

Prayers

Opening prayer

Praise You, Lord God, for the beauty of life which surprises us day by day. You have created a world which never ceases to give us more and more; never fails to fill us with awe and wonder; and never hides its vibrant and exuberant energy. Lead us to love Your Creation, Almighty God, and treat it with the utmost respect. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas_(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)

Call out to God for your friends in need, whether their perceived needs or for their real needs, whether for their spiritual needs or their materials needs. Bring them before the Lord your God.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who lead worship in your church.** *Pray for the relationship between preachers and musicians and church leaders within your church, and pray that together, they will enable God's people to worship the Lord in Spirit and in truth.*
- *Give thanks to God for the blessings of weather, with its 'bad' days and its 'good' days, all necessary for the seasons.*
- *Pray about the exploration of the seas. Much work is done to explore the seas but we do not know enough about how this will affect the oceans. Pray for godly wisdom*

Meditation

Holy Spirit, speak to me about the things of God:
teach me why perverse human nature
seeks to defy the hand of its Creator,
so I may understand my ever present failings.

Holy Spirit, speak to me about the mysteries of heaven:
show me how far science can go
and where faith begins in the quest for truth,
so I may give You glory for the world You've made.

Holy Spirit, speak to me about the person that I really am:
explain to me how my will has failed
and life has compromised my living,
so I may make decisions worthy of my calling.

Holy Spirit, speak to me about the path on which I stand:
show me how to come alive in faith
and live with fearless courage and love
so I may ever witness to the One who gave me all.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 18: 1-9

¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked,
'Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven'

² He called over a child, who He placed amongst them ³ and said,

'Amen, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever is as humble as this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵ Whoever welcomes a child like this in my name, welcomes me, ⁶ but whoever causes one of the least of these who believe in me to stumble or take offence, it would be better for them to be drowned in the depths of the sea weighted down with a great millstone.

⁷ 'How sad is the world because of scandal and rejection! Such offence is bound to happen, but how desperately sad it is for the one who makes it happen! ⁸ If your hand or your foot is the cause, remove it and get rid of it; for it is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹ And if your eye is the cause, pull it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell's fire.'

Review

Our reading today contains some important teaching. Most of us know this passage because of the way it starts, with Jesus taking a child as an example of greatness in the kingdom of heaven. However, if we want to understand this passage, we must start by looking at its place within the whole of Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew 18 is in fact the fourth block of teaching in Matthew; the first is in chs 5 to 7 (the Sermon on the Mount), the second is in chapter 10 (about mission), and the third is in chapter 13 (Jesus' parables). Just as each previous block of teaching has a theme, the material found in chapter 18 also has a theme, which is discipleship and 'being a Christian'. It is also the chapter in which we find instructions about relationships between God's people (18:15f.), especially about forgiveness (18:21-35).

Once we know this, our passage today comes to life as a description of God's Kingdom. From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus taught repentance because of God's coming Kingdom (4:17), and here, he says more about this, specifically that the Kingdom must be entered 'as a child' (18:4), and it is a place where a child is as welcome as an adult. This is a stunning message, and it is characteristic of Jesus to describe the things of God as utterly contrary to the natural order of this earth.

At the beginning of our reading, the disciples come to Jesus with their request; they want to know who will be the '*greatest in the Kingdom*' (18:1). It is not too difficult to work out what was going on. The disciples had just proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah (16:16f.), they believed Jesus was indeed coming to establish God's rule on earth. Their first thought about this was then about where they might be placed within this new order of things! We should perhaps sympathise, for in every generation, lives and destinies have been shaped by where people stand in relationship to others. History shows that Kings rule and peasants serve, and only rarely is there interplay between the two; the disciples wanted to know where they stood.

Notice that initially, the good news is that Jesus does not say that the disciples cannot be rulers or kings! Rather, He goes on to say something more radical; by placing a child before them and speaking as He does, Jesus confronts their expectations and turns them upside down! He is not surely not saying that in the Kingdom of heaven, children will rule over adults with their own distinctive brand of anarchy? Rather, He is saying that all God's children are equals and 'rule' together!

Jesus also draws this from His dramatic illustration this simple point; anyone who wants to enter the Kingdom will have to become '*childlike*' (18:3,4). Here, Jesus does not suggest that people should abandon spiritual maturity or turn away from learning; rather, He advises all who would come into God's presence that He accepts everyone as equals, of whatever age, and without prejudice or favour. Moreover, Jesus Himself rejoices in the company of the child (18:5,6) and recoils at the thought that anyone could prevent a child from knowing God. It is a stunning message and an additional word of warning to every generation.

