

The significance of the insignificant

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is found in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 19, verse 13 through to verse 30, and it's on page 994 in the Church Bibles.

Then children were brought to him, that is Jesus, that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.

And he laid his hands on them and went away. And behold, a man came up to him, saying, Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?

And he said to him, Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.

He said to him, Which ones? And Jesus said, You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness.

[1 : 13] Honor your father and mother, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The young man said to him, All these I have kept.

What do I still lack? Jesus said to him, If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess, and give to the poor.

And you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me. When the young man heard this, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

And Jesus said to his disciples, Truly I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, Who then can be saved? But Jesus looked at them and said, With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.

[2 : 29] Then Peter said in reply, See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have? Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my sake, will inherit a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.

But many who are first will be last and the last first. If you read the newspapers, you'll know that the political party conference season has just ended.

And if you've been following the reports of it on the news, you'll know that the question of national security has been prominent this year. Politicians have been grilled with questions like, Would you ever press the button to launch a nuclear strike?

Do you want to renew Trident? And will you support military intervention in Syria? And of course, they're important questions for politicians to consider.

[3 : 54] After all, the defence of the realm is a principal concern for any government. But what about for us? What question ought to be uppermost in our minds?

What's the principal concern that we ought to have? Well, as Simon mentioned, this morning we're beginning a little mini-series in chapters 19 and 20 of Matthew's Gospel.

And the question which dominates much of these chapters is the question the Bible would say is of uttermost importance. The question of how we can enter the kingdom of heaven.

The question not of our national security, but even more importantly, our eternal security. This week, we're just looking at the first three verses of our reading, verses 13 to 15 of Matthew 19.

But just notice the question we read earlier in verse 16 at the beginning of the passage that we'll be looking at next Sunday. We're told, verse 16, that a man came up to Jesus and asked him,

Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?

[4 : 59] What good deed must I do to have eternal life? Now, as we'll see, this man's question actually reveals a grave misunderstanding about how eternal life is received.

But his concern is right, isn't it? How can I have eternal life? Or look on to the disciples' question to Jesus in verse 25. They too are somewhat confused and they ask Jesus, Who then can be saved? Saved, that is, from the judgment the Bible says our sin merits before a holy God. You see, like the rich man before them, the disciples understood that there can be no more important or relevant question for us, even in the 21st century, than that which concerns our eternal security, our eternal destiny.

And it's the same question which is in view in the short passage we have before us this morning. Have a look at verse 14. Jesus said, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.

It's the same issue that's under discussion. Who gets into heaven, into God's kingdom? It's the most important question we could ever ask. And it's a question to which, wonderfully, we can know the answer.

[6 : 26] And we find it right here, in Matthew 19 and 20. If you're not able to come back for the remainder of this little series, why not download the forthcoming sermons from our church website?

Because Jesus' answer to this most fundamental of questions that we'll be looking at over the next few weeks is somewhat surprising, I think. Well, having set up the big question of the section as a whole, let's dive into the few verses we're looking at this morning.

And we're going to consider just two things together from verses 13 to 15. Here's the first, and you'll see the headings are printed on the back of the service sheets. The most loving thing we can do for our children is to bring them to Jesus.

The most loving thing we can do for our children is to bring them to Jesus. Now, my guess is that these are well-known verses for many of us here. But I think their primary message is often misunderstood.

Because as I hope we'll see later, principally, these verses aren't here simply to show us how much Jesus likes children. Or to tell us how innocent children are. Or perhaps to teach us something about infant baptism.

[7 : 34] Now, understood in context, they're giving us an illustration of how we can enter the kingdom. The children are a picture for us to imitate. We'll see in what sense that's the case later on.

But although that may be Matthew's main intention, since we've got the luxury of being able to focus on just these three verses this morning, let's not be so quick to jump to the main point that we fail to notice what's actually going on here in the episode itself.

Let me remind us of what happens by reading from verse 13. Then children were brought to Jesus that he might lay his hands on them and pray.

The disciples rebuked the people. But Jesus said, Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven. And he laid his hands on them and went away.

Now, what's going on here is that people are bringing little children to Jesus. The word Matthew uses implies that these are infants or very young children. Presumably, they were doing so because they want some kind of blessing from Jesus, his favor on and acceptance of these children.

[8 : 41] And they want Jesus to pray for them. I guess we may not see much wrong with that. But the disciples are somewhat put out and they rebuke these parents or whoever it was that was bringing the children to Jesus.

