

The Little Ones of the Kingdom

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Date: 05 March 2017

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[0 : 00] Well, on the next slide, who is this person? That says it, doesn't it? I didn't make it very hard for you, did I?

But here's the question. What was his most famous line? I am the greatest, yeah. And now no doubt he was one of the greatest boxers of his time, but the question then becomes, well, who are the greatest people of our time?

Who are the greatest people in society? Who does the world say are the most important? Doctors, because they save lives, perhaps. Politicians, because they lead us.

Sports people, because we Australians love our sport. Or CEOs, because they make lots of money. Or Hollywood stars, because they are famous.

Certainly we pay Hollywood stars enough money and photograph them as though they're the greatest. But who are the greatest, the most important people? A little while ago, my children were talking about who the greatest parent was, me or Michelle.

[1 : 05] You see, they were trying to bait us into giving them dessert. Now, Michelle had actually already said they could have it earlier, and so she was the greatest parent. Then our youngest added, and mum, you look so nice tonight.

And then she turned to me and went, Dad, keep working on it. And so for our kids, the greatest and most important parent is the one who gives dessert and looks the nicest.

Please pray for them. But who are the greatest? That's the question the disciples asked Jesus today. So we're at point one in your outlines and sentence or verse one in your Bibles.

At that time, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And I wonder what they might have been thinking Jesus would say.

I wonder what sort of answer the disciples might have expected. Perhaps in their minds, they thought the greatest in the kingdom was the one who did the most amazing miracles, the best preacher, the one who helped the poor the most.

[2 : 07] In Christian terms of today, perhaps a Billy Graham, a Tim Keller, a Mother Teresa. But Jesus says something very different. Have a look at verse number two to four.

He called, Jesus 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. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly or humble position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus uses a visual aid, doesn't he?

He welcomes a child, places the child in the middle and says, This is greatness. Jesus is saying, True greatness in God's eyes, true importance in the kingdom is about being like a child.

But how? Are we to become innocent and unassuming again? Let me say, children don't remain innocent for all that long. Or are we to throw tantrums and not listen to our parents like some children?

[3 : 13] In fact, I saw on Facebook the other day a quote on the next slide from one mother. She said, Having kids has taught me that their ears are there for decorative purposes only. So how are we to change and be like a child?

Well, have a look at verse four again. Jesus says, it's about having a child's lowly or humble status. Children, you see, are dependent on others for help.

Children have to trust in and depend on their parents for food and life. And so Jesus is saying that to enter the kingdom, verse three, and therefore to be great in the kingdom, verse four, involves the same thing.

Everyone who enters the kingdom is, by the way, great in the kingdom. That's the implication. And it involves the same thing. It involves humbling yourself to trust in and depend on Jesus.

It's about acknowledging that we cannot earn our way into the kingdom of heaven ourselves. We need to be perfect to do that and yet none of us are. So instead, we must depend on Jesus and his death to pay for our sins, to wipe the slate clean, to, as we're saying in that other hymn, Jesus Loves Me, which is very well chosen, to wash our sins away.

[4 : 33] We need to depend on him to do that so that we can enter the kingdom. And then greatness in the kingdom means continuing to do the same thing, to continue trusting in Jesus for the best way to live our lives now as members of the kingdom.

That's true greatness, true importance. I was visiting a member of our church last week who was in hospital after suffering a serious heart attack.

In the world's eyes, she is not very important or great. She lives in a small nursing home room. She has little money and she now has very poor health. She had before. Now it's even worse.

When I saw her in hospital, she was sharing a room with five other patients. There's no special treatment. She had a hard life, unloving parents, her husband dying, leaving her with five young ones to raise on her own and yet, despite it all, she continues to trust in Jesus.

Found strength, comfort and guaranteed hope in Jesus. Another church member said to me about her, I cannot remember knowing anyone more faithful to God over so many years.

[5 : 46] So here is someone who has few worldly achievements. Her name will not go down in the history books of our society. She's not great or important in the world's eyes, but she is in God's.

And yet, so also is every person who humbly depends on and trusts in Jesus. That is, every Christian is great and important to God. And that ought to shape how we treat one another.

You see, the importance we give a person often shapes how we treat them, does it not? During the Australian Open in January, some people from our church lined up to get autographs from Federer and Nadal.

But I've never had anyone line up and get my autograph. Have you? No? I mean, we're not great tennis players, of course, but you see, the importance and greatness we give to someone often shapes how we treat them, whether by asking for autographs or not.

And yet, every Christian who humbly trusts and depends on Jesus is a little one. They enter the kingdom and are great in the kingdom. And so that ought to shape how we treat one another, you see.

[6 : 57] And that's what the rest of chapter 18 is largely about. Verses 1-4 are like an introduction about true greatness and importance. And the rest of the chapter is about how we are to treat one another, given our greatness and importance to God.

