

# Matthew 18:1-6

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[0:00] For those of you I've not met, my name's Dave. I'm one of Shoreline's pastors.! So, Father, will you do that?

May the weakness of my words not be a hindrance, but, Lord, may the power of your word and your spirit do the work that you intend among your people for our good, for our joy, and for your glory. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our King and Redeemer. Amen. You'll turn with me to Matthew chapter 18.

Our passage today has to do, as Jordan said, with greatness. And honestly, you know, I'm tempted here. Jordan did such a great job already to just say amen and close in prayer.

But as we turn our attention to this idea of greatness, because the apostles ask it of Christ, what is greatness?

[1:38] How would you define it? Maybe we define it in terms of achievement, having accomplished something extraordinary. Alexander was Alexander the Great because he conquered the world.

Or maybe we define it in terms of ability, right? Being more capable than other people at something. Serena Williams is a great tennis player.

Or maybe we define it in terms of quality, right? Possessing an uncommon refinement. Rolls-Royce makes the great luxury vehicle, right?

And here today, there are some great people, right? Some great artists. Some, the Coast Guard Academy, actually, all the cadets are on the Labor Day retreat. We should have prayed for that. Right? Is trying to create great military leaders, right? Many people in this room work at Electric Boat. What are they doing? Well, they're producing one of the greatest technological feats humanity's ever achieved, right?

[2:43] A nearly undetectable vessel full of people and weapons and a nuclear reactor under the sea for months at a time. That's pretty great, right? And we're all pursuing greatness of some kind, right?

You have a dream, right? You have something you're shooting at. And for you, in your own, however you're calculating it, that's pretty, like, you're looking for the great life.

That's the American dream, to set your own goal for what the great life is and then to pursue that. And today, in Matthew chapter 18, Jesus brings us into his school of greatness.

And it looks different. Join me in Matthew chapter 18, verse 1. At that time, the disciples came to Jesus saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

But by this time in the ministry of Jesus, he has been talking about the kingdom of heaven for about three years. He's on his way to Jerusalem for his last act, right?

[3:56] And because he's been talking about the kingdom so long, the disciples assumed that, well, if it's a kingdom, there must be a hierarchy in that kingdom. And they want to know where they stand.

And that's our impulse, too. We want to know how we measure up. In every room we walk into, don't we? We want to know how we compare, right?

In high school, there's, you know, the popularity culture. In the work world, the world of vocation, the corporate world, there's another kind of strata, right?

Everywhere we go, we have the impulse to figure out and oftentimes to signal how great we are. And that's why marketers can sell luxury brands to us as status symbols, right? And in every way we measure greatness, whether it's popularity or achievement or appearance or success, it's something we strive after, something we work at, right?

[5:06] Tim Keller put it this way, the ordinary way people conceive of greatness is that greatness is something you fight for. It's something you struggle for. It's something you win. It's something you achieve.

And the apostles want to know, right? Well, Jesus, we've been your traveling companions, right? We've given up our homes. We've given up our lives, our livelihoods.

We've been your helpers. When you're glorified, and they probably still thought that he was going to go kick the Romans out of Jerusalem and set up a new kingdom, right?

And begin ruling in Israel. We're going to have a place of privilege in your palace, right? Right, Jesus? Jesus? How did that strike Jesus?

In Jesus' eyes, they were very dense. And so are we, right? Not getting it. In fact, in Jesus' eyes, this is not a great thing at all.

[6:04] When the disciples were so dense, he decided that he would do more than teach them a lesson. They needed a visual aid. Look with me in verse 2. 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. That's the model. Not Caesar.

Not a priest. Not a great leader. A little child is great in God's kingdom and in God's eyes.

Now, Jesus is not commending children as our example as if they are innocent or sinless. Every parent in history can attest to the reality of the doctrine of original sin.

But what Jesus is getting at is this. Even the most selfish, stubborn child knows he isn't the greatest or the strongest.

