

1At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, 3and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. 4“Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5“And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; 6but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

7“Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!

8“If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. 9“If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell.

10“See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven.

In Matthew's gospel, there are 5 great extended teaching sections where Jesus teaches extensively. The Sermon on the Mount, Ch. 5 - 7, The cost and realities of discipleship in Ch. 10, the Parables in Ch. 13, and now we're going to look at relationships in Matthew 18.

That's the fourth, and the fifth is future things in Matthew 24 and 25. Of course He teaches continuously, but these sections are set aside as lengthy sections of teaching.

In the Bible, the term 'one another' is mentioned 40 times. Some are positive. Some are negative. All are relational. Love one another. Be ye kind, one to another. Bear one another's burdens. Encourage one another.

Matthew 18 is about the one anothers. Human relationships. Broken by

sin, and the fall. Every single relationship is affected by sin. We are born into the world broke, and most of us have to struggle some time, some ways, with relationships. It's the human condition.

Me first, then you, if there's any left. And that's what we've got in Matthew 18 as Jesus launches into teaching us what things will look like in the Kingdom. Different. Very different from what is normative in this broken world.

If you're like me and you're enjoying the political show, it's a little window into the soul of a fallen world. Dog eat dog. Scratch your way to the top of the heap and all's fair in love and war. Do whatever it is you've got to do to claw your way to the top of the heap. Leave the others for dead as you scramble to the top. It's pretty raw.

And Matthew begins this section the way he's often started a section of his story, *At that time . . .* I found 5 or six other places with that same construction, and it ties us to something previous.

In this case, I believe it takes us to the general discussion that began in Matthew 16 about His death and resurrection.

Mark says in Mark 9:30 *From there they went out and began to go through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know about it. 31For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, “**The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later.**” 32But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.*

33They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, “What were you discussing on the way?” 34But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest.

There's a direct connection between "who's going to be greatest" and Jesus death.

Luke says in Luke 9 *But while everyone was marveling at all that He was doing, He said to His disciples, 44“Let these words sink into your*

ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.” 45But they did not understand this statement, and it was concealed from them so that they would not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this statement. 46An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest.

The disciples have a limited concept of Jesus death and resurrection. They can sort of understand Jesus, who can speak and the sea is calmed, can also speak and a child who was dead, comes back to life. Peter and James and John were the chosen ones who got to see that.

And Peter and James and John got to see the transfiguration. So, by default, if Jesus is going back to heaven, who's going to be the boss? And my guess, given the natural leadership tendency of the sons of boanerges, the sons of thunder, James and John, and Peter the Rock, it would naturally fall to one of those two parties.

Sort of like the James and John Party, the thunder party, and the Peter party, the Rock party, and they're heading to super tuesday. And an argument ensues.

What would happen? Well the other 8 men, there should be 9, but Judas is a dark cloud, and independent party voter, so the other 8 would split into groups and follow their party captain. Not good.

Somebody's got to be Pope. Who's it gonna be? And the party arguments have ensued. They fall out of earshot of Jesus and they're actually arguing about this.

In your bulletins was a little hand out that I thought was wonderful, so I printed them up in a size you could stick on the fridge. Tim Challies and Josh Byers get the credit. They do these kinds of little Visual Theologies on the web. All the one another's in the Bible. There are at least 40. Each one is about how christians are to treat or not treat each other.

Love one another. That one is the basis for all of the others. Encourage one another. Be humble to one another. Greet one another. Live in

peace with one another. Have compassion on one another. Forgive one another. Bear one another's burdens.

This is what the Kingdom looks like. It is NOT what this world looks like. And the disciples, at this moment, are on the world's natural, fallen path. Who will be greatest. Who's going to be the CEO when Jesus is taken away from us. Who's going to call the shots. And they're arguing about it.

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

This Kingdom thing, long promised to Israel, that comes about through David's son, is apparently about to come into fruition, and you're saying you're going to heaven, who's going to be the greatest down here Jesus?

I think that's why the "then" is there. Who, then, is greatest? And the disciples approach this the same way the civilized world finds its leaders.

I mean, they didn't take their swords out and start killing each other. It doesn't degrade into gang warfare. Tribal territorialism, which is what naturally happens in Satan's world. The biggest dog wins.

We haven't gotten there, but we are seeing something that is very natural to the fallen world. Arguing about who will reign on earth.

And Jesus has to nip this thing in the bud. The authority to reign of God on earth will not look like any of the natural progressions that have previously been seen in a fallen world where Satan is the prince.

