

The Little Ones of the Kingdom

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[0 : 00] Well, on the next slide is this great boxer who died last year, Muhammad Ali. Who can remember his most famous line? I am the greatest.

Yeah. And he was one of the greatest boxers of his time. But I wonder who you would say are the greatest people of our society. Who are the great ones, not just the boxers, but people in general? Who are the most important in our society? Doctors, because they save lives. Politicians, because they lead us. Sports people, because we Australians love our sport.

CEOs, because, well, they have lots of money. Hollywood stars, because they are famous. Certainly we pay Hollywood stars lots of money and we take enough photographs of them as though they are the greatest.

But who are the greatest people in society? A little while ago, my children were talking about which parent was the greatest, me or Michelle. You see, they were trying to bait us into giving them dessert.

[1 : 08] Now, Michelle had actually already said they could have it earlier. And so she automatically became the greatest parent. And then our youngest added, and mum, you're looking so nice tonight too.

She turned to me and went, dad, keep working on it. And so for our kids, the greatest and most important parent was the one who gives dessert and looks nice. Please pray for my kids. But who are the greatest? That's the question the disciples actually asked Jesus at the beginning of our passage today. So we're at point one in your outlines and verse number or sentence number one in your Bibles.

Have a look there. At that time, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? I wonder what the disciples expected Jesus to say here.

I wonder what sort of answer they expected Jesus to give. Perhaps in their minds, the greatest in the kingdom was someone who did, I don't know, amazing miracles, or was the best preacher, or helped the poor the most.

[2 : 12] In Christian terms today, a Billy Graham or a Mother Teresa. But Jesus says something very different. Look at verse or sentence number two. He 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, he says.

Jesus here, he uses a visual aid, doesn't he? He asks a little child to come and stand in front. And then he says to his disciples, This is greatness.

It would be like me taking young Hannah and saying, This is greatness. No doubt Alex and Krista think she is great.

But Jesus says true greatness in God's eyes, true importance to him, is about being like a child. But in what way? Are we to become innocent and unassuming again?

[3 : 21] Well, children don't remain innocent for too long if you've had any experience with kids. Or are we to throw tantrums and not listen to our parents like other children? In fact, I saw on Facebook the other day this quote on the next slide.

And it said, Having kids has taught me that their ears are there for decorative purposes only. So in what way then are we to become like a child?

Well, notice verse 4 again. Sentence 4. Jesus says it's about having a child's lowly or humble position, status. Where a child is dependent on others for help.

Children have to trust in and depend on their parents for food and for life. And like Hannah still needs to trust in and depend on Alex and Krista for life.

And so Jesus is saying that to enter the kingdom, verse 3, and therefore to be great in the kingdom, verse 4, involves the same thing. It involves humbling yourself to trust in and depend on Jesus.

[4 : 29] It's about acknowledging that we cannot earn our way into the kingdom of heaven ourselves. We need to depend instead on Jesus and his death for us to pay for our sins to, as we sung in that song, Jesus Loves Me, to wash our sins away, like baptism represents.

And greatness in the kingdom means continuing then to humbly trust in Jesus for the best way to live our lives now as members of the kingdom. That's true greatness, true importance to God.

I was visiting a member of our church last week who is in hospital after she suffered a massive heart attack. In the world's eyes, she's not very important or great. Her home is a small nursing home room.

She has very little money to her name. She has very poor health. She's had a hard life. She's had unloving parents, a husband who died leaving with her with five young kids to raise on her own. And yet, despite all this, she continues to trust in Jesus, to depend on him for strength, for comfort, for the certain guaranteed hope of heaven that she's looking forward to.

[5 : 41] In fact, another church member said about her, I cannot remember knowing anyone more faithful to God over so many years. See, here is someone with very few worldly achievements.

Her name will not go down in the world's history books. And yet, she's great and important to God. And yet, so is every person, I take it, who humbly depends on and trusts in Jesus.

That is, every Christian who humbles themselves, sorry, every person who becomes a Christian by humbling themselves to depend on and trust in Jesus, to become a little one, is important to God.

And that ought to shape, then, how we treat each other. You see, the importance we give to a person often shapes how we treat them, doesn't it? Earlier this year, the Australian Open was on in Melbourne Park, and some people from our congregation lined up to get signatures or autographs from Federer and Nadal.

Now, I've never had anyone line up and ask for my autograph. Neither of you, I take it. Why? Well, we're not great tennis players, but the point is, the importance and greatness we give to someone will shape how we treat them, whether we line up and get their autograph and so on.

[6 : 54] And yet, every Christian who humbly trusts in and depends on Jesus is a little one, and is great and important to God. And so that ought to shape how we treat one another, you see.

And that's what the rest of chapter 18 is about. Verses 1 to 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.

So next week, we'll see that we are to seek reconciliation and forgive one another. But this week, we'll see that it means a few things. Firstly, we're to welcome one another. So point two in your outline, verse number five in your Bibles.