[7:21] He needs someone else if he's going to survive. He has a huge list of needs that he can't meet himself. He knows he's not great. He can't build a habitable dwelling, feed himself, clothe himself, food, shelter, water, the very things he needs for survival.

Someone has to give him those things. He knows he isn't the greatest because he knows his dependence. No child is powerful.

Powerful lungs, perhaps. But when they insist on using their own strength, right, to clothe their feet or care, do anything to sustain their life, how does that go for them when they insist on relying on their own greatness?

They get nowhere. And they know it. It's that joined thing, being powerless and knowing it. One commentator put it this way.

In the modern Western societies, children are often seen as very important. But, you know, like, children are the future, right? That's a saying in America, not in the ancient world.

[8:31] In the first century, they were not. In the affairs of men, children were unimportant. They could not fight. They could not lead. They had not had time to acquire worldly wisdom. They could not pile up ridges.

They counted for very little. Their smallness made them very humble members of society. So what happens when a small child who is powerless and knows it needs something?

What do they do? They run to an adult they trust and ask for it, right? They put up their arms and ask for it to be done for them. Parents of small children, how much do they depend on you?

Like, what would they do without you? If you vanished, what would happen to your children? How much do they depend on you? Completely. And they know it. You do for them.

You know how the world works on behalf of them. How badly do they need you? And how much do they know that? And that's what Jesus is saying here.

[9:45] You'll get nowhere in the kingdom of God and in God's eyes on your own greatness. The distance between you and your child, right, between a young child and the parent is great.

But the distance between even the most capable human and almighty God is far, far immeasurably greater.

The distance is so far, we can't even begin to understand it, to contemplate it. Right? From the moon, even skyscrapers don't look tall.

He is so high and lifted up that what we call greatness doesn't move the needle, doesn't even register. So when we look at the great people of this world, remember, that's not very great. Not in an absolute sense. Right? My attempts to impress God with my greatness are laughable. Thoughts of my greatness are delusion.

[11:02] Just a few weeks ago, at the beginning of chapter 17, we came to the transfiguration of Christ.

God the Father and God the Son reveal some of the glory that they have shared from eternity to eternity. Did Peter, James, and John, who witnessed that, feel great in that moment?

They felt great fear. As the whirlwind of God's glory drove them to their knees. Right? And just a side note, if you weren't with us a couple weeks ago in Matthew 17, do your heart a favor to spend some time in that passage.

On your own, or you can go back and listen to the sermon. I mean, getting to preach that passage is, you know, like a golfer getting to play Augusta National, or, you know, a gearhead getting to, you know, test drive a McLaren.

I mean, just like, I had a lot of fun. So, right? This is also why God's unmeasurable greatness, right? Before which we and our greatness looks puny and insignificant, and our thoughts of our own greatness are delusional, right?

[12:22] That's also why our sins are so great. Why we can't get anywhere on our own. We, who are so small before so great a God, have sinned against Him.

If you spray graffiti on the back of an abandoned building, you might get away with a fine and some community service, right?

But if you do the same thing to the Mona Lisa, right, you're going to prison, right? If you maim a human being, you're going to prison for a long time, right?

If the object of the offense increases in dignity and worth, so too does the significance of the offense. How great is it to sin against that God, who is so much greater than us?

We don't have the capacity. Our minds are not great enough to understand the height, the depth, the magnitude, the greatness of our sins. Which is why Jesus took a tiny child and said that we need to understand we're as helpless as that.

[13:50] And if we're going to entrust ourselves to a Savior, we'll need that humility, that attitude born of helplessness. To enter the kingdom of God, we don't say, Lord, aren't you impressed with me? We have to say, Lord, in your mercy, because I have no other hope, will you save me?

And look at verse 3. Thinking you can achieve greatness in God's eyes, not only will it fail to make you great in the kingdom of heaven, holding that stance in your heart means that you won't even be there.

