

Don't Cause the Humble to Stumble

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Date: 30 March 2025

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder what you think. What game could we invent for a child and a wolf to play safely? What would the rules have to be for no one to get hurt?

Or how about this one? How might we live safely in a high radiation zone? Like saying in Chernobyl or Fukushima. How could we set up a home there and thrive and be healthy?

Or how about this one? How can sinners live safely together in a church?

What does it take for sinful people to come together and be one family in a church and it not be spiritually fatal? Three situations. The first two we know are non-starters, right? A child and a wolf can't play safely together. We can't set up a home in a nuclear blast zone and be safe.

But what about the third? What about the third? Can sinners live safely together in the church?

Tonight we're beginning the fourth of Jesus' big teaching blocks in Matthew's gospel. It's the whole of chapter 18. This one is more of a seminar than a sermon. And in this seminar, Jesus says, bringing sinners together in the church is no less dangerous than playing with wolves or living with radiation poisoning. In fact, he says, potentially, it's more dangerous than those things.

[1 : 51] Now, Jesus is the most loving, most caring person ever to have lived. If you've been with us through the gospel series so far, you'll have seen that. Selfless love, infinite compassion, mercy, mercy on the undeserving. But in this teaching seminar in Matthew 18, I count six separate references or allusions to hell. And four of them come in our passage this evening. And the surprising thing is that he's not talking here about life in the world, life away from God. The subject of this seminar is life in the church. Relationships between Christians and people who say they're Christians. Eternities are at stake, says Jesus. Sinners brought together and turned into a family. What could go wrong?

And yet, let me be really clear, Jesus does not think that this idea is a non-starter. In fact, it's his idea. He started it. That's what the section that we've just finished in Matthew's gospel has shown us. Jesus, the promised king from God, has come to save us from the mother of all problems. And it's not a problem out there that's coming to get us. It's a problem in here. It's the problem of our hearts. For said Jesus in chapter 15, out of the hearts come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.

And the heart of our heart problem, if you like, is stubborn unbelief. The drumbeat, remember, of those chapters leading up to this point has been, oh, you of little faith. You of little faith.

Little faith. Big self-belief. Big unbelief in Jesus. And human solutions don't scratch the surface.

Friends, if we've concluded anything from Matthew's gospel so far, let it be this, that we need Jesus to save us from our sins.

Hence why when Peter says to Jesus, you are the Christ, the son of the living God, there is the turning point. There is the seed of change. Jesus says, blessed are you. Peter, you've got it. And he says, remember, on this rock, the rock of Peter's words, his confession, I will build my church. My church. And the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Peter says, Jesus is king. And Jesus replies, yes, and my kingdom will be my church. He is saving sinners, not only for eternal life in the world to come. He is saving us into his church, his kingdom right now.

[4 : 50] And so, friends, let's be in no doubt that the church is Christ's church. And we're seeing in the morning, aren't we, in the letters to the Ephesians, that the church is wonderful, precious, holy.

But that does not mean that life in the church is easy, simple, straightforward, without risk, harm, or danger. And in this seminar for his disciples in chapter 18, Jesus is speaking about that much tougher reality. What needs to be in place for sinners to safely live together in a church?

Jesus is going to say to us that three things are needed, three things that we'll draw out each over the next three Sunday evenings, three things we need to live together safely in Christ's church.

Humility, repentance, and forgiveness. Humility, repentance, forgiveness. And tonight, we're going to learn the first of those humility. Here, Jesus teaches tonight, do not cause the humble to stumble. And to hear that rightly, we need to understand firstly that Jesus's church is a humble church. It's a kingdom, he says, of little ones. Now, his teaching is prompted by a question, look, verse 1c. At that time, the disciples came to Jesus saying, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Now, can you see how just utterly out of sync that is from what Jesus has been teaching them so far? Just cast your eyes back to the verses just before this question comes. Ben helpfully showed us what's going on there last time with the temple tax and the fish. Now, Jesus' question in verse 25 is to do with kings and kingdoms, isn't it? From whom do the kings of the earth take toll or tax from their sons or from others? So, he's saying, watch Jesus' relationship to the king of the temple, to God himself. And Peter's already said it, hasn't he? You are the son of the living God. He is God's son. And so, says Jesus, the sons are free. There is a greatness then, a dignity, a glory to being part of God's church, part of his family, a child of his. But the next word out of Jesus' mouth is, however. However, not to give offense to them. Remember, go and catch a fish and with a coin in its mouth, give it to them and that will pay for us both. I am free. You are free. But that status of sonship is to be used to serve.

