Nobodies Are Somebodies

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Preacher: Shawn Woo

[0:00] We're in Matthew chapter 17, verse 24, going all the way to chapter 18, verse 9. The saints of God, to worship you together.

And now to sit under your word as you address us from it. And we ask God that you would renew our minds and captivate our vision with this unique vision that Jesus set out for his church, for the community of his people, characterized by those who are childlike in their humility, their dependence, who treat each other with much love and respect because of whom we represent. Father, won't you even in this time, this morning, work powerfully within us by your spirit and make us a little bit more like that.
And a little bit more like Christ. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen. Please stand if you are able to honor God as we read from his word, Matthew 17, 24.
When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two drachma tax went up to Peter and said, Does your teacher not pay the tax?
[2:06] He said, Yes. And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax?

From their sons or from others? And when he said, From others, Jesus said to him, Then the sons are free. However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up.
And when you open its mouth, you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself. At that time, the disciples came to Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?
And 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.
Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. But 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 to be drowned in the depth of the sea.
[3:22] Woe to the world for temptations to sin, for it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes. And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.

It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.
It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire. This is God's holy and authoritative word. Please be seated.
Politics is inevitable because politics is about how people relate to each other and live together in society. Wherever there is a community of people dwelling together, you're going to encounter politics.
What makes politics distasteful to so many people, however, is the sin that taints all earthly politics. Selfish ambition, authoritarianism, rivalry, envy, factions, rebellion, insubordination.
[4:41] Because humans are sinful, you see these sins and temptations at every level of society, in city governments, state governments, in federal governments. You see it in corporations and schools and even, unfortunately, in local churches and denominations, though if they are healthy churches to far less degrees.

In our passage, Jesus casts a new vision for Christian community that is founded on humility, on humble self-regard for others rather than on prideful self-seeking.

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But the realization of this grand vision depends on a radical reorientation of our perspectives. It requires a heavenly, eternal perspective rather than an earthly and temporal one.
And according to this perspective, children are the greatest. According to this perspective, the nobodies are the somebodies. And according to this perspective, the crippled and the lame might be better off than the whole and able-bodied.
As I've been saying throughout my sermon series in the Gospel of Matthew, this book is organized around five major discourses of Jesus, the teaching discourses of Jesus. We are now on the fourth one where Jesus talks about Christian relations.
[6:00] We know where the discourse kind of ends because at the end of each discourse, it has something along the lines of when Jesus had finished these sayings, and we find that here in chapter 19, verse 1.

And so this is the beginning of Jesus' fourth discourse, which focuses on Christian relations, but more specifically on how sin affects those relationships and how we ought to deal with that. Usually people mark chapter 18 as beginning the mark of this new section in discourse, but I'm treating 17, 24 to 27 as being a part of this passage for two main reasons.
One, in chapter 18, verse 1, the phrase, at that time, specifically marks what follows in chapter 18 and links it back to what happened just before.
It's happening at the same time as the conversation that took place in 17, 24 to 27. Two, this whole section has a common thread that runs through it all, and that's the Greek word skandalon, where we get the English word scandal from.
It's a word that means a stumbling block, causing offense or causing someone else to stumble, causing them to sin, to make them trip and fall.
[7:11] In 1727, the word translated giving offense is that same word. We see the same word again in 18.6 when it's translated as causing someone to sin.

And the same word appears repeatedly in chapter 18, verses 7 to 9, whether it's translated as temptation to sin or things that cause you to sin. Jesus is teaching us about the gravity of sin and why we should take utmost care to ensure that we don't put stumbling blocks in front of people as we relate to each other.
So my main point of this morning is this, remove every stumbling block that prevents people, including you, from entering the kingdom of heaven. My outline's a little bit abstract, but first I'm gonna start talking about the subjective stumbling blocks, secondly about the objective stumbling blocks, and lastly about personal stumbling blocks, which I'll explain what they mean.
I'm gonna focus the majority of my time on the first section because the latter two sections have, those themes have already been touched on in this series and will be touched on again and again in the coming passages. In 17, 24 to 27, Jesus first talks about subjective stumbling blocks, and we are told in verse 24 that Jesus and his disciples are passing through the Jewish region of Capernaum once again, and when in Capernaum, usually Jesus and his disciples made Peter's house their home base.
We saw that early in chapter 8, verse 14. So they're presumably at Peter's house again, which may explain why when these people come to collect the two drachma tacks, they address Peter in particular.
[8:47] Does your teacher not pay the tax? They don't address the other disciples, just Peter, and later Jesus only pays for himself and Peter.

