

The Greatest and the Best

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[0 : 00] Mighty God, we stand in awe in your presence. As we gather together, Lord, would you bless us and direct us. As we gather around your word, open our hearts.

Receive these gifts, Lord, that they might be used for your glory and to build your kingdom here. In Jesus' name, Amen. Please be seated.

If you would keep your Bibles open to Matthew chapter 18, verses 1 to 14, which is on page 18 of the New Testament section of my Bible here.

We're looking at a section on the kingdom of God. Going into some teaching here about the kingdom, Jesus is discussing it. And in this case, we've had a question from the disciples.

Who is greatest in the kingdom of God? And as I've been reading this passage, one of the things that's just weighed heavily on my heart, and I'm not quite sure even how to express it, but the thing that's been weighing on my heart that I want to get across to you has to do with the way God cares for one believing person at a time.

[1 : 08] I don't know about you, but I think that I sometimes tend to think of the big picture. And we think of people coming into the church en masse as a big mass of people. And yet, part of the message coming out of these verses has to do with God's great care for one believing soul at a time.

And I hope that as we go through this, you will feel kindled in your heart a passion to reach out to and love one believing soul at a time.

One of the things that I find fascinating about being a parent is the labor intensity involved in the whole thing. We are hardwired to pour all of our effort and our energy and time and emotion into the raising of a very small number of very little people.

As human beings, we do not normally have very large broods. We produce one offspring at a time, and we do not have very many during our lifetimes. And we invest in our offspring for 20 years or more.

Actually, after 8 o'clock, one of the members came out and said, 20 years, you've got to be kidding me. And the whole thing happens one child at a time. We invest intensively in one child at a time.

[2 : 28] The English have a wonderful institution to deal with this, and it's called boarding school. I have a lot of time for boarding school. And surely we should expand the concept.

It would be so much easier and more efficient if we expanded the concept and sent all of our offspring at a very early age into big central clearinghouses so that they could be raised there. It would be more efficient by fewer people.

They could be raised and trained and turned into more productive citizens, and we would age less in the process. But, of course, it's not like that. God designed us to raise our children the labor-intensive way, to pour our love into our children in a family, one at a time.

Each child in our life needs all the love and the wisdom and the care we can give them. And that is the thread that runs through the passage we read from Matthew 18, verses 1 to 14.

We are in a discussion about the kingdom of God, a discussion now initiated by the disciples, who said, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

[3 : 38] Now, Jesus refrains from answering this question directly, but instead he gives them a demonstration, he gives two warnings, and he tells a story, all of which are intended to show the values, the nature of his kingdom.

Running through it all is this concern, this passion, this love of God, for one person at a time. The kingdom is worked out and grows, one person at a time.

When we talk about the kingdom of God, we're not talking literally about the exercise of kingship, although God is understood in the Bible to reign in heaven as king, but rather it's the coming into

human existence of the spiritual reality of God.

The growing of the kingdom of God is about the coming into human existence, the spiritual reality of God, the two coming together. And the way the spiritual reality of God comes into human existence is through Jesus Christ.

And so in Matthew chapter 3, when John the Baptist announces, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is here, he is talking about Jesus. And in Matthew chapter 4, when Jesus announces, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is here, he is talking about himself.

[4 : 53] The kingdom of heaven is the bringing together of the spiritual reality of God and our human life in Jesus. And so it is possible for human beings to meet their deepest longings for reunion with God.

And in doing so, Jesus makes possible for us the fulfillment of our innate potential in ways we could never have dreamed of. But it all happens one life at a time.

Let's look at Jesus' words now about greatness in the kingdom of heaven. He has three categories, three types of people he thinks are great in the kingdom of heaven. First is the one who is humble. Second is the one who believes. Third is the one who struggles with sinlessness. First is the humble one. And that's verses 2 to 4. When I began to read this, this demonstration Jesus does, bringing this child in the center, I thought, Jesus, I don't think you knew much about children. This morning when I got up and we had the orange juice spilt on the floor and the breakfast not eaten, and I got woken up at 2 in the morning by someone who wanted a cuddle, I don't know what childlikeness has to do with the kingdom of heaven.