That's the way of the cross, isn't it? That Jesus has been teaching his followers twice now. He said, I, the king, must suffer, die, rise again. The first time Peter told him off for saying that, no way, Jesus. The second time was simply told that they were distressed by hearing it.

But that is the way, isn't it? Not only for Jesus, but he says that anyone who wants to come after him must deny themselves, take up the cross and follow him.

[8 : 22] So I wonder if the disciples have understood that by now. 18 verse 1, at that time, the disciples came to Jesus saying, Jesus, we were wondering, who's the greatest in your kingdom? Right? Who's the best one of us? Who's top in your church? Right?

So what's the most radical way that Jesus could show these guys that they've got it all upside down and back to front? Well, what does he do? He shines a spotlight on the person in the room who probably no one had noticed as they came in.

Or if they had, maybe they thought was a nuisance, an inconvenience, just getting in the way under our feet. He chooses a child. Now, the point is sort of lost on us, I think, because we know that children are so precious.

Right? We give them special protection, special care. We love playing with them. We just love having them around, don't we? Boys and girls, tonight, your moms and dads love you.

We love you here at church. We love you. You're special. But back then, sadly, children were not seen as special. They were seen as freeloaders, just mouths to feed.

[9 : 43] Their worth was measured by their economic output. And while there isn't much that a child can produce that can be sold or eaten, so in that room, the child held the lowest status.

Right? Even a slave, a servant, can contribute to the household, but not the child. And so that is the context that we need to have in mind for Jesus' reply to have its proper impact.

In fact, verse 2, calling to him a child. He put him in the midst of them and said, Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Do you see how upside down Jesus' kingdom really is?

Lots of you will have been to a theme park, I imagine, been on rides, roller coasters and things.

And, you know, as you go to queue up, normally there's a sign, isn't there, that you stand next to and it says, You must be this high to ride.

[10 : 55] And maybe some of you, if you're maybe a younger sibling, have had to wait while the big kids and the grown-ups have gone and queued and gone on the ride and you haven't got to go on.

But Jesus is doing something like that, isn't he? But it's the other way around. The disciples are shoving, jostling, aren't they? Trying to get in the queue. Jesus, who's going to be first in your kingdom?

Who's the king of the castle? And Jesus puts a child-size measuring tape in the middle of them and says, You have to be this little to enter.

Notice he doesn't just say, You'll only be the greatest if you are this little, but unless you are this little, you will never get in. Now, to be clear, he's not saying that children have a special path into his kingdom.

It's important, actually, for the passage as we go on, that we see that Jesus is speaking about little ones, children, as people of any age who have turned and made themselves become spiritually little, humbled themselves.

[12:06] So how can we do that, become like this child? Well, verse 4, Jesus tells us, Whoever humbles himself, whoever comes low, makes themselves small, whoever takes on the status of this child, in the world's eyes, ignored, thought little of, unimportant, counted as nothing.

I've heard it said, this may be helpful for us, that if Jesus were to put someone in front of us today to make this same point, who would he choose? Well, I've heard it said, he might well go to a care home and bring an elderly person suffering with dementia, sadly, sadly, a person who is often neglected, forgotten, ignored, counted as having no value to our society, put that person in front of us, take on this status, says Jesus, become like this person, turn, humble yourself, become like this. Friends, we do not get into Jesus' kingdom unless we make ourselves small before him and before others. His kingdom is a kingdom of little ones, the way up is the way down.

You just think about it. What is the answer to the disciples' question? Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Well, it's Jesus, isn't it? But what did he do?

He came down from heaven. He hung upon a cross. He made himself small. The very greatest is the very least.

[13:58] So friends, big people, self-important people, race to the top people, crowned without the cross people, do not get into his kingdom. But they can cause great harm to those who do get in.