Now, that may seem somewhat unreasonable. But we need to understand how children were perceived back then. Children are often the center of attention today, aren't they?

Perhaps too much sometimes. But back then, the culture was much more akin to the Victorian idea that children should be seen and not heard. Children were nobodies with no status or rights in society.

And I guess the disciples were irritated that these lowly children were interrupting Jesus' important teaching and ministry. I was on a long train journey the other day, trying to do some work on a quiet carriage when the train pulled into the next station.

And bounding onto my carriage came dozens of noisy schoolchildren, instantly disturbing my peace. And I felt resentful. I almost moved carriage to get away from them.

[9 : 48] There's nothing worse than sitting next to a screaming infant on a long-haul flight, or your own child suddenly playing up at a wedding or an important function, failing to understand the significance of the occasion.

And I guess these disciples saw these children simply as an irritation, somehow being beneath Jesus. And so they wanted to get them away from him.

After all, why would Jesus be interested in children? But Jesus was interested in them.

Yes, partly, as we'll see, because he wanted to use them as an illustration for his hearers. But he does also urge the disciples to let the children come to him. And he does lay hands on them, I guess as an expression of his concern for them.

So while the disciples themselves are rebuked for seeking to keep the children from Jesus, those who brought to him are, I guess, commended. And I guess there has to be a lesson for us there.

[10 : 51] These parents were willing to defy social conventions so their children can meet Jesus. They knew, I guess, how important it was that these children came to Jesus because only through Jesus, as we'll see, could they enter his heavenly kingdom.

And as we think about the baptisms this morning, I guess that's a privilege that both Jack and Tom have enjoyed since their earliest day. Having parents who've introduced them to the Lord Jesus and the salvation he offers.

And I hope and imagine that as Jack and Tom make this public stand as Christian believers this morning, they are enormously grateful that their parents gave them that privilege. If we love our children, we'll bring them to Jesus.

I'm aware, of course, that not all of us here will be parents. But for those of us who are, I wonder what aspirations we have for our children. Apparently, 49% of parents would be happy for their child to be a doctor, 45% an engineer, 43% a lawyer, but only 16% a musician or an artist.

I guess we want our children to be healthy and happy, to be socially adept and popular, to be successful and well-off, perhaps to marry well and have children and generally to become responsible citizens.

[12 : 12] Certainly, the way we parent and spend our money communicates that, doesn't it? So in a place like Dulwich, huge amounts of money are spent on school fees, sports clubs, music lessons, social engagements, and so on.

Now, for the most part, they're good things. But if that's where it ends, the Bible would say we're failing to care for our children in the most important way of all. To care for their material needs, but not their spiritual needs, is to sell them desperately short.

In fact, to set them up for success in this life, without equipping them for eternal life, could be catastrophic, if what we'll see later about entering God's kingdom really is true.

Now, I guess that's somewhat counter-cultural today. Long gone are the days of children attending Sunday school, being the norm in this country. And just as these people met, in Matthew 19, met opposition from the disciples for bringing children to Jesus, so we may raise eyebrows or be criticised if our number one priority is to introduce our children to Jesus.

For example, there will be some who will accuse us of brainwashing our children and not giving them the opportunity to make up their own minds. But we don't think like that in our parenting about other things that are good for our children, do we?

[13 : 40] We don't let them make up their own minds about how many sweets to eat or whether to bother to do their homework. We rather teach them the dangers of eating too much unhealthy food and the importance of self-discipline and hard work.

Well, how much more if Jesus is the one who can guarantee eternal security for our children, ought we to teach them about him? And of course, not to teach our children about Jesus is just as much to teach them a worldview as it is to do so.

We inevitably give out the message to our children that Jesus isn't that important, that it's okay to go through life without him at the heart of it, that even if there is a God, he isn't particularly relevant to daily life and that we don't need to bother much about eternal matters.

There can surely be no greater thing we can do for our children than tell them about Jesus. Now, for those of us here who are Christian believers and parents, I guess following the example of these parents in Matthew 19 will have huge implications for our own parenting.

Perhaps also for those of us who are grandparents or godparents. We go to such great efforts, don't we, to try to get our children into the school we want them to attend or into the school orchestra or whatever it may be.

[14:56] But do we go to the same efforts to introduce them to Jesus? Of course, we can't physically bring them to him in the way people did in Matthew 19 and obviously, we can't determine our children's ultimate response to the gospel.

