

Are You a Loser?

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, you know how it is, don't you, with an old friend? When you've known some for a long time, you kind of know what they think. You know what's important to them, you know what matters in their lives.

And you can sometimes second guess what they're going to say. And I think, and I recognize there's some people here for the first time, and for that I apologize for what I'm going to say.

But for those of us who've been in church right from the beginning of this series of Matthew. I think we're beginning, I hope we're beginning to feel a little bit like Matthew's an old friend.

And that we should be really beginning to get the message that the Holy Spirit and God through the Holy Spirit and through Matthew is giving to us. There's a real thread, there's a theme.

And the emphasis that God has through Matthew, both for Matthew's original audience, mainly Jewish audience who had become Christians, and also for us.

[0 : 5 9] And if we, we tend to make it quite plain, but it's pretty explosive really what Jesus is always saying. And we've looked at Matthew and we've seen that there's different blocks, there's different teaching blocks that Matthew, it's a beautiful literary piece, beautiful teaching series, and also parables and works, and it all blends together.

And this chapter, chapter 20, I think is very much part of a section that starts from chapter 18, okay, which is, starts with who is the greatest in the kingdom?

And really find that this whole section, both his teaching and his parables and his actions are unfolding that whole emphasis.

And what he speaks about, what Matthew speaks about a great deal, and he speaks about it a lot in this chapter, okay, is the kingdom of heaven. I'm going to look at that generally, and then we're going to look at something more specific about what it means for us today.

So the kingdom of heaven, let's see a little bit of a word count for the moment. There's 31 times that Jesus is quoted, or Matthew is quoted, as using that phrase, the kingdom of heaven.

[2 : 1 5] And that's unique to Matthew, so that already makes it stand out. It's only used three times in the rest of the whole New Testament, so it's very much an emphasis of Matthew.

And it's kingdom itself, the idea of the kingdom is used 55 times. Ten times, we'll do a little bit of Matthew, ten times the kingdom of heaven is used with the words after it, the kingdom of heaven is like, and then he goes on to tell a parable.

So ten times Jesus wants to explain even more with a picture what the kingdom of heaven is like, and that reminds us that the theme of Matthew is very much on the kingdom of heaven.

And he wants Christians to understand, and God wants us to understand as Christians, that our primary identity as believers is that we are citizens of a kingdom, a different kingdom to the world in which we live.

We're citizens of a heavenly kingdom, of a spiritual kingdom, here on earth we belong to another kingdom. And that's really what Matthew and Jesus is teaching about so much here.

[3 : 24] Jesus is king of this kingdom, and remember the whole idea of a spiritual kingdom was very different from the original readers and listeners to Jesus, who thought Jesus was going to be an earthly king and usurp the Roman Empire.

And interestingly, Jesus, when he talks about the kingdom, often talks about God as Father in this kingdom. So there's a mixture of this fatherly picture of God who is divine and good and loving and perfect and holy, and he is the Father that we are to look to in the kingdom where Jesus is the king and where we are citizens.

And so what often we find that Jesus is speaking about here is two different worlds, and he recognizes that as God the Son. The world we live in now, the earth it's often referred to as the kingdom of heaven, and there's the earth in which we live.

So we're living on the earth, but we're part of a kingdom, and very often it's contrasted in Matthew here. They're polar opposites, and Jesus is redefining that for the disciples and for us, for the church that is starting.

He's reminding us as believers, and we recognize it just now, don't we? We're living in both worlds, but one is going to be destroyed. The world that we can feel and touch and see, which we often feel is the realest world, that's going to ultimately be destroyed and renewed in the new heavens and the new earth.

[5 : 07] And so what's clear from Matthew's teaching and from the reaction of the disciples, and often from our reaction when we read the Bible, is there's great tension between the world we live in and being the principles and following Jesus and being citizens of His kingdom.

And so Jesus is always provoking His disciples and us to say, who governs your thinking? Who is Lord of your life? He's calling us constantly to align with Himself, and that's...and we've tamed it terribly.

It's very often shocking and unexpected and radical, and He's saying, look, you know, what are your life choices as a believer? Have your values been turned upside down by following Jesus?

Because it's not what we often think, and Jesus repeats it again and again in His teaching, as He walks, as He talks, as He tells parables. He's provoking us to think about who we are, our whole mindset.

So what's a Christian? Someone will ask you that tomorrow. What is a Christian? What are you as a Christian? He'll say, well, I believe in God. Or is that what we say?

[6 : 22] I believe in God? Is that the extent of being a Christian? Well, the Bible tells even the devils believe and shudder. Now, 1988, no, 1998, still a long time ago.