2And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, 3and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Vs 2 is telling. Note that here and in other places, there's something about Jesus that overcomes a child's normal shyness, or reticence from any fear. Jesus says come, and the child just wants to be with Him. We

can picture such a little one as overjoyed that the master is calling him, and he quickly comes to Him.

3and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

For many years, my beloved wife was Miss Pam to almost all of the children of Tonopah. And there was a certain magic about that, that the parents would note. Why is it that the little ones would be naughty when with their parents, and as soon as they got into the school room situation, they would conform to a different set or rules.

Some of the parents would marvel and say, I can't control one, how can you control 20! 3 year olds. And all of those little kids adored her, and they knew, that a certain protocol was necessary in order for them to enjoy that relationship with their teacher.

In some small way, I think that's what Jesus is getting at. In the Kingdom of God, there's God, and there's children. Period. There isn't a pecking order of least to greatest.

Jesus will say, the first will be last and the last will be first, and it's getting at the same idea. There's only 2 levels. God. Children.

In Pam's classroom none of the children ever challenged that natural order. There's teacher, and there's children. All the children were equal. And that's our picture here; *"Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

In God's realm, in God's authority to reign, in heaven where it's natural, and on earth where it isn't, there can only be 2 categories. God, and children.

In heaven that will never be challenged. On earth, not so much. We struggle from childhood forward trying to move upwards to rock stardom, don't we. One way or another.

That's where the disciples are at. We don't look down on them for that, it's the natural order of things in this fallen world, but it doesn't work in God's kingdom.

In the Catholic church you have the Pope, then the Patriarchs, who are like the rest of the apostles, just below the greatest, then you have major archbishops, then Cardinals, then Primate, then Metropolitans, then the archbishops, then the Diocesan bishops, then the Ordinaries, and local ordinaries, then the Presbyterate's who are the local parish priests, like the one right here in Tonopah.

How did that happen. Or, am I mis-understanding what Jesus was teaching here?

It's interesting that after the reformation in the 1600's the protestants began again well by recognizing that individual local congregations should be independent from any authority beyond that congregations elders, or as it were, bishops. It's the same word in the greek.

Biblically, and we may get there in our verse by verse study at some point, but Biblically, the rule of order in the church is local to the congregation and is by a plurality of elders selected from within the congregation.

Those elders are servants of the congregation, not lords over them. It fits the model that the Lord Jesus is painting here.

I'm called to mind of 2 times in Revelation, once in chapter 19 and once in chapter 22 where John falls down prostrate before an angel. *Then I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, "Do not do that; I am a fellow servant of yours and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus; worship God."* R 19:10

2 categories of hierarchy in the Bible. God. Every other created being. Children of God, if you will. The angel says, get up. I'm just a fellow servant, like you.

Jesus illustrates the Kingdom hierarchy, with a child.

4“Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

In Pam's classroom, it's remarkable. 3 year olds and 4 year olds have a well formed image of personhood.

They may well be tyrants with their parents, and that's a sadness, really, but in the classroom situation, they are totally aware of their own personhood. And with very little training, they understand that they are little, the teacher is big. They are weak, the teacher is strong. They are just little children. And they're all waiting patiently for their turn in the teachers lap. The teacher is kind, and there's no fear. I used to love to see that phenomenon.

In an imperfect way, that's a picture of the Kingdom of God. We're small, He's big. We're weak, he's strong. We listen in submission, He's the teacher. And we love those moments when we get to sit in His lap. We wait our turn.

Jesus calls a 3 or 4 year old to him. They're very likely in Peter's house. This could have been one of Peter's little ones. When we get to heaven we can ask. Who was it that got to come to the teacher that day? What was it like?

“Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven

The lesson is about humility. Be like a little child. Recognize that in God's Kingdom, we're all the same. The first is last and the last is first. We're all just 3 and 4 year olds in the teachers classroom. The discussion about who's greatest . . . well, it just doesn't compute. God is greatest. We're just children.

5“And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; 6but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Jesus expands His teaching moment. He shifts the emphasis off of the adults becoming like children, and shares about the relationship between adults and children, in the kingdom.

The privilege is remarkable and the responsibility is grave.

I often envied my wife's position as a pre-school teacher. Because of this verse. She was receiving all of those little ones, in Jesus name. Truly! And that is a position of special blessing. That's exactly what this verse means.

People who take the time to love and teach children, in Jesus name, have a special place. A special blessing. When they hug those little ones, and love them, and teach them what's right, out of God's word, Jesus says, those people are receiving Him. That's an enviable position.

One of the mission organizations that I have a special heart for is a group of people in Uganda who for no other reason than the name of Jesus, have adopted a whole community of little ones who were so poor that they had to spend their days combing the dumps for a bite of food, instead of going to school.