This is Peter's house, and I think that's why that's happening. While they're at it and asking Peter about that question, they want to know what Jesus' opinion is, what his view is on the temple tax. Jesus is already at this point quite a well-known, famous teacher and miracle worker, and so they wonder, does your teacher not think that we should pay this temple tax? The collectors of the two drachma tax approached Peter and asked this question, and the two drachma tax is the half-shekel temple tax that was levied on adults, all adult Jewish males.
If you've been following along in the Bible reading plan that we've recommended to the whole church, you may have read this past week, Exodus 30, verses 11 to 16. And if you read that, that's where it talks about the census tax, and the census tax of Exodus 30 is what's called the atonement money.
This was meant to be a ransom to the Lord for your life. So by collecting this census tax for everyone in Israel, for every adult male representative, they were supposed to signify that all of our life belongs to God.

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[10:11] He's the one who has ransomed us, and the money that was collected in that way was used for the administration and the upkeep of the Tent of Meeting, their tabernacle, before the construction of the physical temple.

So even though the census tax when it was first levied was meant to be a one-time tax, once-a-life tax, the Jews used that rationale to justify the annual temple tax for the upkeep of the temple building.
And unlike the Roman tax, which the Jews universally resented because it was being imposed by these occupiers, many Jews saw this temple tax as a patriotic and religious duty.
So the collector's question is phrased in a way that expects a positive answer, an affirmative answer. Does your teacher not pay the tax? Surely he does, right? If he really is a Jewish prophet, what's his view of the matter?
Their suspicion that Jesus might not pay this tax, I think is well warranted based on the body of Jesus' teaching up to this point. In Matthew 12, 6, Jesus said to his disciples, I tell you, something greater than the temple is here, referring to himself.
[11:25] And later on in chapter 21, when he is in the Jerusalem temple, he will overthrow and overturn the tables of the money changers who are changing money so that people can pay, among other things, this two drachma tax.

And Jesus says, it is written, my house shall be called the house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers. Matthew 21, 13. And then still later in chapter 24, Jesus will prophesy of the downfall and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.
And he says in John 2, 19, destroy this temple, referring to his body, himself as the new spiritual temple of God. Destroy this body, and in three days, I will raise it up.
So if you examine the full body of Jesus' teaching, the Jerusalem temple is going to one day soon become obsolete. So perhaps these tax collectors are catching the drift of what Jesus is saying, and they ask, does your teacher not pay the tax?
And Peter, as he has the habit of doing, blurts out the answer before he has even had a chance to get Jesus' mind on the issue. Yes. Yes, of course. That's what he means.
[12:33] Yes, of course he pays the temple tax. I mean, come on, what kind of question is that? And then he goes into the house thinking, okay, I better check with Jesus about this. But before he checks with Jesus, Jesus knows what's on his mind.

He says, when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first. He already knows what's on Peter's mind. What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax?
From their sons or from others? And when Peter responds, from others, Jesus says to him, then the sons are free. Every earthly ruler levies tax, you know, because in order to rule and govern, you need revenue.
However, some powerful empires like the Roman Empire primarily taxed outsiders and foreigners because they had conquered so much territory they could sustain the running of their empire without taxing their own citizens.
They could just tax their subjects. So that might be what Jesus is referring to here. But even more specifically, even kingdoms that can't afford to sustain themselves by simply taxing outsiders and must tax their own citizens, when they tax their own citizens, they don't tax the king's children.
[13:47] The king's kids, their family, are exempt from the tax. And that's the point Jesus is making. From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax?

From their sons or from others? Of course it's from others. And this raises the natural question in the case of the temple tax, who is the ruler levying the temple tax?
No human being could rightly claim to be the ruler of the temple of God because that's the house of God. If God is the ruler of the temple, who then are his sons?
Twice already at Jesus' baptism and at his transfiguration, God the Father has declared authoritatively that Jesus is his beloved son with whom he is well pleased. And repeatedly throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has referred to God as my father.
So Jesus has confirmed his divine sonship and he's referring to that. If God is the ruler of this temple and he is my father and I am his son, the temple tax does not apply to me.
[14:53] And that's not all. Jesus says in verse 26, then the sons are free. He uses the plural word, sons. Who else can claim to be the sons of God?