Probably some of you weren't born. I was asked to go and teach in a Bible school in Serbia. It was just after the Balkan War, and it was in a very rural place, this Bible school.

And my whole world was turned upside down when I was there. I'd never been in that kind of culture, never been in that scenario. I hadn't eaten the kind of food they ate. I didn't speak the language.

Nobody spoke English. There was no supermarkets. There was no food. There was nothing that I was used to. My whole life was turned upside down. It was a real challenge to know that my thinking and my culture wasn't the only one in the world.

And you know, I think Jesus is trying to teach that sometimes with us, our lives as Christians. Is that it's a whole new reality that we come into when we follow Jesus.

[7 : 30] And we're changing our lives from thinking, not my will be done, but yours, God's. And that our default thinking is being challenged by Jesus.

Now that for Matthew and for the people we listened to was really significant. It had both theological and pastoral implications. You know that taking Jesus as Lord meant that they needed to think what it meant to live as a Christian, as a Jewish Christian in a Roman world.

It was very different from what they'd been led to believe. But it was also for their encouragement and challenge as it is for us. You know, what is it for us to live in a 21st century pandemic world?

What does it mean for us as Christians? How do we respond on social media to all the conspiracy theories and everything that's going on in the world in which we live? Do we realize as believers we're part of something bigger than even the most twisted even conspiracy theory that there might be around?

Are we defeatist? Are we parochial in our thinking? Is it just about my own understanding of Christians will be in heaven? Are we materialistic? Are we enslaved?

[8 : 40] Are we selfish? Do we recognize Jesus as the answer to our deepest longings rather than just that someone on the edges of our lives who we say that we believe in but doesn't really change our thinking or lives?

So Jesus speaks all the time about the kingdom of heaven. And Matthew records that in the gospel. But specifically in this chapter especially, and in, well really from chapter 18 onwards, he's making something, he's making a very specific claim about belonging to the kingdom of heaven.

I'm being a Christian. And we're going to look at that for a minute. And it's that the first, very often, the first will be last. Now could I just, if you've got a Bible, just follow with, if not just follow with me.

Chapter 18 in this section, verse 4, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. So he's saying something there about what it is to be a Christian.

In chapter 19 and verse 30, the last verse, but many who are first will be last and the last first. And then chapter 20 where we read, and Rachel read, this is the last verse she read.

[9 : 57] So the last will be first, and the first will be last. That's the third time. And then the fourth time in verse 27 where Israel read, it said, Jesus said, and whoever will be first among you must be your slave.

So Jesus is repeating these things a lot of times. We know it's important, and he's reemphasizing this principle of belonging to Jesus Christ. The last will be first, and the first will be last.

And it's kind of uncomfortable, isn't it, for us? But we'll find it throughout Matthew's gospel, you know, if you go to the Sermon and the Mount, the teaching of the Sermon and the Mount is not what we would expect.

It's saying the kind of people that are significant as followers of Jesus are those who are meek and who are humble and who are not pushing always to be first and to be important.

But even thinking back on the chapters that Thomas preached on a couple of weeks, the last, or I preached on 18 and then in 19, we find Jesus saying the same thing.

[11 : 04] Christians he said, he likes Christians, Jesus said he likes Christians to the attitude of little children and the humility that they have. He says that he is a significant care for the drifters, for the people who are struggling in the Christian faith who are wandering away, for the one as opposed to the 99.

He talks about having mercy for failures. He talks about forgiveness for others who have sinned against you. This wouldn't make much of an agenda for a political party today.

He blasts, remember we saw it last week, he blasts against misogyny and against a terrible attitude towards women and marriage and the way we think about it. He spoke about being sensitive to those who didn't fit the mold of what we think are husband and wife and 2.4 kids in the unix of the day.

He talked again about the priorities of children and the importance of children. He emphasized beggars not billionaires as being important in the Kingdom in that last chapter. And it's important for us to let that sink in in our thinking about the Kingdom and to live under His kingship, whether our primary roots.

Who do we follow? What is our thinking? What is our philosophy of mind as we live our lives? When we follow Christ, we may have to admit that we will be last in line, that we have to get rid of the principles, this world's principles about coming first and being significant and important, even in church, being significant and important and better.

[12 : 45] So he takes us to this parable. We're going to briefly look at the sections, very briefly. He talks about this parable in chapter 20, the first 16 verses, and it's about an employer, a business owner who's looking for our laborers, and he takes on people at the beginning of the day and he promises them a day's wage.

And throughout the day, he takes on people all day. And at the end of the day, he pays the ones that only worked one hour or worked five hours or worked 12 hours the same salary.