He says, truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The childhearted ones are the greatest in the kingdom because they're the only ones in the kingdom. Ask a random American on the street, right, if they're going to heaven.

What are they probably going to say? I think so. I'm a pretty good person. But Jesus says, if that's your attitude, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

[15:18] There's nothing you can bring in your hands that will compel God to open the gates of heaven. But if you drop whatever it is that you think commends your case to God and hold fast to Christ, place all your hope and trust in him, the Father will welcome you as his own child.

On the last day, there will be a place where people concern themselves, their own greatness, their reputation, their position, but it is not heaven. Everyone in heaven will be saying, can you believe this?

I am so unworthy. And now that I see him, I understand so much more how unworthy I am. The Lord, in the magnificence of his mercy, has given me life forevermore, all of grace.

His love, his mercy, his greatness. Let us not be concerned about our prominence in heaven.

As Jesus told the disciples in Luke 10, simply rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

Because if you have had a taste for or seen a glimpse of the glory of God, you will be very unimpressed with yourself.

[16:54] All right, go back to chapter 17. Peter, James, and John were not impressed with themselves. When Isaiah was drawn to the throne room of God, in Isaiah chapter 6, was he impressed with himself?

No, not at all. Right? The glory of God ought crush our pride. If it doesn't, it's because we've not really seen it.

And friends, we call people wise when they can see things as they really are. Right? But the greatest, see what I did there?

Wisdom. The greatest wisdom is to know you are complete spiritual poverty. And to know who to ask for help.

Christ Jesus, our Lord. I'm going to ask Jules and Nina to make their way up here. What they're going to do right now is give us a taste.

[18:02] In C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*, there's a scene that puts this idea on display so helpfully. If you've not read that book, the idea of the great divorce, it's a fable and a parable, but there are a bunch of people who are standing outside heaven's gate.

And the saints of God come out and say, will you come in? And people choose other things, lesser things, over God and His glory and the matchless joy that's offered them.

And so this scene that we're about to see, a recently deceased painter finds himself on this celestial plane. And a saint of God, who in his earthly life was also a painter, leaves the heavenly city, comes to meet him.

And the saint is trying to lead the painter into true joy through the gates of heaven. But the painter is struggling to let go of his reputation, his own greatness.

See how it plays out. Of course. Hello. Of course.

[19:26] There will be interesting people to meet there. Oh, everyone will be interesting. Ah, yes. To be sure. I was thinking of people in our own line, you know, painters, shall I meet Monet, or Picasso, or Michelangelo, or Da Vinci, or...

sooner or later, if they're here. But you don't know? Well, of course not. I've only been here a few years. All the chances are against my having run across them.

There are a good many of us, you know. But surely. In the case of distinguished people, you'd hear... But they aren't distinguished. No more than anyone else.

Don't you understand? The glory flows into everyone and back from everyone, like light and mirrors. But the light's the thing. Do you mean there are no famous men?

They are all famous. They all are known, remembered, recognized by the only mind that can give a perfect judgment. Uh, of course, in that sense.

[20:29] One must be content with one's reputation among the posterity, then. My friend, don't you know? Know what? That you and I are already completely forgotten on the earth.

What's that? Do you mean those cursed modernists? Painters of one after all? Lord love you, they're out of style too. You couldn't get five pounds for any picture of, or mine, or even of yours in Europe, or today, or America today.

We're dead out of fashion. I must be off at once. Let me go. Curse it all. One has one's duty for the future of art. I must go back to my friends. I must write an article.

There must be a manifesto. We must start a periodical. We must have publicity. Let me go. This is beyond a joke. And without listening to the spirit's reply, the painter vanished.

Friends, the light is the thing. We don't bring greatness into heaven.

[21:36] We are brought into heaven to witness, to celebrate, and to reflect the greatness of the king.

The greatness is already there. Capable people don't need saviors. So if you think you can stand before God on your own merits, you'll never cry out to Jesus for help to save you.

