

Matthew 18:1-13

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[0 : 00] Matthew 18, I'm going to look at verses 1-13. Who is the greatest? Roger, Rafa, or Novak? ! Who's the greatest? We've heard about it all week, haven't we?! Who is the GOAT, the greatest of all time? If England won the Cricket World Cup today, that'll be the thing, isn't it? Is this the greatest one-day cricket team ever? Who is the greatest? Well, that question is here this morning, isn't it, in Matthew 18. It's not a new question. Here, the disciples and the followers of Jesus are arguing who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? Who is the GOAT in the Kingdom of Heaven? And what's really interesting is rather than putting that down or saying that's a false question, Jesus takes it and he answers it and he uses it as an occasion for teaching his disciples.

And this question of verse 1, who is the greatest of the Kingdom of Heaven, really unlocks Matthew 18, because the whole chapter is devoted to the kind of people that Jesus' people are to be.

[1 : 17] The kind of church that Jesus' disciples are supposed to be. What sort of community is the Kingdom of Heaven supposed to be like?

What kind of community is it supposed to be like? What kind of fellowship is it to be? And so on. What kind of people are you to be? And Jesus takes the trouble to take this question seriously. Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?

What does Jesus want to tell us? Well, he's teaching us about what sort of creature his church is supposed to be. First thing, I want you to notice a few things and then two implications.

First thing is the low position you must take. The low position you must take. And that's from verses 1 to 4. It's an odd question, isn't it?

Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? But that question was alive in the religious nitty-gritty of the day. Because no matter where you turn, this was the question.

[2 : 20] Who was the greatest? Whether it was of worship, whether it was in the law court, whether it was of meals, whether it was a matter of business feelings. Again and again, they would have to ask the question. Who is the greatest?

They felt it was important to know. Who ranked where? And what honour should be ascribed to them? It was a question that they were used to.

Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? And the people over whom we rule. And so on, and will rule. And so Jesus makes a response, doesn't he?

That takes them by surprise. Look at verse 3. He takes a child. And he puts them in the middle of them. Those disciples.

And he says, truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Let alone worrying about your status and your rank.

[3 : 18] You won't enter it unless you are turned. That's what it is strictly speaking. The verb there is passive. It is not the disciples who are doing the acting.

But they are acted upon. It is literally translated, unless you are turned. What does that mean? It is such a radical change needed in your attitude.

That before you enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. You and I need to be turned by someone else. That is, it has to be a working of God turning you.

Turning you away from your pride and your self-centeredness. That unless you are turned from that and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

He places a low position that you must take. And it is the evidence that you've been turned like that, that your whole attitude has changed. It is that verse 4, that whoever humbles himself like a child, is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

[4 : 33] Humble yourself like this child that I've said in your midst. And when you humble yourself, you become the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. It's as if Jesus is saying, the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven is the one who doesn't care about being the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now as we look back at this again, and go back to it, note that Jesus deals with this child. He puts this child in the middle, and he talks about becoming like this child, becoming like children.

And he's putting the child, isn't it, in front of them as a model. What does he mean by that? What does he mean by that? Become like little children. And so the customary way of looking at this passage is to say that there's some characteristic there's some character trait of children, little children, that we need to manifest, that we need to show.

Some might say it's little children's humility that you need to follow. And little children are not concerned with self-advancement. And so, that's what you must model yourself on.

Or you must humble a child in its innocence. Or in its receptivity. Or you must humble yourself like a child in its trustfulness.

[5 : 56] And if you read the commentators, you'll see various suggestions of the qualities of little children that we are to emulate. But there's a problem with that, isn't there? And the problem is this. Have you been around little children recently?

Even little children? Do you really believe that little children are humble? And little children don't care about self-advancement?

That little children are full of that art? You know others first. Please put others first. Do you really believe that children are innocent? Well, you've not seen that in the Bible.

And that is a false way of interpreting what Jesus is saying here. And it's also sentimental. And so what did Jesus mean when he says you need to become like little children?