And the ones who worked for 12 hours grumbled, oh, what is he doing? That's grossly unfair. And if you read that, if you listened to what you were reading, you probably thought the same one, it seems a bit unfair, Jesus, it's a bit mean to those who worked all day, that they just get the same as the guy who worked at the end.

But then the landowner says, well, you agreed to work for that? It was a good living wage. It was proper pay. And are you angry about my generosity? No, it's quite a difficult parable, isn't it?

Because we naturally, and I think that's why Jesus told it, because we naturally kind of, we take offense a little bit, oh, it seems a bit unjust. It's not a parable here about fair pay.

[14 : 05] He's not speaking about fair pay or social justice. It's not a commentary on these things that Jesus is making. He's making a spiritual point, and it's in the context of the disciples that we have in the end of the previous chapter saying, you know, we've given up everything.

What's in it for us? You know, what are we going to get because we've given up everything unlike the rich man who walked away sad? And it's in that context that Jesus is wanting to remold their thinking about what it means to be a Christian.

And he's saying, it's not about what you've given up. It's not about that God owes you a favor. It's not about having a pecking order that I'm worth more than other people in the kingdom of God.

It's not about being self-important as individuals, being more gifted, therefore more important than other people. It's not about status or position. It's about his generosity.

And that we're all levelled by his generosity, by his grace. That nobody is worthy of his grace. And nobody can earn his favor is what really the point of this parable is.

[15 : 16] He's wanting to get across that in the kingdom, we're absolutely equal, and we're all dependent on his grace. And nobody can knock on God's door and say, take me first.

I'm worth it. Look at what I've given up. Look at who I am and recognize that I am worthy. So we need to let that parable speak into our lives.

In God's kingdom, in the church, if we narrow it down to the local church or to the church in Scotland, for example, we are one in Christ.

We're united in Christ because of his grace and his generosity. We've all been recipients of that. We're all different. Different roles to play.

But the shelf stacker and the company director, the janitor and the head teacher, the apprentice and the pastor, the old and the young, the forgiven and the forgiving, the strong in faith and the gifted, the weakened faith, we are all objects of God's grace and nobody is more worthy than anybody else.

[16 : 25] Whether we become a Christian, nailed to a tree beside Jesus at the very last moment of our life, having lived a wretched life of depravity and sin, or whether we've been a Christian since the day we were conscious and even set aside in our mother's womb, we're recipients of the generosity of our Father.

We are all His children, often forgotten in church, often forgotten in the way we think and live our lives as Christians. And in a sense, there's a link, I think there's a link between this parable, I hope, I sense a link anyway, between this and between the parable of the prodigal son, because it's the same kind of attitude, isn't it, that the elder brother had.

He was judgmental and he doubted the generosity of his father. He doubted that his father loved him and cared about him. And we can have that same attitude and Jesus is teaching us to fight against the fact that He is generous to us and that we don't deserve His grace any more than anybody else.

He's arguing against being snooty about grace. And it seems strange, doesn't it, but we can be snooty about grace. We can be grudging believers. We can be legalists who are judgmental of others who are not like me and who are not as holy or as far down the road or as knowledgeable of the Bible as me.

We can be... we can have a bad attitude towards serving that we're doing God a favour that we're grumpy while we're doing it. And why isn't He rewarding me for what He's doing?

[18 : 10] He wants us to regard ourselves as the lasts, as believers, part of the lasts, part of those who don't deserve His grace but have received His grace, every one of us.

And in an irony, the older we get, the more mature we should become and the more we should feel like we're the lasts. We're least worthy because we're more aware of His bright, shining eye looking into the darkness of our own hearts.

So we grace throughout the gospel here. Jesus reminds us that grace teaches us to be spiritually poor in recognizing our need humble, unworthy.

We're not really to be go-getters and have priorities that will make us first by the world's standards and look for our treasures here in this world.

And we're to let that soak in, that we're to find our treasures in heaven because we belong to the kingdom of heaven. So that's that part, it's a very radical parable for our thinking because of the riches that we have in Jesus.

[19 : 26] Because what He offers is so much different from what this world offers, which we sometimes chase in all the shadows of this world, whether it's companionship or popularity or wealth or careers or whatever it might be, He says, we have a different set of priorities.

So then Jesus asks, and this is the last two sections of the chapter, and again it's beautifully set out by Matthew here.

It's a literary masterpiece because we have a thought provoking contrast after giving us all this teaching about the first will be last, the last will be first, and this parable that He gives us.

We have two questions. Jesus asks the same question of two different peoples, of the disciples or the mother and the disciples and also of the blind men who come to Him.