As the spirit said, right, we're the mirrors. And the best mirror is one that adds nothing.

Are you okay letting go of your own achievements? Are you okay letting go of your own reputation, your wealth, your status?

Are you okay being on a completely equal footing with anyone and everyone else who calls on the name of the Lord?

[22:46] Let that sink in. God, that's the heart you need if you will ever cry out for the Savior you need.

If not, you'll try to hold on to self and personal greatness, but in the end you'll lose that too. The painter was dead out of style.

Right? But if you can lay those things aside, God offers you the greatest treasure of all, himself. The light. And the light's the thing. And on that day, in the presence of the King of Kings, his presence will make you nobler nobler and greater than you ever dared dream.

Greater than the greatness you hoped to achieve for yourself. All by his grace. All by his love. All by his greatness.

[23:58] Lord, will you humble our hearts so we may see and savor your glory. not our own. And with that attitude in place, we ask ourselves what impact that mindset is supposed to have not only on our eternity, but on our today.

Jesus answers that when he moves us into verse 5. He says, whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. All right, so if we don't bring our own greatness into the kingdom of heaven, if we don't rest on our own worlds, if, as the Spirit said, they aren't distinguished no more than anyone else, if that's all true of every member of the kingdom, of every child of the king, how do we relate to one another?

And as we look to this, when he says, whoever receives one such child, remember, he's talking about the people who have made themselves children, humbled themselves, right? He's not just talking about little people.

Everyone who belongs to the kingdom, verse 3, has become childlike in spirit, depending on Christ for their very lives. And Jesus says that whoever receives or welcomes one of those children in his name receives and welcomes him too.

What does that mean? What does that look like? In Acts chapter 9, Paul has an encounter with the risen Jesus.

[25:40] Up to that point, he has been persecuting the church, trying to harm, imprison, and silence them. And Jesus stops him dead in his tracks and says, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting my church?

Because that's not what he says, right? He says, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? He says that because every Christian is indwelt by God the Holy Spirit.

And every Christian has been united to Christ by faith so that his death and resurrection are our death and resurrection.

so what you do to the Lord's people, you do to him. So we have these things that all drive us to receive and to welcome and to consider every person who trusts in Christ, right?

First, we are spiritually humbled ourselves. and ought not think of ourselves first. Second, they are joint recipients of grace and our family, right?

[27:01] It is a natural human thing to have an affinity for the people who share common ground with us, right? The same hometown or the same sports team or shared history of military service.

But friends, being bought by the blood of Christ is the ultimate common ground. Nothing runs deeper than that. It supersedes race or political affiliation or language or whether you like the Chick-fil-A or the Popeye's chicken sandwich better.

Every blood bought child of God belongs to your family. It is the ultimate common ground. We are humbled.

We have this common ground in family and what we do to Christ's people, he says we do to Christ. No matter someone's background, no matter their social status, no matter their appearance or their education or their lack of one or their politics or their sports team, if they belong to Christ, we must welcome them as family.

And that's because, as Paul says in Galatians 3, in the church there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

[28:44] One writer said, they are not welcomed because they are great or wise or mighty, but because they come in Jesus' name. They belong to him. So what does it look like to welcome the family of Christ as your family?

what ought we do? In his first epistle, Peter says, having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart.

within the church of God, we don't have the option of hatred or slander or gossip. We don't have permission to ignore the person in the kingdom of God who is all alone.

We do not have that option. He does not permit it to us. And so here in verse 5, Christ is calling us to show dignity to those the world doesn't.

for his sake. We listen to those whom the world won't for our family's sake. We don't dismiss others as lesser or unworthy or unimportant or worthless.

[30:11] In this same line, the scriptures command us, therefore, Romans 15, receive one another as Christ has welcomed you or received you.

Friends, how has he welcomed us? With patience and forgiveness and love. He didn't use us for his own ends, right?