See, secondly, Jesus warns his disciples, do not cause these little ones to stumble. Now, why does he say that? I wonder if you can see the logic here. What happens when somebody who is trying to climb to greatness greatness gets in among people who are trying to climb down from greatness to nothing?

Well, we see it all the time in the news, don't we? We know what happens. When we put people who think they deserve better, who think they are something, in and among little children, or the frail and the elderly, the vulnerable, terrible harm, neglect, abuse, even death.

It is not safe, is it, to let little children spend time with people who think they're great. We borrowed a DVD from the library. I know this sounds so retro, doesn't it?

Borrow a DVD from the library. But, oh, we did. And it had some stories of Roald Dahl. Maybe some of you have heard them. One that I actually hadn't heard before.

[15:20] The Enormous Crocodile. I wonder if anyone knows The Enormous Crocodile. It's about an enormous crocodile. He decides one day that the fish in the river are not enough.

So he crawls out of the river to go to try to find a child to eat. And he disguises himself as a bench and a seesaw and a tree to try to catch a child.

But the jungle animals always arrive at the right moment to thwart him. That is until the third or the fourth time that this goes round. At which point, the elephant decides enough is enough, picks up the crocodile by the tail with his trunk, swings him around his head faster and faster and faster and faster and faster.

The crocodile launches into space, zooms past the planet, hits the sun and explodes. And that's the end of the story.

And when I first saw that, I thought, that is a really, really weird ending. But then I thought, how would it sound if I was listening to this as a child?

[16:41] Somebody is praying upon me, coming to eat me. How do I want that story to end?

If an enormous crocodile is praying on you, this is the way you want it to finish, isn't it? It surprises us, but it's actually the right ending. And Jesus agrees.

Hear this, verse 5 and 6. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. What a thought. Welcome humble disciples as humble disciples and we welcome the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

That is a healthy church, isn't it? But verse 6, whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Who saw that coming? It seems over the top, doesn't it? But notice, Jesus doesn't say this will happen, but that it's, this is preferable to what will happen.

[17:51] What could be worse than this? We're going to find out. But to who? This is a really important question. It actually takes a little bit of work, so just stick with me.

We've spotted already the little ones Jesus is talking about or anyone who's turned to him, however young or old, humbled themselves by becoming low, little like a child.

So little ones here are genuine Christians in the church. And the word Jesus uses for sin isn't the same as in verse 15 next week, which is actually the normal word for sin.

The word he uses here and throughout our passage tonight is stumble, stumble, which is a slightly different thing, isn't it, from sin in general.

Stumbling isn't either the cross word spoken in haste or the glance at somebody else's body in lust. Those things are sin and we should repent of those things.

[18:55] Stumbling is what happens when we don't habitually repent of those things and we let ourselves go on and we keep sinning.

We lose balance in our faith and we stumble. Stumbling is what you do just before you fall, right? So this warning is for people who put stumbling blocks in front of genuine Christians in order to knock them off balance so that they fall away from Christ.

That's really important for us to see, isn't it? Jesus' words are not meant to make us sit here and worry. Have I ever unintentionally done or said anything ever that has ever maybe led to somebody doing something sinful?

Possibly. But if it troubles our conscience we're probably in a good place, aren't we? Now who's in view I think of the spiritual equivalent of the nursery teacher who intentionally sticks her leg out as the toddler's running past so that they fall over and graze their face?

It's not the nursery teacher who sort of bumps the toddler on her way past and stops to make sure that they're okay. If you are deliberately tripping children over in a nursery you deserve to be sacked and investigated.

[20:15] That is the right ending, isn't it, to that story? Jesus says if you are deliberately causing humble Christians to stumble and fall in their faith, what is the right way for that to end?

Being worse, worse than being drowned in the depth of the ocean because his kingdom is a kingdom of little ones and any great ones who come among them to mislead Christ's little ones with a gospel of greatness, of bigness, a message of self-importance, self-belief and reaching the top instead of humble belief and reliance upon Christ and his rescue.

They are preying upon his children and this is the right ending for them. Now I would love it if you could not picture anyone who fits that description but they are out there, perhaps some of you have met them.

Okay, big self, greatness, gospel, crown without cross people but the point for us tonight I think is twofold that we all have it in us to stumble and to cause stumbling.