In verse 21, the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee come and says, she wants to ask Jesus a favour.

[20 : 32] And Jesus says, what do you want? And basically, they don't understand the first shall be last. They don't understand all the teaching. And so they say, well, see when you come in your kingdom and when you serve the Roman emperor and you sit in your throne, can my sons sit on either side of you in that place of real preeminence and importance?

They just haven't got it yet. What do you want? What favour is it you want? And then interestingly as well, in verse 32, Jesus asks the same question of the blind men, what is it you want from me?

And so we find a parallel in the two responses and the two questions that are being asked. And we need to ask ourselves where we come in to the same responses that we're looking for to that question that Jesus might be asking you today, what is it you want from me?

What is it you want from me? The disciples and through their mother particularly, and we've seen it with all the disciples earlier on as well, isn't it? They don't really understand. They want to be spoiled by Jesus.

They want to be spoiled by Him. You know, they're in it. I don't want to be harsh on them because Jesus is incredibly patient with them. But they, and I would have been exactly the same as them.

[21 : 57] They didn't get it. They were in it to win it. They thought that Jesus was going to usher in this earthly kingdom, and they were going to be right there at the front of it with them. Their mindset was still earthly, not heavenly.

They didn't get the spiritual kingdom. They were looking at an earthly kingdom. They wanted the glory, the reward, the pecking order, the significance. We've given up everything. What are you going to give us?

They misunderstood the nature of the kingdom of God and of His grace. And I know that we need to be nuanced in our own thinking about that, but is that how you think spiritually?

And is it how I think that we're looking for God to spoil us, to do us a favour because we've come to faith in Him, that God owes me. God owes me a favour.

He owes me a good life. He owes me a reward for believing in Him. I've earned it. I've given up so much to follow Him. I want His blessings, but I want them on my terms.

[22 : 57] We've misunderstood His generosity and His mercy and the equality we have with others. And we've misunderstood sometimes the concept of being last in His kingdom, or the thinking about what it means not to want that preeminence in that first place and that servant spirit.

They weren't spoiled by Him. And in contrast, what did the blind man, isn't it interesting that Jesus uses the disciples in the blind man, the blind man who nobody had any time for, the children that nobody had any time for.

He uses the blind man to nail home His teaching and remind us all of the inverted nature of greatness in the kingdom of God.

He takes these blind beggars who nobody had any time for, and He uses them to get across both a healing but also a spiritual point.

They wanted to see Him. The disciples wanted spoiled by Him. The blind man wanted to see Him.

[24 : 08] Physically, they wanted to see Him. They wanted their sight back. But they wanted to see Him because spiritually they knew He was Lord and that He was God. They understood that He was the Messiah.

We don't know the level of their understanding, but, you know, they called Him Lord and they recognized He was their only hope of mercy. Their only hope, He was the Son of David.

They understood there was a connection between the Old Testament and between the great King David and that He was the Messiah. We don't know exactly what they understood, but they got it.

Jesus said, look, they could see. They recognized their need for mercy. See, the disciples said, we want to sit at your right hand. They said, show me mercy. Isn't that the contrast that Jesus wants us to see so much of the time?

And that impossible prayer for physical healing was also answered. But surely there's spiritual truth in what Jesus identifies through that miracle as well.

[25 : 16] It's an inversion of everything that was expected. These poor, blind sinners who were under God's judgment according to the church and everyone else around them were the ones that actually could see.

They could see their need for mercy. And I think that's hugely significant. So as we draw it to a conclusion, the question is, who is Jesus to you and who is Jesus to me?

Is He someone that we want to spoil us or do we simply want to see Him for who He is and our need of His mercy in our day to day living? You know, we see Him in these chapters 19 and 20.

He's so patient. He's a patient King. He doesn't blast the disciples for their misunderstanding. I love that. We often, you know, with our, all with our knowledge, 21st century knowledge and everything that goes with it about theology and the Bible.

It was like, oh, they were so ignorant, these disciples. How could they be so ignorant? Jesus is so patient with them. And even when, you know, the mother speaks in these terms about sitting right hand and left, you know, you think they could blast it?

[26 : 22] Don't be ridiculous. No, he says, well, that's not for me. But he says, remember the way of the Kingdom. He still teaches them, first shall be last, that wanting to be first wasn't the way of the Kingdom.

He re-emphasized that he's a patient King. He's also, the bit I read, the sacrificial King. So in the midst of this great teaching, he again reminds them that he's going to go up to Jerusalem.

He's going to be condemned to death, delivered to the Gentiles, mocked and flogged and crucified in the third day raised. You lose the importance and significance of that because it happens before he goes up to Jerusalem.

