

The Church's Life Together

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[0 : 0 0] So, we're in Matthew 18, and our text today, Christ, when you heard it read, Christ has very stern words this evening, doesn't he? Very stern words, and they're quite assaulting words for his disciples. And at the heart of it, Jesus is saying to them, what kind of community are we going to be? Are we just going to reflect the values of the world around us, or are we going to be a community of contrast? And that's the question for us. What kind of church are we going to be? So, let's get into it. Starting with verse 1 there, at the time the disciples came to Jesus saying, who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? They had just heard Christ talking about his death, and perhaps they were thinking about succession. But the very fact that they had asked that question tells us that they really had no idea what the kingdom of God was going to look like. So, how does Jesus respond? He responds with a living example, and he puts a child amongst them.

And he says, truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you'll never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. So, you want in the kingdom? You'd be like this child. You want to be great? You'd be like this child. Do we want to be a church community that exemplifies the values of the kingdom?

Well, we must become like children. Now, the question is, what are the qualities of a child that Jesus wants us to emulate, that he's pointing out? Well, I can tell you, as a father of three small children, it is not innocence. Look, and you know this to be true if you've been around kids at all.

My kids, if they did what they did now as adults, they would be in jail. Like, they'd just be in jail. Like, even just today, they would be in jail for assault and theft. Like, just in the last few hours.

Jesus says, to enter the kingdom, you've got to become like this child because, well, it's not because they're like, you know, trusting little innocent angels and stuff. To be like this child, be like this child because they're completely dependent on others and they have no real status. Now, today, we're kind of a child-centric culture, but way, way back in the days, I think these kids, these little kids, this little kid that Jesus would have put right in the middle, it would have been a crazy thing for Jesus. A crazy example because they've got no social or economic power. They haven't achieved anything great. They don't have cool stuff. You know, they bring nothing to the table. In fact, in the ancient Near East, kids were regarded as half human until puberty because only at that point could they actually reproduce and be useful. That's not a right way of thinking about kids, but it's the way they thought about it way back in the days.

[3 : 0 0] They didn't really matter. So Jesus is saying, and I know it's really full on. Jesus is saying, you don't get to enter the kingdom until you recognize that status doesn't count.

You don't get to enter the kingdom until you realize that you don't actually bring a whole lot to the table. You don't get in there on your merits. And then he doubles down in verse 5, and he sort of changes direction slightly here. So he says this in verse 5, whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. So verse 5, just before that, he switches from saying, you must become like a little child, a no status person, to you must welcome other little ones. And he equates them to him. He says, you welcome them, you're welcoming me. How does that work? Bonhoeffer describes this quite well in the cost of discipleship. He says something like this, and it's heavily paraphrased. He says, Jesus stands between me and you. So Jesus, between my relationship with Brie, Jesus is standing between us. Between my relationship, any of you, Jesus is standing in the middle. So if I don't look at Brie as Jesus looks at her, I have rejected Jesus. You know, what a thing to do.

Now look at the beginning of verse 6 there. Look how serious Jesus takes this. Now remember, I've just said this. As you welcome others, you welcome me. That's what Jesus has said.

And then he goes on, he gets very serious. He says, but if you do the opposite, if you do the opposite of welcome, you're in trouble. So welcome, welcome, welcome. But if you do the opposite, goodness me. Look at verse 6 there. Let's just look right at the beginning of it first.

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin. So remember, the little ones here, it's not specifically talking about children. It's talking about other followers of Jesus. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin. We'll just start with that first part of the verse there. Remember, the context is welcoming. The context is welcoming these little ones. So relationally how we operate in a church community. If we lack welcome, if we lack relational generosity, and as a result of that, someone can lose their faith, that's a terrible thing. And Jesus takes that very seriously. So practically, it's...