And so next week, we'll see that we're to seek reconciliation and forgive one another with that famous parable of the forgiving servant or unforgiving servant. But this week, we'll see that it means three things.

Firstly, we had to welcome one another. So point two on your outlines and verse five in your Bibles. Jesus continues and says, and whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Here, Jesus moves from talking about actual little children to talking about Christians who come in his name. Like in ancient times, if you come in the name of the king, it meant you came as one of the king's people, one of his representatives.

You belong to him or so too here. A child who comes in the name of Jesus is a person who belongs to Jesus. Jesus is now talking, you see, about Christians, how we treat one another.

[8 : 02] And he actually ups the importance of us Christians, doesn't he? He says, whoever welcomes one such child, you know, who humbly trusts in him, a little one, actually welcomes Jesus himself.

You see, it really does matter how we treat one another, doesn't it? On the next slide, we read a few chapters later in Matthew, Jesus was telling a story and he says, he tells a story from the perspective of someone who helped a fellow Christian.

And the fellow, the person who helps says, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?

Then the King Jesus will reply, truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. You see, to welcome a fellow Christian is to welcome Christ.

It really does matter how we treat one another, doesn't it? And so we are to welcome one another. How? Well, it's more than just saying welcome in Sunday mornings at church.

[9 : 10] It should include that. But it's more than that. In the ancient world, to welcome someone often included giving them a meal, for example. It still does in some cultures. Again, in the ancient world, if they were travelling, often it was by foot and they needed somewhere to stay.

So it included giving them a bed. In other words, welcoming people involves caring for their needs. Things like the examples we just saw on the screen.

And can I say, I've seen people here do that. I was talking with someone on Wednesday, I think it was, who said that the help they have received from church people here when they were having chemo was invaluable.

They said they wouldn't have been able to get through the cancer and the chemo without it. And I know that many of you do provide meals, whether through frozen ministry or on your own to other people who need it.

Others have told me how cards or text messages have encouraged them when they were sick or struggling or when they'd missed church just to be noticed that they were gone. People even gave me meals when Michelle was overseas last year, which the kids loved because they didn't like my cooking.

[10 : 24] All of this is part of welcoming and caring for one another. And on the flip side though, we're not to cause one another or ourselves to stumble.

So point three, verse six. Jesus continues with literally, but whoever 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 to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble. As such things must come because we live in a fallen world, but woe to the person through whom they come. If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.

It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away.

It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. Wow. Welcome to Holy Trinity this morning.

[11 : 29] I hope you have a great time so far. It is full on language, isn't it? Jesus says in verse 6 and 7, don't cause others to stumble and in verse 8 and 9, don't cause ourselves to stumble.

To stumble here means to walk away from Jesus and heaven that comes with him. But why does Jesus use such full on language? Well, for two reasons, I think.

At first, so that we'll know it's serious. I mean, he calls hell an eternal fire that lasts forever. That's pretty bad. And he says that hell is so bad you're better off gouging out your eye than ending up there.

Hell is so bad that you're better off cutting off your hand or your foot at being a crippled in life than ending up there. To walk away from Jesus and heaven that comes with him, well, the only alternative is hell.

And Jesus wants us to know that it is real and seriously bad. But second, Jesus speaks like this because he's also concerned for us and our eternity.

[12 : 39] So in verse 6, there is a threat for anyone who causes one of his little ones, those who believe in him, to stumble. Why? Because he's concerned for his people and our eternity.

And in verses 8 and 9, there's a severe warning for us. Why? Well, again, because he's concerned for us and our eternity. He doesn't want us to end up suffering in hell but end up enjoying life in heaven.

I mean, that's the purpose of a warning, is it not? On the next slide is a warning sign and it says life after death, trespass here and find out.

But there's also those graphic or severe warnings on things like cigarette packets. Have you seen those? Or on TV ads when they've got speeding cars and you actually see someone get hit. And the images are quite graphic. I was going to show you some of them this morning but they were a bit too severe. Yet that's the point, isn't it? It's meant to be so that people don't end up suffering.

[13 : 51] So too here. The severe warning is meant to stop us from suffering in hell. And so the severe language here not only helps us to see how serious it is, it's also because Jesus does not want any of his little ones, us or others who trust in him, to stumble and miss out on heaven.

You see, we and our eternity are important to him. Now of course God can bring those who stumble back and we'll see that later but for here we are not to cause others or ourselves to stumble but what does that look like?

What does that involve? Well it's doing anything that leads others or ourselves away from Christ. Now perhaps one of the most common examples of causing others to stumble is where a Christian is really hurt by the words or actions of another Christian at church and so the first Christian ends up walking away from church from Jesus.

I've sadly heard that story far too many times. In fact one young lady was telling me just last Friday that that's what happened to her at her old church. A Christian said some really hurtful things to her such that she ended up walking away from church.