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By virtue of their relation to Jesus, his disciples were also given the privilege of calling God as their father, praying to him as our father, as Jesus taught them.
And so Jesus said in Matthew 5, 44 to 45, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so you may be sons of your father who is in heaven. So sometimes Jesus refers to when he is addressing the disciples, he refers to God the father as your father.
And all of us, all of us who are in Christ Jesus through faith are sons of God. He says in Galatians 3, 26 and uses the language of sons to indicate that we are all heirs of God.
We all have an inheritance in God's kingdom. Those who are members of God's family through faith in Jesus therefore should be exempt, free from this temple tax. So neither Jesus nor Peter has to pay this tax.
[16:00] It's a foolproof argument. Imagine a lowly servant, a tax collector who is going around towns and collecting the king's taxes unknowingly going up to the crown prince of the kingdom and telling him, hey lad, pay your tax.

And then the son says, excuse me, do you know who I am? However, Jesus continues in verse 27, not to give offense to them.
Go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself. Jesus knows that there's a fish that has swallowed a Jewish shekel and that will be the first fish that Peter catches and one shekel is equivalent to two Roman denarii which is two days worth of wages for a common Roman worker which is the equivalent of the four Greek drachmas necessary to pay for two people's temple tax, both Jesus and Peter.
It's fascinating and instructive that Jesus gives Peter instructions to pay the temple tax despite the fact that he just demonstrated that he doesn't need to pay the temple tax.
There is no theological or biblical obligation to pay the temple tax. Their payment of this temple tax is a humble accommodation.
[17:26] They are accommodating the tax collectors and other Jews who believe that it is not only lawful but pious and pleasing to God to pay this tax for the maintenance of the temple.

So they are doing this not to give offense to or to not to cause them to stumble. For Jesus and his disciples who are the sons of God it is no sin not to pay the temple tax.
However, for these other Jews who are collecting the tax and who are watching what Jesus will do regarding his temple tax for them it would be sinful to not pay this because it would be in their mind neglecting the house of God failing to honor God consigning the house of God to disrepair and not prioritizing the worship and the sacrifices that are offered at the temple of God.
This is where it's important for us to distinguish between objective sins and subjective sins. In Romans 14 Paul contrasts a Christian who has a weak conscience who believes because of his weak conscience that it is wrong to eat meat or to drink wine.
And the Christian with a strong conscience on the other hand believes that it's totally fine to eat meat and to drink wine. The former eats only vegetables and abstains from meat the latter eats meat to his heart's content.
[18:51] However, in this situation Paul instructs the Christian with the stronger conscience never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

For if your brother is grieved by what you eat you are no longer walking in love and so by what you eat do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.
This is Romans 14 13 and 15. Paul says he is himself convinced that no food is unclean and that it is perfectly fine to eat meat and drink wine.
Nevertheless, for the Christian who is not convinced of that and has doubts about that the Christian who thinks that it might be sinful for him to eat meat if he eats it that's sin for him.
Why? Romans 14 23 whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats because the eating is not from faith for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.
[19:50] What does Paul mean by that? Eating meat is not objectively sinful. However, it is subjectively sinful for those who believe that it is sinful and do it anyway.

If he eats it he is eating against his own conscience. He is doing what he believes is sinful what he believes offends and displeases God. Therefore, he is no longer acting out of faith and obedience but out of unbelief and disobedience.

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I think it's wrong to eat meat but who cares I'm going to do it anyway. what's God going to do about it? A whole bunch of people do it anyway.
For that person it is sin to eat meat for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. It follows from this then that if the person with the stronger conscience flaunts his freedom and eats meat in front of this other person with the weaker conscience he is actually inadvertently tempting this person to sin.
he is putting a stumbling block in the way of a brother and putting a stumbling block in front of a Christian brother or sister is itself sinful because that Paul says is unloving.
[21:05] Romans 14, 15 for if your brother is grieved by what you eat you are no longer walking in love. So the Christian with a weaker conscience who eats meat sins because his action does not proceed from faith.