Jesus continues, Here again, we see the importance of little children.

And he's actually switched now from actual little children to talking about Christians. How do we know? Well, because a child who comes in my name is a child who belongs to Jesus.

[8 : 00] In the ancient times, if you came in the name of a king, you came as one of the king's people. Well, so too here. A child who's to be welcomed in the name of Jesus is a person who belongs to Jesus.

In other words, a Christian. And he says to welcome a Christian is important because it's as though you're welcoming Christ himself. And so it really does matter how we treat one another.

So on the next slide, we read a few chapters later in Matthew chapter 25. Jesus is telling a story and he talks about some people. And the people say, 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 and visit you? And 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.

The way we treat one another is a reflection of how we treat Christ. It's kind of like when we have ambassadors who visit a country, they are sent by the president, aren't they? And if that ambassador is treated well or poorly, well, it's as though the president of the country is treated well or poorly.

[9 : 10] It's the same idea here. We ought to treat one another and welcome one another. In doing so, we are welcoming Christ. And what does this look like?

Well, hopefully it involves at least saying good morning to one another, welcoming each other at church, particularly if people are new. It means that. But in the ancient world, to welcome someone often included giving them a meal.

Some cultures still do it today. Again, in the ancient world where they traveled by foot without cars and so on, it often meant giving them a bed to sleep in at night because they still had a long journey to go.

In other words, it's about caring for their needs. Things like the examples we just read about on the screen. And can I say, I've seen people here do that. I was talking with a lady yesterday, Wednesday it was, from our church, and they said the help they have received from people here meant that she could get through her chemotherapy.

She said that she would not have been able to get through the cancer and the chemo without the care she received. I know that many of you provide meals when people here have babies, for example.

[10 : 21] Others send cards or text messages or emails if they've noticed that they've not seen you at church for a while. And people have said that they've found that really encouraging. These are all ways that we are to welcome and care for one another.

And especially those who are in need. On the flip side, though, we're not to cause others or ourselves to stumble. So point three, verse six.

So sentence six, he says, if anyone 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 such things that cause people to stumble. Such things must come because we live in a fallen and broken world. But woe to the person through whom they come. If your right 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 to be thrown into eternal fire.

[11 : 21] 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.

Well, welcome to Holy Trinity this morning. I hope you're enjoying your time so far. It's full on language, isn't it? In verse six and seven, he says, don't cause others to stumble.

And in verse eight and nine, he says, don't cause yourselves, ourselves to stumble. To stumble here means to walk away from Jesus, to have something happen and walk away from Jesus and heaven that comes with Jesus.

But why does Jesus use such full on language here? Well, two reasons, I think. First, so that we'll know it's actually serious. I mean, he calls hell an eternal fire.

It lasts forever. That's what eternal is. That's bad. And he says that hell is so bad that you're better off gouging out your eye than ending up there. Hell is so bad that you're better off cutting off your foot and being crippled than ending up there.

[12 : 27] You see, to walk away from Jesus and heaven that comes with him, well, the only alternative left is hell. And it is real and seriously bad. That's what Jesus wants us to remember.

But the second reason he speaks like this is because he is concerned for us and our eternity. He doesn't want us to end up there. So in verse six, there is a threat for anyone who causes one of his little ones, those who believe in him, to stumble.

Why? Well, because he loves them, as we sung in the kids song. We are important to him. He is concerned for us and our eternity. And in verse eight and nine, there's a severe warning for us as well.

Why? Well, again, because he is concerned for us and our eternity. He doesn't want us to end up suffering in hell, but end up enjoying life in heaven.

That's the purpose of warnings, is it not? I saw a warning the other day, a warning sign. It said, is there life after death?

[13 : 32] Trespass here and find out. There are other serious warning signs, though, that are a bit more graphic. You remember those warning signs on packets of cigarettes where you see the cancerous flesh or those TV ads where they show a person getting hit by a car?

I was actually going to show you a couple of these graphic images, but they're a bit too graphic, right? They're severe, but that's the point. They're severe so that people don't end up like that. That's the purpose of a warning. And that's Jesus's purpose here. He uses severe language, not only so that we know how serious it is, but so that we won't end up there.

He doesn't want to see any of his little ones, us or others, to miss out on heaven. We and our eternity are important to him. Now, of course, God can bring those who stumble back, and we'll see that in a little while.

But for here, we're not to cause others to stumble or ourselves. But how? What does that look like? Well, it's doing anything that leads others or ourselves away from Jesus.

[14 : 37] Perhaps the most common example of causing others to stumble is where a Christian who's at a church is really hurt by the words or actions of another Christian.

So much so that they end up walking away from the church and from Jesus. And sadly, I've 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 the church. Thankfully, after a while, God prompted her to look for another church, and she's ended up here.

