

Disciples Must be Lowly

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[0 : 00] Now, these verses in Matthew 18, like much of the Gospels, are probably pretty familiar to you if you've been around the church for any time.

And if that's the case, let's try to get unfamiliar. Let's try to unhear it today so that perhaps we can understand it with a little bit more clarity and see Christ with more clarity as well.

And if you're new to the church context or new to the Bible, this might have been kind of weird to hear. Sometimes you think of Jesus as this really mild-mannered guy, but he's getting really intense.

So what's Jesus getting at with this child? And why the intensity? Well, we're going to look at these things, and I pray that it will lead us to two truths about the gospel, about Jesus, that can actually completely transform our whole lives.

And truths that transform us and help us to live together, too, because even though we're apart, we're still in a community together as believers. And this chapter, this whole section of Matthew, is actually about life as disciples, life together as disciples in the kingdom of heaven.

[1 : 15] So in Matthew, Jesus has come on the scene in this book announcing the arrival of this long-awaited kingdom of heaven. It's finally here.

And the disciples show throughout the whole gospel, we've seen several times, that it's not what they expected it to be. So the disciples have been expecting a king to come in and usher in this new kingdom.

In fact, the Jewish people have been expecting this king for many, many centuries. But what they had come to expect was a warrior king.

They came to expect someone who, as the Jewish people came under Roman oppression and Roman rule, they expected a king to waltz in and free them from Roman oppression.

But it wasn't, so Jesus now is on his way to Jerusalem, and we know that the capstone of what's going to happen there is he's going to be executed.

[2 : 18] And he wasn't going to Jerusalem to free Israel from Roman oppression. He was going to Jerusalem to die, to free the world from the power of sin and death.

The disciples couldn't get their heads around that. In fact, they misunderstood the king himself, and so they misunderstood the nature of the kingdom that he would bring in. They didn't understand what Jesus was doing, that what he was about.

And so they misunderstood this kingdom that Jesus was ushering in. By way of illustration, I have a friend from an old church back in the States, and this friend has written quite a few books.

And as we got to know each other, I thought, it would be nice to read one of my friend's books. And I asked him, and he sent me a PDF, and I began to read, and I was shocked.

Because from a church friend, I wasn't expecting a book that was kind of in the genre of a horror book. It was really surprising. I misunderstood him, and so I didn't expect what I got with this book.

[3 : 28] And that's how the disciples kind of felt all the time, is like, well, we thought we understood what Jesus was doing, but this isn't really making a lot of sense.

So they come to Jesus, in verse one we see this, and they say, who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Now I want to make a point here that this isn't a dumb question.

We might kind of scoff at that and think, you know, it was ridiculous. Why would you ask that?

Come on. It's obvious, right? That Jesus is the greatest, moving on.

But it's not really a dumb question, and let me give you a few reasons why. First of all, they were in an honor shame culture. We in the West, we've kind of moved away from this kind of a culture over the last several hundred years, really.

But in an honor shame culture, that a status of greatness, or a status of honor, it actually lifted up in a noble, everyone who's connected to you.

[4 : 27] It was about giving you and your family better options for your future, better prospects, and it provided some security. So that's one thing.

The other thing is they brought their questions to the right person. They weren't just asking any old person, or they weren't making statements of themselves. They were actually taking their question to Jesus, as we all must do with our questions about the kingdom.

They understood something. In fact, it was one of the gifts of being in an honor shame culture is you understand where honor comes from. They knew in the kingdom, the king is the one who bestows honor.

So they must go to Jesus to understand who has greatness, who has status. And lastly, they didn't say who will be the greatest in the kingdom when the kingdom gets here.

They said who is greatest in the kingdom. Jesus has been demonstrating and teaching all along that where he is, the kingdom is. So they actually were kind of taking Jesus at his word, that the kingdom is here and now, in a sense.

[5 : 32] So it's important that we don't mistake this as a dumb question, because then we might be tempted to kind of disregard Jesus' answer.

But the intensity that Jesus responds with shows us that Jesus took their question seriously and has something really serious to say in response. So let's not take that too lightly.

So when they came, they said who's going to be the greatest, or who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And if you imagine it, you know, there's 12 guys over here coming up to Jesus. And I think they imagined that Jesus would call one of them out and put him in the middle of them and say, well, it's James.

Or you know, Peter, come here, go stand in the middle. See, Peter's the greatest and here's why.

That's probably what they expected, but Jesus did something unexpected, as he usually does.

He calls to himself a child. And he takes that child and he puts that child in their midst. And he says, look with me, verses three to four, truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

[6 : 42] Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Now it's tempting and it's a little bit fashionable sometimes to imagine that Jesus is saying that we must have some of the qualities of children, that we have to be childlike in certain ways.