It's the third time now he's taught that to the disciples. And he's saying to them, this is the outworking of being last, he says. I am the King of kings.

I am God the Son. And I am going to be led to a hill and nailed to a tree as a condemned criminal to be your Savior.

[27 : 29] Jesus Christ, homeless, rejected, penniless, isolated, condemned, forsaken of God, punished as guilty, unprotected from hell, last in the thinking of so many, last in the world, walked away from, stood, nailed to the tree, everyone walked away from Him.

First Corinthians 15, 23 tells us he's the first roots. He's first in the heaven as the Redeemer, as the Lord, as the Savior, as the King of kings because he was resurrected as victorious over sin and grave, the grave and death and hell for us.

Sacrificial King, he epitomizes what it means to be last by dying in our place, rejected and ignored.

But also, he reminds himself of the thinking of the Kingdom in verse 28 where he says, Even the Son of Man came to serve, came to not to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many.

That's the kind of, that's the kind of king we have, that's the kind of Savior we have, a servant king who gave Himself for others.

[28 : 44] And for us as leaders in the church, we are to be servant leaders. As Christians we're to be serving Christians, recipients of mercy, doing the unseen stuff, self-forgetful, not comparing ourselves to one another, giving for the Kingdom.

That's what we seek to be in St. Columbus, that kind of church. That's the emphasis we have, that we are last in the thinking and the working out of what it is to be important.

And we are servants because of our sacrificial king and because he's patient with us. So I hope that your prayer, certainly my prayer, in the light of what he's teaching is, Show me who you are Lord, I want to see.

It's not that we're saying Lord, spoil me as a Christian, but Lord, I want to see you. I want to see you for who you are.

What's that going to mean? Well, I think it means that you're probably going to be a loser. That's the title of the sermon, are you a loser? Well, that's what it means to follow Jesus.

[29 : 59] You're probably going to be a loser here on earth as part of the Kingdom of Heaven. You're possibly going to be last in the opinion of other people and in the value of other people sometimes.

If we're following Christ's priorities, it means we will be out of step very often with the world's priorities and thinking. And it might need a realignment in our thinking as to the priority of our career, of our relationships, of our wealth, of power advancement.

Our CV might be rubbish in the world's eyes. It might be a joke because we value different priorities and we put people before ourselves.

We may be rejected, we may be mocked, we may not get the dream life we hoped for here and now on this earth. But why does that matter?

Because it means being first in the Kingdom. It means in the day of judgment we will stand. It means that one day we will appreciate and recognize that these will be the principles by which the King of Kings will reign in the new heavens and the new earth and will reign in every heart and in every part of the universe.

[31 : 23] This world's standards, this earth's standards in thinking and what we often have lived with in our own hearts and thinking for our lives without Christ will be rejected and judged as destructive and cancerous and self-serving.

It matters because these principles that Jesus gives us are the principles of eternal life and can only be ours not by trying to work them out but by pleading His mercy and coming to Him as King of Kings and recognizing that we need His mercy and we need Him to change our hearts from the inside out.

But it's a gift and He's generous and He loves to give it and He'll give it to anyone who asks Him and He'll be patient with us and it will take a lifetime to change us.

We'll always be changing but that's fine. He'll work at different things in different ways but that's who He wants us to be. I just love that quote that was, it's on the print, it's not on it, we don't have a printed order of service now but it's on the line of an order of service and there's a thought each week.

And it's that famous quote from Jim Elliott, the missionary who was martyred for his faith. He said, He is no fool who gives what He cannot keep to gain, what He cannot lose.

[32 : 45] Amen. Let's pray. Father, God help us to be thankful to you for who you are and for your grace and for the great level or the graces for us.

Isn't that great? We thank you for that Lord God. We thank you that we come to you rich or poor, talented or less talented with maybe everything going for us in this world's standards or nothing going for us.

We come as equals and we come needing mercy and we come pleading your grace and we come together, we come as one and we thank you that you can help transform our thinking to be not people who are shouldering others out of the way, pushing to get to the top, condemning and criticizing and brutalizing others with our words or with our actions, not leaving you at the sidelines and thinking you're relevant but recognizing you as king of kings and that you, we are citizens of your kingdom and we belong not to this world, although we are in this world and seek to love and live effectively in this world.

But we only do that as we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom. So help us to do that. We pray today. Give us when we fall short of your glory, we thank you that you were so patient with the disciples and in their blindness it took them so long to understand that you would be a crucified Savior.

Remind us that we are often like that too. Help us to give thanks today for your patience. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.