[6 : 06] But notice what Jesus says. He actually says, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

You've got to turn and become like children. So he's using childlikeness as a simile. It's like. We are not to become this. We are to become like this.

This is very different in spirit from what the disciples were talking about, from whatever, from the situation in which they were growing up in first century Palestine, from the religion they were used to.

They were accustomed to a religion of externals in which the inner reality of righteousness had been scooped out and they were left with the outer reality of ritual, of obedience to the Old Testament law code, the performing of rites, the living of life in a certain way so that you could regard yourself as greater in the kingdom of God than the sinner over here who does none of those things.

That's the essence of that wonderful story about the Pharisee and the publican. Remember the Pharisee stands there and says, oh God, thank you that I perform all the rites, I tithe, I go to temple every day, unlike this publican over here.

[7 : 24] And the publican just says, Lord have mercy in me, a sinner. You see, those are the two competing spiritualities here. The one is saying, I stand on the soapbox of what I do and say, here I am, God.

I am more righteous than the next person. The other recognizes that I am sinful and powerless in the face of the reality of God. So you have two very different religious systems.

And now we today in Vancouver might not tend to be like the Pharisees exactly. We wouldn't look back to the Old Testament and say, I'm doing this, this, this, and this, so I'm okay. And yet I think what we say, a lot of us today, is essentially, I am a good person so God will accept me.

I find if I ask people, what do you think is going to happen when you die? They say, I'm going to go to heaven. And if you say, on what basis? Many people say, I'm a good person.

And you see that actually that is very little different from what the disciples were saying, from this Pharisaical kind of religion. Many of us see our lives as a mathematical equation in which the merits outweigh the demerits.

[8 : 35] And so we think that when we present ourselves to the pearly gates, God will accept us.

And so the disciples are taking that way of thinking and transferring it over to Jesus. And they're just worried about who's going to be the first pope, who's going to be number one.

Who's going to do the most and get the most merits and be great in the kingdom? But according to Jesus, that is not how it works. It is not about presenting yourself as righteous before God.

It is about acknowledging yourself as sinful and powerless. We do not present ourselves as complete, but offer ourselves in surrender to God.

That's what he means. You've got to turn and become. You've got to have conversion in your life. Now, many of us were raised in the church and have been close to Jesus all our lives. That doesn't mean that you have to have some extra experience. Other people come into the faith through a very dramatic conversion experience. But what he is saying to these people is that a religion that is about presenting myself to God on the soapbox of my life will not do. [9 : 43] That will not bring the kingdom of God into your life. It's about me acknowledging my infinite weakness before my creator.

And that is where the childlike humility of Jesus comes in. Because as parents, we take the place of God in our children's life. At least, some parents do. I don't, exactly. I wish I did. But in a way, we do. Our children live in total dependence upon us. Every day. And the thing I love about it is they don't even know that. They just live that way. They live one morning to the next, one meal to the next. And so if my child wants love, they go to their mother. If they want food, they go to their mother. If they want to be played with, they go to their mother. If they want to go to the bathroom, they come to me. But they live their life every day in dependence on us. [10 : 45] And you see, that is how the kingdom of God comes into your life. And you see, the message here is the same for everyone. It makes no difference whether you are on the top of the pile, if you are in a career and you're really flying, or if your life is in complete shambles and you don't know how to get out of it.

The message is the same. You've got to turn and become like little children. You've got to live your life surrendered to Jesus Christ, knowing that He is powerful, knowing that the illusion of control you have is just that.

It's an illusion. And that before God, you are utterly powerless, but He is merciful. We've all got to do that ourselves, one person at a time, living your life in whatever situation you are in, dependent on Jesus Christ, like a child.

Who is the greatest in the kingdom? The humble one. Second, it's also the one who believes. This is verses 5 through 7. Very powerful discussion here.

Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. And then He goes on and talks about little ones who believe, and Jesus expresses this great concern that these little ones who believe in Him should not be offended, should not be given the occasion to sin, should not be presented with a stumbling block that will cause them to sin.

[12 : 09] In these verses, Jesus uses the Greek word skandalon, where we get the word scandal. He uses it four times in these two verses. It's a great concern for Jesus. He is greatly concerned that people who come into the faith should not be given an offense or a reason to sin.