He gave sacrificially for our good. He welcomes us into his presence in prayer. He listens and cares about our griefs and our sorrows and our worries and our confusions and our joys.

He is interested in us. Friends, he is calling his church to be the most welcoming, most understanding place in the world. We care for and protect and provide and open our homes to and open our lives to other Christians.

We are family. Which is why before he went to his cross, Jesus said, a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another just as I have loved you.

[31:24] You are also to love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.

And Jesus follows up this command this positive command, right, with a negative warning. Look with me at verse 6.

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

[32:33] It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire. Now, your Bible might have a footnote when it says, verse 6, and throughout this whole section, when it says, cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin.

And in fact, depending on which translation you're reading, it might come across a little different. The English Standard Version, the version we're using here, causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin.

The NIV and the New American Standard say, cause to stumble. The RSV says, put a stumbling block before them. The reason this, you've got a footnote there, the reason the Bible translators are kind of scattered across the board, is this is a weird word.

It's not the normal word for sin. It normally means cause to stumble. In some contexts, it means to entice someone into sin.

That's how Paul uses it in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8. In other contexts, it means to find Jesus repulsive to you, unworthy of your worship.

[33:58] That's what he meant in Matthew chapter 11 and he said, blessed is the one who is not offended by me. He means that blessed is the one who doesn't reject me. It can also indicate apostasy, that is falling away from faith in Christ.

We're going to see that in Matthew chapter 24. He's going to use the word that way. He tells us that some people who profess faith in Jesus will fall away from the faith and betray their brothers and sisters in Christ.

So the question is which of these is meant here? What sense of the word is Jesus intending? The two main interpretations of this passage are this.

First, the first one understands it to mean enticing someone into acts of sin, stealing and lust and angry outbursts. In that interpretation, Jesus is warning his disciples about the seriousness of sin

and the seriousness of holy living.

The second major way to look at this passage and understand it is as enticing someone to abandon their faith, pressuring someone to apostatize.

[35:08] In this interpretation, Jesus is pronouncing woes on false teachers and to those who would turn professing believers away from the gospel to renounce their faith.

Now, certainly, both are terrible and Christ does not want either of them. But which does he mean here? I think there are two clues that point us towards that second interpretation, that Jesus is warning us away from apostasy, abandoning our faith.

You look at verse 6, he highlights the fact at the outset that he's calling out the children who believe in him before they stumble. and then verses 8 and 9 say that those who do stumble will be thrown into hell.

And it is certainly true that sin is gravely serious, even in the lives of forgiven sinners. And if we're not growing in holiness, that's an indication that the Holy Spirit does not dwell in us, we're not born again.

but those who trust in Christ, verse 6, will not be condemned to hell for the sins they commit, like we see in verses 8 and 9.

[36:27] Because Christ has already suffered the consequences of all their sin, once and for all, on his cross. It is finished. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

So I think what Jesus is warning us against here, most explicitly, is every enticement, not just against sinful behavior, but into stumbling at the gospel, from turning away from Christ.

Whether that's because the world has told us the message of Christianity is stupid, or senseless, or wrong, or misguided, or obsolete, or warning us against false teachers who would corrupt the gospel and lead us away from Christ.

pay careful attention to your doctrine. The gospel of Christ's substitutionary death, his resurrection, and our need to repent and believe as our lives depend on it.

Pay careful attention to the teachers you listen to. It's a big internet out there, and some of the most popular voices in the religious space are wolves in sheep's clothing.

[37:41] I'm not going to just give you a list here or something like that, but if you have questions or thoughts about, hey, is this a good place to be looking, reading spiritual guidance, talk to your community group leader, talk to one of the elders, we'd be glad and happy to help you.

And pay attention to your own heart, right? Not just about the information that you're hearing, but what is pulling on your heart strings.

Are you being led by Hollywood, by the corporate world, by your own sin, to hope in something other than Christ?