And in other stories in the gospels, he does point to other qualities of children as being admirable, but that's not actually what Jesus is doing here. Here we find Jesus doing what I think of as a visual parable.

It's an object lesson, but it's a very visual, tangible one. Can you picture it? A bunch of guys about my age, 12 guys, and he calls forth a little child.

The word here is, you know, someone before adolescence, think maybe an eight-year-old, maybe this high, this little child and puts them in their midst.

The lesson is in height. The disciples are grown men, they're tall and they're asking about greatness, and the child is little.

[7 : 50] Jesus is pointing to the difference in size between the disciples and the child, and he's using it as a metaphor for lowliness, for humility.

He's saying to his disciples, you're trying to pop yourselves up. You're concerned with greatness in the kingdom, but to even get into the kingdom, you must turn and get low.

Because the kingdom of heaven is not like the world's kingdoms. Jesus is always driving this point home, and we would do well to attend to it. Because, you know, in our daily jobs throughout the week, often we climb the corporate ladder.

We polish our resumes. We dress for the job we want. We position ourselves advantageously in our social spheres of rank and status.

That's normal. We all do that, if we're honest. But that's not what the kingdom of heaven is like. To get into the kingdom, you've got to get low.

[8 : 57] We disciples in the kingdom are to be unconcerned with reaching for status and greatness. Unconcerned with honor for ourselves.

Humble. And if I'm honest with you, I find that kind of humility very difficult. I find it hard to even imagine for myself. It's really deeply ingrained in me to strive for recognition, to strive for status.

So what would it be like then to be truly humble? Imagine, what would it be like if you met a person who was really humble, really lowly, not reaching for their own significance and greatness?

C.S. Lewis wondered the same thing, and he wrote, I think it was in mere Christianity, but I'm not sure. But he wrote, basically, if you were ever to meet a truly humble person, you wouldn't come away from that meeting thinking, man, that person was humble.

You would come away from that meeting thinking, that person was really interested in me. Do you see the difference there? I think he's right.

[10:04] I think that true humility, true lowliness, is unconcerned with me and more concerned with you. In a sense, humility is unconcerned with humility.

I like to think of humility as shy. As soon as you even look at it, it runs away. So we may be humble, but as soon as we begin to think, hey, I'm being really humble, it's gone, because we've started focusing on ourselves again, which is the enemy of humility and lowliness.

True humility is self-forgetful. It's not self-abasing. That would be low self-esteem. Low self-esteem is a cheap mockery of humility.

By the way, so is high self-esteem. True humility is self-forgetfulness. It's not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.

I think that's also a C.S. Lewis quote. So lowliness, Jesus says, to enter the kingdom of heaven, you must be lowly and humble. It's the way in.

[11:12] Look at verse three with me again. And let's just think about this a moment. He changes the question from who's the greatest to how do you even get in?

Well, how do we enter the kingdom of heaven? How do we become followers of Jesus? Well, we must, one, admit that we can't do it on our own.

And two, we have to confess a total dependence on Jesus himself to get in. So in other words, our conversion to Christ is actually an act of humility, isn't it?

So put it the other way around, there's no Christian conversion without humility. It's not possible.

We have to completely rely on Jesus, dependent and lowly, as obviously helpless as a child.

So you might think, okay, I can do that. I want to get into the kingdom of heaven, so I'll muster up some humility, you know? But there it is again, humility is shy, isn't it?

[12:19] We don't find humility by looking within to our own strengths. We find humility by looking to Jesus. We stop being concerned with our own status anymore, our own ability.

We just admit that we can't do it. That's our starting place. Now, you know, children are born like children, but Jesus says that we must turn and become like children.

So he's not saying that some are naturally fit for the kingdom and some aren't. He's not saying if you're born short, you're in luck, but if you're tall, sorry. He says that we have to turn.

So what aspirations of status and greatness are keeping us from turning, from turning to Jesus?

And if you're not a disciple of Jesus today, please understand, no one, no one in the history of Christianity has ever become a Christian truly by getting better and shaping up.

No one has ever pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps to enter the kingdom of heaven. So if you're thinking, well, I can't be a Christian, you don't know my past, you don't know what I'm like, that's the perfect place to start.

[13:42] Now Jesus goes on to say that not only is lowliness the way into the kingdom of heaven, lowliness is the way forward. Look at verse four.

Overhumbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. So we become Christians by a faith filled humility, but we also continue on in the kingdom in the same manner. Now I don't mean that you'll lose your salvation if you become prideful. What I mean is the same gospel that saved us at the beginning through humility, through an act of dependence on God is the fuel that carries us on day by day, moment by moment.

