



Matthew 18:6–7

6 “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.
7 Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!

Reflection

Near the end of chapter 17 Jesus' disciples are filled with grief at the prospect of his coming death. But quite quickly it seems their thoughts have turned back to themselves. In particular, who might be the greatest amongst them. Perhaps it's because Jesus has often spoken about rewards in the kingdom of heaven. Or maybe it's because Jesus recently honoured Peter, James and John in taking them to witness his transfiguration. Or it could be because over the last few chapters Peter has been repeatedly singled out. Whatever it was, in yesterday's passage Jesus' disciples asked him a question about greatness.

‘Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’

‘Could it be Abraham? The founding father of the Jewish nation. Maybe it’s Elijah or Moses? Or maybe even one of us? I mean, Jesus has chosen us hasn’t he? Out of everyone he chose us. There were twelve tribes of Israel and he’s chosen twelve disciples, like a New Israel. And we’ve left everything to follow Jesus. He’s teaching and training us privately and he’s even given us power to heal the sick and cast out demons. Could it be that we will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’

Can you hear the pride creeping in? I think Jesus can. And so in response he places amongst these twelve Jewish men a small child off the street. By way of illustration.

Jesus is about to teach them about greatness in the kingdom of heaven. But not before stamping out their pride.

‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’ (18:3)

Unless you change and become like little children (who had the lowest station in the ancient world and were utterly dependant) you will never even enter the kingdom of heaven. ‘Watch out for pride! Because child-like humility is essential in order to even the kingdom of God. And in answer to your question, humility is also the path to greatness.’

And with this little child still standing

amongst them, Jesus then continues on to compare citizens of the kingdom of heaven with little children. In fact, he's going to do so over the next few days as he teaches us about relationships within the church. This the central theme of Matthew 18–20 which many see as the fourth speech or discourse in Matthew's gospel, they call it the Discourse on the Church, and its all about relationships within the church.

Perhaps Jesus is even pointing at the little child standing in their midst when he says in verse 6 of today's passage,

6 “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be

drowned in the depths of the sea.

This is a shocking statement. But before we discuss it it's important to understand who's in view. This little child is an illustration. Jesus has just identified all believers as little children and so when he says in our passage 'If anyone causes one of these little ones' he clarifies by adding 'those who believe in me' just to make sure we're with him. So while little children are included in Jesus' statement he's speaking about all believers who've come to him in humble repentance and faith. All the children of God.

He says if anyone causes a Christian brother or sister to stumble — whether that be a little child or an elderly widow, or anyone in-between — it would be better for them

to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

We've seen the power, directness and graphic nature of Jesus' language before but surely this must be one of his most severe warnings about spiritual punishment in all of Scripture. Anyone who causes one of the children of God to sin, to stumble, to falter in their faith — be warned. Jesus then rehearses one of the most brutal forms of punishment in the Roman world.

To be sure, the cruellest legal punishment in Jesus' day was crucifixion, but this image of drowning represents a Roman punishment even more horrifying to Jewish hearers than crucifixion. Given its Old Testament connotations Jewish people had a

deep fear of the ocean. And this image is so graphic because everyone would have been able to picture a large millstone, they were part of daily life.

When people in a community had grain to grind they took it to the community mill, pouring it between an upper and lower millstone. Jesus here refers not to the lighter millstone turned by a woman's hand but to the heavier community kind turned by a donkey. A huge stone wheel that was attached to a horizontal bar connected to a donkey's harness. As the animal walked around in circles, the wheel rolled over a raised stone slab (similar to a large bird-bath) crushing the grain underneath.

It would be better for you to have a large millstone tied around your neck and for

you to be taken out to the deepest part of the ocean and drowned – it would be better for you, a mercy – than what will happen to you if you cause one of my little children to stumble. This is a horrifying image; the certainty and inescapability of judgement, the weight of your sin, metaphorically tied around your neck, not just as a mark of certain death, but also as the means by which you will die.

But what does Jesus mean? In the last verse of yesterday's passage Jesus said of the little child standing amongst his disciples that 'whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.' But the inverse is also true. Anyone who rejects one such child also rejects Jesus. Now on one level Jesus is speaking about the way we treat children. But on the level of

his illustration he's speaking more broadly about all the children of God. If you wickedly try and entice one of God's children away from the faith, you're not just damaging his people but you are deliberately rejecting him. And the horrifying fate that Jesus has just described will be far preferable to what is in store for you.

Jesus continues in chilling fashion,

7 Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!

Think

As Christians, and rightfully confident in

our salvation, our temptation is to make light of verses like these. This isn't me, we might well say. And eleven of the twelve disciples could well have said exactly that. But Judas, who went on to betray Jesus, also made up one of their number. And so at the very least this passage is teaching Christians to be on their guard for people in our midst who might seek to lead our children and brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers in Christ away from the faith. For this reason and because of Jesus' warning in our passage we must remain forever vigilant.

Pray

The weight of a passage like this must lead us to prayer. Pray for those who are right now being unsuspectingly led away

from the faith. Pray that they might wake up to what is going on and choose life. Pray that God would intervene, that Christians around them would speak the truth in love and that their words might find their target.

But pray also for the most innocent and vulnerable amongst us, not metaphorical-ly this time, but for our actual little children. Pray for their protection within the church, that we might be ever vigilant, so that the unspeakable evil of child abuse within our walls may never, ever happen again. Perhaps it's in light of this thought that the severity of verse six is best understood. Jesus promises us:

‘...it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around

their neck and to be drowned in the
depths of the sea'