In the last part of our passage, we read Jesus' lament for those who cause the scandal of separation between God and His children. It would be better for those who have caused offense to God to have removed any part of their body than to stand before Him condemned (18:8,9). It is an awful picture, and we who read it recoil at Jesus' words; He speaks of removing a hand or a foot, or perhaps an eye. Remember here that the Jewish Law was founded on the principle of '*eye for eye ... hand for hand ... foot for foot*' (see Ex 21:24 etc), but Jesus is consistent, He taught the same in the Sermon on the Mount. By looking carefully at what Jesus said there in chapter 5:29f. we can deduce that Jesus did not want people to mutilate themselves, He wanted to warn people of the turmoil they will face one day at having become a stumbling block to others, once they finally meet their God.

All in all, this is a remarkable and deeply significant passage of Scripture, and one that deserves our closest scrutiny. Each part of it is controversial, and perhaps it is Jesus' intent to be controversial. Through it all, I

believe that when the disciples asked Jesus about who would be the 'greatest', Jesus took a child out of love and compassion to tell us something about the nature and character of the God in whom we place our trust. He loves us as a parent loves a child, and more.

Going Deeper

- Become like little children
- Entry into the church
- Scandal!

Throughout most of the Gospel up to this point, Jesus had been understanding of the disciples and very careful to help them in every way, explaining things to them and giving them time for teaching. However, on one recent occasion Jesus had responded sharply to a disciple; that was when Peter suggested to Him that the path to death and resurrection was perhaps not best. Jesus turned on Peter and said 'get behind me Satan' (16:23).

Here in our passage today, Jesus appears to become equally annoyed. The disciples asked what seemed to them to be a straightforward question (v1), and whilst Jesus' initial response of using a child to illustrate His reply (2-4) was memorable and very powerful, He suddenly spoke out with extraordinary strength, if not anger (6-9). The end result is a saying of Jesus which is very hard to both hear and interpret (8,9). There can be few people who read these words about 'removing' your hand or foot, or 'pulling out' your own eye, and feel comfortable with what Jesus is saying. It may well be that we are not meant to be comfortable!

Become like little children

It all begins with a question from the disciples to Jesus 'who then is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?' We should remember that Jesus had just been talking about the freedom of the children of God within the Kingdom, and how they were all related by sonship to the King (17:26). The disciples' question, therefore, was not entirely ignorant. If all were free and paid no tax (17:24-27), what kind of power structure would there be, if any? It was a natural question. Some people think that Jesus' later apparent anger in this section was generated by the disciple's question, which, taken in isolation, sounds very presumptive and reminiscent of the occasion in Mark's Gospel (9:34) in which the disciples had been discussing amongst themselves who would get the best roles in heaven! We should let Mark's Gospel make its own points however, and allow Matthew to speak through the story he was inspired to tell.

By placing a child in the midst of the disciples, Jesus was completely consistent with what He had just said about the freedom of the children of God (17:26). He persisted in turning the values of the world upside down by reversing the natural human orders of power, prestige and authority, and rejecting them as utterly irrelevant for the Kingdom of Heaven. Nothing could be clearer from His actions of placing a child amongst the disciples; children did not have a 'role' within society then, as now. They may have had intellect, ability and any manner of talent, but none had value greater than another, as 'greatest'.

From this we can deduce that God is interested in our potential and the basic gifts and grace that we bring as individuals; He is not interested in the labels we put on each other or status. It is a profoundly liberating message. Moreover, Jesus does not say that we will not 'rule', and we are left with the anticipation that although some rule over others on this earth, such an economy is not replicated in heaven. This is a fundamental challenge to our perception of leadership in the life of God's church, which is His as yet imperfect Kingdom here on earth.

Entry into the church

Jesus reinforced what He said by using His characteristically emphatic words 'Amen, I tell you ...' (v3) and said two things about His dramatic illustration; firstly, that unless we 'change and become like children' we will not enter the kingdom of Heaven. This is not about entry into the kingdom as a future 'End Time' occurrence, but about a present requirement for entry into the church. Jesus is quite clear then the requirement for entry is repentance and complete humility before the righteousness and authority of God. Indeed, this talk of becoming like a child in Matthew 18 is very close to the teaching of John (3:3) 'no-one can see the kingdom of God without being born again'; Nicodemus certainly thought Jesus was talking about becoming a child again from a mother's womb (John 3:4ff)!

Secondly, Jesus says that those who maintain this humility are the greatest in the Kingdom (v4). In other words, there is no authority in the Kingdom except through the righteousness of humility, as that of a child who has unknown potential and yet must accept total subservience. It requires a radical change and work of the Holy Spirit for a person to lose all normal sense of power and social hierarchy; yet this is exactly what Jesus says is required of the church!

