

Little Children (Matthew 18:1-9)

The disciples ask Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" Jesus's response is radical and paradoxical: he places a little child in their midst and tells them that you have to lower yourself to the level of a little child to be in the Kingdom of Heaven. He then goes on to give some very strong warnings...

Fear of Failure?

In the recently published Children's Society report, *The Good Childhood Report*, they claimed that UK 15 year-olds had worse life-satisfaction than any other children across Europe.

The report suggested that one of the reasons for this was a particularly British fear of failure. Children and young people talk a lot about the pressure on them to do well. They feel judged if they don't succeed.

How are we to think about this as Christians?

On the one hand we should want children to make the most of their God-given gifts. We should encourage our children to work hard and do their best at school.

But, the problem is not fear of laziness, but fear of failure. It is fear that they won't achieve often unrealistic dreams, fear that they will be looked down on or left behind by more successful students. Not all students can achieve A*s or 9s, not everyone can even achieve pass marks at the basic exams. If we as a society value people because they are successful or have achieved some kind of greatness either in exams, sport, business or talent shows, then is it any wonder that the majority of youngsters fear failure, because they fear not being considered valued or worthwhile.

If we value only the great, then we condemn the majority to being unvalued.

This is not a new problem - it is a fundamental human problem. And it is one that Jesus faced head on with his disciples.

The Kingdom of Heaven and Greatness

The Question: Top Dog?

Jesus has been with his disciples for a few years. They have come to understand that he is Jesus God's special chosen Christ or anointed one. The one who will save his people. Jesus has now started telling them that he is going to Jerusalem to be betrayed by the Jewish authorities and to be killed, but he will rise again. In our passage he has only just done that in chapter 17.

So, perhaps wondering who is going to take the lead in the Kingdom, when Jesus goes, the disciples come to Jesus in Matthew 18:1 and ask:

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

Here they are concerned about greatness. Concerned about who is considered the best, about status and ranking. Who is the top dog, they wonder?

Perhaps they feel that Peter is already considered by Jesus to be the greatest?

When Jesus asks who do they say he was and Peter is the first to get the correct answer, Jesus seems to put him top of the class and says:

"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church..."
(Matthew 16:18)

Then, Peter is one of the three taken up the mountain to see Jesus transfigured in 17:1.

Then at the end of chapter 17, Peter shares with Jesus in a miracle whereby he catches a fish with a coin in it that enables him to pay the temple tax for him and Jesus.

Perhaps Peter looked to be becoming the top dog and the rest felt that they were failing in comparison?

So they ask,

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

The Answer 1: Be like a Child!

Jesus's answer is radical and he uses a small child as a visual aid. He calls a little child to him and makes the child stand in the centre of the circle. Then he gives an incredibly radical answer:

"Unless you change and become like this child you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

This is radical because he is saying to his top, most trusted disciples, the ones whom he had spent years training, that they needed to change. And they needed to change urgently, because this was not just about being great in the Kingdom of Heaven, this was about being in the Kingdom at all.

How did they need to change? In what way did they need to become like a little child? Did they need to start wearing shorts? Singing nursery rhymes? Playing with toys? No, the question is to do with greatness and so the point Jesus is making is to do with greatness.

The child has no greatness in human terms. The child has passed no exams, she has won no competitions, she is not in charge of anyone, she has not achieved anything, she is at the bottom of any hierarchy, you can think of. She is the opposite of top dog, the opposite of the kind of greatness that the disciples were aspiring to and Jesus says, this is what you need to become if you want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven!

And to confirm that this is what Jesus means he says:

"Therefore, whoever humbles himself like or whoever takes the lowly position like this child
is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. " (Matthew 18:4)

It's not dissimilar to the verse that Peter quotes at the end of his letter as we saw last week:

""God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."" {Prov. 3:34} (1 Peter 5:5b)

Also, when you consider the gospel story we should not be surprised by this. Jesus, the one who is the very Son of God humbled himself and put himself in a lowly position. He wasn't born in a palace, but in a stable. He never lived in a palace, he never held an official position like king, general or prime minister in any government.

In fact the people in charge where he lived had him crucified, a form of execution that was designed to demean and humble the criminal. You had to hang naked in a public place in excruciating pain for hours, while crowds gawped at you and jeered at you. For Romans, this form of execution was illegal for anyone who was a Roman citizen, it was a punishment for slaves and foreigners, those who had no status, power or greatness to them in the eyes of Rome.

