

Good morning, its good to see you!

I feel I have been saying this phrase for quite some time now,
but just in case you're new here ... ☺

"we're continuing our series in the book of Matthew"

and today we come to Matthew chapter 18

To a passage entitled "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven".

Now I guess, few of us want to be great –

if by that, we mean: famous, powerful, movers and shakers

I don't think many of us, are ambitious for 'greatness' in that sort of way.

But I do think, we **would** all like to be considered great by those we love,
if by "great", we mean, respected, admired, significant to them.

I think we'd all love to be "great" in the eyes of those we care for...

So if (someone clearly deluded) said

"Steve? he's a great dad, a great son, a great friend, a great husband, a great guy".

Well we'd all want a bit of that for ourselves.

We'd all like to be considered "great" by those who are important to us...

Well, the disciples were no different.

Matthew 18v1 says that

they came to Jesus and asked him,

"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

Mark and Luke tell us that they were having a private argument
about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

was it the guy with the greatest number of conversions under their belt?,

the biggest number of healings? (resurrections count double), or

the most profound teacher?

Was it the person with the

least number of sins per week; or

the greatest number of good deeds per day; or

simply the one with the shiniest halo?

What makes someone great in the Kingdom of Heaven?

Well, Jesus overhears their conversation and
asks them what they were talking about.

Now it's unclear whether they volunteer the information
or whether Jesus has to wheedle it out of them...

but in

v2 He calls a little child to him, and has the child stand among them.

The child is small, the word here is "infant",

and he has him stand in front of them a silent, innocent admonishment for their foolishness

And Jesus says, 3 things that I want to draw out this morning, that:

To enter the Kingdom of Heaven we must become like a child;
To live the Kingdom we welcome each other; and
To shine in the Kingdom we must remember that we ourselves are God's children.

To enter, to live, to shine in the Kingdom of God we must become like Children.
That's what I want to focus on this morning.,.

1. To Enter the Kingdom of Heaven we must become like children.

Jesus said:

v3 I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now there is a question we need to deal with before we get to see what Jesus is saying here
It is this "What IS the Kingdom of Heaven"?

The Kingdom of Heaven is the place where God's Sovereignty is acknowledged.
It's the place where God is King, where God is God.
So when we die, "heaven" is obviously the Kingdom of Heaven –
because God rules, God reigns, God is Sovereignty there.
The Kingdom of Heaven is heaven.

But it's also part of the "here and now".
The Kingdom of Heaven is also part of the "here and now".

Those places in our life where God's reign is seen and experienced -
those places where we know his security, his peace, his purpose, his strength
that is a taste of the Kingdom of Heaven.
It is glimpsed in the lives of every person who shares their life with GOD as King.

And the reason why so many people
are not at peace with themselves, are not at peace with others
who have no sense of rest or purpose or real understanding of why they are here
is because they are not experiencing the ruling presence of God.
They (or that part of their lives) is outside the Kingdom.

And so Jesus

v3 "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never even enter the kingdom of heaven.

And I just want to draw out three ways in which this is true

1.1 Firstly, little Children cannot survive by themselves.

We won't find a Toddler saying:

don't worry about driving me to play-group I can make it on my own or

don't bother getting me stuff – because I can earn my own money practicing law or stacking shelves in Sainsbury's or

don't protect me from other people because I can look after myself – I can suck him to death if I have to!

Toddlers know they are completely dependent, they are helpless, they cannot survive life by themselves.

In the same way

Human Beings can't survive eternity without God

We can't even survive life without God.

We are a heart beat from death,

The only thing that keeps us from starvation is a thin layer of soil and the fact that it rains.

When nature moves against us, we see how utterly impotent we are.

Without God we are mortal, biologically insignificant and without any real understanding as to why we are here

and until we acknowledge that we will remain outside the kingdom of God

1.2 Secondly, Toddlers put all their hope and trust in their parents unconditionally

When dirty they look to their parents to change them and they don't offer to pay

When hungry they simply cry to be fed

When lost they hold their hands out to be rescued

When they are in trouble, Toddlers put all their hope and trust in their parents

- AND they make no claims about their own worthiness, their own greatness, their own ability to sort themselves out.

because they know they cannot save themselves

This is how it should be with us and God.