The Christian with the stronger conscience who eats meat in front of that weaker brother sins because his action does not proceed from love. You guys following?
Paul addresses a similar situation in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. Should Christians eat food sold at marketplaces that had previously been offered to idols? Paul says an idol has no real existence whatsoever there is since there is no God but one.
And for people who understand that it is no sin to eat food that had previously been offered to idols as long as you are not actively participating in idolatrous worship which is demonic. However, Paul continues not all possess this knowledge.
There are some people in Paul's day who came out of that kind of idolatry who still think that there is something real happening in that meat that has been offered to an idol that is associated with idols that it belongs to an idol and so they feel this pang of their conscience to not eat it.
[22:16] And for such people to eat that food that had been sacrificed to an idol Paul says is that it defiles their conscience. So Paul warns the people with stronger conscience take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

If they see you eating food offered to idols and then they follow your example they themselves lack the faith and the knowledge that this food is fine to eat that the idols are nothing but they follow your example in it.
their conscience is defiled and they've become entangled in sin. You have in effect made them stumble and fall into sin. So Paul himself says this is his own avowal he says if food makes my brother stumble I will never eat meat lest I make my brother stumble.
Imagine making that kind of declaration. it's quite a sacrifice for all you meat lovers out there. But this raises a question why should my liberty be restricted by someone else's conscience?
Paul anticipates that exact question in 1 Corinthians 10 verse 29 and this is his answer. Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do do all to the glory of God.
[23:44] Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God just as I try to please everyone in everything I do not seeking my own advantage but that of many that they may be saved.

Wait a minute Paul just admitted that he tries to please everyone in everything he does. Isn't that the definition of a people pleaser?
Isn't that a bad thing? Why should I change how I live based on other people's concerns? Why should I give up my freedoms for them?
This idea of foregoing our rights for the love of others and accommodating other people's weaker consciences goes against the grain of our culture.
Think about how many times you have uncritically adopted these mantras of popular therapy speak. Don't live for other people.
[24:57] Be your authentic true self. You don't owe anyone anything. Protect your peace. Set boundaries. Set boundaries. Our culture has gone well beyond simply trying to avoid being controlled by others.

Now we don't even want to be concerned by others. Doing concerns, doing things out of concern for others because we feel that that is what we should do is not viewed as a threat to authenticity because we should really only do what we ourselves want to do.
And telling people to bear that kind of emotional burden for the sake of other people is seen as a form of manipulation. Externally imposed expectations and obligations are automatically suspect in our culture.

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This kind of thinking has in fact become so pervasive that it almost feels intuitive. But this kind of thinking is rooted in 18th century romantic philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau who taught that we must be true to our internal feelings and resist conforming to external expectations.
This kind of thinking is rooted in 19th century Sigmund! Freud who taught that psychological unhealth comes from among other things letting your reality be defined by and restricted by your super ego which is your moral conscience representing the internalized societal and parental expectations.
[26:33] This kind of thinking is rooted in 20th century Abraham Maslow who taught that self actualization involves becoming one's own true self rather than living to meet the expectations and demands of others.

It's this kind of thinking that has given rise to the radical expressive individualism of our age. This kind of thinking does not come from the Bible. Now please don't hear what I'm not saying.
I'm not saying that you should live enslaved to other people's opinions and expectations. Far from it. Having concern for other people is not the same thing as being controlled by other people. Living out of the fear of man, being controlled by what they perceive of you, what they think of you, and wanting to do everything you can to please them, living out of the fear of man is night and day different from living out of the fear of God and the love of man.
The secular culture's antidote to the fear of man is love of self. But the Bible's antidote to the fear of man is the fear of God and the love of neighbor.
[27:55] Do you see the difference? God is the God. That's what Christianity is all about. Faith working through love. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

When we are transformed from the inside out by the love of Christ, we have the power to selflessly serve others and to accommodate even our weaker brothers and sisters with weaker consciences. This is what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 9 verse 19. For although I am free from all, I'm free from all, he says, I have made myself a servant to all that I might win more of them.
Martin Luther captures this paradox in his book, The Freedom of a Christian. A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. earlier on in chapter 15 when Jesus taught that it is not what goes into the mouth but what comes out of the mouth that defiles a person, the disciples kindly informed Jesus that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying.
[29:10] And that word offended is actually the same word that's used in our passage to cause someone to stumble. Jesus made the Pharisees stumble. So Jesus at times had no qualms whatsoever about making certain people stumble.