He's not talking about a quality. But he's talking about the position of little children. He's not concerned about a characteristic that they have but about the status of little children in the Palestinian culture of this day.

[7 : 07] Why? Because when he places that child there and he says you need to be turned and you need to become like this little child humble yourself he's saying like a child in our culture.

Now in the culture of Jesus' day it was not that in Jesus' time children were particularly despised. That wasn't true. But it was true that children in Jesus' day did not have any status.

They didn't have any position you might say. They were a responsibility but they did not have any clout in this way. Part of a little bit of background.

In some of the rabbis, the teachers' laws that they formulated around this time you'd often find the child or sometimes he's called a minor. And the child would be mentioned in a group.

And the others in the group that the children would be mentioned were the deaf and the mute and people who suffered from mental disability they called them the imbeciles. Somebody who had a kind of mental impairment.

[8 : 14] And the child. Three people in the group. And the deaf and the mute are someone who had a mental disability and children. It wasn't meant to put them into a despised status but it was something like this.

So who was required to go up to the yearly feast? And so in Jerusalem and they gave some exceptions they said everyone except somebody who's deaf and mute somebody who has a mental disability and someone who is a child.

The child was exempted from that requirement. They weren't required to go. And what about if you had an ox that gored somebody or an ox that gored another ox and the ox said well if their ox belonged to somebody who was deaf or mute or somebody who had a mental disability or somebody who was a child they weren't responsible.

They couldn't be charged. It's as if for whatever reason they didn't have enough position they didn't have enough legal status to be charged as being culpable.

Or if they were sheep and the sheep got out of the pen and somehow got into somebody else's crop or damaged their neighbours' fields the shepherd or the owner of the sheep they would be responsible for what that sheep had done.

[9 : 34] But if that man had entrusted the care of that flock to a deaf and mute person or somebody with a mental disability or a child then those persons weren't responsible for it.

the owner was. It's just as if the child did not have any status. He wasn't even legally responsible in certain situations.

It was that kind of position. And so when Jesus seems to be saying it's not that you become like little children and that you have some certain quality that children have and you are to emulate it. But no you are turned and you become like little children in their position. The position that little children have in our society. Jesus is saying not one who is great not one who is significant but one who accepts their position of insignificance.

Who has no status. And you are willing to accept that. And so when Jesus says whoever will humble himself in verse 4 as this child he does not say whoever humbles himself as this child humbles himself.

[10:49] But he means whoever humbles himself as this child is in a position of humility and insignificance in our society. So that it is a low position do not be concerned with greatness or status but be willing before the kingdom of God if I ever enter it I must be so radically reorientated or turned that I am willing to say of myself there is one sense in which I don't have any clout at all any influence at all any significance at all.

It is a humbling thing. Gerald Ford was the American president and he lost a president election to Jimmy Carter.

Before he lost the election Gerald Ford was invited to be the guest of honour at a dinner for Vince Lombardi the kind of legendary American football coach.

It was a benefit dinner for Council Research and they invited the president to come and be the guest of dinner guest of honour but in the time from when he accepted the invitation to the time of the actual dinner he lost an election and he was now the ex-president.

And on their way flying to Houston Gerald Ford was contemplating whether people would be disappointed. He was saying out loud they asked to get the president but instead they were getting the ex-president and he said it out loud to his wife he said he hoped people would be too disappointed that he was not a sitting president and his wife Betty Ford said don't worry darling it's me that they're coming to see It's devastating for the man isn't it?