Jesus says to watch out for this. And what's the warning he gives? What is the consequence? It's a millstone.

Fastened around the neck, drowned in the depths of the sea. Part of good Bible study is not only to notice every detail in the text, but to really consider it, to heed what it says.

[38:59] And so when Jesus gives us a word picture here, an analogy like this, we need to take it seriously, to stop and contemplate it. This is going to be super uncomfortable for some of you, but I promise I'll only do the millstone one, and you can go home and do the eye-gouging one yourself.

How's that sound? And our congregation might be better equipped than most to meditate on Jesus' words here, the depths of the sea.

Many people in this room have sailed beyond the side of land. many have plumbed beneath the surface of the waves, the submarine.

So, in your mind, set sail in a first-century fishing boat. It's about 25 feet long. The single mast and sail, this is the kind of boat that Jesus' disciples worked on before they set out to follow him.

Now, Jesus said the depths of the sea, so we're not talking about the Sea of Galilee, which is a lake. we're going out into the Mediterranean, into open water, past the site of land.

[40:12] The water changes color now as you move into deeper and deeper waters. As the last landmarks disappear over the horizon, you feel further and further removed from the land of the living, isolated, and vulnerable.

The boat is being moved by larger and larger swells. As you peer over the side of your little boat, there's nothing beneath you, a vast, unknowable abyss.

Now, imagine you are being brought here as a convict, judged guilty of a crime, condemned to a symbolic sentence, right? What you've done deserves death, and what you've done deserves to be taken far from the land of the living.

What you've done deserves to be buried in the depths and never spoken of again. And actually, in the first century, the Roman government did do this to people. And as the little boat bobs in the great expanse, imagine strong cords being tightened around your neck.

Feel the coarse fibers pulled tight. And watch as the other end is tied to a milling stone so large that a donkey was used to move it to grind grain.

[41:44] And take your last breath of air as several men struggle to flip the millstone overboard. watch it swiftly disappear into the depths.

And feel its weight snatch you overboard by the throat. Feel the pressure build as the daylight above you is swallowed up as you plunge into the icy, bottomless depths.

Jesus doesn't say, that's the fate for those who cause my children to stumble, to abandon the gospel. What does he say?

He says, this is a better fate than the wrath stored up for those who lead my children to stumble. That's how seriously our Lord takes the faith and life of his children.

And when the devil and the world and false teachers try to pry his beloved children away from him, though through persecution, through mockery, through manipulation, through lying tongues, he promises that he sees and that he knows and that he cares.

[43:05] So take comfort. When you feel pressured and opposed for your faith, your Lord is not inactive. He is not uncaring.

He is not unmoved. He sees you and will support you and he will bring great justice on that day. So on that last day, how will you stand before the great throne of God? Because every sin will receive justice in the courtroom of God.

the evils of this world, great and small, will be vengeanceed with a perfect and terrible judgment, including yours.

Either you will say, Lord, look at how great I am. I was a pretty good guy. You should let me in. and the millstone of your own sin and shortcomings will stay fastened around your neck and drag you to the pit of hell where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth forevermore.

[44:19] Or Jesus will say, this child of mine humbled himself, humbled herself and called out for the salvation that I offered.

Therefore, I bore the burden of his sin, her sin around my neck. Like a millstone, our sin was tied to him and he was taken outside, outside the city, outside the gates, outside the habitation of men and he bore the wrath.

friends, choose this day. Around whose neck will that millstone of your sins hang? Jesus stands ready to take the burden of your sin that will condemn you forever and fasten it to himself and extinguish it at his cross.

will you do? On the last day, where will you be found? Will you be found plummeting into the fires of judgment or celebrating the great grace of God who, in Christ Jesus, carried your sins far away?

Let's pray. Lord, will you humble us so that we might receive your grace?

[45:59] Will we truly contemplate your greatness so that we in our own eyes do not appear great?! We pray this all in the name of Jesus Christ, who took our millstone for us.

Amen.