Here Jesus unpacked that. Jesus says verse 7, woe to the world for literally stumbling blocks for it is necessary for stumbling blocks to come.

[21:50] What's he saying? Christians do stumble. The world is full of trip hazards, isn't it? He even says and this is confusing that it is necessary that they come our way.

We heard earlier, didn't we, so clearly God does not tempt anyone. He does not tempt us and yet he is sovereign, isn't he, over a sinful world in which our faith is tested.

So, it is probably more normal than we think, isn't it, for Christians to trip over things. It's probably more normal, more common than we think for Christians to stumble, for things to unbalance our faith.

If that is you tonight and you've hit a stumbling block in your faith, you feel ready to fall, listen to how much Jesus cares about that. especially if somebody has put it there.

He is livid about that. He curses a world of stumbling blocks and he curses those who put them there. If that is you, you feel yourself going, you're unbalanced, you're about to fall, please talk to somebody about it.

[23:03] Do not fall away without ever having told anybody that you stumbled. don't be too proud to do that. Humble yourself, says Jesus.

Make yourself little, vulnerable, open. And friends, you will find in the community of humble Christians a welcome, a reception, the welcome of Christ himself.

We can all stumble and none of us are above that or beyond that, are we? But we can also all cause stumbling, not least, says Jesus, in ourselves.

Now, isn't this quintessential Jesus that he has just told us about the wickedness of preying on his children, but now he holds up the mirror and says, is there a predator in ye?

Is there a stumbling block merchant in your hands? Is there an enormous crocodile in your eyes? It's exactly the same phrase as he's used before. If your hand or foot causes you to stumble, if your eyes cause you to stumble, here's how twisted we are, brothers and sisters, that we can trip ourselves up in the faith.

[24 : 23] And like the person who causes Christ's little ones to stumble, Jesus' warning to us about ourselves is the same. If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, to stumble, cut it off and throw it away, it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.

And if your eye causes you to sin, to stumble, tear it out and throw it away, better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

this is what drowning in the depths of the ocean is better than, isn't it? Better than this, the hell of eternal fire.

But here's the thing, we can put ourselves there by tripping ourselves up. Our own eyes and hands and feet can lead us off the straight and narrow and hard path that leads to life and onto the broad and easy way that leads to destruction.

And you know the classic thing for a preacher to say at this point is, Jesus didn't really mean for you to cut off your hands. Well, didn't he? If it would help, if it would save you from this, if it would spare you this ending, wouldn't you do it?

[25 : 49] Now, I'm not saying you should, not least because it wouldn't help, right? Cutting off our body parts doesn't actually do surgery on our heart, our inner person, we would still find a way, wouldn't we, to lead ourselves astray even if we went about with one hand or one eye or one foot.

But it is better, isn't it? It would be better to enter the new creation with one eye or one hand than to stumble and fall into eternal fire.

If it was that simple, brothers and sisters, wouldn't you do it? Do it? Friends, let's not for one second think that Jesus is not that serious about the ways that we mislead ourselves astray by our own behavior and habits and desires and we trip over and we carry on as if nothing's happened.

Jesus does not let us do that. That is a fatal path, says Jesus. You are heading to hell. Keep going and that is where it ends. Jesus, the merciful, the merciful and compassionate Lord Jesus does not spare our feelings on this point, does he?

So, friends, let us not spare our sin. Not only can it trip us up in the faith, but if we let it, it will end up tripping others up too.

[27 : 17] So, verse 10, see this, see that you do not despise one of these little ones as Jesus. He brings it all the way back around, doesn't he? And we think it couldn't ever be us.

But, brothers and sisters, we can all get to that point if we are going for greatness, if our hearts say, don't worry about temptation, forget about sin, about confession, turning to Jesus, humble yourself, it's not necessary.

Don't worry about that. I know what you heard at church on Sunday, but you just shelve that away, okay, and you live your life today. There is a small step, isn't there, from telling ourselves that to telling someone else that.

Don't worry about confession, it's not that bad, don't worry, just do it, you only live once. Christian community, humility, confession, repentance, trust, faith, faith, just forget all that humility stuff, live your best life.

Friends, if our hearts are saying, if our bodies are saying it's okay, then we aren't days or weeks away from becoming that very enormous crocodile that we feared that we would meet on the road.

