

Drastic Measures

Matthew 18:1-9

February 9, 2020

Please read Matthew 18:1-9 before going any further in this manuscript.

As a church, we've been working our way through Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of Heaven for a little over a year now. We've been looking at the 5 main discourses in Matthew's Gospel. By discourse we simply mean the larger sections of Jesus' teaching. We started back in January of 2019, when we looked at Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. We began with the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."¹ We saw this Kingdom focus again in Jesus' 2nd discourse when He sent out the 12 in groups of 2. Jesus told them to "...go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'"² And last Sunday, we just finished looking at the Kingdom Parables in Matthew 13. These parables taught us that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, it's like yeast, it's like hidden treasure or a valuable pearl. Today we're beginning a new sermon series on the fourth of Matthew's five discourses. For the next few Sundays, we're going to learn about "Kingdom Greatness." Matthew 18:1 starts off with an important question about the Kingdom: "...Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"³ This seems like a fair enough question. Every kingdom has a king. And that king is the one who determines how His kingdom will be structured. The King has the final say on who is the greatest in His Kingdom. In Matthew 18, King Jesus defines His standards for what makes someone truly great in His Kingdom. Today, we'll just look at the first 9 verses.

In answer to His disciples' question about Kingdom Greatness, Jesus begins with an object lesson. The object is not actually an object though, it's a human being. Specifically, it's a human child, about 5 years old.⁴ Do we have anyone here who is about 5 years old? Matthew 18:2-3 tells us that, "He (Jesus) called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." So, Jesus begins to answer their question, by taking a step back from "who's the GREATEST." Before Kingdom GREATNESS, Jesus begins by talking about Kingdom ENTRANCE. In other words, Jesus moves us from this cute little illustration of an endearing child, to a Kingdom ultimatum: "unless you change and become like little children, you will NEVER [even] enter the kingdom of heaven."

So, let's not get ahead of ourselves with all of this "who's the GREATEST" talk. Entering the Kingdom of Heaven has nothing to do with how great we are. There's nothing we can do to earn a place in it. It's not about where we were born, or our lineage or our status or our goodness, or anything else that we might think would entitle us, to a place in the Kingdom. When any one of us stands before God and asks to enter His Kingdom, we come before Him empty-handed. We have nothing to offer and no way of purchasing or earning our way in. Becoming "like little children" means admitting our desperate dependence on our Heavenly Father. It's learning to trust Him fully and accepting His amazing gift.⁵ To be clear, Jesus is not suggesting that we should be child-ISH, but rather that we should be child-LIKE. Being child-LIKE means that we recognize our vulnerability, that we can't survive on our own, that we must depend on our Heavenly Father.⁶

Therefore, the very 1st thing that we need to know is that **Kingdom Greatness calls us to...**
1 ...Admit our childlike dependence on God. But, if we are not willing to humble ourselves and admit our desperate need, then we can't even get through the front gate!

¹ Matthew 5:3.

² Matthew 10:7.

³ See also Mark 10:35-45 and Luke 9:46-48, 22:24-27.

⁴ Παιδίον = "a very young child 'up to seven years' ...normally below the age of puberty" (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the NT and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 749). Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.)

⁵ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1622 footnote on Matthew 18:3.

⁶ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1967 footnote on Matthew 18:3-4.

Now that Jesus has clarified how someone enters the Kingdom of Heaven, He goes on to address their initial question: Who is the GREATEST in the Kingdom of Heaven? The next step toward Kingdom Greatness is the call to...

2 ...Take a lifelong, lowly position. Here's what Jesus says in Matthew 18:4, "Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Not too many of us go out looking for a low position. Much like Jesus' early disciples, most of us would like a high position. Something prominent and important. Something that pays well and has great benefits. At this point, some of Jesus' followers might have even been wondering, if He heard the question correctly. Their question was about 'who is the GREATEST?' But Jesus keeps talking about things like childlike dependence and lowliness. That doesn't sound very "GREAT." Most kingdoms have a hierarchy, where you can work your way up through the ranks. But the Kingdom of Heaven, is NOT this way. This is one of the things that makes it so unique. It's why it's sometimes called the "Upside-down Kingdom." The Children of God don't "work their way up." This kingdom is NOT a race to the top. In fact, if anything, it's a race to the bottom! Each and every single citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven, enters with humility and then takes a lifelong, lowly position. As much as this may not sound very attractive to some people, frankly, this is precisely what makes the Kingdom of Heaven SO attractive. It is SO MUCH bigger than our meager human accomplishments. The Kingdom of Heaven has a beauty and attractiveness to it, because it has a Servant sitting on its throne: King Jesus!

Just when we think that Jesus has fully answered their question about Kingdom Greatness, we realize that He is just getting warmed up. Jesus still has more to say on the subject. In v. 6, He goes on to talk about "these little ones," which is really just His way of referring to anyone who believes in Him. These "little ones" are His followers; and Jesus' love for these "little ones" is fierce! God loves His children fiercely! In verses 6-9, Jesus brings up some rather disturbing imagery. Right after using this tender image of a small, helpless child, Jesus then switches to some very intense and startling imagery. He goes on to illustrate the necessary and severe response that sin requires. Specifically, a severe response, to ANYONE or ANYTHING, that causes one of God's children to stumble. The 3rd thing that Jesus teaches us, is that Kingdom Greatness calls us to...

