

The Community of the King

The privilege and responsibility of being in the Kingdom. Matthew 17:24-18:14

Jesus Saved a People [Matt. 16:18, 1 Peter 2:9-10, Rev. 5:9-10; Gen. 12:2, 17:7, Lev. 26:12, Jer. 31:33, Ezk. 36:28]

Jesus always intended to save a people as the fulfilment of God's purpose, the purpose of God to have a people for His own, which He declared in His promises to Abraham and repeated throughout the Old Testament. Upon Peter's confession that He was Lord and Christ Jesus said "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

He will have a people, bring a people into being by His saving work, who will be distinguished by sharing Peter's confession of Jesus, now crucified and risen, as Christ and Son of God,

A people who are not an abstract idea, a concept, but who, as we will learn in chapter 18 of Matthew, are to find concrete expression in the world by living in self consciously distinct communities of Jesus' followers, communities that conform their life to Jesus' word, the saving word through which He gathers them around Himself just as God gathered redeemed Israel at Sinai.

A people as we will see today of extraordinary privilege, and with real responsibilities for their own perseverance and the perseverance of their brothers and sisters until they come to the fulness of the salvation Jesus brings, the reign of God in the new heaven and earth where there will be no sin, no evil, no suffering or death

Over the next few weeks we are going to be thinking about the people of God as revealed in Matthew chapters 18-20

Who belongs to the community of God's King Jesus? What should characterise them? What is their life together to be like?

And it's a good time to be asking those questions

We have just been through a time that has isolated us physically from each other and disrupted the rhythm of our common life – and we are still feeling it, even though many of us have worked hard and well to maintain connection with each other, to keep loving in deed and not just in words

And we live in an individualistic culture – where we are encouraged to pursue the interests of me and mine without too much engagement with the needs of others

That can be left to the government, or those who are paid to care

Where it is all too easy to live self contained and self sufficient lives, mixing only with the select few we choose

And that can overflow into our Christian life and lead us to downplay, to minimize the importance of, our life together and the responsibility Jesus gives to each of us for the welfare of other believers

Where we can think – as long as my personal relationship with Jesus is ok, or my family life is ok

I'm right, free to just get on pursuing my own goals and plans

Others – they can be left to the professionals who are paid to care

Where we can almost believe, despite all the evidence of Scripture and the urgings of God's Spirit, that we can live a Christian life on our own, not needing or caring for others.

But our life together as Jesus' church is important – it is the visible, tangible, expression of God's saving purpose in the world, of His calling people to Himself through the gospel

It is where Christian truth is to be found, defended, and passed on, the pillar and foundation of the truth [1 Tim. 3:15]

It is the place where trusting obedience to Jesus' word is modelled to the world – all the NT letters bar Philemon, including the pastorals, are written to churches, to congregations of God's people

And the obedience looked for is not just individual but communal, the common faith producing a common life

And the Lord Jesus, as part of the privilege of being His people, calls us to share in His love for His people, gives us the responsibility of caring for each other as the Father and the Son care for their people.

So, giving thanks to God for His word, light in our darkness, the word that equips us to trust the Lord Jesus and do the good He has called us to

Let's look at the privilege and responsibility of being Jesus' people

And if you are not yet one of Jesus' people – I hope you will see in both our privileges and responsibilities how good it is to belong to Jesus

Jesus' people

Sons of the King 17:24-27

Matthew 17: ²⁴ When they came to Capernaum, those who collected the temple tax approached Peter and said, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?"

²⁵ "Yes," he said.

The temple tax was a theoretically voluntary levy paid annually by adult male Jews for the upkeep of the temple. Some groups didn't pay it and so the collectors ask Peter a genuine question.

But Jesus takes the initiative v. 25 – speaking before Peter can say anything, to use the tax and Peter's answer to teach Peter that He really is the one Peter has just confessed Him to be – the Son of God

And also to teach him that His followers are also sons of God, in the family of the great King

When he went into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do earthly kings collect tariffs or taxes? From their sons or from strangers?"

²⁶ "From strangers," he said.

