

# Matthew 18:1-14

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[0:00] As Andrew said, this week and next week, we're taking a break from Paul's series in the book of Acts. This is a one-off in Matthew 18. And next week, Matthew Roberts will be preaching, Lord willing, at the ordination of Andrew Quay.

Please turn up Matthew 18 again, page 823 in the church Bibles. Talk of greatness is fairly commonplace today.

The concept of the GOAT, G-O-A-T, greatest of all time, is debated up and down and round and round. Often that's the case in sport.

The sport I'm most interested in, that case has been closed with the arrival of the French scrum half, Antoine Dupont. No doubt, the greatest of all time. But whatever the field, whether it's sport or business or academics or your field of interest, you know both who you think is the greatest, and you also know what you think it would take for you to be great.

Greatness is the topic on the lips of the disciples in our passage this morning. Chapter 18, verse 1. At that time, that is in the context of a discussion about comparative status.

[1:22] That's what's been going on in chapter 17. At that time, the disciples came to Jesus saying, literally, So, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

And that's an important question, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Because, well, it concerns an important topic. Greatness in sport or business may be interesting, it may be inspiring, but ultimately, it isn't a matter of life and death.

Whether LeBron James or Michael Jordan is the greatest in the NBA, or whether Warren Buffett or Elon Musk are the greatest in business, that's actually neither here nor there in light of eternity.

We can have a debate, we can have a conversation, that might be interesting, but it's not important. And it's certainly not important in the light of eternity. But who is great when it comes to the kingdom of God?

That's a question that actually matters. It makes a difference. Because it relates to how God views greatness. And when all is said and done, when everything's been said, when everything's been done, when history is brought to its culmination, His opinion is the only one that matters.

[2:38] The truth is, you can be great in all kinds of fields. You can be great in all kinds of fields all at once. You can be wonderful in all those ways. But if God doesn't care about that, if God doesn't care about those areas, well then, you've wasted your time.

Your greatness may actually be a cosmic failure. To paraphrase our own Rico Tice, he said this, the definition of failure is being great at things that don't matter.

Being great at things that don't matter makes you a failure. So we want to pursue greatness according to God's standards. And the disciples' question opens the door to the answer.

Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? That question is brought to us via their own ambition. They've been with Jesus for a while now. They've heard him talk about the kingdom that he has brought in.

And he has told them that his mission is going to be to die for the sins of the world. He isn't going to be around forever. And so the disciples are looking at each other. And they're wondering, well, who's going to take over?

[3:44] When he goes, who's going to be the greatest? Who's going to be the top dog? Who's going to be in charge? Jesus has just at the end of chapter 17 had an exchange with Peter. Is it going to be him?

Is he going to be the man they don't know? So the question comes. So who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And we discover that Jesus' answer turns all our expectations upside down.

He does what he often does. He uses a visual aid. He calls a child. I assume reading it that the child is old enough to walk. It says that he calls him. So he says, come over here.

You, little one, come over here. And I imagine him just leaning forward and lifting him into the middle of the disciples and saying, you want to talk about greatness? There's your answer.

Who's the greatest in the kingdom? There you go, boys. Verse 3. Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

[ 4 : 48 ] Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Some of you may remember back in 1995 at the beginning of the football season, Alex Ferguson, as he was known then, picked a Man United team full of youngsters.

They lost the first game of the season. And Alan Hanson speaking to Des Lynham on Match of the Day. Des Lynham. There's the greatest of all time when it comes to sports presenters.

But Alan Hanson famously said on Match of the Day that Man United had big problems because, quote, you can't win anything with children. You can't win anything with kids. Now, the young players that Alex Ferguson had picked included Ryan Giggs, David Beckham, Paul Scholes, and the Neville brothers, who all became legends.

And they actually went on to win the league that year by four points. I don't like football. I don't like Man United. I have no horse in this race. But it's very interesting.

Alan Hanson is famously known not only as a legend of football playing for Liverpool, but by that quote, you can't win anything with kids. Now, ordinarily, although Hanson was proved wrong on that occasion, he's right, isn't he?

[ 6 : 07 ] The sentiment is generally true. Children aren't usually an example to follow. We don't think, what's the answer to the problem here? What's the solution? Let's go to the kids. Except, that is, when it comes to the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God.