When we put it another way, how do we grow as disciples? The Christian life is about growth, right? We've talked about the tree metaphor a lot last year, this idea of being rooted in Christ and growing. So how do we grow as disciples? Well we grow by staying low. I didn't mean for that to rhyme, but it sounded nice. We grow by staying low by turning and turning again, by cutting off and killing and tearing out anything that would keep us from Christ.

[14:52] Humbling ourselves is our daily affair. A mature Christian is a humble Christian. You know greatness in the kingdom is so associated with lowliness that Jesus says, look at verse five, he says that when we welcome a lowly disciple, even the lowliest, it is as though we're welcoming

Jesus himself.

Think about that. In the kingdom, we are to show tremendous honor to everybody, even the lowliest people that we meet.

And we're to grasp after no honor ourselves. In fact, as far as I know, it's the only competitive verse in the Bible, Romans 12-10, says out, do one another in showing honor.

Out do. I love that. That's what a Christian community should be, is a bunch of lowly saints outdoing one another with how they show warmth and love and respect and honor to the people around them, to all the lowly disciples around them.

Now we've spent a lot of time in understanding Jesus' object lesson of lowliness because it's the key to what's coming next. As we read the passage, you probably hoped I would talk a lot more about hell and gouging out eyes and things because it's weird and it's startling, but lowliness is the thread that runs through it all.

[16 : 21] It's key. So Jesus is about to get really intense. First, he says that it would be better for someone to be violently drowned with this giant millstone than to cause one of his lowly disciples to sin.

What's all that about? Get verse five and six with me again. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fashioned around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Notice that the warning of causing a lowly disciple to sin is in contrast to receiving someone in Jesus' name.

It may be that Jesus is warning us as a community of believers that the way that we withhold our warmth and love and respect from people can cause them to sin.

Haven't you seen that in your experience? How many people that you know have given up on Jesus because they've been hurt by his death, because of the coldness of his church, or because of a community that grasps after their own honor and makes much of themselves at the expense of the lowly?

[17 : 50] Jesus takes very seriously the fact that our behavior can cause someone else to sin. Now that might sound startling to you. There are many people in the wider church who deny this, really, and they say that the Bible is very concerned with personal moral responsibility, and so I can't be responsible for someone else's sin, that's on them.

But this is not what Jesus is saying. I wonder if that's new to you. He's essentially saying children are easy to trip. So we don't put a stumbling block in front of their feet and then point at them when they fall and say, do better next time.

That's cruel. Jesus takes it so seriously that he says, for that person, it'd be better to get a massive stone tied around your neck like a necklace and go walk the plank.

He's being alarming on purpose to make a point. So if we take the route of overemphasizing personal moral responsibility at the expense of social responsibility, we may be going up against Jesus himself.

If we're so concerned with, well, they're responsible for their own actions that we let ourselves off the hook, then I think we have some serious reflection to do in light of the words of Christ today.

[19 : 15] And it's worth a few minutes of reflection and prayer then. How do I? How do I cause those around me to sin by what I do and by what I don't do?

There's a wise old prayer of the church. It begins like this, merciful God, I confess that I have sinned against you in word, thought, indeed, by what I have done and by what I have left undone.

That's a good prayer of confession to pray to the Lord, maybe daily, because we all sin in ways of going against our brothers and sisters, but we also sin by withholding our warmth, our love, and our respect from them.

So we actually have to become, as Tim Mackey put it, students of our own character flaws for the sake of those around us. Well, how do we do that? One way that can be like rocket fuel is to gather two or so mature Christians and occasionally ask them, say, help me see myself clearly.

Where can I grow? Where can I turn? So Jesus has talked about causing others to sin, but what about when we find ourselves causing ourselves to sin?

[20 : 30] Well, let's look at verses eight and nine now. 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. Wow.

So the Jews of Jesus' day were appalled, I mean, as we all should be, but they were appalled at the deep kind of religious conviction level of self-mutilation. So Jesus is reaching for very extreme language here.

Now, we're not going to get into it a whole lot, but when he talks about children and throwing limbs and things into the eternal fire, there's a lot of biblical history, a lot of color in this picture that's provided by the Old Testament and by the sins of the kings who, when Jesus says, I said I wasn't going to get into it, here I am, getting into it, when he says the hell of fire, he's referring to a valley. And in this valley, in the Old Testament under King Manasseh, they would offer their children up as burnt offerings to a false God. So Jesus is using their own, the stories of their own past failures to make a very extreme point here.

[21 : 50] Anyway, I digress. Many in that day believe that in the resurrection, those who did believe in resurrection, believe that if you had been mutilated in some way, if you had lost a limb, you would be raised to resurrected life without the limb that you lost.

Does that make sense? That your mutilation stays permanent. That's why Jesus is addressing those beliefs and saying it'd be better to enter into life, you speaking of resurrection life, I think, mutilated than sinning and apart from Christ.