"Then the sons are free," Jesus told him. ²⁷ "But, so we won't offend them, go to the sea, cast in a fishhook, and take the first fish that you catch. When you open its mouth you'll find a coin. Take it and give it to them for me and you."

The temple for which the tax was being collected was symbolically the house of God, the throne of God, the sign that the LORD reigned as King amongst His people. So the tax was being levied on God's behalf, for the upkeep of His house.

But Kings, in those days, didn't collect taxes from their children. To be family of the King was to be tax exempt

Jesus is getting Peter to think about the reality of his confession of Jesus as the Son of God. As the true Son He doesn't need to pay the tax

But more. He is also saying His followers don't need to pay the tax as well

See that v. 27 – so we won't give offence – Jesus includes Peter

Why is Peter also exempt

It is because Jesus' people are also in the family, God's children, sons of the great King

Our Father, He has already taught them to pray

In 18:14 we hear him speak of God to his disciples as your Father

Later, after the resurrection, He will refer to His followers as His brothers Matt. 28:10

Jesus' people, believers in Jesus – you and I if we are His followers, are children of God

The gospel is clear on that

John 1:12 But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name,

Jesus Doesn't expand on the extraordinary privilege of being God's children here, but it is great

We are loved by the eternal, almighty God, so loved with a love that will never fail

John 16:27 For the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.

We have Access to God

Ephesians 2:18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

And so no need of temple or priests

And, being given the Spirit of God's Son we come to share in the life of God, in eternal life

To be God's child through faith in Jesus is to be richly privileged

Believer – is that how you know yourself?

Richly privileged, by grace, through faith in the Lord Jesus

The great privilege of being included in the family of the great King, of God, is not expanded on here

But what we do see here is the character of God's true children in the character of the Son, the Lord Jesus.

He knows He doesn't need to pay the tax but He says, v. 27

²⁷ *“But, so we won’t offend them, go to the sea, cast in a fishhook, and take the first fish that you catch. When you open its mouth you’ll find a coin. Take it and give it to them for me and you.”*

Jesus humbles Himself to pay a cost He doesn’t need to pay so that, by accommodating Himself to the expectations of the collectors, it is made easier, not harder, for them to listen to Jesus, to believe in Jesus

That humbling to seek the good of others seems easy here – catch a fish with a coin – but it will take Him to the cross, cost Him all to achieve good for us, the good of being forgiven and included in God’s family

The family whose members are to share in the humility that can seek the good of others [Phil. 2:1-11, 1 Cor. 11:1]

Humility, humility as necessary for belonging to the family of God, is what our Lord emphasises in the next part of the gospel

The community of the Humble 18:1-5

Matthew 18: At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “So who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”² He called a small child and had him stand among them.³ “Truly I tell you,” he said, “unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child—this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.⁵ And whoever welcomes one child like this in my name welcomes me.

You can understand how the question could arise.

Kingdoms then and now have hierarchies. Some with more power and honour, some with less.

And Peter has really been quite prominent lately

Blessed for his confession

With Jesus up the mountain

Now included along with Jesus in payment of the tax

And Jesus has spoken of his own death, and so you can understand the disciples wondering if Peter is going to be top dog when Jesus departs.

Who is the greatest?

But before we look at Jesus’ answer – ask – how do we measure greatness, importance?

Achievement – military or civil; buildings built, battles won,

Education

Wealth

Connections

Positions held

Recognition of peers

Now look at what Jesus says

² *He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. ³ And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Jesus gives them an object lesson in humility.

This child wasn't going to be a wealthy or privileged child. They didn't hang around with Jesus. Just a curious peasant child

And such children were at the bottom of the social pile.

They were powerless, without status, subject to and dependent of their parents.

In a time, as this was, of high infant mortality, even their hold on life, their place in life, was insecure. You couldn't build any kinds of hopes on them and you didn't consult them when making your plans.

Did they have any of the marks of greatness? None at all, in fact they were the very opposite of greatness, as far from being thought important as you could get – and that's the point.

Jesus says your starting point for entering the kingdom, for belonging, is turning and becoming like this child, reckoning yourself to have no greatness.

