves in Jesus, but we still struggle every day because in our flesh, we will still want to be great.

[18 : 15] But if we keep trying to be great, eventually we will become more and more self-focused, self-centered. And then we won't be able to, I mean, we won't have anything to do with the kingdom of heaven because in the kingdom of heaven, nobody who is self-centered will be there.

We need to be Christ-centered. But we still struggle. So in our struggle, we sin. We also cause other people to sin.

And so we come to the part of our great sins. In verse 6 of chapter 18, Jesus said, let me just read to you.

But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great mewstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

So who are the little ones? Jesus used a child as example. But a little one is someone who is learning to trust in Jesus, learning to live for Jesus.

[19 : 38] And so this person is not there yet, is learning, and so they can fall.

And we, when I'm preparing for this sermon, I was thinking to myself, am I a little one or am I a great one? Then I realized that as soon as I think about this, am I a little one or a great one? I'm surely not a little one. Because a little one will not even think about, a true little one will not even think about himself or herself. He's not, he doesn't care so much because he's lost in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that is a true little one, but there's none of us here, so we are halfway to dare to be the true little one. So we can be the great one and we can sin and influence the little one who look up to us, or we can follow those we look up to and sin as well.

So this is something that's happening all the time. How do we cause the little one to sin, or how the little one's cause to be sin?

[21 : 03] Their cause to sin is not to trust God for their importance. We show them that we need to try hardest to be important, and not to trust God for that.

And how do we sin? By using our eyes, our hands, our feet. So our eyes sin, when we see something, we cover it, we want it.

Our hands sin, our feet sin, we move closer to that target, the thing that I desire, and our hands sin by grabbing it and wondering it for myself.

in the history of mankind, I think the two persons who are closest to the little ones besides Jesus, Adam and Eve, yet they fell into temptation and sin as well.

And how did Satan tell Eve to sin? Satan asked Eve, did God say that you shouldn't eat any of the fruit from the garden?

[22 : 13] And then if they know only that particular fruit, we shouldn't eat, otherwise you will die. And what did Satan say? He said, no, you won't die.

That fruit is good for you. God knows that if you eat that, you will know, you can decide, you will have wisdom to decide what is good and evil.

What Satan means is that don't trust God on this because that fruit would make you great. You will be like God in being able to decide what is good and evil.

And so Eve saw with his eyes that fruit can make her greater person. And then she moves closer to the tree and then she used her hands to pick the fruit and eat it.

love. And that is how generation after generation we attempted to sin or caused others to sin by doing the same thing. We see that in the life of Lot, Abraham's nephew, when Abraham and him had too much property, servants and stocks, that Abraham said we should move apart so that we do not fight for resources.

[23 : 40] so Lot saw with his eyes that the lands near Sodom was fertile. He knew that the people in Sodom were wicked but because he was rich enough Lord but he wanted to be richer, he wanted to be greater so his feet moved closer to that place and his hand grabbed her of the land and lived there.

And we know the consequence of that he eventually lost everything. But we see a different story in the life of Jesus.

When Jesus was tempted by Satan the same thing happened. Satan said, look at the world, all is glory. If you will worship me, I will give that to you.

And Satan said, use your hand to turn the stone into food and eat. Satan told Jesus to jump down from the high place and God will protect his feet.

So all this just to tempt Jesus to be great on his own terms. But Jesus' whole identity was in God the Father.

[25 : 06] And so Satan had no way of being able to tempt Jesus to be great because Jesus was completely satisfied for his greatness in God himself.

When we look at ourselves, we can look at examples in the church context how we want to be great as well.

Sometimes I'm not talking about our church but I've been to many churches in Malaysia but this can happen in our church or other churches.

Sometimes Christians will not serve or will not do any ministries without being given a title or position. So a position like an elder or a deacon or a leader of some sort.

A title like a reverend or father and that because even in the Christian community a lot of Christians are still seeking to be great.

[26 : 24] If we follow a title, they don't want to be involved in ministries. And in particular in Chinese churches, a lot of the people who are in positions, even though they are elderly, 80 years old, 90 years old, they still would not want to step down because that is their identity.

And that is how we can be a bad example to the younger ones. Sometimes Christians will not give unless their giving is published.

It's not very common in Austria, but in Malaysia it's very common that churches will publish the list of people, their names, and how much they give week by week. We may be short, but this is a common practice.

And churches do that will tend to have more income. Because if your name appear there and you give more, then you are important, somebody who's great.

If you really want to be accountable to the giving, they could have just published the figures before the name, because people can give a unique number of some to know that your money has been given, which could be required in some Asian context, because the money is quite a big temptation for people who handle money to steal.

[27 : 56] And so it's not without reason, but now it's just been abused to make somebody great. There are also times when Christians would not turn up to service unless they are leading on their Sunday, or they are leading in songs.

Again, in Malaysia, we visit some churches repeatedly, we know that every time if we go to the church, if that leader is not doing something on the front, that leader will not be in the church.

So every time unless the leader is doing something in front, that is also accepted. Again, there's a sign to show that we want to be great.

the other thing about Christians' tendency is that in a church setting, roads that would attract attention, like in the front or doing something, usually it's not difficult to get people to take up those roads, but if you get people to do cleaning behind things behind the scene, it will be a lot harder to get people to do that.