That's what that word means. It's an offense, a stumbling block, a reason to sin. And the word in the Greek as well, I like this, for little ones, is micron.

You know, we get the word microscope, micromanagement, microbiology. So we're talking about the very little, right down to the very smallest unit. And do you see the degree of concern here for every single person who believes.

Jesus is not talking about God's love willy-nilly, extended out over every idea and everything. He is talking about people who believe, who begin the journey of following Jesus.

And what he is saying is that every single one is utterly precious to God. The message is that God cares deeply about every person who makes that journey into faith in Jesus Christ.

[13 : 22] And his desire and his determination is that nothing should stop that person from choosing Christ. Nothing should deter them from remaining in Christ.

Nothing should tempt them away from Christ. Because, as we will see in the next verses, when someone falls away and turns back into sin, they are going back to damnation.

And God does not desire that. He cares about each and every one. And that value needs to be our value also. That needs to make us all pause and ponder our hearts about how much we care and what we do about those very precious people who are journeying into the faith in Jesus Christ one at a time.

Because I think we can get very impatient with people. We want people to come quickly into mature faith in Christ. We want them to get it over with. We want them to deal with this in their lives and move forward very quickly into service of Christ, preferably here in the church.

When the reality is that someone who is coming into faith, perhaps they're on the periphery, perhaps they're coming a little further in, is very vulnerable. That person needs a lot of care, a lot of teaching, a lot of loving.

[14 : 44] And so those of us who are disciples of Jesus have a job to do. We have to help those people stay in the kingdom and grow in their faith in Jesus Christ.

We have to make sure that nothing we say or do will cause these people to fall back into sin. Now, of course, there's nothing we can do if someone willfully rejects Christ.

But we must not in our lives, our words, our actions, in the things we do or the things we fail to do be the cause of a stumbling block that will prevent someone who is seeking from staying with Jesus Christ.

And we have a responsibility, then, in what we say to people about sin, about what God's expectations are. We must not be the cause of temptation in someone's life.

We have to be telling them the truth about Jesus Christ and what God wants for us. And, you know, there could be nothing worse than a church full of friendly people who are being busy being friendly to one another.

[15 : 50] You may not remember or even realize how difficult it is to get up enough nerve to come to church or to a church event. It takes even more nerve to go across to another building for coffee.

And then, if no one talks to you, that can be a real killer. It's a serious issue, and we will not know until the last day how many souls have been dissuaded from choosing life by our conduct.

But there is an incalculable value that Jesus places on individuals as they come into the faith.

Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. God cares that much.

And in verse 10, he says this, See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of the Father.

I'm not quite sure how that works. I don't know if there's a bank of angels waiting around for someone who becomes a Christian. They get assigned them. I'm not sure how it works. But I do know that Jesus is telling us that God has a personal, intimate concern for every believing soul.

[16 : 58] Every person who comes into the periphery of the faith, who comes into faith in Jesus Christ, is under God's gaze. And we need to realize that whatever person comes into faith in Jesus Christ, however exalted, however lowly, God cares about each one.

And we need to share that value. Because Christianity is not a fast food restaurant. You can't order up a beginner's course, put people through it, and expect that they will come out of it a fully converted follower of Jesus Christ, mature in every way.

Of course, it's good if people do courses like that. But we have a job to do in tending new Christians, in caring for them, in reaching out beyond the network of our friends to those who are new and those who are coming into faith in Jesus Christ.

As I have been pondering these verses all week, I have to say I have been thinking back to relationships in my own life with people that I never pursued. I have in mind one young man I knew when I was just at the beginning of university here.

He was a teenager. He lived with his grandparents because his parents were alcoholics and had split up and couldn't care for him. He and his grandparents, his grandparents were churchgoers, went to the same church I went to, and he kind of came with them and stood on the periphery.

[18 : 16] He was a couple years younger than me. And what he needed was some other Christian guy to come along and be his friend. I remember talking to him, but I guess, I don't know, I guess I was too wrapped up in myself in my own life to really make the sacrifice of being that Christian friend.

And now I look back and wonder how his life went. How did it go? Wonder if God had put me his way for a purpose that I didn't fulfill.