This passage illustrates Jesus acceptance of children, but not their blessing; of which Matthew writes later (19:13ff). It is about adults behaving as those who have genuinely repented and become like children before God and others. I find it astonishing that the church has, over the centuries, developed hierarchical ministry structures and theologies of baptism, whether infant or adult, which appear to totally bypass our Lord's clear instructions here about entry into the church and the nature of authority within it.

You may feel, like me, extremely uneasy at the domination practiced by many so-called leaders within churches today who evidently believe God speaks most clearly through them alone (whoever they are); and I am extremely uneasy at the exclusive and entrenched theologies of baptism practiced by most churches. Much of what is done is far removed from the teaching of Jesus in this passage. Who will challenge it? If you do, you will soon discover the insidious power structures that are railed against you to prevent any 'level playing field' of entry into the church / Kingdom as taught by Jesus.

Scandal!

Some would regard the sentiments expressed above as scandalous. So be it. In our text, Jesus uses the word 'scandal' (in Greek) six times, making a unity out of verses 5-9, in which Jesus talks with great passion about the wretched ways that people prevent others from coming into the kingdom. Each time you see the word 'scandal', 'offence', 'stumble' or 'rejection' in my translation, Jesus is talking specifically about this scandal.

In verse 5, 'child' simply means a disciple who has become like a child in order to enter the kingdom (become a member of the church). Jesus affirms that when the church accepts someone who has repented and become 'childlike' for the kingdom, then it is doing what He requires, but He immediately begins a tirade against those who prevent this. No 'stumbling-blocks' to Jesus' invitation to the Kingdom are mentioned, but whatever they are, they lead to dire consequences. We talk even today of having a 'millstone' around our necks, but here in the Bible, this was not regarded as 'something to live with', but as a sentence of death (see Jer. 51:63,4 and Rev. 18:21).

Jesus is entirely realistic, and recognises that because of evil in the world, there will always be stumbling blocks, but refuses to lay the blame for this at the door of institutions or even the church itself (as we would do today). He lays responsibility at the door of individuals; 'the one who makes it happen' of verse 7. It is in this context that Jesus then speaks a proverb (verses 8,9) about removing that which causes sin in order to avoid being damned.

Jesus has talked in the same way before, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount, He spoke of 'removing the plank from your own eye' in order to 'see the speck in your brother's eye' (Matt 7:4,5). For just as we can easily see the proverbial nature of this saying, so we should when Jesus says 'if your hand or foot is the cause (of scandal) ... remove it ...' (17:8). This is a powerful and urgent appeal by Jesus for the church to ensure that its practices and discipline do not prevent people from entering the Kingdom, or becoming followers of Christ.

Discipleship

Application

There is much within this passage of scripture to occupy our minds, and each generation within the church should ask itself whether it measures up to the words of this passage. My own fear is that the church of God in our world today stands condemned by these words, but my concern is tempered by the knowledge that I have played my own part within that church; something we should perhaps all consider before pronouncing too forthrightly on the matter, whatever our role. Certainly, we should fear Jesus' words about cutting off a hand or a foot if it causes scandal, for our very being in Christ is bound up with our witness to His saving love, and if this is compromised, then we are already doomed.

The picture of a child in the midst should perhaps be a defining image of the Christian church, reflecting the importance of its central place in Matthew's teaching about entry to, and membership and leadership of the church. What happens within the church of God is supposed to be a 'foretaste' of the heavenly Kingdom we will all enjoy in Christ's presence at the 'End Times'. So whilst there are many problems to be overcome because of the sinful world in which we live, the Lord has given us the resources by the Holy Spirit, to show something of the humility, righteousness and service which lie behind Jesus' teaching about the church and discipleship.

Questions for groups

1. Do you recognise the life of the church you know within this study? Do you agree or disagree with some of the sentiments expressed within this study? Why?
2. In what way can you, do you or have you 'become like a child' in order to be part of the Kingdom of God which is the Church?
3. Have you identified or can you identify stumbling blocks within you or your church which prevent people responding to Jesus and accepting Him?

Discipleship challenges

- *This passage of scripture lays down its own challenges quite clearly. It is a matter of responding appropriately to the various issues that are raised. Which of them are relevant to the life of your church community, or which could you do something about?*
- *Think about all the children in your church or your family, and pray for them one by one. Pray for their future and their blessing, and pray that they will come to know the Lord Jesus Christ and their salvation by grace.*

Final Prayer

How can we be sure that You have led us, O Lord, when we are but sinful creatures? Forgive our sin, guide us on our way, give us signs to help us, and fill us with Your Holy Spirit so that we may better walk in Your Light, O Lord God, Almighty Saviour and Lord AMEN.
