

This fall we are continuing our study in the book of Matthew chapter 18. Matthew was an actual eyewitness to Jesus' life and ministry. He was one of Jesus' original 12 disciples. Matthew literally followed Jesus for three years. He heard what Jesus said, and saw what Jesus did. He wanted to make it clear that all earthly kingdoms will rise and fall, but Jesus' Kingdom will reign forever. And Matthew wanted to make clear that the values of any kingdom made on earth are completely upside down from the values of God's kingdom.

We can see why this idea of kingdom values mattered to Matthew. Matthew was a Jew. Before Matthew followed Jesus, he had aligned himself with the values of the Roman Empire, which was the most powerful kingdom on earth in Jesus' day. Matthew was seduced by the money and power of Rome and went to work for them as a tax collector. He was paid by Rome to collect the high taxes placed on his fellow Jews, who viewed him as a traitor.

Then Jesus came into Matthew's life and called Matthew to follow Him. This changed Matthew's life. He converted, left his job, his good Roman salary, and followed Jesus. His conversion is a great story found in chapter 9.

After Jesus rose from the dead, Matthew dedicated his life to making sure we understand that following Jesus is the better way and that Jesus' Kingdom is the better kingdom. Matthew wanted us to know that Jesus' way of greatness is better than any greatness the kingdoms of this earth serve up.

You might be thinking, I'm not well informed about Rome, but I see all kinds of failures in the power structures within the earthly kingdoms around me. I am open to the idea there may be a better way. But what is it about the way of Jesus that is any different or better? And what does the way of Jesus require of me?

To help us understand the way of Jesus and his kingdom, I will read the first four pages from that "great theologian," Dr. Suess, from his classic work, *Horton Hears a Who!* "After all, a person's a person, no matter how small."

More than a children's fable, this book is an eloquent statement about human rights and the dignity of every person. In Jesus' Kingdom, those who the world considers insignificant or marginalized matter to Jesus and they should matter to us as well.

Jesus often mingled with "marginalized" people... children, women without rights, social misfits, the chronically ill, religious

outsiders, even tax collectors, and prostitutes. Our earthly kingdom is filled with unwanted babies, angry teens, old folks crammed in nursing homes, the mentally ill, the addicted, immigrants, refugees, and the poor or as one author put it the "bottom billion."

In this passage, Jesus envisions a new community that is committed to seeing, serving, and protecting people on the margins. It's not so much that we are the better people and we are called to help the marginalized people. In Jesus' kingdom, it is very simple, the first become last and the last become first. And our understanding of greatness in Jesus' kingdom begins right there.

Greatness Requires Humility

Let us join the disciples on this Journey to understand what greatness requires.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matthew 18:1)

What an amazing question! Had they already forgotten the first beatitude back in chapter five? "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God." Or the third beatitude, "blessed are the meek," or the fifth beatitude, "blessed are those who show mercy?" Had they forgotten the faith of the Roman centurion and his humility back in chapter eight? He was a great man in the Roman kingdom, who knew true greatness was found in Jesus. He said to Jesus, "Lord I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word and my servant will be healed."

What was it that Shakespeare wrote? Be not afraid of greatness: Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." These disciples were following true greatness in the person of Jesus Christ. He was great as only God is great. They were not. They were not born great. They did not achieve greatness. They did not have greatness thrust upon them. Yet they wanted so much to be great.

But in Jesus' new community, his new and everlasting kingdom, the foundational attribute of greatness is humility. Jesus turns the secular definition of greatness upside down. Real greatness is not found in seeking to be praised or served by others, but in seeking out others to serve, no matter how small.

In sharp contrast to the disciple's fascination with status and position, Jesus took a little child and declared that greatness was found there.

He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (verses 2–4)

Literally, if you want to be great, you must convert and become like this little child. In God’s kingdom, there is no room for big-headed people who can’t fit through the narrow gate, no room for camels who can’t fit through the eye of a needle. Jesus is saying, what we think about children, and what we do to them is an indication of what we think about the world, God, and ourselves. In the original Greek language, in which the New Testament is written, the words used for “child” are mostly neither masculine or feminine, but neuter: The child wasn’t a he or she, it was an “it.” But to carry this further, a child who was a girl was considered even less. They were expensive and in the worst cases left out to the elements to die or sold into prostitution at an early age. So Jesus actually could have brought a little girl into the middle of their discussion. Like the weakest most vulnerable, least significant human you can think of, that’s the clearest signpost to what the kingdom of God will be like.