Self-mutilation would affect your access to the temple and your ability to worship and give burnt offerings and celebrate with the Lord's people. And it would deeply affect your own social status, your dignity.

So Jesus is cutting at the heart, making a really extreme case here, and he's doing it because he takes sin so seriously. He's so protective of his little ones that he says that that social disgrace and all of that baggage that comes with it would be better.

It would be better than causing yourself to sin. Now Jesus takes that temptation very seriously because he takes sin very seriously. Is Jesus being literal though?

[23 : 09] What's the deal with the hand, the foot, the eye? Well, of course, Jesus is not, I don't think I have to say this, but it's good to say, Jesus is not actually advocating that you go and cut off your hand, right?

By singling out hands and feet and eyes, he's probably drawing attention to the way that we treat people for our way of life, our walk, and by the way that we see people with eyes of compassion and understanding.

And those are the areas that we little ones are so vulnerable to fail in, aren't we? But regardless of that, the point is clear. Temptations are bound to come, but sin is serious.

So you better get rid of anything that makes sin easy. Cut off anything that makes sin tempting for you.

So Jesus cares about social responsibility, we care for those around us and we don't cause them to sin, and he cares about personal moral responsibility that we watch ourselves, that we don't cause ourselves to sin too.

[24 : 16] So on the one hand, it's comforting. It's comforting to know that Jesus is upset when someone's behavior causes you to fall. Jesus is angry on your behalf.

That's comforting. And it's sobering to know that we bear serious responsibility for our own sins as well. Now, how does all this fit together?

Well, Jesus started with children, he ended with self-mutilation and drowning, and the thread that runs through it all is the little one. Have you picked up on that?

The little one is the thread because it takes humility to enter the kingdom, and it takes humility to treat our brothers and sisters like Jesus himself with the same honor.

And it takes humility to admit that we've caused others to sin. And it takes humility to take action against our own temptations to sin.

[25 : 12] That child in their midst, that visual parable is the key to understanding this, because Jesus wants us to thoughtfully and thoroughly grasp this truth. If we don't have humility, we don't have Jesus.

Now, there are a couple things I'd like us to notice. I told you at the beginning that there are two truths here about the gospel and Jesus that can transform us. Here's the first one.

Jesus' intensity, because you should be asking, why is he getting so intense? Jesus' intensity is like the intensity of a parent. He's intense about protecting the little ones of the faith, because we are precious to him.

He's fierce about protecting you. When you are rejected, he takes it personally as if he was rejected.

Fierce like a parent. And when you are tempted and fall to sin, if you're a Christian, God's wrath for your sin has been satisfied in Christ.

[26 : 18] So if you're tempted and fall to sin, he's not angry at you. He's angry for you. Do you realize that? In other words, Jesus is intense, because you deeply matter to Jesus.

You do. Becoming humble, lowering ourselves, it's a vulnerable thing to do. It's hard to stand up in front of somebody and really lower yourself, really get low.

You can only do it if that person is really trustworthy. So we wouldn't do it for just anybody, but for Jesus? Absolutely. Because his greatness is the kind that drives us to kind of a joyful humility.

He doesn't have a superiority complex. Jesus is not a narcissist. The second point, by the way, the second truth is that we can really humble ourselves to Jesus because he did it first.

Eternal God, immeasurable glory for ages past, became a human. And if that wasn't low enough, he went even lower.

[27 : 31] He became like a servant. He didn't come as a great human, you know, a stately king riding in with his army. He came in lowly. He washed feet. And if that wasn't low enough, he went even lower still.

And he died a disgraceful, shameful death that he did not deserve for you.

And that's why we can get low with Jesus is he's not above lowliness. Isaiah 57-15 is one of my favorite verses.

It says this, for thus says the one who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy. I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and revive the heart of the contrite.

I love that. So what now? If you've been trying to climb your way into the kingdom, to climb up the ladder of the kingdom, stop it.

[28 : 46] It's not going to help. Just get low and admit that you can't and watch Jesus. He loves that. And if you're a disciple and you've lost your lowness, turn.

It's the way on in the kingdom. It's how we continue with Christ. We turn and we turn again. We cut off whatever makes sin easy. And we just get low.

And that's where Jesus is. Let's pray. Lord, we accept a difficult teaching from you today.

And I ask that you would help all of us be honest in light of your word. That you would allow us to be divided, bone from marrow, as it were, by the sharp sword of your word.

That we would be confronted where we need to be confronted, that we would be comforted where we need to be comforted. And for those of us who have some turning to do today, help us to do that, Lord, for your sake, for your glory, for your honor.

[30 : 01] Help us to get low. Amen.