

# Little Ones as Big Examples (18:1-10)

What's good church fam? If I haven't met you yet my name is Marcus Williamson and I'm one of the pastors here at City Church. If you have your Bibles go ahead and turn with me to **Matthew 18**. We'll start in verse 1 and work our way through to verse 10. If you are newer around here, we have been working our way through the book of Matthew coming up on 2 years in August.

Matthew has covered a lot of ground so far. We've talked about what the kingdom of God looks like and how it's Jesus' way of talking about the areas in our world where, in his language, "God's will is done." It's where what God wants to happen, happens. Where life looks like what he says life should look like. We have also seen the type of people the kingdom is made up of, people's various responses to this type of kingdom Jesus tried to share, and then we've watched the disciples grow up before our eyes and start to understand (imperfectly) the nature of it.

But here in ch. 18, the focus shifts and Jesus starts talking about *relationships* in the kingdom of God. How the kingdom shapes and informs the way we relate to one another as followers of Jesus within it. And that's what the next three chapters will be largely about. So today will be foundational for the next seven weeks, so if you are new, you came on a good day, welcome. Glad you're here.

With that being said, let's work our way through the text and then we will unpack what all of this means for us in the here and now. Verse 1

*[1] At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"*

Everybody loves a good greatest of all time, a good GOAT, conversation right? It just gets the blood really going right. It just bring *unity* to a conversation. Joking. It never does that right?!? Is it Michael Jordan or LeBron James? Tom Brady or Peyton Manning? Diana Taurasi or Candace Parker? Oh here's one for you, is it Pat Summit or...Pat Summit? Sometimes you just know who the greatest is, right? So the disciples are not immune to these types of conversations either apparently, but this feels different. "Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Seems very odd to use that phrasing because to me the answer Jesus would give is, "you're looking at him." Surely Jesus is the greatest of all time. So why ask this question to Jesus? Well if you remember, a chapter before, Jesus has just informed his disciples that he is going to die. So you know the disciples being the disciples just casually bring up, who's going to be in

charge when he does in fact die. Pretty morbid but I mean, if he's gonna do it anyway, someone has to lead right?

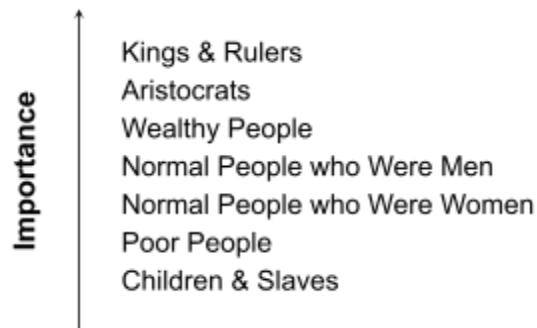
Now I know what you're thinking. Silly disciples...get it together. Well I would be remiss if I didn't point out that we do similar things in our modern age. The top of the food chain is something fierce in this culture. Everyone is fighting to get there. We want to be the best in our field, the coolest and most liked in our friend group, the most successful person in our family, you name it. And this also goes that say I don't care about status or fame or whatever, that's silly. Even for us, you're still saying you want to be seen as the person *above* all of this—which is just *another* way to try and be the “greatest.” In other words, we are more like the disciples then we might claim to be.

So Jesus gives his disciples and in many ways us an answer. Verse 2:

*[2] He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. [3] And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. [4] Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

Alright so let's talk for a minute about this, because chances are what Jesus says here hits way different for us than it would have been for the disciples there at the time. In our society, we think of kids as cute, cuddly, and innocent. So if Jesus were to bring over a little kid in our midst and said “become like this little child,” we'd be like [“awwwww you want me to be innocent and kind like this kid. You want me to view the world with an incredible child-like wonder. Be dependent like a child is dependent on his parents.”](#) And some of that is indeed taught in other places of the bible. But that's not what Jesus means here.

The key to what Jesus is saying here is in v. 4: “...whoever takes the *lowly position* of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” So in Jesus' day, children were not primarily seen as cute, cuddly and innocent as hard as that is to imagine. If only Jesus would have seen kids unboxing things on YouTube. In this culture, kids were seen honestly as insignificant, non-contributors to the household. In many ways they were seen as liabilities. Attachment to children happened far later in life due to the high infant mortality rate. So basically the social hierarchy in Jesus' day looked like this:



This is more or less how it worked. The further towards the top of that list you were, the more *important* you were. And just like in every society, people idolized and revered the people above them on the importance scale: everybody wanted to be like them. And society was structured in such a way that the people at the *bottom* of the food chain oriented themselves around the people at the top. That doesn't hit at all today does it? Joking. That's the air they breathed and in a similar way the air we breathe. We see it play out that way all the time, everyone orients themselves around the most important people.