So why does he take a different approach here with these two drachma tax collectors? Because there previously Jesus was teaching on the fundamental inside out principle of the gospel and in order to confront the Pharisees self righteousness and outside in legalism there was no way to avoid scandal.
There's no way to avoid putting a stumbling block in front of these Pharisees. However here this morning in our passage what's at stake is not a fundamental gospel principle.
Some sincere Jews who believe that faithful God honoring Jews should pay the temple tax are asking whether or not Jesus pays the temple tax because they just don't know better yet and Jesus does not want to cause them to stumble.
Jesus don't value the temple or don't value the worship or the sacrifice of God the very things that point to Jesus ultimate sacrifice on the cross.
[30:29] So it requires wisdom and discernment to know when you take what approach. You see the same adaptation in Apostle Paul and I think the reason why Apostle Paul has these kinds of teachings!

in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 10 and other places is because Jesus taught this. In Acts chapter 16 verse 3 when he is traveling and ministering in Jewish cities he circumcises his apprentice Timothy.
Why does he do it? Because he doesn't want to cause the Jews to stumble because the Jews were aware that Timothy had a Jewish mother but he had a Greek father a Gentile father. So they didn't want people to think that Timothy was this lawless faithless Jew who just flaunts just openly disobeys the law of God.

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So he circumcised Timothy. However later on in Galatians 2 3 to 5 when the Judaizers who insist that Gentile converts to Christianity must become a Jew by getting circumcised and they start to pressure Paul and people who are with him to therefore circumcise Titus who is a Gentile convert to Christianity Paul says here in Galatians 2 we did not yield in submission even for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.
Completely to completely different responses. Why? Because in one situation the gospel is at stake in the other situation it is not. So you can accommodate others and give up your own preferences and freedoms.
[32:06] Jesus and the apostles followed they operated on higher principles of fear of God love of neighbor and the stewardship of the gospel.

Love is a higher value than individual freedom and autonomy. Christian love demands that we sometimes forego our rights for the sake of others rather than insisting on our rights at the expense of others.
So you might understand for example that it's no sin to drink alcohol but if your Christian brother or sister formerly struggled with alcoholism and they are finally sober after years of hard fought battle and you're drinking in front of him and inviting him out to a bar in doing so you might cause him to stumble.
Maybe you're convinced that behaving in a certain way with members of the opposite sex or the way you spend alone time with or show physical affection to your boyfriend or girlfriend is perfectly proper and fine.
But a Christian friend of yours disagrees and your behavior in front of them might set a bad example for him or her cause her to stumble into sin with her boyfriend.
[33:33] Maybe your practice of yoga is causing Hindu converts to Christianity to stumble because they associate it with their former practices within Hinduism.

Don't destroy your Christian sister for the sake of your freedom. Why? Because their eternal souls matter more than your temporal preferences and desires.
Undoubtedly we need to apply this carefully and wisely and I don't want you to ever compromise gospel principles or biblical commands but if it's a matter of giving up your preferences and desires why not gladly give up your preferences and desires for the eternal good of your neighbors Jesus drives this point home even more pointedly in chapter 18 verses 1 to 6 he says in verse 1 at that time the disciples came to Jesus saying who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven I keep saying to you guys that the unpopular!
topic that Jesus likes to return over and over again too is that he is going to die right he is going to suffer and be killed and on the third day be raised again now the most popular topic among Jesus disciples is the never ending goat debate who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven Jesus mentioned of who the sons of the kingdom are in the previous passage appears to have sparked this lively debate or questions wow we're really something aren't we not only that Jesus had taken Peter James and John on their exclusive field trip to Mount of Transfiguration and they just came down from there and a couple chapters earlier Jesus had declared to Peter blessed are you Simon bar Jonah for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my father who is in heaven and I tell you you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Haiti shall not prevail against it all of these events probably created murmurings whisperings and debates who's the top dog who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven what does it mean to be the greatest the concept of greatness is inherently competitive and comparative isn't it who are the people that we call great in our society!
to be perceived to be superior to others in some kind of significant way in order to be called great in society there is no objective level of achievement that qualifies you as being great otherwise if there is who defines that you're only considered great if you achieve something that others have not achieved and as soon as everybody else around you reaches the same level of success and wealth and fame and beauty and power you cease to be great you're now normal you're only great if you're better than someone else this pursuit of so called greatness then is really an unbridled expression of human pride because it brings so much focus on the self and the public perception of the self it produces because of that reason deep insecurity and anxiety and because it thrives on comparison and self promotion it erodes community it destroys community how often have we seen this even in churches!