And sometimes those who are hurt will use their experience to blame God when it's not God's fault, or they'll use their experience to never look for another church again. And that's their decision, that's on them.

But we as Christians are not meant to cause them to stumble in the first place. And for ourselves, well, it's not putting ourselves into positions where we know it will take us away from Christ.

[15 : 44] So for another person I know at our church, she said that she is cut off, not her hand, you'll be glad to know, but all alcohol, even though she knows Christians are free to have a drink. Not get drunk, but have a drink.

Now, why has she done that? Well, because she used to struggle with alcoholism. And she knows it would be far too easy for her to be consumed by it again, and that it would take her away from Christ.

And so she's cut it out of her life. That's just one type of example. We're going to get rid of anything that might cause us to stumble, to take us away from Christ. Because both we and our eternity matter to God.

But what's more, we are then also not only to welcome one another, not cause ourselves or others to stumble, but point four, we're not to despise one another either.

So point four and verse number 10. To despise a fellow Christian is to look down on them, to think they're beneath you, that they're not important to you.

[16 : 50] And Jesus says we're not to do that, because all Christians are great and important to God. And that's the point of the bit about the angels. It's a bit of a strange idea, but Jesus seems to be saying that we are important enough to have angels in heaven.

Angels who always see God's face, and therefore always ready to be sent by him to help his people in need. And if we're important enough to have that, then we're important enough not to be despised, seen as unimportant by one another.

And just in case you haven't quite got the message, Jesus continues in verse 12 to 14. Have a look there, number 12 to 14. Jesus says, See, God is not willing to let any of his children perish.

He cares for each individual Christian. And he's willing to go after them to bring them back. He's like the shepherd we heard about in that first reading. He goes and searches for the lost, the woe who have wandered, to bring them back.

And when he does, he rejoices at their return. Not because he values the one more than the 99, but because the one that was lost is now found. It's kind of like if a parent goes shopping with a few children.

[18 : 26] It's a pretty traumatic experience. But if you've got a few children, you go shopping, and then one of them wanders off, and they get lost in the shops. The parent goes searching for them.

And when they find them, they are relieved and hug them. They probably tell them off as well for wandering in the first place. But they rejoice that they have them back. Now, it doesn't mean the parents then love that one who wandered off more than the three or whatever who stayed.

It just means they were concerned for the one that was lost. And so they rejoiced at having them back. But the point here is that we are important to God. We are great in his eyes.

That is, we little ones who humbly trust and depend on Jesus. And so the first question for us this morning is, do you? Do you humbly trust and depend on Jesus?

Do you depend on him and his death to pay for your sins, to wash them away, as we sung and as we saw in baptism that it represents? For without this, no one can enter the kingdom of heaven.

[19 : 33] Remember, that's how Jesus started today in verse 3, by saying that to enter the kingdom means being like a child who humbly trusts in and depends on others, him. For help.

We cannot depend on ourselves to enter the kingdom. There's no amount of good things we can do that will balance out the bad things. I mean, to get into the kingdom is what requires perfection. And no matter how much good we do, we'll never get to be perfect again.

We have to depend on Jesus. And so have you done that? Do you trust in him, believe in him and his death to pay for your sins so that you can enter?

That's the first question. Secondly, for us who have, do we realize how important we are to God? After all, he gave his one and only son to die for you and for me.

And to suffer hell upon the cross so that we don't have to. You don't do that for someone you don't love or is unimportant to you, do you?

[20 : 38] 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 here this morning, I'm sorry to say, you're not all that great and important in the world's eyes.

I mean, I think you're great and important. But in the world's eyes, not many of us are. But we certainly are in God's. 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, because we are important to him, he does promise to always be with us and help us through it.

And he does promise that he will bring us home to the world to come where there will be no more suffering. That lady I mentioned at the start, who's in hospital at the moment, I saw her on Friday afternoon.

I was there when the doctor came in to give a report. And the doctor basically said that they can't do anything for her heart surgically because she's not strong enough for an operation. And so basically, it's a matter of time before she has another heart attack and dies.

[21 : 51] And yet, she continues to trust in Jesus. She knows that there's life to come. She knows that God is with her to help her through it and bring her home to heaven.

Because she knows she's one of God's little ones. Someone who trusts in Jesus. We are important to him. And thirdly and finally, since we are important to God, then we are to be important to one another.

We are not to cause ourselves or others to stumble. We are not to despise one another. Rather, we are to welcome one another. Care for and encourage one another.

For we, as Christians, are God's great little ones. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you for this reminder today that you measure greatness and importance not the way the world does, but by whether we humbly trust in and depend on the Lord Jesus.

And so, Father, we thank you that we who do are great in your sight. We thank you that those who want to be great can still humbly trust in Jesus.

[23 : 05] And Father, we thank you that we who do are important to you, that we matter to you. And so, we pray that you would help us to matter to each other. Father, help us to care for one another, to see one another as important, because we are in your eyes.

And Father, we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.