But here's where stuff gets a little strange. Jesus just took a little kid, who was at the bottom of the social ladder with the slaves, and said *this* is the type of person who is *great* in the kingdom of God. And then he doubles down: he doesn't just say that those people are the *greatest* in the kingdom; he says unless you take on the *position and posture* of one of them, you'll never *enter* the kingdom at all. Did you catch that? You will never *enter* the kingdom. To say it another way, **unless you see yourself as the least significant, the least powerful—until you see yourself as existing to orient yourself around others—you'll never actually understand what the kingdom of Jesus is all about. You'll never actually experience life in the kingdom of God.**

Here's the way Jesus puts it elsewhere in [Mark 10:43-44](#):

***...whoever wants to become great among you must be your [what church fam?] servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.***

Remember where slaves were on our chart? All the way at the bottom with children. So here Jesus is getting at the exact same idea. Greatness in the kingdom of God is precisely the opposite of greatness in the world at large. Jesus knows there's this desire to be great. He knows there's this desire from a lot of us to be first. But Jesus also knows that this path to be the greatest or first from a worldly perspective orients others around us. I'm important, I'm significant, I'm a big deal and I run the show—so make sure you orient yourselves around me and what's best for me. We see it in corporate America, in

politics, in some churches as well. But greatness in the kingdom, is orienting yourself around others. You're important, you matter, you belong. To put it another way: **in the kingdom of Jesus, the more you demand that others orient themselves around you: your wishes, your desires, your preferences, the more immature you are. But the more you orient yourself around others, specifically, around those that the world treats as insignificant and unimportant, the more MATURE you are.**

Hence, v. 5:

*[5] And whoever **welcomes** one such child in my name welcomes me.*

So if you want to be great in the kingdom: first, learn to take the posture of an insignificant child at the bottom of the social ladder. And second, welcome and place priority on those at the bottom of the social ladder. And you'll notice that in theory, the more you do the first thing, the more natural it becomes to do the second thing. The more you see yourself as insignificant, the more instinctive it becomes to welcome the insignificant. In the kingdom of God, the social ladder gets flipped on its head. **We identify with and orient ourselves around the least significant—not the most significant.**

Now, Jesus is about to give an at-length teaching on a specific way that we should orient ourselves around the least significant. Verse 6:

*[6] "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.*

Alright so that got intense real quick, but let me explain the first half of that verse before we tackle these millstones being hung around. So to "stumble" in Jesus' day was a word picture for falling *into sin*, or *away* from belief in God. Jesus says if anyone in the community of faith causes one of these "little ones" to do that—so if anyone makes it harder for one of the weakest, smallest, least significant members of the community—it would be better for them, in Jesus' mind, to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Ok, so the intense part. Jesus is using hyperbole here—he's not advocating for drowning people as punishment, just like in the next couple verses, he's not advocating for people to literally amputate limbs to avoid sin. But what he *is* saying is that he is *deathly* serious about what he's saying here. He wants us, as the community of faith, those who believe

in him, to so *orient* ourselves around the weaker brother, sister—that we would never in a million years make it *harder* for them to follow Jesus.

Jesus evidently believes that we have a responsibility to not make it *harder* for each other to love and follow Jesus. Such that he says if our actions cause another follower of Jesus to stumble, it would've actually been better for us to just go ahead and bite the dust. So in what ways do we often do this? In what ways do we sometimes make it harder for others to follow Jesus? **So I don't know about you guys, but this makes me think of times where the Church has let self-righteousness and general meanness become commonplace in its midst. It makes me think of times that we squash diversity and try to conform every follower of Jesus to our particular mold of what a Christian "should" be. Times that Churches have allowed abuse and misuse of power to go unchecked. Times where we make it seem like people have to jump through social or political hoops to be a Christian. Times where we sin against other Christians in significant ways and never own up to it and apologize.**

The list goes on for miles, probably. There is virtually no *limit* to the ways that we as followers of Jesus sin against one another, and therefore make it harder for each other to follow Jesus. And participating in those things—or just refusing to put a stop to them when we see them—can have a real, lasting impact on other people's faith. It can cause them to "stumble"—to doubt that God and God's design for humanity is worthwhile or worth following. And Jesus takes that very seriously. He says if your actions have that effect on other followers of Jesus, especially those who are new to faith or young in faith, it would've been better for you to just not be around at all. In others, it's a big deal to Jesus.

Let's keep it moving, v. 7:

*[7] 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!*

So it's almost like Jesus in saying all of this about not causing other people to stumble, expects a clap back, "Come on, Jesus. Isn't that a little *intense*? There are temptations to sin everywhere. Temptations to doubt who you are are everywhere in our world. Twitter or Facebook alone gives people so many reasons to doubt that there is a loving God and he is worth following at all. Are you really saying that in a world like that, we need to all walk around on eggshells worried about whether or not we're doing things that are making it harder for *other people* to believe?"