[12:45] I hope she's doing you but it would be humbling it's humbling for him and to be told listen it doesn't matter whether you're the president or whether you're the ex-president they're not coming to see you anyway and that's one of the first principles of the church of Jesus Christ that if I'm going to enter into the kingdom of heaven I need to accept this position of insignificance and you might say that is a devastating blow to my self-image but Jesus isn't dealing with your self-image he's dealing with your pride and Jesus is saying to you this morning unless you are turned and you take a position before the doors of the kingdom of heaven of saying I have no clout I have no claim on this kingdom I have no status the only way that I can enter into the kingdom of heaven is as a gift from you Lord because I have no status I make no demands and it is a low position and it is a humbling of yourself it's not taking up a false honesty and beating yourself down and saying oh how insignificant

I am it's not trying to say something that you aren't but it's to realise that before God we are in the position of little children as they were in Jesus day they had no status they had no significance and if we are going to enter into the kingdom of God we will only do so as a gift and that is excruciating for our pride the low position that I must take and I must maintain when I am in the kingdom because after all if I am in that kingdom of God this morning if I am in the kingdom of heaven if I am great at all I will not care about greatness and really who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven well the answer is very easy isn't it the answer is easy Jesus is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven that he who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing taking the very nature of a servant he humbled himself even to the point of death even death on a cross now secondly not only the low position you must take but secondly the high value you must appreciate and you'll see that in verses 5 to 14 we will come back and deal with verses 8 and 9 some other time

I'm not trying to avoid those texts but I want you to see the main flow of the argument in 5 to 14 and the main flow of the argument from verses 5 to 14 is how highly Jesus values every one of his people that's the main point notice how he speaks to them he speaks in terms doesn't he in verses 1 to 4 he calls his people child and children and then in verses 6 and 10 and 14 he uses a different word he uses the word little ones and so the question I think we need to ask are these children that he's speaking about are they literal children or not sometimes it's taken in that way well I don't

argue no if you look at verse 6 whoever receives one such child in my name receives me then verse 7 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 depths of the sea but you see what it says the little ones who believe in me he defines them doesn't he who are the little ones the little ones who believe in me and so when

Jesus talks about little ones he's talking about believers he's talking about his disciples he's talking about his followers not merely children they represent all Christians all his people he's trying to say what a high value you have upon you now how do you see this look at verses 6 and 7 if you have somebody who tries to trip up one of these little ones these little ones who believe in me no matter who he or she is just one and someone tries to trip up that one of Jesus' little ones up tries to make them fall tries to make them fall away from me tries to get their affection away from me however they do it they want them to grow cold towards Jesus they want to sabotage their faith in Jesus well it would be better for them if a millstone was tied around their neck think of the millstone it's not the little stone that you use to get ground herbs it is the massive great stone that would be turned by an ox or a donkey there'd be a great stone and an ox or a donkey would be tied to it and they would strain with all their might the animal and they would grind the millstone let's think of a better illustration for us today let's say one of those big people carriers and let's say one of those people carriers was tied around your legs and you were thrown into the middle of the sea it's a horrible death isn't it it's a horrible death and that's what

Jesus is saying it would be a horrible death but it would be far better than facing the kind of death the kind of judgment that that person will have to face and accountability before God because he would destroy or he would lead astray one of God's Jesus flock now it's a horrible thing to say but I want you to flip the image and this is what you're supposed to do because what you're supposed to see is the value that lies behind it Jesus is saying to you this morning if you're one of his followers that is how valuable you are that is the kind of value to me that you are precious gives another picture of verses 12 and 13 it's the picture of the stray sheep here's a guy isn't it he has a modest flock and one of them goes astray he's got 99 safe on the hillside but one of them has gone missing what do you do stuff the one

[19:21] I'm alright with the 99 what do you do does he leave the shepherd the 99 on the hills and go and look for the one sheep but he does see when he's found the sheep he takes the two legs one hand and he carries the other two in the other and he puts it over his shoulder and he carries them home and Jesus says I tell you that when he finds that sheep he rejoices over that sheep more than over the 99 that didn't go astray look at that image it's a bizarre image does Jesus not care for the 99 who are left or does Jesus leave the 99 at risk to go and get the one that's not the point it's not the point of the story no the point is this do you see much how one of the father's sheep matters to him do you see the high value that the father places on his sheep so what