I pray for him now, but I should have done something then. And you see, that's sort of like raising children. That one relationship could have been very labor intensive.

It could have taken time away from other worthy causes, other things I wanted to do. But one person in this world would have, through me, been shown Jesus Christ.

Instead, one person has not been. Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Each one.

Thirdly, though, it's also the one who denies sin.

[19 : 22] And that's verses eight through nine. This teaching here is a repeat of Matthew chapter five. You'll find this also in Matthew chapter five. The language is clearly rhetorical to the extent that

Jesus does not expect us to cut up our limbs, I don't think.

But the teaching is real. And what Jesus does here is he links sin and eternal punishment. That's why it's so critical that we not be the cause of sin in someone's life.

Because when someone forsakes Jesus Christ and goes back into a sinful way of life, they are leaving eternal life for damnation. Most people today do not really believe in a hell, but it is part of Jesus' teaching and it's linked to sin.

It is punishment for sin. And one of the big values of the kingdom of God is the struggle with sin. We are intended to take sin seriously. We are meant to deal with sin.

We are meant to overcome sin. We do not do this in our own strength, but in partnership with Jesus Christ. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus knew clearly that his sacrificial death on the cross was intended to be the solution for sin.

[20 : 31] This is my blood of the new covenant poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sin. So while the disciples are busy wondering who's going to be the first in the kingdom, who's going to be the greatest, who's going to get to be the first pope, Jesus is probing their lives and saying, yes, but have you dealt with sin?

Has standing on the soapbox of your life and of your spirituality effectively dealt with sin in your life? And while we are busy presenting ourselves to God because we are decent people and live decent lives, Jesus asked us, but have you effectively dealt with sin in your life?

Because you see, the only spirituality, the only pathway that God, to God that works, is the one that deals with sin. Remember what Jesus said?

Unless you turn and become, you have to deal with sin. And the pathway is the one that Jesus provided. Sloppiness in the Christian life comes when we get sloppy about sin, when we turn a blind eye to sin in our own lives and say, well, it doesn't matter that much, when we become accepting of sin in our lives, when we tolerate sin in our society, when we start calling what is sinful good.

But the one who is great in the kingdom of God is the one who struggles against sin. And that is something that starts with you and with me. I think there are many heroes in the church, many heroes, people who struggle to overcome deeply entrenched sinful habits in their lives, who struggle to live lives that are faithful to what God desires for us, live lives that are pleasing to God.

[22 : 16] And that is a beautiful sacrifice. And Jesus will meet you more than halfway in making you a new creation. And of course, it's true, we are all sinners and we will always be sinners until we are perfected in heaven.

And yet, the value of the kingdom is that being in the kingdom and engaging in sin is not compatible. You can't walk into the kingdom and say, well, I've got these sinful areas in my life, but that's okay.

And you see the balance in Jesus' words here. Yes, God profoundly loves us. And as soon as someone, however sinful they are, embraces Jesus Christ, then God loves them totally, even though there may be a lot of refining to do.

And so, it's not for us to be impatient with other people who come into the faith. But, we have to find the right balance. We don't want to be judgmental, but sin is a serious business and so, we have to start with ourselves because sin leads to damnation.

We must struggle with sin in our own lives. We have to look within ourselves. The person who is great in the kingdom of heaven is the one who denies sin and that happens one life at a time, yours and mine.

[23 : 39] Who is great in the kingdom of heaven? The one who is humble, the one who believes, the one who denies sin. These are the ones who are great in Jesus' kingdom. If a man is a sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?

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

See, it's like raising children. God's attention is on each and every one of us and God's desire is that no one who embraces Jesus Christ should be lost but should go on and live an eternal life.

And whenever anyone, anyone, turns to Jesus Christ, this is a matter of eternal significance which God, our Father in heaven, sees and knows and cares about.

that is how the kingdom of God grows in the world, one person at a time. We have to share that passion for each one. That is how the kingdom of God comes to you.

[24 : 51] When you put your trust in Christ, when you turn to him, you become as accepted by God as the most righteous of saints. Who is the greatest in the kingdom of God?

You are, each and every one. that is how the kingdom of God comes to you.
And God, and I understand