Certainly, there are characteristics in children people in Jesus’ community are not to copy. My wife teaches Kindergarten; she could name a few childlike qualities that Jesus isn’t talking about here for us to copy. Jesus isn’t referring to being easily distracted or have the uncanny ability to throw temper tantrums. Rather to be like children means humility. For a little girl to come to Jesus she must trust (believe in Him and believe He is safe) that he is okay to come to, and listen to as we are all called to listen to him (remember the transfiguration back in 17), This humility is expressed as mustard seed faith, listening, and obeying. Humility is what counts in God’s kingdom because pride and arrogance are the things, which more than anything else, distort and ultimately destroy human lives.

Can we see it? Entrance and advancement into this new community of God requires humility. Humility is being unconcern about attaining social status, power, or impressing anyone. Humility is pure receptivity. Humility is in our prayers for God’s grace and forgiveness. Humility is opening up to the heart to God. And when we open up to the heart of God, it compels us to love people, no matter how small, marginalized, or needy.

Jesus reminds us we are not naturally like children in this way. We must change and convert to a totally new nature and become born again as a spiritual child.

When we convert, take on this role of little children, embrace this community, and value humility, it will have a profound impact on our community relationships. And then he gives us a way to practice humility in verse 5—through hospitality. So not only

does greatness in God’s kingdom require humility, greatness requires hospitality.

Greatness Requires Hospitality

And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (verse 5)

Matthew is saying, not only does greatness require humility, we are to practice humility by welcoming those children, those outcasts, those who seem unimportant, welcome them in the name of Jesus: Because they matter to Jesus. How we behave toward the least among us is the great indicator of how we behave toward Jesus. Now that is quite a thought. This new community Jesus is building should be the place above all other places where the children and marginalized people can be sure of a warm and merciful welcome.

In verses 1–5, Jesus uses literal little children as the example of the kind of humility, which he demands of those who want to become part of his new community. Now in verse 6 he makes a subtle shift. He inserts the phrase “little ones” not to mean literal children as in verses 1 through 5, but to now mean Christians. Those Christians who are most often marginalized, or prone to wander like lost sheep. Jesus calls his new community, (especially the more mature) to act to protect these more vulnerable followers of Christ. So greatness requires us to protect those, the least among us, who we have welcomed into this new community.

Greatness Requires Protecting Others

Starting in verse 6, Jesus uses two graphic images to wake us up. These are warnings to us. If we think our little sins are no big deal to Christ, and his new community, we couldn’t be further from the mind of Christ.

If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. (verse 6)

Imagine a great millstone, a two-ton slab of circular stone so huge and heavy that it needs a donkey to move it. Now imagine wearing that millstone around your neck like a concrete collar. Then imagine being taken out to the middle of the ocean and thrown overboard. Down you go, bye-bye.

It’s hard to hear this coming from Jesus’ mouth. It’s the gentle shepherd, Jesus, holding the child close to all of a sudden sounding like the Godfather. “You mess my little ones and you’ll wind up at the bottom of the river...” It’s a stark warning, and it seems extreme, perhaps because we have undervalued the little ones Jesus wants us to protect both in our church community and in the world.

Jesus is warning us: We can cause other believers to stumble when we tempt them to sin by our sinning. We can cause other

believers to stumble when we set a bad example. We can cause other believers to stumble when we don't protect them from predators. Jesus is saying if you hurt one of these I will hurt you.

It's amazing how many people watch you. Children, Students, Young adults, People at your work, and in your neighborhood watch you. People who live by our church campus watch you. What message are we sending with our life to those who watch us?

Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come! (verse 7)

The broken kingdoms of this world, those outside the community will try to take out the least among us. I think Matthew, being a former tax collector and having worked for a corrupt regime, really understood how the world causes us to stumble. Greatness in Jesus' new community requires us to protect the weakest among us when attacks come from any direction.