Jesus says there's a couple of implications that if my people really do have that kind of value one implication has to do with assurance assurance you see that in verse 14 so it is not the will of my father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish he said that is the way the will of God is that is the purpose of God that his people matter so much to him he will not allow one of them to perish they are so precious do you hear the assurance there is in that if God values you as one of his people like that you must be terribly immensely secure every one of them matters every one of them counts judge life it's a funny phenomenon isn't it

I think one of the ways the devil works in judge life is he causes people to just pull back a little bit so maybe they kind of decide to miss for a few weeks people don't call as they should people don't email as they should people don't notice as they should people think nobody really cares for me I'm not important I don't matter do you see this here every one of Jesus sheep counts everyone matters it doesn't matter what the world thinks about you it doesn't matter what Christians think but that person matters to Jesus and if that person is precious to Jesus then he or she will never be lost and do you know why well because it isn't God's will for one of these little ones to perish and some of us need that don't we not only assurance is there assurance but there's another implication and it's got to do with attitude look at verse 10 look at verse 10 it says see that you do not despise one of these little ones you see if God's people have this kind of value in God's sight and in

Jesus sight if they are such worth to him then you better not treat them with contempt and you ought to have the same kind of values as the living God does and therefore you don't treat them with contempt another disciple of Jesus he gives an argument in verse 10 and he says for I tell you

that in heaven their angels always see the face of my father who is in heaven what on earth does that mean there's a lot of ink that's being spilled on that what it says in some ways all of Jesus people and it's not talking about guardian angels here okay but everyone evidently that everyone of Jesus people have angel representatives in heaven who always behold the father's faith and so we probably need to do a bit more work on angels but in Hebrews chapter 1 verse 14 we read that angels are serving spirits sent forth on behalf of those who are to inherit salvation angels are the servants of God set to do his work for the good of his people we need to do a bit more work on angels but the main point here is not that you can put it all together but Jesus reasoning is if my disciples even the most minor league ones even the littlest ones if my children always have angels representing them before the father if they have angels ministering on their behalf they must be somebody what's the point it's another way of showing exactly the same truth the supreme value of Christ's flock and so he says don't despise one of these little ones don't despise one of these little ones have the value that your father has towards his people there's another boy my sister was looking after me she's 10 years older than me and she was about 10 I was about one and I was crying for some reason uncontrollably and my mother had humble figures you've got to be a certain age to be into humble figures they're kind of funny looking porcelain children really they're worth a fortune and I don't know mom or dad three or four and I don't know and I was crying and controlling my sister gives me a humble figure to play with and I toss it into the fire grate and smash it and I don't know what happened I was too young to know what happened but the tales were the legendary when my father wrote home and the humble figure is extremely precious worth a fortune but in my sister's eyes and in my eyes it was just another thing to play with it was a common thing [25 : 55] I didn't recognize I didn't realize the value of it I just thought it was something to play with and we can so easily do that in church life but we don't realize the true value of Christ's church Jesus people are not common things we must not despise them or treat them with contempt now I know in a church we can't all be highly intimate with each other we can't all have a really intense degree of involvement all the time we know that that's impossible but is there another believer here that you actually regard with contempt you wouldn't use that word but you would have to say yeah I do kind of look down upon him or her and you or I need to repent of that you might look at some other Christian and think well they're too old for me or they're too young for me to care about or they're not in my age bracket or they're not in my stage of life or that great line that the devil whispers in your ear there's no one like me here or you might say that person is not spiritually sure there's all sorts of subtle ways in which that attitude can come out and Jesus saying see that you don't despise any of these little ones no one left behind no not one and Jesus saying you must have that attitude you must value my people with the same capacity

I have for them and that will make a difference it will make a difference to the way that we regard one another and to the way that we treat one another and that all means this as we finish up it means that I don't need to care about whether I have great status or not I don't need to care whether I'm the greatest or not when Jesus places such high value upon me let's pray