

Title: A Very Big Deal
Text: Matthew 18.5-9
Theme: the seriousness of heeding the warnings of Christ
Series: Matthew #89
Prop Stmtnt: Following Christ brings the greatest reward and rejecting Christ brings the greatest judgment.

God is Creator and we are the creation. As Creator, he is infinite. As the creation, we are finite. That which is finite can recognize, admit and even believe that God is infinite, but because we are finite, we cannot really understand in an experiential sense what that is actually like. That is why there is both a knowledge and an experience gap of incomprehensible size between the Creator and his creation. The reality of God's infinite nature has enormous implications that go way beyond the fact that he is timeless. It also means that the love of God is far beyond what we are capable of understanding. The depth of God's love is unfathomable.

Therefore: the rewards and joys of following Christ and being with God and his people for eternity are beyond our capacity to fully grasp. 1 Corinthians 2.9 says, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him." Dream as high and as far as you can about the joys and delights of being with God knowing that your imagination cannot dream big enough.

By the same token: the righteousness of God is far beyond what we are capable of understanding. That means that our sin is far more serious than we could ever realize. We honestly have no idea how serious of an issue our sin is. The Old Testament law was given to help us realize how deep this problem really is. We still do not get it. As high as the delights of God are, so too, the weight of God's judgment is far greater than we can know. God's judgments, particularly the teaching that Christ gives on the reality and duration of hell strike us as being too harsh and severe, and we have a difficult time reconciling this teaching on hell with the love of God. That is because we do not realize how valuable and intense God's love really is. If we did, then we would see that the consequences of rejecting and despising his love are so severe. God's righteousness is infinite and therefore to rebel against him and to spite him is to so deeply offend the most glorious and perfect of all beings. We tolerate sin because we believe the lie that it really is not that big of deal, when sin is by far our worst enemy. Sin is far worse than Satan.

Therefore: the condemnation and judgment of rejecting God for eternity is also beyond our capacity to fully grasp.

This is a text that takes us to two extremes. The one extreme shows us the intense love and loyalty that Christ has toward those who appear to be the most insignificant people in

the world. On the other hand this text reveals the seriousness of discarding, abusing, and/or causing to these little ones to stumble. Christ is fiercely devoted to taking care of his own. Even the care of little ones is a very big deal.

Read Text:

Observations: 1) Notice the emphasis upon the individual. "one" 2) Notice the emphasis upon eternal. This comes out in the following text as well. There is a contrast between eternal life (implied) and eternal fire (clearly stated); the one being blessing and the other being judgment. Hell is a doctrine that is convenient to ignore. But Jesus talked more about hell than he did heaven. It is a reality though this is not a text that I am anxious to preach. I do not believe that Jesus found great pleasure in saying this either. But he is wise and loving to tell us the truth. And the truth is, we need to hear this. We need to consider this. We need to give these words of Christ our full attention. I fear that some of you are trapped in sin and you have not been taking it seriously, and therefore you are in far more danger than you realize and are willing to admit. A text and sermon like this are threatening to you because you fear they will expose you and shame you or embarrass you. I have no interest in shaming you or embarrassing you. Please listen carefully. Your biggest threat right now is not this text, but it is your sin. When you realize that your sin is your biggest threat, then you will see this text as a gift of grace from a wise and truly loving Savior and will welcome the warning so that your blinders are removed.

Last week: Christ called his disciples to humble themselves like a child. We are called to follow Christ, but there is a way in which we can and cannot do that. Jesus is both God and man. We are just man. As the God-man, he died for the sins of everyone who would ever believe in him. We cannot pay for our sins through our death, much less the sins of others. We cannot perform miracles at will. But, we can follow his example of humility and leadership. In the spirit of humble submission, Jesus took up his cross and went to death for us. As followers of Christ, we too, in the spirit of humble submission take up our cross, that is, willingly take on the consequences of being identified with Christ and die to our own desires that we may live for his, which are far greater anyway. The life of a follower of Christ is consistently marked by humility. This is a very big deal.