In verse 6 through 9 Jesus uses the phrase "causes to stumble" four times. It hit me as I was studying this past week. We can cause someone to stumble because of our sinful actions. But we can also cause someone to stumble because of our lack of a good action.

If we cover our eyes to avoid seeing what is really going on around us and ignore those who are being exploited and abused around us, we are causing someone to stumble because of our inaction. If we stick our hands in our pockets and refuse to engage, to rescue, and protect the least among us, we cause someone to stumble because of our inaction.

John Stott puts it this way, "It is not so much the case that I am under obligation to my fellow human beings as that I am under obligation to God for my fellow human beings."

I found a verse this week, which makes it God's heart for justice very clear to me.

Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan, I will now arise, says the Lord. I will protect them from those who malign them. (Psalm 12:5)

When people are mistreated—especially the weak and vulnerable, God comes looking for a fight. Those of us who belong to Jesus are to share our Father's heart for justice and goodness. As members of his new community striving for greatness, it's like Jesus is saying, Be my eyes, be my hands, be my feet, to engage and protect the neediest wherever you see injustice.

Greatness in Jesus' new Community requires humility. Greatness requires hospitality to welcome the least among us. And Greatness requires we protect the least among us. And finally, Greatness requires that we protect ourselves.

Greatness Requires Protecting Oneself

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to

enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.

And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. (verses 8–9)

Could Jesus possibly use any stronger language to make his point to us? Let's be clear Jesus is not advocating self-mutilation. That is a sign of a mental disorder not of genuine holiness. Jesus is using an exaggeration to make his point—a serious point.

The language is not half repentant. It's not, "Lord, take these three fingers, but leave my thumb and pinky." The action here is immediate, decisive and absolute, and it's going to hurt. Ever broke a sinful habit? If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off, ouch!

But there is another piece to this. Our personal sin has consequences for others in Jesus' new community. What we do privately with our eyes, will affect how others see. What we do with our hands will affect what others do. What we do with our feet will affect where others walk.

The act of protecting oneself is really an act of protecting all.

And let's not gloss over one more point in this passage. Jesus uses "fire of hell" to drive his point home. This is serious stuff, so we are to take it seriously.

William Barkley tells a story of an old man on his deathbed who was upset and confessed, "When we were boys we thought it would be fun to reverse the street signs at an intersection on the highway, and I've never ceased to wonder how many people were sent the wrong direction for what we did." Instead of being stumbling stones, Jesus is saying, wake up, shape up and grow up and become stepping stones that lead the least and the most vulnerable in the right direction to a place of shelter and safety.

And speaking of the most vulnerable creatures in God's creation, N.T. Wright tells a story about a woman who was walking her dog on the beach one day. Her dog stopped and sniffed and looked wary about something. The woman stopped too, but she couldn't see anything. She looked hard at the rocks in front of the dog, just above the line of the tide. And then she saw it. It was a baby seal camouflaged against the color of the rocks and sea. The poor seal had washed up and was unable to get away. It was far more frightened of the dog than the dog was of it. The baby seal's reaction was interesting, indeed charming. It put up its little flippers in a half-successful attempt to cover its face. That's not what the seal's flippers were meant for. But it was the best it could do. If it covered its face, it seemed to think it would become invisible and in less danger.

Our natural tendency may be to not want to see the harsh reality around us. We want to put up our flippers and cover our eyes like that baby seal. We want to hide our faces from the most

vulnerable in our church and up and down this peninsula and pretend they or we are invisible. But our flippers were not meant to cover our faces. Our flippers, also known as our hands, were meant to engage. If we don't use our hands to give support, to rescue, and protect the most vulnerable, we might as well cut them off. Our eyes are meant to see needs. If we cover our eyes and don't see the needs around us, we might as well pluck them out. Our feet are meant to walk. If we are unwilling to walk into the homeless shelter or soup kitchen, we might as well cut off our feet. God created us to be great by using our eyes, hands, and feet. If we don't use them for his glory, why do we even need them?

What does greatness require? I think we know. And I think the prophet Micah sums it up beautifully. He wrote,

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

May we see ourselves in the great tradition of Horton: Utterly humbled that Jesus chose us, and then utterly committed to defending the marginalized.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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