Turning is a word that can be used for repentance, changing your mind about something

The disciples had to turn from their pre-occupation with greatness, with being concerned with their status and importance relative to each other.

They had to abandon it as wrong headed, and embrace having no status, no claim on greatness as those who depended entirely on Jesus for being in the kingdom

In a sense Jesus is repeating what He has taught on the sermon on the mount

Matthew 5:³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

The kingdom is for the poor in spirit, the spiritually bankrupt

No one who thinks they are great, Deserving of position and prominence

Who thinks they can bring to the King of the kingdom some service He needs and should recognise and reward

Has any place in the Kingdom

You get in by abandoning any notion of greatness, of your importance

Belonging is entirely by Jesus' gift, His grace to the undeserving, and we are all equal in our undeserving.

Having laid that foundation in v.3 about belonging to the Kingdom Jesus now answers their question about who is the greatest

⁴ *Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child – this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

This really is a bit of a slap down. Jesus is saying two things that tell us anyone concerned for greatness is on entirely the wrong track

Firstly, Only one who has abandoned any ideas of greatness, any thought of deserving more honour than others – can be great in the Kingdom

And secondly, that has to be everyone who is in the Kingdom, .. – for all who are in the Kingdom, v. 3, have turned and become like children

You can't even compete in humility to show how great you are.

The greatness of the Kingdom is for every believer, for every believer has to abandon a pre-occupation with their own importance

How are you going in the pride and status stakes?

We can hear Jesus but still think like the world

Here are some tests

Are you easily wounded if you or your contribution is not recognized?

Have you started to think some service is beneath you, perhaps only for beginning Christians?

Do you think your concerns should have precedence?

Do you think the salvation of a sports star is more significant than that of a child in Kid's club?

Not embracing the humility Jesus calls for, thinking you are greater, puts you in real danger as a follower of Jesus – dangers spoken of here

Of 'despising' others

Of Not heeding rebuke by your brothers and sisters, for where we are concerned with status low status persons are reluctant to rebuke high status persons, and high status persons can be reluctant to hear

And leaves you vulnerable to bitterness at what you think is the inadequate respect shown you by others

But heeding Jesus' call to turn and become like a little child

Is Freeing –

It frees you to acknowledge reality, that you have nothing to offer God, frees you to depend entirely on His grace and kindness, which is our only security

Frees you to listen to others who speak the truth in love to you, and to serve them by speaking that loving truth to them

But just because believers have abandoned ideas of greatness – doesn't mean they are not valuable.

In fact every believer, because of their relationship with Jesus, has to be reckoned of infinite value, infinite worth

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

'in my name' means because of their relationship with me, their association with me

He is talking of His disciples, those who have turned and humbled themselves to trust and follow Him

Welcoming them is

Welcoming the Son of God, the Son of the great King

They were asking who is the greatest, and now Jesus' disciples are told they have to Treat all disciples as if they are the greatest, for Jesus is the greatest

Have you been consciously welcoming other believers as if you were welcoming the Lord Jesus?

If you believe Jesus' word here, and in Matthew 10:40-42 and 25:31-46, the way you treat other disciples is the way Jesus reckons you treat Him

So ask yourself

When you are relating to your brothers and sisters, even the least – do you think they feel they have been treated as someone important?

That you've given them time, shown them courtesy, listened to them.

You do that for the important, you even rearrange your time to meet them

And you make provision for their comfort, not like the believers in James 2 – who made the poor sit at their feet.

I find this challenging

Hard not to be impatient when you are busy or tired, to be dismissive of what you think are trivial concerns, to be selective in who you give time to, driven by the perception of who will be more useful to your plans

We need grace to love and welcome Jesus' people as Jesus

And we need to show grace

Jesus' humble people matter

And Jesus and the Father who sent Jesus into the world to save His helpless and undeserving people – want them to come to their goal

To come to enjoy living under Jesus' rule in the new heaven and earth

Who matter to God

A warning to the world 18:6-7

*Matthew 18:⁶ "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me **to fall away**—it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were hung around his neck and he were drowned in the depths of the sea. ⁷ Woe to the world because of offenses. For offenses will inevitably come, but woe to that person by whom the offense comes. CSB*

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.* 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! NIV*

Because Jesus’ people matter

Jesus warns all who want to cause them to fall away, or as in the NIV, to stumble

To stumble is more vivid. Jesus has called His people to follow Him, to be directed along life’s way by Him as He brings us to His goal for us.