These folks said, we're going to give you a nice big lunch, every day, count on it, and we want you to be able to go to school. You won't need to scour the dump for scraps. They have received those children, in Jesus name, and they feed them every day.

I'm miserly about money. I want the most bang for my buck. And it's because of this very verse we're looking at this morning that I send some money to that group. Shopping for good investments for treasure in heaven, and these folks have got my attention. This verse.

And sadly, the obverse is also true and the responsibility of it is grave.

There is special blessing for those who receive children in Jesus name and help them to believe in Him, and there is special hell for people who cause children to stumble.

We are a society who as we sink deeper and deeper into depravity, prey more and more on children. I thank God for people in this church, who go out of their way to offer a safe place for children who are stumbled by adults in our society.

That's what Christians do. That's how we roll. It stems from these verses.

It's sort of like when God says Israel, on a national level is like His eyeball. Taking pokes at Israel is like poking God in the eye. There's a very real connection. This truth is like that one.

Blessing children is blessing God. Receiving children, in His name is receiving Him. Preying on children, has an equivalent direct corresponding result from Him.

Want to get straight to God's wrath? Want a shunt that bypasses all of the normal channels to wrath? A direct route. Cause children to stumble. Mis-treat children. Take advantage of children. Harm children, in any way, and you have poked God right in the eye. Whoa!

6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

In our nation, as we talk about different world views on the political stage, this has become a huge topic. Abortion. What could be more stumbling of little ones than to snuff them out before they ever take their first breath.

Yes, I would apply vs. 6, in all of its force, to that topic. Murdering little ones, in the womb.

I spoke of taking a direct shunt, a straight route, do not pass go, do not collect \$200, to God's wrath, on a personal level. Mano a mano. But abortion is doing the same thing on a national level.

Want to make God furious. Want to make God look on us nationally as someone who would have been in less trouble if they'd been drowned by a heavy stone in the depth of the sea. Here's the formula for that.

Murder these little ones, that God has a direct connection with. Murder them in the womb. Then get on a platform and tell everyone how good that is. I can't even imagine the fury of the judgement to come on a nation who murders millions and millions of children, and calls it good.

God destroyed the Canaanites for exactly that. We're a million miles further down that road than the canaanites were. Probably several thousand to one. Why has God withheld judgement on us. Only one possibility comes to my mind. Final judgement is near, and HE waits for the day.

How grave is this responsibility? I certainly cannot say it any more plainly than Jesus;

7“Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!

This word woe. Ouai! You've watched those movies where some yiddish person says Ouai! Fright and dismay! alas!, uttered in grief or denunciation.

It's the word for when the car in front of you goes careening off the road and rolls over. It's the word for a train wreck. *“Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks!*

skandalōn Stumbling blocks. Every kid with a normal childhood knows this word. It's the word for the stick with the string attached to it that holds the box up with the bird seed underneath.

Gonna wait and see what takes the bait. A small bird? Maybe a chipmunk? Whatever. And it goes under the box to get the bait, and you jerk that stick out! Bam! Trapped. That stick in the greek is the scandalon. Stumbling block.

Jesus says; *For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!*

Why is it inevitable? Because of the prince of this world. Because men fell into a sinful state in the garden, and it pleased God to redeem them in the way that He designed, which allows Satan and Sin to scandalize and trap men.

This world is a dangerous place, and getting more dangerous with each passing day. It's dangerous to be in the womb! If you survive that, the world has got a thousand dead end streets to tempt you to come down. Stumbling blocks. Traps.

They look so good. And the man in proverbs is called the fool. And it means naiveite. Proverbs sees men as children. lack of experience, wisdom, or judgment. innocence or unsophistication. It expands the idea of children. Foolish men and women who buy into the worlds scandals. The worlds traps.

And they look at us, who hold this book up high and say, you folks have got to go. It's inevitable and we're seeing it every day, but Jesus says *it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!*

Bad to be stumbled. Bad to be trapped in the box when the stick gets pulled. Worse to be the guy pulling the stick. One is like a foolish child. The other is one who preys on the foolish child. Woe to that man. Oaiu!

Now Jesus is going to talk a bit about stumbling and how important it is to avoid being trapped by a skandalon. A stumbling block.

8“If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. 9“If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the

fiery hell.

Is the world helpful, generally, towards Godly living that honors and glorifies the heavenly Father?

Silly question. The world has got something tailor made to every possible weakness in the book.

We're all different. Alcohol doesn't pose any real threat to me. It's just how I'm wired. I might enjoy a glass of wine with dinner and it's harmless. It might even be beneficial.