[5 : 34] If the way we talk to each other, a lack of invitation, a lack of wanting to do life together, and that causes one of God's little ones to lose their faith, to walk away from a church community, to walk away from God, that is a situation that we tremble about. If the way we operate relationally here says to somebody, well, you know what? To be a part of us, we have to share the same language. We have to share the same race. Or you kind of have to be... For us to kind of connect it all and hang out and be together in this journey with Christ, you kind of have to be the sort of person I'd like to go to a party with. Folks, if we shut the door of the kingdom of God on people's faces with attitudes like that, and it can happen in quite subtle ways, goodness, Jesus takes that very seriously.

I get lots of emails. And the emails I hate the most are not the ones where people say, I can't understand a word you say. Those are fine. I have a special folder for those emails.

The emails I dread are the ones that have to do with a lack of welcome. And I received one a few weeks ago, about a month or so ago. And it related the following story. It was about Soup Sunday, actually. So a couple of people turned up to Soup Sunday, and the tables were laid out downstairs. There's eight chairs around a table. And new people, new people, first time church, sat down.

Not only did no one come up to speak to them, but people went up and took the remaining chairs from the table to sit with their friends. Now, on a scale of one to what would Jesus do?

Folks, this is at the lower end, isn't it? Now, a more subtle example would be, and this is, perhaps you've done this. I know I've done this. As you walk into a room, you walk into church, or you walk into a churchy thing, you know, and you walk in and you mentally filter out the people you know you won't talk to. Folks, one of the ways God's little ones lose faith and walk away from Christian immunity is when they get the idea that other people don't want anything to do with them. It causes bitterness. It's one of the reasons people walk away from church, walk away from faith. And I know you think, you might probably think I'm being a bit harsh this morning. I think I'm being quite easy. Listen to the words of Jesus here, the rest of verse 6.

[8 : 41] But whoever causes one of my little ones who believe in me to sin, this is the context of welcome, 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.

Jesus goes on, verse 7. And he fills this out a little bit. It starts by saying this, Woe to the world for temptations to sin, for it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one whom by temptation comes. And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away, etc. So it's saying a lot here. But this first bit, Woe to the world for temptations to sin, is saying this, saying the world's already a tough place to be a Christian. The world's already a difficult place to follow Jesus. And people can lose their faith because of worldliness, because of what's going on around them at work or at school or their situation. Woe to the world for temptations to sin. Jesus goes on. But it's not just the world that can cause stumbling. He's saying here that the church, we can play a part in people walking away from faith. I can do that. I can be that person that does that. You can be the person that does that. You, church member, by, you know, we can be the person by which temptation comes, the temptation to leave the faith. So Jesus says in verse 8 to 10, when it comes to sin, sin, that sort of presents itself in sort of pushing people away, making them feel like they're not part of us, making them feel excluded. Jesus says in verses 8 to 10, be ruthless with yourself. Be ruthless. That's what all the cutting off stuff is about. If your hand causes you to, or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. Now clearly this is hyperbole. It's not to be taken literally. Although some have in church history taken this literally.

And in the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, which was a big Christian meeting of church leaders, they had to pass an edict to outlaw priests castrating themselves, which is a terrible business.

So Jesus is obviously not being literal here. It's hyperbole. But let's not let the non-literalness of this take away from Christ's choice of image. He clearly takes this whole issue very seriously.

Let's be ruthless about the things in our life that cause sin, especially sin that results in other people stumbling. God's little ones stumbling. So if you see anything in yourself that you think that they could do that to others, cut it off. Do you know what that's called? You know what another name for this is called? Repentance. It's repentance. So back for a moment to the beginning of the sermon. The question the disciples asked, who was the greatest in the kingdom of God?

[11 : 40] It's the repenter. That's the mark of a truly great person right there. Repentance. The truly great are quick to admit, goodness, Lord, I have this terrible attitude towards some people.

I've got to change. Help me. And let's dig into this little, this imagery that Jesus used here, this cutting off imagery. He talks about hands, feet, and eyes. Hands representing what we do, you know. Feet where we go, eyes what we desire. Or our ambitions. So a worldly eye will enter a room and looks for the most significant person. And their feet walk over and their hands are only interested in doing the great tasks, the important tasks. But the follower of Jesus notices God's little ones, the new person, the different person, the difficult person, and walks to them and are happy to do small things. Are just happy to be helpful and welcoming.