I. Humility is the path toward eternal life. (5)

I am not speaking of humility in a general sense, but I am speaking of a specific gospel-driven humility that not only recognizes my sin, but also owns it, identifies it, feels it, confesses it, repents of it and trusts in Christ alone because I recognize that I have nothing on my own to offer to God as a payment for my debt. This is a prerequisite for becoming a genuine follower of Christ. I must admit that I am a sinner who is defiled by my sin and cannot do anything to wash away the guilt, no matter what I do. Admitting that I am a sinner who is deserving of the wrath of God is humbling. But that is exactly what I have to admit. Admitting that I have nothing to offer God as the payment for my sin is humbling, but that is exactly what I have to admit. Admitting that Christ alone paid my debt without any help from me, and without any causation from me is humbling, but that is exactly what I have to admit. Admitting that I need as much grace and forgiveness

in the sight of God as every other sinner in the world is humbling, but that is exactly what I have to admit. Therefore, admitting that every person who trusts in Christ is on the very same level that I am is humbling because I tend to believe that I am a little better than others, particularly I tend to think that I am a bit better than those who think that they are a little better than others. We are so quick to be proud of the fact that we are not as proud as others are. Our sin is so deceitful. It is so subtle. But here is the point:

A. Humility is not only the means by which we gain entrance into the kingdom of heaven (4), but humility marks the life of a genuine citizen of that kingdom (a genuine believer).

Chapter 18 is a conversation that Jesus had with his disciples. Here is the flow of the chapter: Christ is preparing the disciples for life without him, and for life in the church. The people of Christ (disciples/church) are people who care about the vulnerable. Great people care about little people. The greatest: Jesus cares about you. A) Every person in the church is, in a sense, a little child (5-6) B) It is a very serious matter if you are the cause of stumbling for a believer (one of these little children) (7) C) Therefore, you must take this warning to heart and do everything you can to address sin in your life so that you are not the occasion for others to sin and so that you do not go to hell. People who set out to cause the stumbling of others and do not care because they are hell-bent on pursuing their sin are not believers, no matter how gifted and talented they are, or how powerful and persuasive their teaching and preaching is. Jesus is warning us about the reality of how people will aspire to leadership and influence among the people of God in order to prey upon his sheep. Hell awaits them. And if you have ever heard someone say that hell is not hot enough for certain people, they only say that because they have never considered the realities of hell. The truth is, hell is hot enough for the most wicked and vile people who have ever lived. In fact, it is so serious that hell is to be avoided at all costs, even if it means severe personal restrictions now. D) Christ is so concerned about each “little one” (children/sheep) that he warns people not to despise even one, and that if one wanders off, to go in search of that one in an effort to bring it back to the safety of the fold. E) The fold is the church, where walls are built to protect the sheep from danger, but where problems within have to be confronted. Anyone who persists in sinning (and thus potentially causing others to stumble) has to be confronted and called upon to repent. If he/she does not repent, then this one is to be put outside of the fold. If the person does repent then he is to be forgiven and restored. This brings up the issue of how many times do we have to forgive? So, Jesus delivers one of his most memorable parables in response to this. The fact is, the parables that most people probably remember more than others have to do with forgiveness, because this is such a personal and corporate matter. There is a thread that goes through this entire conversation and that is the thread of humility.

B. Humility is put on display when we consider the lives of the vulnerable as being more important than our own. (5)

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.” Watch what happens in this text. The disciples want to know who is the greatest in the kingdom (v.1). Jesus answers by saying; you are getting the cart before the horse. You will not even get into the kingdom unless you humble yourself like a child. Then he says that if you do humble

yourself like a child that you will be the greatest in the kingdom. I concluded the sermon last week by pointing out that Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of that. He is truly the greatest in the kingdom because he became like a child and humbled himself by giving up his rights as God and died in our place. Every single person who trusts in Christ belongs to Christ and Christ is very, very attached to his own. When you receive one of these “*who believe in me*” (6) you are receiving Christ.

What does it mean to “receive” someone one? To receive means to welcome, to give a loving reception and to accept someone. In other words, if you are going to receive someone, you have to pay attention to him. You have to acknowledge that she is there. Being aware of other people and paying attention to them and going out of your way to welcome them, may seem like a trivial matter, but in reality it is a very big deal. It is not only a ministry that everyone of us is to have towards others, but when we respond with warm care to people we do not know and to people we are tempted to ignore it creates an incredible culture of warmth that gives so much experiential credibility to the truths we sing, teach and preach. It is certainly true that people are not attracted to a cold and unfriendly congregation, but our desire to welcome new people is not so that people will say nice things about us, or just come back but caring for others is a tangible and necessary expression of the very gospel we claim to believe. In contrast to that...