Jesus' response? "Sure, woe to the *world* for things that cause people to stumble. Those things really *are* everywhere. **But woe to the one *through whom they come.***"

Translation: **just because brokenness is everywhere doesn't mean we should contribute to it.** Remember: as followers of Jesus, we are actually called to partner with him as agents of *reconciliation*: we're invited to partner with God to bring aspects of heaven to earth. To show the world what life is like when Jesus is king. As followers of Jesus, we're actually called to push back on the brokenness in our world, not add to it. So brokenness may indeed be *everywhere*; but that means all the more reason to not participate *in* it.

Which leads to Jesus' *next* idea, v. 8:

*[8] 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. [9] 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.*

So Jesus makes a small shift here. Instead of talking about things you do to cause *other* people to stumble, he starts talking about things you do that make *you* stumble. And this is actually language that Jesus has used before in the gospel of Matthew. Back in chapter 5, Jesus said something almost identical about the fight against *sexual* sin.<sup>1</sup> Here, he seems to just apply it to *any* type of sin.

If there are things in *your* life that are causing *you* to doubt who Jesus is, to want to know and follow Jesus—deal with those things just as severely. **If watching certain shows on Netflix makes you desire things that you shouldn't desire—stop watching the show. Or cancel your Netflix account altogether. If having a certain app on your phone makes you participate in behaviors that followers of Jesus shouldn't participate in—delete the app. If going to a certain store makes you want to buy things that you don't need and that you don't have the money for—stop going to that store. Just like we should take it seriously when our actions cause *others* to stumble, we should take it seriously when our actions cause *us* to stumble.** Both are very important.

So I want you to see that Jesus' perspective on all this is wonderfully nuanced. On the one hand, he understands that sometimes people can lead other people to struggle, doubt, stumble, and sin. We are *relational* people, and sometimes in our relationships, we impact others in really negative, harmful ways. But at the same time, the fact that we are a relational people doesn't remove the responsibility we have to take our *own* sin

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:29-30

seriously. In other words, whenever we sin, we can't respond by going, "well if it weren't for *that* person's actions, I wouldn't have sinned." "If it weren't for *that* person hurting me, I wouldn't be struggling to believe." That may be true, but God will ultimately hold us accountable for the decision and decisions we made: to follow or not follow him. **He'll hold the *other* person accountable too—but not *instead* of us. In *addition* to us.**

Here's why I think that's really important for us to realize. It's become really popular in recent years for people to say some version of "I left the Church because of the Church. I left the Church because of Christians. Christians hurt me, sinned against me, excluded me, rejected me, didn't love me like I wanted to be loved—so I had no choice but to leave." And believe me: I get that. I understand it. I've walked with people through it.

And based on what Jesus teaches in this passage, I think he gets it too. He's sitting here saying that he takes hurt caused by Christians very very seriously. In fact, he uses the strongest possible *language* to condemn people that *cause* that hurt. He takes it very, very seriously. And he will not let it go unaddressed.

And listen: no one has been hurt more by Christians than Jesus has. No one has been let down more by the Church than Jesus has. No one has been opposed and mistreated and excluded more unjustly than Jesus was. Which means, listen to me here: if you'll allow it to happen, **all of that can all be more of a reason to walk *towards* Jesus than it is to walk away from him.** Because it means he's the only one who has walked through what you are walking through, and come out the other side of it a gracious and compassionate human being. He's the only one who has been through what you've been through, and hasn't let the bitterness and hurt consume him. And all of that means that Jesus can and will meet you exactly where you're at, and help you walk through every bit of the hurt you've experienced.

Here's what we've found to be true in pastoral ministry: decisions made out of hurt and bitterness never end up being the best decisions. They might be the *easiest* decisions. They might be the most *emotionally satisfying* decisions. They might feel like the *only possible* decisions at the time. But very rarely are they the *best* decisions.

Let's finish out our passage with v. 10:

*[10] "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.*

Now, very quickly: let me address this interesting language about angels in heaven. So this passage, and a couple others like it, are where some people get the idea of



“guardian angels”: this idea that all of us have personal representatives in heaven who watch over us, protect us, and keep us from harm. And scholars actually disagree as to whether Jesus is speaking literally or figuratively with what he says here. But regardless of any of that, the point Jesus is making is actually very straightforward: **don't mistreat one of his kids, because his kids always have the Father's attention.** And God always takes sins against his kids seriously.