[28 : 40] And isn't it the essence of that greatness mentality to tell ourselves we couldn't do that, I'm better than that, that could never be me. Oh, but Jesus says it could be.

And it will be if we let it. As soon as we stop being little children, humbling ourselves, we are days or weeks away from that.

We must continually bring ourselves low, mustn't we turn from our sin, that instinct to think that we're above it better than we are, and treat each other with humility, as Christ commands us to do. For finally, these little ones, says Jesus, are loved by a heavenly father. Imagine a shepherd, says Jesus. How much does he care for the wandering sheep?

Well, he had a hundred, and one of them went astray, or literally has been led astray. What does the shepherd do? Does he not leave the 99 on the mountain, and go in search of that one that went astray?

[29 : 48] Jesus says the father in heaven cares so much for straying Christians, that he goes after them, looking and searching for them. And what does he do when he finds them?

Does he tell them off, rebuke them, punish them in some way? No. If he finds it truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the 99 that never went astray.

So it is the will of my father in heaven that none of these little ones should perish. See the father's passion for the individual Christian who wanders from the church and strays from Christ.

His love for each one, each one, you sitting here, that if you should stray, he should come after you. And he delights, doesn't he, in finding or refinding the ones and twos? Think of the greatness of Jesus' kingdom, and he delights to find one, one lost sheep, even more than he delights in those who never were led astray, who never wandered.

[30 : 54] You just think getting a child back who you thought was lost, you would not love your other children any less, would you? But you would weep for joy that your one child had come back, that you had got them again.

That is the father's love for the little ones who have gone astray. So what do you think, says Jesus? Despising one of these little ones, tripping up God's children, good idea or bad idea?

The father is not indifferent, and he is not ignorant. He is passionate, consumed with the search for his little ones who have been misled. Just side note, what do angels have to do with that?

Verse 10, I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my father who is in heaven. It's not enough to build a doctrine on. It's not saying, as some have said, that each one of us has a kind of dedicated guardian angel that follows us through life keeping us from harm.

Notice, Jesus says that these angels are in heaven gazing at God, not chasing us around. However it is possible that what Jesus means by that is that these angels are poised, ready and waiting to be sent out from the father's presence after the one who has gone away.

[32 : 17] Hebrews calls the angels ministering spirit sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation. So it could be that Jesus is saying something like this, that God the father is willing to empty heaven of its angels to return one wandering Christian to his church and to Christ.

It could be saying something else but at minimum the fact of these angels that their angels are in the presence of the father before his face is good reason not to lead others astray.

That's what he's saying. So as we come into land, if you are wandering tonight, if you are straying and you know that you are not where you're supposed to be, know that your father loves you and has come searching for you.

The very fact that you're here listening to this tells you that it is not his will that you perish. If you are scared to be found, know that he delights to find you, it brings him joy.

And especially if you're wandering has been caused by others, know that God the father cares deeply about that. The Lord Jesus cares deeply.

[33 : 41] So friends, don't be lost forever, be found by him, be brought back into the fold, into Christ, into his church. Humble yourself afresh, and you will find a welcome, a reception among the humble as we welcome the Lord Jesus Christ among us.

Let's pray for that together. Let's pray. God, our father, how we worship and delight in you, you delight in us.

Father, we are in awe that you would love us so much, that you would rejoice in finding us when we have strayed. And father, we pray then that you would keep us from straying.

Father, we pray that you would, by the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us, mortify our sin. Lord, all that is in us that causes us to trip, to become unbalanced in our faith, that leads us from you.

Lord, take it away, cut it off from us, we pray, and strengthen us, give us the power inwardly to do that to ourselves because we love you and we want to follow you and worship you.

[35 : 03] And father, we pray that you would keep us from being led astray, keep us from leading one another astray. The Lord Jesus has warned us how close we can come. Lord, keep us, we pray, from that dreadful warning of eternal damnation.

Lord, lead us in paths of righteousness, we pray. Keep leading us forward on the narrow and hard path that leads to life. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you have walked it before us, you have borne the cross for us, and you have been raised for us.

So keep us your flock, your people, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. As we do we do we to do we to have to we have to!