II. Arrogance is the path toward judgment. (6-9)

Arrogance is the evidence of a heart that says, “I am fundamentally better than others. I am not as bad as God says. I have some intrinsically good things about me. I may need some help from God, but I am certainly not as bad off as others. At least I am not like _____.” What did you notice about that description? The arrogant person divides people into categories of “people like me” and “people not as valuable as me.” That is why arrogant people do not care about little people since little people are the people who are not as valuable as they are.

A. Arrogant people do not care about little people. (1-4)

Little people are those who do not really matter. They have nothing to offer me that I could possibly want. They have nothing to add to my life. They have nothing to teach me. This attitude is not only so belittling of a person, but once you are able to convince yourself of these categories of “people like me” and “people not as valuable as me” then it is easy to apply two different sets of rules for them and believe (wrongly) that the people in the “people like me” group deserve preferential treatment while the “people not as valuable as me” can be treated less so; unfairly, perhaps discarded or even killed. People who are not in my group (age, gender, race, education level, etc.) can be discarded. (pic – two circles) (pic – circle inside of circle)

Boston marathon bomber – killing police officer Collier; it goes both ways though.

B. Arrogant people do not care if they hurt little people. (6)

A person who causes one of these little ones to sin, is pictured as someone who puts a stumbling block in the path of another person that results in that person falling over it and experiencing great bodily harm. A person who causes one of these little ones to sin is described elsewhere by Christ as a false prophet. I believe that is what he has in mind here as well. There are two types of false prophets. There are those who teach false doctrine in a church and because of the trust factor that is found in a church, false prophets are able to influence others and lead them astray, which results in grave harm to those who are under their influence. The other type of false prophet is one who teaches true doctrine but does it for the purpose of being respected, admired, or who exploits his position of influence and trust for wicked purposes. Publicly, he appears to be a man of giftedness and perhaps charm. But, he is actually a predator waiting to take advantage of the trust that is given to him in order to pursue his wicked schemes. When someone who has been in a position of spiritual influence in your life is revealed to be a hypocrite, it is devastating. The harm that is done to the church is so very deep, which is why Jesus is so intense. The warning here in vs.6 and following is quite possibly the strongest language that Jesus uses in his entire life.

These verses are particularly personal, not only for me, but I suspect for just about everyone here. Many years ago, in another region of the country, I knew a girl whose father was a respected Christian leader. One day she confided to me that for years her father had been abusing her. I was young and did not even have a category for this in my mind. It was the first time that I had ever experienced such a close-up view of the devastation, pain, confusion, fear, resentment, torment, and false guilt that can overwhelm and dominate people who have experienced abuse at the hands of someone they trusted, or should have been able to trust. When this person admitted to herself what had really happened to her, it was like a dam burst. I witnessed personal trauma that I had never even contemplated before.

But, beloved, we are capable of inflicting the same kind of pain, maybe not to the same degree as what I have just described, but it feels very similar when we, by our hypocrisy or harshness give people a reason to question the faith. Let's say that you are a math teacher in high school, but you do not balance your own checkbook. Is that going to devastate your students? No. Let's say that you are a painter and your own house needs painting. Is that going to cause the people around you to be personally conflicted and full of doubts? No. But, if you stand before people and teach the Bible and then live contrary to what you teach and by means of your hypocrisy cause those around you to question the gospel, or when you enjoy a reputation at church as being a kind, faithful, follower of Christ, but at home you are a human wrecking ball, then Jesus says that it is better if a millstone (pic) would be anchored to your neck and you would be thrown in the depth of the sea. The millstone that Jesus is talking about is the several-ton-stone that can only be turned by a powerful animal and is used to grind up seeds into meal. Jesus is graphic with his language because this is a serious issue. The imagery is of a violent, swift and certain death. When you profess to believe in Jesus, you are professing to believe on the One who is safe, secure, true, faithful, loving, merciful, kind and patient. When you profess faith in him, others should assume, that though you are not perfect that you are indeed

following him. And when they find out that you have been talking behind their back, or they watch you sing God's praises in church and feel your wrath and hear you cuss them out at home, they don't know what to do with that. No one does. The reason is obvious. The truths of God's Word are indeed true and they affect us deeper than anything in all of life. And, while it is true that we should put our hope in Jesus and not in man, the reality is, we are believers. We are people who not only believe in Jesus, but because we believe in Jesus, we tend to believe others when they tell us that they believe in Jesus too. The gospel is the foundation for our trust. We ask people to pray for us. We confide struggles with one another. And when someone that we trusted turns out to be a fraud, it takes the wind out of our sails, and some people it seems, never get it back.