But through the things we teach them and the priorities we model to them, we can give them the privilege of knowing the good news and the importance of the gospel from their earliest days. I guess that will have implications for Sunday mornings with all the sports clubs that happen at the same time as church or for summer holidays, perhaps prioritizing one of the Christian camps that the young people here at Grace Church go to, for example.

And it'll mean we spend time reading the Bible too and with our children, maybe discussing what they learned at Sunday club over Sunday lunch. It'll mean praying for our children's spiritual progress and spending time chatting to them about Christian things.

The most loving thing we can do for our children is to bring them to Jesus. Even for those of us who aren't parents, this may still have something to teach us, I think. Maybe we could be involved in this important ministry with children by volunteering to help out at Sunday club or to cook on a summer camp.

[16:12] And it'll mean we'll be willing to put up with a little bit of noise and disruption during our services sometimes. Because unlike the disciples in Matthew 19, we're so delighted that our children have the opportunity to meet the Lord Jesus.

Now I'm conscious that the kind of priorities I've just been outlining are very different from those most people around us possess. And there may well be some here for whom this seems all rather over the top, perhaps even pretty weird in our modern world.

But I hope the second thing we're going to see from this passage explains why it's so vitally important that all of us and not just our children meet the Lord Jesus, that we know him personally. And I hope we'll see that the reason why we want to bring our children to church or to read the Bible with them isn't because that's how we or they get to heaven or because Jesus just wants us to bring up children who are little religious do-gooders.

but rather something quite different that means our deepest longing will be for our children to understand what Jesus came to do for us. And that brings us on to the other thing we're going to note from this passage this morning which is I think Matthew's principal reason for including these verses here.

[17:27] So secondly, none of us can enter the kingdom unless we become like children. None of us can enter the kingdom unless we become like children. Now if we were to read verses 13 to 15 simply in isolation we might think that what we've been saying so far is all that they have to teach us and see them simply as sentimental verses about Jesus' attitude to children.

But Bible passages need to be understood in context and if we'd been reading Matthew from the beginning we'd remember that only in the previous chapter Jesus has also referred to children in a way that helps us understand what's going on here.

Now before we turn back just look down with me at verse 14 of chapter 19 again because it's striking I think that Jesus says let the little children come to me and do not hinder them for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.

To such. In other words to people who are in some way like these little children. You see I don't think Jesus is saying here that you have to be a child to go to heaven or that all children unconditionally enjoy his favour.

Rather he's already given us the key to understanding what he means back in chapter 18 where we see who the such of Matthew 19 14 refers to the way in which we're to be like children.

[18:51] So flick back with me if you would just a page to chapter 18 and verses 1 to 4. Matthew 18 and let me read from verse 1.

We're told that 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. A recent poll in the US found that the words most commonly associated with Donald Trump the tycoon who is I

think currently the front runner to be the Republican candidate in next year's presidential election was arrogant and certainly he's not a man short on self confidence.

He recently said this he said people love me and you know what I have been very successful everybody loves me. Another time he said nobody can build like I can build or listen to this claim of his I am truly a really good individual.

Ironically when asked in a recent debate what he thought his secret service codename ought to be if he were elected president he said clearly sarcastically humble. Now we may be amused by such exaggerated bravado but arrogance is often applauded in our world.

[20 : 27] humility is seen as weak and somewhat pathetic. But here in Matthew 18 for Jesus humility is a prerequisite for entering his heavenly kingdom.

The one thing without which entry is impossible. Notice in Matthew 18 that Jesus is talking about entry into the kingdom of heaven just as he is in our verses in Matthew 19.

and to illustrate heaven's entry policy he calls a little child to him and says to his hearers that unless they become like children they'll never enter the kingdom.

None of us can enter the kingdom unless we become like children. But notice what it is about children that Jesus is commending.

How it is that we're to be like children. because Jesus isn't saying as people sometimes mistakenly think that children are a picture of innocence and that that's the way we're to be like them.

[21 : 27] Any parent actually soon discovers that children are far from innocent. They don't have to be taught to steal or to be selfish or to squabble. Nor is Jesus commending the naivety of children as if the secret to getting into his kingdom is to bury our head in the sand and adopt an unthinking blind faith based on wishful thinking.