The disciples hadn't understood this, for them the penny hadn't yet dropped

They felt that to be acceptable to God, they needed to earn his approval

They felt that to enter into a relationship with him they had to be good enough

good enough - morally,

good enough - in terms of their actions

good enough – to impress

So what the disciples were doing was putting their trust in themselves and hoping that it was good enough for God!

But the problem is,

how can a human being EVER be good enough for a Holy, Omnipotent, Just God?

We can't !!

The longer I am a Christian the more I see how far short of goodness I fall

the more I know God AND the more I know myself –

the more I realise how good he is and fallen I am.

I know I will never be good enough for an utterly pure and holy God

So to enter the Kingdom of Heaven,

we must abandon any hope of impressing God and realise he loves us just as we are

we must forget about earning our way to him and realise **h**e has made his way to us

we must place our faith and trust in him – unconditionally

have you ever done that?

have you humbled yourself and said to God I need you like a child needs its parents
I need you and I need you unconditionally?
my hope, my trust is in you
and I don't have to impress you
and I don't have to earn your approval
and I don't have to beg for your love!

This is how to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.
It has to be as a Toddler who knows he needs God, who puts his trust in God.
Do you see?

And then Jesus goes on to say therefore
v4 whoever humbles himself like this child is greatest in the kingdom of God
because

1.3 thirdly, Toddlers are insatiably curious, questioning and inquisitive

They try stuff and fail .
They want to be like their parents.
They know that if they screw up they will still be loved.

But in doing so they learn to walk, to talk, to write, to be potty trained
They **are still Toddlers** but see how much they learn...!

A Toddler that isn't curious and questioning and inquisitive
will be of real concern to its parents –
They will fear that it will remain an infant and not begin to grow up!

The more I learn about God, the more I learn, that there is so much more to learn.
While I am alive in this body I will always remain a Toddler compared to God
but to be great in the Kingdom of God
is to want to learn – *give me an hour sermon!*,
tell me how I can pray better!
show me how to share my faith!
help to stop messing up!
As a Christian I don't want to be an infant suckling on spiritual milk
I want to try the rusks, *and the roast beef doesn't sound bad either!*

My friends - when did you become a Christian?
What sort of Christian books are you reading now?
Have you read the Bible all the way through? How many times?
Is it become part of your soul?
Are you getting the tough questions answered?
What are your Quiet Times like – have you learnt to feed yourself yet?
Are you beginning to act like your heavenly Father?
These are tough questions I know

But Toddlers are insatiably curious, questioning, inquisitive and so should we be.
There is so much to learn, so much to know, so much to share with others.
My friends are you really hungry to know more, to grow, to become like God

if so then to become great in the Kingdom we must be like a child...

2. Secondly, To live the Kingdom - we must welcome each other.

v5 And whoever welcomes a little child like this welcomes me.

Remember that “the child” standing in front of the disciples is simply a metaphor - a picture
So Jesus’ words are not to be taken literally.

Jesus is NOT ONLY talking about little children here.

He is talking about **everybody** who displays this child-like approach towards God and says
“*God I need you, my faith is in you*”.

We are to welcome each other.

To welcome someone means to accept, to include, to honour them

And what Jesus is saying here is that

“when we welcome someone who has faith in God we welcome him”.

In other words

“what we do to each other, we do to Him”,

“what we *say* about each other, we say about him”,

“the way *we treat* each other – is the way we treat him”.

So when Saul was persecuting Christians and is confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus – Jesus says
“why are you persecuting **me**”!

Not why are you persecuting my disciples – but why are you persecuting me”.

Jesus takes what Saul was doing personally.

“What you do to my disciples you do to me!”

In Matthew 25, Jesus says

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,

I was a stranger and you invited me in,

I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

And his disciples said,

‘Lord, when did we do this?’

And Jesus replied,

‘I tell you the truth, whatever you do

for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you do for me.’

So how we treat each other is taken personally by Jesus.

As a Church we are called to be open, inclusive, tender, caring towards each other

The trouble is, we are human.

And human beings (being insecure) find it is easy to assume the worst about each other (to not give the benefit of the doubt to each other)

– **but to do so** is to think the worst of Jesus

It is easy to gossip and moan about each other

but to do so is to gossip and moan about Jesus

It is easy to MISTrust each other, be critical about each other
but we are being critical and mean to Jesus.