3 ...Take sin seriously. Now, verses 6-9 never actually mention the word "sin." In fact, all 4 of these verses use the word "stumble."⁷ But, the Greek word that is being translated as "stumble," means causing someone to be brought down, that is, causing them to sin.⁸ Jesus makes it clear, that causing someone else to sin is a big deal. In fact, He describes some very drastic measures against things that cause others to sin. Jesus describes:

- Someone having a large millstone hung around their neck and being drowned in the depths of the sea, if they cause a believer to sin.⁹
- Someone cutting off their own hand or foot and throwing it away, if it causes them to sin.
- Someone gouging out their own eye and throwing it away, if it causes them to sin.¹⁰

These are all very DRASTIC measures. These are radical, extreme, even severe responses! Matthew 18:7 declares, "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!" This word, "Woe" communicates both a sense of warning and a sense of pity.¹¹ Warning not to be the cause of someone else's sin. Pity if you have already caused their sin, and are awaiting judgment for it.¹²

⁷ σκανδαλίζω = "to cause to be brought to a downfall, cause to sin (the sin may consist in a breach of the moral law, in unbelief, or in the acceptance of false teachings)" (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 926). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

⁸ Today we might say something like "tripping them up." One of my best friends in high school consistently tried to get me to do stuff that Christ-followers shouldn't do. Things like stealing and having sex outside of marriage. As much as I tried to be a good influence on him, he was a bad influence on me. 1 Corinthians 15:33 comes to mind.

⁹ Compare this with the warning at the end of Galatians 6:1. "Literally 'millstone of a donkey,' i.e., a millstone turned by a donkey – far larger and heavier than the small millstones (24:41) used by women each morning." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1622 footnote on Matthew 18:6.

¹⁰ Jesus used this same illustration back in Matthew 5:29-30 to illustrate the urgency of dealing with lust and adultery.

¹¹ οὐαί = an "interjection denoting pain or displeasure, woe, alas." (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 734). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

¹² However, consider the Apostle Paul's early life and then later outcome. See 1 Corinthians 15:9 and Philippians 1:21-23.

Jesus is clearly using exaggerated language here, to place strong emphasis on this particular teaching. If we really think about it, Jesus doesn't want us to literally cut off our hand or foot, or gouge out an eye. These actions wouldn't ultimately prevent any of us from sinning. But Jesus is exaggerating here, in order to make a very important point; in order to communicate a very literal warning: beware of what your hands touch or what they cause you to take, beware of where your feet take you and cause you to go, and beware of what your eyes look at and cause you to see.¹³ At this point in the sermon, I could give lots of examples of the kinds of things that cause each one of us to sin. Things that our hands touch, places that our feet go, and things that our eyes see. But the best example that I could give, is the thing that God may already be convicting you about, right now, in your own heart. So, I'll simply ask a few questions:¹⁴

Is there a person, in your life right now, who is causing you to spiritually stumble? Is there a place that you're going, that you shouldn't be going? Is there something that needs to be removed or cut out from your life? Are you looking at things that you shouldn't be looking at? Taking sin seriously, means that we will take drastic measures to cut off ANYONE or ANYTHING that is causing sin in our lives. We'll gouge it out, even though it might be very hard to do. It might be very painful, but if it's necessary for our own personal holiness, then we need to do it.

Sometimes, making these kinds of changes, seems impossible on our own. So it's important to remember verses like Galatians 6:2, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Certain sins can be extremely difficult to fight against on our own. Fighting back requires extreme measures: Extreme measures like bringing our sin into the light and asking for help.¹⁵ Extreme measures, like inviting a Bro/Sis in Christ to come alongside of us and help us war against it.¹⁶ If you are feeling trapped or overwhelmed by some sin in your life, why not talk to God about it and ask Him to show you the way out.¹⁷

It's an incredible thing when God's people learn to be honest about their sin. When sinners find genuine hope and healing. When people are rescued from the darkness. When the local church becomes a hospital for those who are spiritually sick. A place where, together, we overcome the sin and temptation that wars against us all. Sin has drastic consequences and we need to take drastic measures against it.

By the way, let's be clear, the focus here is on our OWN sin, NOT on someone else's sin. Verses 6-9 are not calling any of us, to go out and take drastic measures against someone else's sin.¹⁸ Verses 8-9 in particular, illustrate cutting off your OWN hand or foot. Gouging out your OWN eye, not someone else's.¹⁹ Even as Jesus uses these exaggerated examples, He uses them to illustrate dealing with the sin in our OWN lives, not someone else's.

At this point, perhaps a few of us might be thinking to ourselves: "Come on! Really? All this talk about drowning people in the sea and cutting off body parts? Is a little stumbling really that big of a deal? So what? We're human; to err is human! So what? We sin sometimes. What's all the fuss about!?" All the "fuss" is about one very important thing. It's the greatest threat to the human species: sin. Sin has always been our greatest threat, because it separates us from God.²⁰ The severity of these drastic measures is not just a ploy to get our attention. The severity of these drastic MEASURES is in line with the drastic CONSEQUENCES of our sin.