When Jesus said "whoever" (6), he was making it clear that any of us has the potential of being a stumbling block and causing another person to sin. Beloved, take seriously your profession of faith.

C. Arrogant people do not realize the judgment they are under. (7-9)

1) People who do not care if they cause others to stumble are not believers. (7a)

"Woe to the world for temptations (stumbling blocks – scandals) to sin!" When Jesus says "woe" he is pronouncing judgment in a grievous, gut-wrenching manner. Christ knows what is in store for a person who is harming those whom Christ loves. He knows the consequences of judgment that will be visited on those who abuse the body. When you think about it, this is a double grief. There is grief for the ones who stumble, but there is judgment for those who cause the stumbling. In fact, as difficult as the grief is for those who are the victims, the predators are the ones who face a fate that is so serious, that Jesus says it would be better to be forcibly drowned in a manner where one has no hope, because the judgment that comes upon these predators and perpetrators who do not repent, is one that has no hope either.

2) Temptations are necessary because of this present darkness. (7b)

"For it is necessary that temptations come." Sin is part of our world order and will be until it is banished once and for all in the final age. But, listen carefully because this is a very important point that Christ is making here. *The presence of sin in this world does not excuse the presence of sin in our lives.* We do not say, "Hey, nobody's perfect" as a reason not to fight sin, but as a confession of our weakness and need of grace. The reality of temptations is not to cause us to be apathetic but is a reason for vigilance. Which is why Jesus says, *"but woe to the one by whom temptation comes."*

3) You dare not be the source of them. (7c)

I believe that there are degrees of punishment in hell. Perhaps a better way to explain it would be, I believe that there are specific judgments that some suffer, just as I believe

that there are specific rewards in heaven. This “woe” statement by Christ (end of v.7) appears to be a specific judgment that is for those who cause “these little ones to sin.”

4) Get radical when addressing sin. (8-9)

John Owen famously said, “*Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.*”

Cutting off your hand or your foot may severely limit the way you pursue a sin, but it would not address the root of the sin since that is a heart issue. For that reason, I do not believe that Jesus is speaking literally, but using strong figurative language because his point is so very urgent. Dismembering oneself is a desperate act.

You may recall the story of Aron Ralston (pic) who was hiking in Utah’s Bluejohn Canyon and in a strange course of events managed to dislodge an 800 lb. chock stone that pinned his hand and forearm. After 5 days of being trapped and with his hope of rescue being gone, he was left with no other choice than to cut his own arm off in order to save his life. In that moment Aron made a decision. He decided that life without his arm was more important than dying with it. Jesus is saying that you have to be that radical in dealing with sin, particularly if your sin is going to be the cause of someone else stumbling, because hell is so much worse.

Now, what is true about an individual (which is the emphasis of these verses) is true about the church. Jesus is going to address that in verses 15-19. If you are not aggressively and radically confronting sin in your life, then you are going to balk at helping your church deal with sin in its life. If you want your church to be healthy and holy, then be serious about pursuing personal purity. Be serious about confronting sin in your life. Make no excuses, cut yourself no slack and take no prisoners. Show no mercy to your sin because it will show no mercy to you.

When the sin of others (directly or indirectly) gives you an occasion to stumble:

1. Realize that your grief is real and that Jesus knows it.
2. Realize that the guilt and condemnation on the predator is real and hopeless. Let this truth remind you that vengeance is not yours.

If you are not aggressively dealing with sin in your life:

1. You will only fight sin to the degree that you realize how serious it is.
2. Carefully considering the collateral damage of your sin committed (or its potential) is a great weapon in your fight against it.

If you are aggressively dealing with sin in your life:

1. Realize that Jesus is a bigger Savior than you are sinner.
2. Believe from your heart that the blood of Jesus completely cleanses us from all sin.