Greatness in God's sight, winning in the courts of heaven, requires us to go to the little ones. That's what Jesus says. Here's our first point. He tells us, you want to be great?

Number one, embrace the humility of a child. Verses three and four. Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Turning and becoming like children, that sounds a bit unclear. Are we to become childish? Is that what he's saying? Well, Jesus goes on, verse four, he clarifies, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

The issue is humility. And children are the example. Both because in this culture, the culture that they're in at the time, children were the lowest social level when it came to authority and decision-making.

[ 7 : 15 ] They didn't have influence. Children couldn't open doors for you. They were socially as well as physically. Verse six, little ones. But also, they are the example because little children embody humility in all kinds of ways.

We'll say more on that in a minute. But can you see the shock? Talk to us about greatness, Jesus. Go to the children. Become like a child.

It is shocking. The disciples, Jesus sees, need to radically reimagine what it means to belong to the kingdom of God.

All of their desire for authority and for power and for position. The question was motivated by that. Who's going to be the greatest? You only ask that question if you're hoping that it's going to be you. All of that motivation, he's saying, is totally misguided. And the truth is, we can easily fall into the same trap.

[ 8 : 18 ] All the maps for life that our culture lays before us involve some version of go you. Go you. Self-promotion.

Push hard to succeed. Self-belief. Confidence. And of course, all the big names online, and you can take your pick, whoever your big name online is, they are big because we like their confidence.

We like the self-sufficiency. We like the sense of power that they have, that they exude. Because we're told that that is what greatness looks like. It's not that way in the kingdom of God.

Greatness looks like humility. Matthew has said earlier, the Lord Jesus has said earlier, chapter 5, It is poverty of spirit. It is poverty of spirit. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Getting yourself out of the way.

That is how you enter the kingdom. Verse 3. And it is to be your posture as a citizen of the kingdom. Turn and become like children.

[ 9 : 21 ] Take the bottom rung. Embrace humility. Embrace humility. It's the example that he gives is the lowest on the social ladder.

And he says, become like them. Not only because they're down there, but also think about it, children. Become like them in their trust and dependence.

That's what characterizes children, isn't it? Children trust their parents. Children don't try to live self-sufficient lives. They ask for what they need when they need it.

They're not shy to cry out because they know that their parents will provide. Give me today my daily bread is a prayer that you often hear from the lips of a child.

They might not use those words, but they might say, I want it now. I'm hungry. They don't pretend that they can live without mom and dad. If we're honest with ourselves, we resent that we're dependent on anyone.

[ 10 : 27 ] Lots of the way that we live our lives is about getting rid of dependence. And yet it's unavoidable. We must depend on God. We require him for absolutely everything that we have.

Become like children in their honesty and their unfiltered approach to life. Children, little children, don't worry about what others think of them.

They don't pretend. They don't pretend either in the demands that they make of their parents or in the way that they carry themselves in the world. I want that one and I want it now.

It's very honest. They're not pretending. Toddlers generally don't fuss about their hair or their clothes. For honest with ourselves, so much of adult life is playing pretend in the personas that we adopt, the face that we put on to go out into the world to try and look impressive, to try and be accepted.

But it's all a persona in the way that we speak, even in some cases in the way that we pray. We've been taught that there are certain things that we should say in prayer and there are certain things we shouldn't say in prayer.

[ 11 : 40 ] But in our hearts we feel all kinds of things that we never bring to the Lord. And so there's a dishonesty. There's a problem there.

Children aren't like that. Little children live with an honesty and an unfiltered approach to life. Be like children in their resilience.

Children can scream with laughter one minute and scream with sadness and distress the next and back to laughter again and back to distress. Little ones can fall out and they can make up and fall out and make up.

There's no emotional baggage with a toddler, with a little one. They're resilient. Become like children in the way they live in the present.

Little children don't dwell on yesterday or worry about tomorrow. Isn't that what Jesus tells us? That we should live our lives like that? They don't get twisted up about having to have the newest things because they're taken up with whatever is in front of them.

[ 12 : 46 ] We have lots of little, little, I'm talking about the tiniest ones, the little ones, toddlers and below. We have lots of them in the church. Have a look at them, the way they conduct themselves.

Taken up with whatever is in front of them and it can be the most simple thing which is another thing that we should emulate. We should be like children in the simplicity of their lives.