To cause someone to stumble is to hinder them in their following of Jesus, to trip them up so that they are in danger of falling out of the race

And this is a serious warning v. 6

Better that happen to you before you caused someone to stumble

Such causes of stumbling will come from the world, for they don’t recognise Jesus’ followers as God’s children because they don’t recognise God as their King

1 John 3: See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called God’s children—and we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it didn’t know him.

It is the world’s nature v.7, the way it is, to hinder our following of Jesus – for the world opposes the rule of the Lord Jesus. So it will always be the source of temptations, persecutions, cares - for which God will judge the world

But Jesus’ warning is general – whoever –

He wants us to hear it, for it is possible for believers to create stumbling blocks for other believers

Some are mentioned in this chapter

Treating other believers with contempt

Being indifferent to them

Hypocrisy, or harbouring false teaching,

OR being unforgiving

Or ourselves indulging in sinful behaviours that get in the way of our own following of Jesus

A warning to us 18:8-9

Matthew 18: ⁸ If your hand or your foot causes you to fall away, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to fall away, 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 hellfire. CSB

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. NIV

Reaching our goal must matter to us, believers, matter more than anything.

Jesus' language was Shocking in the first century – self mutilation was abhorrent to Jews, and it is shocking now

The Lord Jesus is using very forceful language to make His point

And we mustn't misread His language

First of all we mustn't think that physical amputation will stop us sinning. Jesus used the same language in Matt. 5:28-29.

Matthew 5: ²⁸ But I tell you, everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

Taking out an eye won't stop lust in the heart. He has already taught that our sins originate in our heart, and chopping off limbs doesn't change our hearts.

Secondly, we mustn't think amputees will be disadvantaged in heaven

So what is the point He is forcibly making? It's this

Missing out on the Kingdom because some sin is stopping you from following Jesus is worse than you can possibly imagine – and our Lord talks of being thrown into the hell of fire, or the eternal fire

So don't let anything stop you from following Jesus

It doesn't matter how precious it is – and that is why eyes and hands and feet are mentioned – they are precious, it doesn't matter how dear that sin is to you, or that relationship, or that love of praise of others – if it gets in the way of your following Jesus

It has to go, for coming to the Kingdom has to matter more

There is such a great gulf between the two alternative destinations – Matthew 25:46 – eternal punishment and eternal life

Matthew 25: ⁴⁶ "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

You have to make a complete break with whatever it is that hinders you, trips you up from coming to eternal life

Jesus says His people are serious about living His way, serious about holiness

They don't tolerate sin in themselves, and as we will see next week, they don't tolerate sin, open, persistent disobedience to Jesus, in their assembly

That seriousness is unfashionable, but following Jesus is not a hobby or an interest; it is the only way to eternal life, in a world of death.

And knowing how much Jesus' followers matter to our God, How He cares for them

That they are loved Family

And He will Punish the world for frustrating following;

And knowing what is at stake – eternal life

The perseverance of our brothers and sisters, these little ones, Jesus' followers, must matter to us

It is not enough not to cause them to stumble. We must actively seek to keep them walking in Jesus' way

Who must matter to us 18:10-14

Matthew 18: ¹⁰ "See to it that you don't despise one of these little ones, because I tell you that in heaven their angels continually view the face of my Father in heaven. ¹² What do you think? If someone has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, won't he leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go and search for the stray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over that sheep more than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. ¹⁴ In the same way, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones perish.