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[37:11] I'm an elder I'm a deacon I'm a community group leader I'm a ministry leader I've been in church longer than you I've read the Bible more times than you I'm closer to the pastor's family than you I have more friends than you I'm more spiritually disciplined!

than Jesus turns this natural sinful! human preoccupation with greatness completely on his head in verse 2 Jesus calls to him a child and puts him in the midst of the disciples as an object lesson you guys have it right here right in front of you in the front row as illustration and then he says truly I say to you unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven what does it mean to become like children it doesn't mean to become innocent like children children are not innocent only if you knew that children are ignorant of some of the cynical ways of adults for sure they're not exposed to as many things but they are far from innocent they sin like the rest of us wait till you have kids if you don't have kids in sin did my mother conceive me that's not what Jesus is talking about he tells us exactly what he's talking about in verse four whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven what Jesus is after is humility in what ways are children humble children have no status in society especially in Bible times later in chapter 19 verse 13 to 15 when eager parents I think we have I did one of those parents I think if I saw Jesus walking by eager parents bring their children to Jesus maybe you could spend a little bit of time with them talk to them lay your hands on them pray for them give them some amazing blessings!
That would be great! And then the disciples who see that they rebuke these parents and they try to shoo the children away why?
Because children in their view are not important Jesus is far too important and far too busy to have children taking up his time how inconsiderate of you take them away children are the nobodies of society they don't have a seat at the table have you guys heard that before?
[40:33] And that kind of expectation is pretty universal across cultures but Jesus turns that upside down he welcomes children into his presence then he says unless you adults turn and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven I pointed this out to you last week that more than any other New Testament writer and more than four times more than any other synoptic gospel writers Matthew speaks of Christians as little ones he does it in our passage here too that's his favorite way of referring to the followers of Jesus whoever gives one of these little ones his disciples his followers even a cup of cold water because he's a disciple truly I say to you he will by no means lose his reward and then what he says later in this passage verse 6 whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin it will be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea these little ones these small people he's referring to

Christians his followers and using the object lesson of literal children to teach them this is what you must be like before God becoming a Christian in fact I would say requires turning and becoming like children that's literally what Jesus says how so to become a Christian is to become a child of God to declare our dependence on God to become his dependent to become a Christian is to depend on the provision of God rather than providing for yourself and trusting in yourself and being self sufficient to become a Christian is to receive the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross on our behalf for our sins through faith to believe that we are saved not by our own righteousness but by the toning sacrifice of Christ and his righteousness imputed to us counted on our behalf to become a
Christian means to come to God as empty handed helpless sinners like we were talking about last week God apart from you I have no good thing I am a ruined sinner with no hope of saving myself I have no merit to commend myself to you so I come to you empty handed to receive freely from your bounty and grace only those who humble themselves in that way before God are called children of God and when you see yourself as children when you see yourself in that lowly humble station in your relationship to God you stop trying to measure yourself against other people you don't mind being overlooked or being occupied with lowly tasks it transforms community out there in the world you need to have degrees out there in the world you need to stand upright and keep your head keep your chin up out there in the world you to be articulate out smart out there in the world need to have power out there in the world need be tall and good looking out there in the world you need to have all these things to be recognized by somebody as sons and daughters of God.
So let's not import that stuff into the church. Christian pastor and author C.J. Mahaney says this in his book, Humility, True Greatness.

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As sinfully and culturally defined, pursuing greatness looks like this. Individuals motivated by self-interest, self-indulgence, and a false sense of self-sufficiency to pursue a selfish ambition for the purpose of self-glorification.
[44:58] Contrast that with the pursuit of true greatness as biblically defined, serving others for the glory of God. This is a genuine expression of humility, and this is true greatness as the Savior defined it.

But wait a minute. I can hear the objection in my head. Have you ever tried this? If I live like that, people are going to step all over me.
Sean, have you ever tried this? If you live like that, you're going to be overlooked. You're going to be mistreated. You're going to be hurt. You're going to be taken advantage of. And here's Jesus' answer to that in verses 5 to 6.
Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but 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 to be drowned in the depth of the sea.
It's very similar to what Jesus said earlier in chapter 10, verse 40. Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.
[46:11] Jesus is saying, the way you treat my children, you treat, well, God the Father is saying, the way you treat my children, you're treating me. Jesus is saying, the way you treat the members of my body, that's the way you treat me.