Little children aren't worried about making a name for themselves. They aren't worried about what their friends are saying about them. They live in the moment and they live with the most simple and straightforward little things. They haven't even thought, it hasn't even crossed their mind that they have no authority or status.

They enjoy simple things. And they're content. If we, if Jesus is saying your example for greatness is a child, we are called to the humility of at least those things.

Dependence, honesty, resilience, presence and simplicity. Where do you need to change? Where do you need to have the Holy Spirit break down old attitudes and desires?

[ 13 : 59 ] And you might say, well, but what if I found myself actually with status and authority in the world? What if I'm not actually on the lowest rung? What if I'm pretty impressive in the eyes of the world?

Well, if God has given you that, that's up to Him. Praise Him for it. Thank Him for it. Recognize Him. Recognize that it is a gift from His hand. It's not ultimately what you've managed to do by the sweat of your own brow, however hard you've worked.

It is a gift from Him. And if He has given that to you, even though you might have that status as a follower of Jesus, as one who belongs to His kingdom, you must carry those responsibilities with the same qualities, with dependence, honesty, resilience, presence and simplicity.

And you know, don't you, that doing that is possible. Doing that is possible because you, as a follower of Jesus, understand the paradox of a kingdom where the least are greatest and the last are first.

Embrace the humility of a child. Well, having placed a particular child, He took a real little child and put them in their midst, Jesus then moves the point of discussion to how we should treat others who have adopted this humble, childlike posture.

[15:18] He doesn't just care about how we conduct ourselves and how we exercise our own personal humility, but also that we do what we can to help others in this area too. Now, it could be that He's referring to children specifically.

Verse 5, Have a look. Whoever receives one such child, although it seems more likely that His repeated use in the rest of the section on little ones is His way of describing all of those who have embraced the humility of the kingdom, little ones being a nickname, as it were, for disciples. Now, those are the options that commentators present us with, but I wonder why it is that we need to choose, actually. Are not our children, born as they are into our covenant homes, themselves disciples of the Lord Jesus?

Jesus has in view here the whole church family, as it were. And so our second point, Having embraced the humility of a child, we must secondly also embrace responsibility for others. Embrace responsibility for others. That's verse 5 to 14. Now, what's happening here is a challenge to any sort of sense of individualism that we might bring to the kingdom of heaven.

[16:27] And Jesus starts with an encouragement. You see, verse 5, Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. When we receive, that is, when we welcome, show respect for, care for, another Christian in the name of Jesus, that is, seeing them as one who represents Jesus, we actually receive Jesus himself.

Jesus so closely identifies with his people that the way that you treat them is the way that you treat him. And in saying this, he is giving to the least important person in the eyes of others, the little ones, those that have embraced this humility, he is giving them a significance that is completely out of proportion with their human standing.

The last, really, our first in his kingdom. Now, isn't that a great encouragement? It's an encouragement to us both to embrace the humility that he calls us to, but also to embrace others in his name.

When you greet or serve or go out of your way to be a blessing to another Christian, not because they can do something for you, not to enhance your agenda, not to make you feel better, not to have you at the center of you doing what you do, but simply because they belong to Christ, you are displaying heavenly greatness according to Jesus.

And it pleases him. But he goes on, and if he starts with a positive word about how we should treat others, he continues with a more somber tone, do you see?

[18:08] He so cares about his little ones that he takes a very dim view indeed of anything that anyone might do to cause them harm. The warning is very grave.

Look at verse 6. It starts there. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, more literally, to stumble, 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.

Now, I take it here that Jesus has in mind stumbling people specifically for misleading them about what it looks like to belong to Christ's kingdom.

I take it that the theme of humility actually runs through this whole section 1 to 14. And the warning is that if you give the impression to others, to other people in the body of Christ, that life is actually about status and recognition, that life is actually about posturing for greatness, you will cause them to stumble, it will lead them down the wrong path and they may wander away completely.

That's why he takes it so seriously. Now, let's think about this in terms of how we raise our children. If it is literal children that are in view here, little disciples, those that are less mature, of course, we would put children in that category.

[19:31] Do our children believe that following Christ, no matter what it costs, is more important than anything else in the world and they can invest their lives in nothing more valuable.

Are we training them to understand that life consists in cultivating dependence, honesty, resilience, presence, and simplicity?