As a church we have had hundreds of opportunities
to fall out, to be suspicious, to mistrust and offend each other!
There have been many **new people join us**, and many changes introduced,
and sometimes things get a little stormy.

But if this church is a boat,
then we are NOT a boat in the harbour.
A boat in the harbour is going nowhere
it risks nothing,
it achieves nothing that it was designed for

If we are a boat.
We are out at sea.
And at sea life can get stormy and the waters choppy

But we are going somewhere...
We have a vision for a town-wide ministry.
We have a vision to launch a new congregation.
We have a vision to transform our church physically to serve our community.
Dianne Rhodes is about to join us.
Helen Garratt is about to get ordained.
Chris Steynor takes on a new role
Enock Latonza is going to lead our Foreign Student ministry.

None of these things are easy.
All of these things could go wrong.

But we are being children together,
we are taking risks, we are learning to walk together
And if we fall over – we can encourage each other to get up!

Yes, it is easy to lose confidence,
Yes it is easy to think it's all too hard
Yes we can worry that it isn't going to work

But we need to keep welcoming each other,
keep encouraging each other,
keep loving each other.

For what we do to each other, we do to Jesus.

If we cease welcoming each other then we destroy the Kingdom
and this is how it often happens

*I can think that perhaps you don't like me
(and let's say my worry is **completely** unfounded)
but as a result I avoid you, I act cool towards you, I am uncomfortable around you (nothing **you** have done
– its MY imagination).
But **you** pick up on it, and (naturally) you act just a little carefully around me
Which I (in turn) notice
which validates my wrong impression about how you feel towards me.
And before we know it - there are barriers between us!
This happens in ALL communities that include human beings*

But I wonder how many relationships within our church
are strained, or cautious, or uncomfortable –
because of some distant, **unfounded** sense that began with
“I think you don't like me”.

We are to welcome (and not distance ourselves),
embrace (not throw rocks at),
honour (and not think the worst of) each other.
Even when it gets rough!
whoever welcomes a little child like this welcomes me.

and finally

3. To Shine in God's Kingdom we must remember we ARE God's Children.

v6 reads

*But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,
it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and be drowned in the depths
of the sea.*

Does that sound a little extreme?

*Look I have five children.
I love them and I am protective of them.
Like any parent I feel an almost painful sense of responsibility to keep them safe every any danger.
So when people come into their lives that I think will harm them I'll do my best to shield them.
I have no tolerance for people who threaten my children.
In fact, most parents find it easier to forgive an offence against **themselves**
than one committed against their children.
We are incensed by anyone who harms them.*

If we feel this way about **our** children –
then how much more does God feel about **his**?

What God is saying here is that
we, his children, should have zero tolerance
for anything in our fellowship
that trips people up.

We are God's children so

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

And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

This is hyperbole.!

Jesus is using extreme language to make a point.

He is saying let nothing remain in your life that holds back the kingdom!

Let nothing you do, or say, or think hurt or offend or trip up someone else.

But the trouble is if we followed these words to the letter –
there would be nothing left of us!

If I were to cut off every bit of me that trips me up, or offends others I would have nothing left!

My hands, my feet, my eyes, my ears, my mind, my imagination, my mouth all cause me to sin
I am like Brighton Rock –shot through with selfish desires!

The same is true for all of us...

And so we end up where we began.

By ourselves we are hopeless,
unable to get into heaven,
unable to salvage any part that is unsullied
unable to not be selfish
we need Jesus.

And the extreme reaction that Jesus has to our sin (cut it all away!)
is only matched by his extreme **love for us!**

If cutting off my hand is the only way for me to get to heaven –
then Jesus was completely cut off so that no part of me would be.
Jesus was completely gouged out, completely maimed and completely cut down so that I would not have to be.

His extreme distaste of sin is caused only by his profound **care** for us.

And if its true,
then what makes a little child grow up to be secure and balanced
is knowing from Day One that they are *this* precious and loved.

What has made a difference in my life as a Child of God -
What has given me security and perseverance
is realising that I am this precious and loved.

Knowing that, letting that penny drop, building our life on that

allows us to be secure and live at peace with each other

it allows us to build a community that gives people a glimpse of heaven

that is warm and welcoming

it allows us to keep going – keep discovering – keep encouraging each other

Because whoever humbles himself like a child is indeed the greatest in the Kingdom of God