And so this is why in the context of the church, the community of God, this can work. Because here, you don't need to pretend, you don't need to live in pretense and put up faces, and like you have everything put together.
Why don't you have to do that? Because all you need to be recognized is to be a child of God if that's enough to respect someone in the church of Christ. When you come to church, you are not surrounded by nobody.
You're surrounded by royalties, crown princes, and crown princesses of the kingdom of heaven. Doesn't matter what they look like.
Doesn't matter how little they have accomplished out in the world. So we treat each other as if we're dealing with Christ himself because we are members of his body.
[47:17] We treat each other as if we're dealing with the children of God, the Father himself, because we are his children. God is in essence saying, I know, I know what I'm asking you to do.

I know sometimes you'll get hurt. I know sometimes sinful people will step all over you. I know sometimes you're going to humble yourself before others, and you're going to confess your sins to them, and then they're not going to, instead of giving you grace and mercy, they're going to stomp you.
Say, yeah, you are that bad. But this is what God the Father is saying. Don't you worry about how other people will treat you.
I'll take care of that. I remember when I was in grade school, there was a girl that was bullied every single day.
And one time, her mom stormed into the classroom. It's like a sliding door. Slam, slam, just stormed into the classroom, started naming all the boys that were bullying her.
[48:37] who is this guy? Who do you think you are? And started calling them and yelling at them. And then the teacher is just panicking, doesn't know what to do. You know, like, and I mean, she didn't, she didn't try to hurt the boys or anything.

She's just trying to make a statement. After she left, those boys never behaved like that ever again. God the Father is saying, I'll take care of you.
In this life or the next, there will be justice. I'm watching over you. Think about having a millstone tied around your neck and being drowned in the sea.
The millstone here is not the small ones that people do by hand. It's literally the donkey millstone. The huge ones, the heavy circular, three, six feet in diameter, weighing around 1,000 pounds that only animals like horses and donkeys can pull or oxen can pull.
Jesus says, it's better for that person who hurts one of his little ones to have that tied around his neck and drowned in the depths of the sea. That person is never getting back up.
[50:06] So this radically changes the way we interact with each other in the Church of Christ. This doesn't mean, of course, that Jesus eschewed all forms of hierarchies and leadership structures.

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That'd be a wrong application of this text.

Jesus does not endorse a radically flat, egalitarian vision for the Church that some Christian movements throughout history have espoused. The original Quakers were of this ilk.
They supremely valued immediate experiential revelation of Christ to the individual, aka prophecy. So they correctly believed that every single Christian has a Spirit of God, but they wrongly applied that truth into disregarding the Bible's teaching about elders and deacons, and they flattened out the structure of the Church.
They accorded everybody attending their meetings, their gatherings, equal status, and everybody would sit in a circle. There would be no pulpits and no altars, no set liturgies in the worship. Anyone, regardless of their membership status, gender, or age, was permitted to speak as long as they claimed to have felt the leading of the Holy Spirit.
In the absence of elders whose responsibility it is to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it, as it says in Titus 1.9, it should not come as a surprise that the Quakers soon slid into heresy.
[51:26] Followers of Elias Hick emphasized what they called the inward light over biblical authority and became the modern liberal Quakerism, most of whom became universalists, Buddhists, or even atheists by the 20th century.

The only Quakers who remain biblically and theologically sound and faithful today are those called the Orthodox Quakers who reinstated biblical leadership structures and appointed elders in the early 1800s.
So the point of that cautionary tale is this, the radical, selfless, childlike humility that Jesus enjoins for all Christians does not undermine biblical leadership structures.
However, it does transform those very leadership structures so they don't work like it does out in the world. Now, finally, to personal stumbling blocks, I'll be brief here since I've covered Matthew 5, 29-30 already, which is very similar.
Woe to the world for temptations to sin for it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes. And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.
[52:38] It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

Jesus, I've said this before, he's not being literal here, but he is being utterly serious. He's not saying literally, gouge out your eye, right?
I mean, you could gouge your, you could have, you could be blind and still be a very, very lustful person, right? And you could be, I mean, you could be missing your legs and you could still take yourself on your wheelchairs to sinful areas to wherever you want to go.
Like, it's not those things themselves that cause people to sin, but he's, Jesus is using them as metaphors, as an analogy to say that we should get rid of the things that cause us to stumble. So what is it in your life that causes you to stumble?
Are you making decisive choices to get rid of these things? I've been watching in shock as the list of rich, famous, and powerful people who are implicated in the Jeffrey Epstein scandal continues to grow, leading to embarrassing mea culpas and resignations from powerful people.
[54:02] This man was a financier who used his wealth and connections for sex trafficking of children, and it seems that his sordid influence was far-reaching, reaching even to a crown princess, a prince, a duchess, CEOs, multiple presidents and prime ministers, diplomats, film directors, university presidents and professors, a Nobel laureate, and a chairman of a top law firm.