Verses 7 to 9. Goodness, they're such stern words, aren't they? And again, all within the context of Christ saying, become like this little child and welcome other little ones. Now, Christ is not asking us to adopt some infantile attitude. He's asking us to adopt a heroic obedience in service to God's little ones, which will involve ruthlessly eliminating sin in your life for us here today. Don't we want to be these people? Don't we want to be a community where we watch our lives? Not just because it's a good thing to do, you know, we should stop sinning because that's a good thing. No, we want to be a community where we watch our lives for the sake of others. Because sometimes those things cause others to stumble. Wouldn't that be wonderful? Let's think about the big picture of church just for a moment. Why do we come here?

Why do we even turn up? We go to church for our own edification. Obviously, obviously, we go to here for our own edification. But folks, that is less than half the reason we turn up to church on a Sunday.

That's less than half the reason we go to a small group during the week. We go to catechism or the other things we're involved in. It's less than half the reason. We also go to serve others. We go to serve others. That's why it's just important just to turn up every week.

[14 : 13] Folks, let's ruthlessly set about the task of getting our lives in order, especially the area of pride. God. It all sounds quite demanding, doesn't it? Why bother? Why bother doing any of this?

Well, let's have a look at verse 10 to 14. That answers the question. Verse 10 first. See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

No idea what that means, I'm afraid. I read a lot of good scholarship this week and everyone was saying, we just don't know what this means. However, I can give you broad strokes.

Broad strokes. Imagine two circles, right? This circle is heaven. This circle is the earth. And there's this overlap. There's this overlap. And we exist in the presence of God in this overlap.

Somehow, amazingly, before God's face. And we don't despise others who are in that space either. Now look at verses 12 to 14 here.

[15 : 29] What do you think? If a man is 100 sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the 99 to go and search for them? And then when he finds them, he rejoices. Now, here's the thing about this.

This is answering the question, why bother doing all this stuff? It's answering that question. So this parable here, in this context, is not talking about reaching out to the person who does not believe in Jesus. This is not talking about the non-Christian.

This is talking about Christians who have gone astray. Because the wandering sheep was in the fold and left. They left the church. Perhaps based on what people said, did not say, did, or did not do in the church.

So the sheep goes astray and the loving shepherd goes after it, finds it, and rejoices. It's a very simple story. What's the point, though? It's a very important point. So I'm going to get there.

Here we go. Jesus' motivation for telling us to become like little children who go about ruthlessly eliminating sin from our life so that we won't cause others to stumble.

[16 : 28] The great motivation for doing all of that is here in the parable, which tells us that people matter to God, that he loves people.

He loves me. He loves you desperately. Think about this incredible story. The sheep takes off, and it's going to be dinner for some wild animal if it stays out in the wilderness.

And God doesn't say, wow, that was a stupid sheep anyway. Stupid sheep. Actually, the flock is easier without that particular sheep.

They would cause some problems. They were a difficult sheep. Nor did it say that the sheep was an especially talented sheep, and that's why God went after it, because it was like the service leader or worship leader sheep.

Just sheep. Just one of the sheep. The sheep does nothing to force God's hand into the search. The only thing the sheep does is be lost.

[17 : 30] It just gets itself lost. But the shepherd goes out to find it, because he loves his sheep. God loves his little ones.

He loves us. We matter to God. He loves us so much, he paid a very high cost to save us from the wilderness. Death on the cross.

And here, Jesus, right at the end of these stern words, is reminding us of that, reminding us of his great love for us, and asking us to have the pastoral mind of God when it comes to all of the folks around us.

Now I'm going to finish here, and it's going to happen real quick. The question I asked right at the start, what kind of church do we want to be?

Let's be a church of little ones, who welcome other little ones. Amen.