The very story of Jesus is of someone lowering himself, humbling himself to the utmost. That is the paradoxical nature of greatness is in the Kingdom of Heaven. It is being willing to give up any form of human status in order to accept the wonderful gift of becoming children of God and inheriting eternal life.

If you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven you need to humble yourself.

Welcome the Child, Watch Yourself

So, Jesus powerfully challenges us to humble ourselves. Yet, these chapters are not about our individual spiritual state. Matthew 18-19 are one of the five teaching sections of Jesus in Matthew's gospel and this section seems to be a guide for individual disciples on how to relate to other members of the Christian community.

And just as Peter stressed humility as crucial for this at the end of his letter, Jesus emphasises this at the start of this section of teaching.

Why? Because when you are happy to take on a lowly position yourself, you are more likely to value those in the community around you.

Welcome the Little Ones - vs. 5

In verse 5, Jesus changes tack and says that if you welcome this child, then you welcome Jesus.

Jesus identifies himself with the lowliest in our society and so as churches we need to make sure that the lowliest - including children feel welcomed and valued in our churches. It is only when we do this that we truly value Jesus.

Warning for Tripping up the Little Ones - vs. 6-7

And Jesus has a warning for those who might trip up 'the little ones,' those who follow Jesus but may have no other start in life.

The word in Greek that is translated, 'cause to sin' means literally to trip up. Imagine you have a child who is running in a crucial race and someone comes along and trips them up, so they fall to the ground and have no chance of winning the race. How would you feel? No doubt you would be furious!

In a way this was behind the fury over the A' Level results, where youngsters hard work to achieve the grades they needed for going to university were decided by an algorithm that did not necessarily reflect what they deserved. The mutant algorithm tripped up those students on their way to their dreams. And people were furious.

God sees his followers in a similar way. We are in a race of life, with the end goal being not winning a race or a place in university, but a place in the Kingdom of Heaven. To trip

people up in that race, to stop them trusting in Jesus so that they lose their eternal hope is a terrible thing to do. And Jesus says God will be furious with those who do that.

Jesus paints a very graphic image of someone with a massive mill stone around their neck being plunged into the deepest depths of the sea. A terrible punishment in Jewish eyes.

And Jesus does not stop there. To trip others up is to trip yourself up. And actually tripping yourself up can also cause others to trip up. If this is what we are doing then we are in deep danger of heading for hell, Jesus says. We need to do something drastic about it.

Asbestos:

There is an interesting bit of trivia here. In Mark's gospel, in similar verse Mark describes the fire of hell, as the fire that 'never goes out'. That phrase translates the Greek word, 'asbestos' which means unquenchable and of course was the word chosen for a material used in a lot of buildings in the mid-20th century to make them fireproof.

Matthew, however, doesn't use the word, *asbestos*. He's changed it to 'eternal fire'. Matthew has gotten rid of the asbestos.

Of course today, there are massive regulations around asbestos. Where it exists it needs to be gotten rid of, because it is so dangerous to people's health. We realise the danger of asbestos, but do we realise the danger of ruining our faith by tripping ourselves or others up. Are we willing to get rid of the things that trip up our faith or that may cause others faith to trip up? Do we see them as a matter of eternal life and death, far more dangerous than asbestos?

So, how might people be tripped up in their journey of faith?

No doubt there are many ways and we should take this as a general warning. Jesus gives a very similar warning about sexual sin in the Sermon on the Mount.

But here, the context is welcoming the child in verse 5 and in verse 10 he goes on to say, "See that you do not despise one of these little ones."

And remember he has just warned the disciples that they need to change their thinking that was revealed in their question in order to ensure they can enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

What to cut off?

What is it that can trip up our faith, that can send us to hell? It is an attitude of striving for 'greatness' in the world's eyes of wanting to be valued for our achievements and recognised for our successes. An attitude that makes us look down on those who have not achieved anything and dismiss them as worthless.

An attitude that might put them off following Jesus and trip them up in their faith.

An attitude that refuses to accept the lowly position that following Christ might lead us into.

Jesus isn't saying that we need to cut off our hands or feet or pluck out our eyes, he is saying that we need to rid ourselves of our pride and striving for human adulation. We need to accept the lowly position and value all the others in their lowly positions.

This is true faith, the foundation of real Christian community, the way to eternal life. Will you take the lowly position of a little child?