The most drastic of which, is eternal SEPARATION from our Heavenly Father. SEPARATION from our holy and loving Creator. Verses 8-9 refer to the consequence of sin this way: Being "thrown

¹³ Consider Job 31:1.

¹⁴ John 14:15 reminds us that as children of God, the way that we love God is by obeying Him.

¹⁵ Consider 1 John 1:5-7.

¹⁶ Consider James 5:16.

¹⁷ I Corinthians 10:13 reminds us that, "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."

¹⁸ It's interesting to note how the Bible urges us to take drastic measures against our own sin but to be gentle in dealing with the sins of others. See 1 Corinthians 4:21; Galatians 6:1; 2 Timothy 2:25; and Hebrews 5:2.

¹⁹ Again, while all of these drastic measures are hyperbolic, Matthew 18:6 doesn't clarify who exactly would hang the millstone around someone's neck.

²⁰ I talked more about this in a sermon, "Our Greatest Threat" back on January 7, 2018. It's available by contacting our church office.

into the eternal fire.” Being “thrown into the fire of hell.”²¹ Jesus not only believed in the reality of hell, He talked about that reality.²² He warns us about that reality. He wants us to know that it is a very real place AND that it is a very real consequence of human sin. In other words, even though Jesus uses exaggeration when he calls us to take extreme measures against sin, He is not exaggerating about hell. Jesus’ reference to hell is not hyperbolic; it is literal. All of us have probably heard a comedian tell jokes about hell. Or maybe you’ve heard someone say that they look forward to going to hell, because that’s where all their friends will be. But hell is not something to be trifled with. The very real punishment of hell is why sin isn’t something to be taken lightly.

One of the main reasons that people reject the notion of hell, is that we lack a proper understanding of human depravity. Of how sinful sin really is. Even as nice and kind as many of us might seem on the outside, on the inside we all have a sin nature. And that sin nature is completely wicked. When we hear about hell, we might think to ourselves, surely God CAN’T be serious. But He is serious. This is the point that Jesus is driving home.²³ Hell is the drastic consequence of our sin. If we have a problem with that, then we’ll need to take it up with God. But none of our arguments will hold up, in the court of a holy God.²⁴ Standing in the light of His own holiness, God fully comprehends the terrible wickedness of our sin and rebellion.²⁵ As our Creator, God has every right to judge His creation. That’s what makes the gracious gift of salvation SO generous: Jesus takes OUR punishment on the cross... and then, He shares His OWN holiness with US.²⁶ That’s what makes the blood of Jesus SO generous. What can wash away our sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. God has taken drastic measures to rescue us from the drastic consequences of our sin!

There will be a final judgment on sin. We will either choose to stand in the holiness of Jesus, or we will be sentenced to the fires of hell. This is the very real choice that every human being must make. With this in mind, I invite you to bow in silent prayer. If there is sin in your life that needs to be confessed, do that now. If you need help with a sin that you’ve been struggling with, ask God for help now.

“Heavenly Father, I confess my sins to You today. And I ask for your help in overcoming my sin, and living a holy life. God, thank you for loving me. Thank you for your generous grace toward me. Thank You for sending Jesus. And thank you for reminding me again today, how desperately dependent I am on You. I know that admitting my sin and trusting in Jesus is the only way that I can enter into Your Kingdom. Lord, I ask that You would help me to continue taking sin seriously. Make me holy Lord, as You are holy. I pray these things, in Jesus’ Name. Amen.”

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on February 9, 2020 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

²¹ Hell is probably not our favorite thing to talk about, but Jesus actually talked about it A LOT. In fact, Jesus spoke about hell throughout His earthly ministry. And He speaks about it as “a real place of eternal conscious punishment. And while some may doubt the reality of hell, Jesus didn’t.” Pastor Eric Nygren, from his sermon “Pulling Weeds” on January 26, 2020. Available at www.efcbemidji.org/sermon/pulling-weeds

²² As Jesus’ teaches about His Kingdom, He urges us over and over again, to affirm the dreadful truth of hell. Read more on pp. 248-252 of *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011.

²³ See 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; Romans 2:8; and Philipians 3:18-19.

²⁴ And as a perfectly holy being, God has every right to demand holiness from us. Each one of us needs to decide for ourselves whether we are going to take God seriously. And, whether we are going to take our own sin seriously.

²⁵ And it’s a terrifying thing for sinners to fall into the hands of a God whose righteous anger burns against sin. Now, I suppose a preacher could pound their fist on the pulpit when making this point. But for some people today, that becomes a distraction or an amusement due to the excessive drama. When it comes to hell, what we need is sober reflection. “Eternal conscious punishment is a sobering subject, but faithfulness to our Lord Jesus obliges us to speak of it, for he certainly did.” *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, p. 252.

²⁶ See 1 Peter 1:14-16; Leviticus 11:44-45, 19:2, and 20:7.