The full story remains to be seen, but it seems that many powerful people were in his orbit, one, because they liked the financial services that he offered, which saved them tens of millions of dollars in tax loopholes, and or because they liked the moral sexual services that he procured on their behalf, and or because they liked access to his money and connections and social clout, and or because they had secrets now that Jeffrey Epstein knew and that he needed to keep his mouth shut.
In this sinful world, it is necessary that temptations come, Jesus says, and you will confront many stumbling blocks that the world throws at you in your social life and in your career paths.

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Maybe your refusal to get drunk and be sexually promiscuous, your refusal to cuss or to agree with unbiblical ideas at your school or in college or at your work will make you unpopular and isolated. Maybe your refusal to engage in unlawful, shady business dealings or your prioritization of your family and your church in an extremely demanding line of work will put you on the hot seat with your boss and it will hamstring your upward mobility.
[55:47] Maybe your refusal to be chummy and flirty with the sleazy but powerful old man means forfeiting a golden opportunity. Maybe fleeing temptations means being cut off from the corridors of worldly power.

Maybe it will make you cripple or lame in the eyes of the world. Jesus says, embrace being crippled or lame.
It is better to enter eternal life as a cripple than to be thrown into the eternal fire whole and able-bodied. It's better to enter eternal life as a failure in the eyes of the world than to be thrown into eternal hellfire as a success story.
So often, isn't this true? That the very stepping stones that make you get ahead in life are the stumbling blocks on the pathway to the kingdom of heaven.
Do you know that, brothers and sisters? It's better to enter life poor than to be thrown into the hellfire rich.
[56:57] Better to enter heaven as a nobody than to be thrown into hellfire as a somebody on the who's who magazines. It's better.

Jesus is not saying, well, this is really hard to do and it's a tough pill to swallow, but it's the right thing to do, so just do it. That's not what he says. He says, this is better. So set your side on something that is better.
In 2018, a man named Wayne Moorhead developed sepsis following an infection and as his body diverted blood to his vital organs, his extremities, his limbs became vulnerable and suffered tissue death, gangrene, which began to spread to his arms and legs.
Eventually, in order to save his life, he had to get both his legs and both his arms amputated. But this was not a sacrifice.
That was the only sensible and reasonable thing to do in that situation. That was the better thing to do in that situation. Yes, he is crippled and lame now.
[58:04] Yes, but he is alive. alive. What if when your eternal life is at stake?

Are you willing to sacrifice less? Don't ever think that, you know, sin is a harmless thing. Oh, that one time will not do much harm.
Remember, it's the one sin of Adam that led to the fall of humanity and the groaning of all creation. sin. That's how seriously God takes one sin.
Moreover, sin never stays confined to where you want it to be. It always grows. It's like cancer. All it takes is one cancerous cell and then it starts to hijack your system.
Sin does the same thing. It hijacks your thinking, your reasoning, your moral reasoning, your spiritual discernment. It impairs your thinking. It dulls your spiritual appetite. It grows and grows and grows and not only within your own life, it spreads to other people in your life that you affect.
[59:13] So if that's what's at stake, if eternal life is at stake, is it a sacrifice to get rid of a limb?
And the greatest way we see the heinousness of sin and the graciousness of God is at the cross of Jesus Christ.

Our sins were so bad that Jesus had to die. The only Son of God, the sinless, blameless Son of God and the Son of Man had to die on the cross as the atonement for our sins.
And Jesus did it gladly because He knew it was the only way He can redeem us for Himself so we can have eternal life with Him. And if that's the love that the Son of God has shown us and if the Son of God, the divine, eternal Son of God laid down His life for us, is it a sacrifice for us to lay down our preferences, our conveniences, our desires so that we can run after, run hard and pursue that eternal union and fellowship with Christ?
I think not. Let's pray. Father, please grant us humility, childlike dependence on You.
Oh, Lord, give us this eternal perspective without which we cannot have a heavenly community. Help us to love one another, honor one another as children of the King, and humble ourselves before one another as children who have nothing to show for ourselves but the provision and the protection of our heavenly Father.

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[61:38] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.

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