Thankfully after a while God prompted her to look for another church and she's ended up here. Of course those who are hurt and walk away will sometimes use their experience to blame God when it's not God's fault or they'll use their experience never to look for another church again.

[15:20] That's their decision that's on them. But as Christians we're not meant to cause them to stumble in the first place because they matter to God. Or for ourselves as well we're not to put stumbling blocks in our way that will take us away from Christ.

So for another person I know at our church she said that she has cut off not a hand but all alcohol even though she knows Christians are free to have a drink. Why? Well because she used to struggle with alcoholism and she knows it would be too easy for her to be consumed by it again and that it would lead her away from Christ and so she's cut it out completely.

That's just one type of example. You see both we and our eternity matter to God and so we must be careful we don't do things that lead others or ourselves astray or push ourselves and others away from Christ.

Instead we are to welcome one another not cause ourselves or others to stumble nor despise one another. Point four verse ten Jesus continues see that you do not despise one of these little ones for I tell you that the angels in heaven always see the face of my father in heaven.

Here we are not to despise a fellow Christian a little one who trusts in Christ and despises to look down on them and think that they are beneath us or unimportant to us and we're not to do that because Christians are important to God.

[16:58] That's the point of the comment about the angels there. It's a bit of a strange idea but it seems Jesus is saying that we are important enough to have angels in heaven who are always in God's presence always see his face and therefore are always ready to be sent to help us in need.

And if we're important enough to have that then we're important enough not to be despised by each other you see. And in case we haven't quite got how important we are to God as his little ones we'll look at verse 12 to 14.

Jesus continues 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 truly I tell you 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 perish.

See God is not willing to let any of his children perish. He cares for each individual Christian and is willing to go after them and bring them back.

[18:11] He is like a shepherd that we heard about in our first reading who goes off and searches for the one who's being lost to bring them back to his flock.

And when he does it says here that he rejoices at their return. Not because he values the one more than the ninety-nine but because the one that was once lost is now found.

It's like a parent who has some children at a shopping centre and one of the children wanders off and is lost and the parent then chases after them and finds them. They are relieved and they hug them.

They probably tell them off as well but they rejoice that they have this child back. It doesn't mean they now love this one who wanted off more than the ones who stayed. No, no, it just means that they were concerned for them being lost and rejoice now that they are back.

But the point is here that we are important to God. We are great in his eyes. That is, we little ones who humbly trust in and depend on Jesus.

[19:15] And so the first question for us this morning is do we do that? Do we humbly trust in Jesus? Do we depend on him and his death to pay for our sins?

To wash away our sins as we sung so that we can enter God's kingdom? Remember that's how Jesus started today by saying that to enter the kingdom means being like a child who humbly trusts in and depends on him.

Verse 3 We cannot depend on ourselves to get into the kingdom. As I said, we have to be perfect and none of us are. We cannot get our perfection back by doing lots of good things.

We'll never get it back. Instead, like a child, we need to trust in and depend on Jesus, depend on his death to pay for our sins so that we can enter in.

Have you done that? And for us who have, then secondly, we have to realise how important we are to God. After all, he gave his one and only son to die for you.

[20 : 15] And for me. To suffer hell upon the cross so that we don't have to. You don't do that for someone who is not important to you, do you?

You see, we matter to God. In the world's eyes, the great and important are the CEOs, the Hollywood stars, the sports people. In the world's eyes, most of us in this room this morning, I'm sorry to say, are not very great or important at all.

I mean, I think you are, but in the world's eyes, not so much. Yet we are to God. Our names may not be written in the world's history books, but our names are written in God's book of life.

We matter to him. And although he never promises us an easy life in this broken world, he promises us that he will always be with us to walk through it.

And because we are important to him, he will ensure that we are brought home to the world to come, where there's no more suffering. The lady I mentioned at the start, who's in hospital at the moment, I was in the room on Friday when the doctors told her that there's not much more they can do for her.

[21 : 31] It's likely she'll have another heart attack, they don't know when, and that will probably be it for her. It was hard news for us all to hear, and yet despite knowing that, she knows her Lord is with her and will bring her home to heaven because she is important as one of his little ones.

She's great in his eyes. And finally, since we are important to God and great in his eyes, then we are to be important to one another. We are not to cause others or ourselves to stumble nor despise one another.

Instead, we are to welcome one another, care for and encourage one another as God's great little ones. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you this morning for this reminder of who the greatest are.

It is not as the world sees it, but it is those who humbly trust in and depend on the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, Father, we pray that you would help us to do this, especially when life is hard, knowing that you will never leave us nor forsake us, because we are important to you, and knowing that you will bring us home to heaven to be with you.

Father, help us to remember this, and to remember that we are all important, and so do what we can to encourage one another. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

[23 : 01] Amen. So we would actually■