So what does this actually mean in practice? What does it mean to take our sin seriously and to not cause other followers of Jesus to stumble? I know we talked a little about each, but I want us to write down two questions to drill this down into our lives. First:

### Where are you making it harder for OTHERS to follow Jesus?

Where are you placing expectations and requirements on other followers of Jesus that the Bible doesn't? Expecting that they vote a certain way, participate in certain behaviors, or avoid other behaviors.

I've known people who insist that followers of Jesus should never consume alcohol, even in moderation. I've known others that believe followers of Jesus shouldn't even go places where alcohol is served. Others that view any and all television and movies as sinful. And those things can be personal convictions: things that you deem it wise to avoid yourself to help YOU steer clear of sin. But when you start to insist that ALL followers of Jesus live up to those personal convictions, you make it harder for others to follow Jesus. You create an environment where other followers of Jesus feel like they can never follow Him well, because they can't keep all of your personal convictions.

Or maybe you're the type that likes to nitpick, go over other Christian's' lives with a fine-tooth comb, and make sure they are aware of every little area of life where they're failing. So we can see how that makes it harder for others to follow Jesus? Jesus says in this passage that when we take these types of postures, we're not actually helping—we're hurting. So consider if there are any ways you're doing that, and if so, repent of those things. The second question we need to ask ourselves is:

### Where are you making it harder for YOU to follow Jesus?

What are those “little” things that you continually say you need to work on, that you continue to tell LifeGroup about, or your friends about, or your spouse about, that you haven't actually worked on. Oh you know the thing. We all know the thing. The Spirit is like...mmmmhmmmm preach. What is one thing that you need to sacrifice because it's a stumbling block between your intimacy with God? I'll give you the gift of going second:



The Lord spoke to me through someone in our church family, and he wanted me to spend more time with him. I didn't know exactly what this meant, and honestly I'm still figuring it all out. But the Lord has been patient and has started revealing to me how much time I was actually spending with him versus with my Nintendo Switch, or with TV. Now hear me say, this is a *personal* conviction. Something the Lord has pressed upon me and is still pressing cause I don't like to listen sometimes...most of the time. So don't get it twisted. I'm not holding everybody else to my personal conviction. But still, I know that to a point, this makes it harder for me to follow after Jesus. So I'm trying my best to put limits on myself.

I know many of us know this, but it goes without saying that we serve a living God, who throughout the Bible says he's jealous of these lesser things getting our attention rather than us giving him our attention.

So for you what is the thing that is keeping you from kicking it with the Father? What is keeping you from spending time in the Word? Maybe you know exactly where you're off but whatever that thing is, it's just too good to let go. Maybe it's a relationship that's not healthy in how God would deem health but it's too "good" in your opinion and you want to make it work. And you feel like you can bring them around. Well maybe for you the most healthy thing for you to do would be to allow God to work in their life and you stop trying to be God in their life.

Maybe for some of us, it's how we deal with our finances. God gives and we certainly take without thinking that maybe just maybe God wants us to be generous with what he's given us. We're so blinded by increasing our status through what we buy and even through what we save, instead of giving. For some of us our first step of repentance is asking the Lord to forgive us in this and then give financially to a local organization or non-profit that aligns with bringing the kingdom of God down to earth.

Whatever the Spirit is tugging on you about, whether I stated it or not, I want you to take it seriously. For some of us we feel that tug right now, don't rush past that feeling. Allow the Spirit to do a mighty work for you right now. If you don't feel anything right now, maybe pray for your brothers and sisters who are at war within themselves, and wondering if they are hearing the Spirit or themselves. And then pray that the Spirit help reveal to you anything that he would want you to do as well.

As we close, and you can come on, I want to encourage us from the book of Jude. It's a very small book, one chapter to be exact, so it's easy to overlook. But there is a ton of

good stuff in it and the ending is fire. And it's that ending that we are going to take a look at. Let's read the last couple of verses in [Jude](#):

*24 To him who is able to keep you from stumbling [let me start over so this can sink in] and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— 25 to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*

As we ask ourselves these questions this week, and pour over how to keep ourselves from stumbling over tendencies and struggles, I want to encourage you that ultimately God is able to help keep you from stumbling. There's an old song called He's Able by Kirk Franklin that I'm not quite sure was meant for this verse but man does it hit when you hear it. I won't sing it to you, I'll leave that for better singers than myself, but here's part of the lyrics that some of us may need to have on repeat alongside this scripture:

*He's able  
He's able  
He's able  
I know that He can do it  
He said He'd help me through it*

*Hold on my brother your change is gonna come  
Be strong my sister for your work is not done, no  
Just keep on believing and hold on tight  
He's able to give you joy in the morning light*

Amen and amen. I don't know if I even need to pray after that but for transition's sake, let's pray.