Now Jesus himself tells us here what it is about children that we are to imitate. It's there in verse 4. Have a look. Jesus says whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

We're to be humble. Now the Bible is its own interpreter. So what we have here in Matthew 18 is the key to helping us understand our verses in Matthew 19.

Which means that when Jesus says in verse 14 of Matthew 19 if we turn back that the kingdom belongs to such as these those like little children it's those who are humble like little children who he has in mind.

We must humble ourselves to enter the kingdom. but again we need to be careful not to misunderstand here. Jesus isn't saying that we need to work really hard to be self-effacing and to put ourselves down so God will then reward our humility by giving us a place in his kingdom as if we can earn our salvation by being really humble people.

[22 : 54] In fact he's saying precisely the opposite that we need to humble ourselves by acknowledging that we can't earn our salvation that we need rescuing that we are by ourselves sinful people who don't deserve to be accepted into Jesus' kingdom.

And we can see that from what comes next. The gospel writers love to paint contrasts in the way they order their material and these contrasts often help us understand the meaning of particular passages and here Matthew deliberately juxtaposes this episode with the little children with the account of the rich young man which follows.

Because if little children are a picture an illustration of what we must be like to enter the kingdom the rich young man is a picture of what we're not to be like.

We'll be looking at the rich young man properly next week but the shock of the passage is that this rich man as he was wouldn't enter the kingdom despite all his worldly success and apparent moral uprightness.

And the reason was because he wouldn't humble himself. And admit he couldn't earn his own way into heaven. As verse 26 puts it, for man on his own entering the kingdom is impossible.

[24 : 13] We just can't reach heaven's perfect entry requirements. In fact this young man's mistake was evident from his very first words in verse 16 which make it clear that he thought his good deeds could bring him eternal life.

life. And of course his way of thinking is the way so many people today think. What people assume about how we can enter the kingdom of heaven.

But if we the reader have learned the lesson of the previous verses, the verses we're looking at this morning, we'll know how wrong such thinking is. Because like children we must rather humble

ourselves, admitting our guilt and our helpless standing before a holy God and receive his forgiveness as a free gift.

Just as children receive presents and everything that they need from their parents as a free gift. If this chunk of Matthew that we're looking at begins with a rich man misunderstanding how to receive eternal life, it ends with two blind men at the end of chapter 20 who get it exactly right when they cry out to Jesus, Lord have mercy on us.

Have mercy on us. So if we want to enter God's kingdom, we need first to humble ourselves by admitting our helpless state before God and then to beg him for mercy.

[25 : 32] And wonderfully, he loves to be merciful to those who are humble. That is of course something of what baptism signifies. The water is in part a picture of how we need to be washed, washed by Jesus because we're stained by our sin, by the way that we push God, the God who made us to the margins of our lives.

The water reminds us that we need to be washed by someone else. And of course, less than two chapters after our passage, Jesus enters Jerusalem in order to die on a cross so we might be washed by his blood.

You see, by paying the penalty for our sin in our place on the cross, Jesus does for us what we can never do for ourselves. So none of us can enter the kingdom unless we become like children.

And that's hard, isn't it? It's hard to humble yourself. None of us like to admit we have a problem, that we're unable to rescue ourselves, that in God's eyes we're not a really good individual to use Donald Trump's expression about himself, but rather rebellious sinners who have offended a holy God.

But it is only to those who, like children, humble themselves before God and acknowledge that, like children, they have no rights or standing of their own before him. It is only to such that the kingdom of heaven belongs, according to Jesus.

[27 : 08] So the most important question we could ever ask concerns our eternal security. And these few verses teach us that eternal life isn't gained through what we do, like the rich young man thought, or through being religious as if baptism itself, for example, makes us acceptable to God, but is given to us on the basis of what Jesus has done for us on the cross.

It's very humbling, but there's no other way to enter the kingdom. let's pray. Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.

Our Father, we acknowledge again this morning that as we are, none of us has any claim upon your kingdom, and none of us can earn our way into it by our good deeds.

We fall far too far short. God, we thank you so much that you delight to show mercy to those who humble themselves. And we pray that this morning you would help each one of us to understand our perilous state before you, but also to rejoice in what the Lord Jesus has done at the cross to make it possible for people to enter your kingdom.

And we pray that you would give us the humility and the honesty about ourselves to acknowledge our need for forgiveness, and therefore to cry out, like those blind men, for mercy.

[28 : 36] And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.