So that is something that we all struggle. I'll mention one more way that we can be a bad example is how an altitude when in a church setting, if one day your small group leader or an elder come to you to challenge you about your behavior or belief, if your first response is that how dare you look down on me, regardless of what the problem is, then we need to be very careful.

[30 : 02] So when we are challenged and our first response is that these people are looking down on me, then if we have such a response, it is easy for us to subsequently criticize those leaders who talk to us, and so being a bad influence to people whom we talk about this too.

And so for all these examples, we can see that we are all great sinners, even in the church setting. How can we be safe?

How can we get importance at the same time and not sin? And that is, we have to come to the great Savior.

In verse 14, we are thankful that Jesus did not stop in giving us a warning about sinning. Verse 14 he said, so it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. And that is a great promise. In chapter 18, basically, there are two things that will happen for us to be delivered from this dilemma or to be safe.

[31 : 26] One thing is mentioned in the second half that I will talk about next week, that is we recognize that we have sinned and we confess this sin and by doing so we will be turned back into the little one when we realize that we have been trying to be the great one.

But in this first half, Jesus is talking about the other thing that is the shepherd or God himself will come and seek those who are lost.

So there is the two things that will happen. One is the seeking from the shepherd or God. the other thing is the response from the sheep. And so Jesus said one sheep that is lost, the shepherd will go and look, will search and bring him home.

And there are 99 sheep that is out, sorry, one out of a hundred that is lost. But he doesn't, he didn't mean that the 99 sheep were not lost though.

The 99 sheep usually in the context is to refer to the Pharisees, the religious people who don't think that they are lost because they are not struggling with greatness because they already gain greatness from their position.

[32 : 50] So we know that Pharisees like to be called teacher or some sort of names or give them respect. And they pray long prayers, impressive prayers.

They wear impressive attires. And so those 99 sheep, they do not rely on God for their identity or their importance. But the one sheep is the one who is struggling, who are struggling to either trust himself or trust himself or trust Jesus for their importance.

And so Jesus came to a person like that. And how does this great shepherd save us from the denom?

The first song we sing, we have a strong plea before the throne of God. So Jesus pleads for us. He said that he has died for us. So our debt has been paid.

We sing that. But on the cross, he shows two things. One is that the pursuit of importance or greatness is not meaningful.

[34 : 12] Second thing is the pursuit of importance or greatness is not necessary. Why is it not meaningful? We just now, in the beginning, Gareth read to us that Jesus, despite Jesus being equal with God, Jesus is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Despite, well, not despite actually, because he's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, he was able to consider this greatness not a thing to be grasped, but empty himself.

That's because he's great. He can do that. And he become in the form of a servant and born in the likeness of man and being found in human nature, he humbled himself by being obedient to the point of death, even death to the cross.

Jesus is showing us on the cross that if you want to be the greatest person, you need to be basically the greatest person is the one who can lay down the greatness and give it away.

And that is the true greatness. And so the greatness that we gain from this world, from the praise of other people, from our own achievements, performance, they are quite empty.

[35 : 50] They don't have much substance. We can see that President Trump is trying to make Americans great again by making them wealthier, the tariffs that he's imposing, because they don't want Americans to be taken advantage by other countries.

In a sense, Americans have been subsidizing the economy of many countries, but that had to end so that Americans themselves can be richer again. But is that greatness?

When Americans were greater, when they were considerate to other developing countries, when they were helping other people, and that is true greatness, to be able to put down oneself.

And so if we try to gain greatness in this world, they don't have much real meaning. The second thing is that it is not necessary, because while we were enemies towards God, God has shown his love to us that Christ died for us.

If God loved us despite us being hostile to him, that means we are precious in God's side. And so we really don't need to be any more important if the Almighty God, if the Lord Jesus Christ loved us and we already are important.

[37 : 30] And so we don't actually need to seek importance elsewhere. Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? in chapter 11 of Matthew, Jesus said John the Baptist was the greatest person ever born until his time.

But he said even the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist. What does that mean? Why was John the Baptist the greatest in his time?

Because of all the prophets, John the Baptist was the only one who was the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ. His whole life purpose was to witness to Jesus Christ.

But why is the least in the kingdom of heaven greater than John the Baptist? Because John the Baptist couldn't say one thing that all those others in the kingdom of heaven subsequent to Jesus

death could say.

We all can say I have been crucified with Christ. It's no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

[38 : 59] You see it's no longer you or I who live is Christ who lives in me and in you. And that's why we are greater than John the Baptist in that way.

John the Baptist died before Christ was crucified. Jesus is building his church with people whose purpose in life is to honor the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

I mean if our church mature towards this then we can be generous towards one another. We can sacrifice our time.

We can compliment one another more and we can be a true witness for the Lord Jesus Christ by the way we love one another.

Let us pray. Father God we know there so many times we are tempted to trust ourselves or trust our achievements to gain approval.

[40 : 19] We are so forgetful that we are tempted by advertisements by how other people live. we thank you for your goodness to us that you come and seek us and you remind us that we don't need to do so because you love us to the extent of giving your son for us.

Father we ask that you might help us to enjoy this love and enjoy one another as brothers and sisters in the kingdom of God. we pray in Jesus name.

Amen. Amen.