Where you are Interested in greatness – despising other believers is a real danger. You will only want to mix with those who can increase your status and reputation

And so dismiss, reckon of not worthy of your interest, seek to have nothing to do with, those who are lowest in the hierarchy, who can't enhance your greatness by associating with you, who you deem of no use to you

But despising Jesus' little ones would be a mistake

Show how out of touch with reality you are in your valuation of others

Matthew 18: ¹⁰ "See to it that you don't despise one of these little ones, because I tell you that in heaven their angels continually view the face of my Father in heaven

Talk of 'their angels' has generated lots of speculation – from guardian angels to even their spirits after death

Sometimes it is good to admit we don't know everything, in fact that there is lots we don't know because we haven't been told, and that includes about angels, 'ministering spirits sent out to serve those who will inherit salvation' Heb. 1:14

We can admit we don't know everything and still take the obvious point, that in saying "that in heaven their angels continually view the face of my Father in heaven" Jesus is saying

Those who have the interests of these little ones as their main concern are close to God

It is a picture from a royal court. Those who behold the face of the king are in the first rank of courtiers, the ones who have the easiest access to Him, who can best bring their concerns to Him

The people you may be at risk of despising – are those whose interests are nearest and dearest to God, the eternal King, who will never be without advocates in the very presence of God.

We should value our fellow believers – every one of them, especially the humblest – rightly, as God does – as dear to Him.

And if we did we would never be content to see them stray from the Lord Jesus, for God is not content to let that happen. Never content to shrug our shoulders and say 'Its only He/she never contributed much. They were always work, never with the program.'

¹² What do you think? If someone has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, won't he leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go and search for the stray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over that sheep more than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. ¹⁴ In the same way, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones perish.

Shepherds and sheep were a common part the life of Galilean peasants. So it is no surprise that Jesus can apply their habits and practices to two things close to God's heart - seeking the lost in Luke 15, and bringing back the straying.

And Jesus makes the application very clear

. ¹⁴ In the same way, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones perish.

In context Jesus is setting the scene for the way we interact with our brothers and sisters when they sin, which we will look at next week.

He doesn't want them lost. He wants them brought back to following the Lord Jesus.

But it should characterise all our engagement with our brothers and sisters

They matter to God

He wants them safe and secure within the flock

Rather than despise any, we should be actively seeking to promote the health and safety of all believers

And when we see one straying – we should actively seek to bring them back.

Not just pastors and elders

It should be the concern of all of us

If we are children of our Father, and that is our great privilege and security, than those who matter to Him should matter to us.

And the picture of the shepherd is a picture of effort.

So you notice – someone has stopped coming to growth group, not seen them at church

You know that they have stopped reading their bible, or started to go out with those non-Christian friends, heard that maybe they are drinking more heavily, or just started to go cold on that whole Christian thing, or have a hurt that is festering into bitterness

We make the phone call, we invite for coffee, we even go round and drop in, we have the awkward conversation – and you pray

Knowing what is at stake, we would want someone to do that for us – wouldn't we

It is the responsibility of all of us –

And if we leave it just to pastors and elders, or growth group leaders – we will fail. It is one thing to search for the one, another thing to be chasing 20.

Privilege and Responsibility

The privileges of Jesus' people – to be sons of the great King, who call God Father

To be the Little ones – who matter to God, to whom He intends to give the Kingdom, whose angels always behold the face of our Father

Whom our Lord has gathered into a people

Do you know your privilege?

Un-earned, a gift to the undeserving, who have nothing to offer, no greatness of their own

A gift of God, of His grace, given freely through the death of His Son

Does it make your heart sing to belong to Jesus' people?

And with that privilege comes our responsibilities, responsibilities given to us for our good

To embrace the humility of sons who can put the interests of others before their own

To welcome every believer as if you were welcoming the Lord Jesus

To be serious about persevering, about getting everything that hinders your following of Jesus out of your life

And to do nothing that would hinder others from following Jesus

More, like your Father to not be content to see any stray, to want to keep every follower of Jesus safe and secure in the company of Jesus' people

Jesus has saved a people

We are His gift to each other where each of us listens to Jesus and does what He says

Given to each other to keep us persevering to eternal life

And as every one of us is prone to forget, to be enticed by fleeting sin, to wander off, we need each other

So, Knowing each believer matters to God

Knowing the kingdom is ours as we trust our Lord Jesus

Let's love each other enough to participate fully in our common life and in our participation seek the good of others by being humble, godly, and persevering in love that welcomes all.