But to others, it's deadly. One glass of wine could lead them down a path of self destruction. Or maybe it's drugs. Or maybe it's porn. Or maybe it's wealth. Or maybe power. Or a combination of some of these. Maybe it's anger. Maybe self pity. Maybe sloth.

So many traps. Tailor made for someone. Every one of us has weaknesses and strengths. *Woe to the world because of it's stumbling blocks.* Woe to the kosmos. Another greek word. World systems. The universe, as it were.

The first century believers understood this word to have a negative connotation precisely because they understood who the prince of this world is. The kosmos.

In the classic, Pilgrims Progress, Christian and Faithful get to a town called Vanity Fair. And that town is a picture of this word. Kosmos. The world system controlled by the prince of the power of the air. Jesus pronouces a WOE on that world.

I remember 2 magazines from my youth, they may still be in business, I wouldn't know, but one was named Cosmopolitan, and the other Vanity Fair. They both got their names from this biblical idea of worldliness. They both promoted worldliness. Cosmopolitan from this greek word Kosmos, and Vanity Fair directly from Bunyan's classic book. The World.

And then He says, it's important to NOT be trapped by this kosmos. How important? Heaven and hell important.

8 "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. 9 "If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell.

You know me as a literalist. I default to the literal translation first and always. It means what it sounds like it means.

Here you have to be careful. You can be confused. Like the church father, Origen, of Alexandria who lived 150 years after Christ death. The story has come down to us through Eusebius the 400 AD ish historian that Origen castrated himself because of this and other passages like it.

The problem is in the translation. What is being taught here is the gravity of the problem, not that cutting things off will solve anything.

I would have to gouge out both eyes, cut off both hands and both feet, and even then I'd be a lump sitting in a blind heap with evil thoughts playing a non stop movie in my evil mind.

The problem is the sin that dwells within. Cutting things off won't change that. But here Jesus says, if it would, it would be a good bargain for you.

If you could stay out of hell by cutting things off, that would be the best deal you ever made. This life is 5 minutes long. Eternity is forever. IF you could avoid hell by cutting off extremities, best bargain ever!

But you can't. Sin only gets dealt with one way. You give it to the Saviour by faith in His completed work on the cross. He gives you His righteousness in it's place.

What we should learn here is the gravity of sin and the importance of dealing with it strongly. Galations 5:24 *Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*

We put the flesh with it's desires to death. Daily. Chopping things off and plucking things out won't do this. We face this dilemma every day. From youth to old age. It's not getting any better. Maybe worse.

Finally, before we leave the subject, Jesus has this final warning;

10“See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven.

We learn here that God is so keen on little children, that they indeed, apparently, have guardian angels.

Once again, do you want to make God really angry? Despise "little ones."

Their angels will give a direct account to God, face to face if you do that.

So I had to look up one more interesting greek word, in order to have a full understanding of this important and frightening possibility.

kataphroneó. It's a compound word from two greek words. kata means down, and phroneo means negative attitude. So, to look down on. To see as value less. Let me read a bit directly from the greek dictionary. I think it's telling.

properly, to view down, i.e. with a negative (hostile) outlook; to despise, thinking down on (thinking little of); to esteem lightly, seeing as insignificant or detestable; to treat with contempt or disregard; to devalue; to depreciate (scorn); pay no regard to (because something seems of no account); " 'despise, scorn,' and show it by active insult"

Is your mind going to the same place mine is? Does that definition not

perfectly describe our society's approach to the unborn.

Oh, I know there are legions of children who would be better off if they hadn't been born, because of the parents who abandon and refuse to love them. My heart goes out to those. But the definition of despise here, is what we have done in this country to millions and millions of "little ones" who were in the safest place God ever designed. Their mothers wombs.

They are despised and considered of no value. Something for the garbage bags. Or maybe they can be torn in pieces and different parts sold off for whatever purpose. At least that way, what the parents considered of no value can realize some small value to the persons involved in their ultimate disposal.

The fury of God over this sin is beyond description. Indeed, John started to try to describe it, and the angel told him to seal it up.

Pam always tells me to go easy here. Be sensitive. Families in this room have been impacted by this. Doubtlessly.

All I can tell you is, there is no sin that's too big for God to forgive. There is mercy at the cross for all of these sins. And that mercy is more important for those to find than their hands, their feet, their eyes, and whatever else we might consider of value to us.

Forgiveness has been purchased at the cost of His only Son. *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* Jn. 3:16

Finally, to move beyond the warnings, which are grave indeed, this passage is about our personhood. We are to be like children. Believers are to be childlike. Humble. We are little, God is big. We are weak, God is strong. We are equals in that sense. We're all just children. Powerless. Humble. Before our God.