Or have we taught them that they should have just the same ambition as their friends, just the same values as their friends, but with Jesus tacked on the side? Because that's actually how we live our lives.

In what ways might we be causing our children to stumble by the example that we're setting them about the values of the world according to Jesus? More widely, does the way that we relate to others or talk about others reflect the reality that in God's kingdom, the great ones are the little ones?

Or does our example tell a different story? Our influence on others, our influence in the context of the church family on those around us is something that we need to consider because causing another believer to sin is very, very serious.

[ 21 : 03 ] if Jesus says a quick drowning, it would be pretty quick if you're thrown in with a massive millstone tied around your neck. If a quick drowning is better than what will happen to you for misleading another believer, it doesn't bear thinking about the alternative, does it?

And so, we are to take radical action to ensure that this doesn't happen. That's verses 7 to 9. 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. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

Again, I take it the temptation and view here as the temptation to stumble over humility. To tempt people to only care about the bright and the beautiful. To tempt people not to treat others as if they are more important than you.

[ 22 : 12 ] Now, this is commonplace in the world. It's dog eat dog out there. It's every man for themselves. We expect those temptations to come out there and God will one day judge that. We can leave that to Him. But we must act to avoid that judgment ourselves.

Do you see? So verse 8, if your hand or your foot or your eye, it's a way of saying any part of you causes you to sin, take radical action in order to stop.

Jesus says, it is better to be impaired in some way now. It is better to have a worse experience of this life but in so doing gain glory in the future than to be fit and healthy, comfortable and happy, self-sufficient, completely self-contained now, but to miss glory and to receive in the end, look at verse 8, the eternal fire.

Verse 9, He repeats it, the hell of fire. Don't muck about with sin. Don't muck about with sin.

And don't muck about with sin such that others follow your lead. It is better to look foolish than in your pride to cause another person to sin. It is better to be thought weird and eccentric by others for the sake of faithfulness than to mislead a brother or sister into sin.

[ 23 : 39 ] We live our Christian lives in relation to others and we are to bear them in mind in the way that we live. And we see here Jesus makes it really clear the stakes could not be higher.

You might say, look, talking about hell sounds a bit much. It's not a bit OTT. Well, think about it like this. In talking about people stumbling, Jesus is talking about people being harmed and being harmed spiritually, which is the worst kind of harm someone can experience.

Falling away from the source of life is a desperate thing. Now, how would you feel if someone harms your little one?

Does that cause serious damage in some way? Parents here, there's nothing that you can think of that would anger you more, is there? Why should God the Father be any different? The extent of the judgment that he talks about here serves to emphasize how deeply God cares for one of his children.

When you think about the nature of this judgment, think about the strength of feeling God has for his children. In fact, this is where Jesus goes next to make precisely that point using the parable of the wandering sheep.

[ 25 : 16 ] How deeply does God care for one of his children? Well, see that you do not despise one of these little ones. Verse 11, for I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountain 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. He's using the parable as a picture of the Father's love for his children.

God, the Father's love for his children. He's using the parable here in Matthew in a different way than he does in Luke's gospel. Here the one sheep is not yet lost. It's just, it's gone astray.

And the point is that for God the one matters just as much as the whole. God cares about individuals. He cares about you as an individual.

[ 26 : 22 ] But he cares about you as an individual in the context of the whole church. He cares that the wanderer, the individual wanderer is restored. But he cares that that happens in the context of the whole church.

That should be our posture. The language in this last section, 10 to 14, has shifted from the singular to the plural. So he's saying this is the work of the whole church.

And he'll say more about this in the rest of the chapter. But we are to love one another enough in the context of the church that when we see another person wandering off we care about it.

That we take one another's growth in the Lord Jesus seriously. Spiritual health of the body is something that we have to take responsibility for together.

Don't despise the little ones. They are the great ones in God's assessment. And if any brother or sister has been stumbled in some way, tempted to wander in some way, if they're going astray, we don't just shrug our shoulders and say, oh that's a bit of a pity.

[ 27 : 30 ] What a shame. We go after them to bring them back because they matter to their Father in heaven. And he has tasked the church to embody the same pastoral care that he shows as the true shepherd of his people.

How is it that God the Father goes after the one? He does it through his body, the church. That is the humility and the care that marks out the kingdom of heaven.

That is the humility and care that in the end defines true greatness. Let's pray. Let's pray.