

**Title Slide #1 How to be great in the Kingdom.**

INTRODUCTION

We wish it was easy to change ourselves and be anything we want to be. I suppose that is some of the appeal of super-hero movies; people are suddenly transformed into a being with super-powers, often by no effort on their own. They encounter some sort of super-natural force or some sort of radiation or a bite from an “irradiated spider” and transform into “Spider-man!”

That extends into the comic world, where “Calvin”, in the comic strip, “Calvin and Hobbes” (written by Bill Watterson) is no different. Calvin is a little kid with a wild imagination. His friend is “Hobbes” is his stuffed tiger that comes to life in his imagination.

**Slide #2 The transmogrifier.**

Calvin is standing next to a large upside-down cardboard box...and Hobbes is there.

Calvin says > This transmogrifier will turn you into anything at all.

Calvin> All you do is set this indicator, and the machine automatically restructures your chemical configuration. You can be an eel, a baboon, a giant slug, or a dinosaur.

Hobbes says > What if you want to be something else?

~~Calvin~~> I left some room. Just write it on the side.

It would be nice if we had a character transmogrifier. If we could just step into the chamber and be transformed into a mature, holy, believer, full of faith. But we can't. Though God has made us alive in Christ changing us from the inside and calling us “born again,” so that we are literally a “new

creation,” he desires that we grow. Every parent loves their baby, but every parent also wants the baby to grow and mature; it’s a tragedy if the child does not learn to walk or talk. God doesn’t leave us as newborns, as wonderful as they are; He wills that we grow, and it will be difficult.

A few weeks ago, we started into Matthew chapter 18. The disciples asked Jesus what turned out to be an embarrassing question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” We know from another passage in the Bible that they expected one of their own, the twelve disciples, to be in the answer. We know this because it says in the book of Luke, “An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. (9:46)”

See, they wanted to be something other than what they were, and they wanted a quick way to get there. They wanted to “be” great without “becoming” great. They thought that simply because they were chosen to be disciples, that their greatness was already assumed.

**Jesus in the remainder of this chapter, in a series of parables, explains how to be transformed in their hearts into those that are truly great in the kingdom of heaven.**

A few weeks ago, we saw what Jesus did, chapter 18 verse 2,

*2 And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them 3 and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

Jesus set them back. He was saying you need to be thinking first if you will even be there. You must humble yourself to be like a child to enter the kingdom of heaven. In other words, you must be willing to accept that you are not great and can do nothing, and everything you need can only be received by God’s grace.

Next, he told them some other solemn words, to re-orient them

<sup>5</sup> *“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, <sup>6</sup> 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.*

His words were strange and startling but showed how important to God each child is that puts their faith in him. Their faith and life in Christ are so important that it elicits a strong reaction of judgment from God for anyone who messes with them. If we want to be great, we need to see God’s children as he does, ones whose faith is very precious and needs to be protected.

OUR CONDITION

**We are just like the disciples were. We want to be different, we want a quick transformation, and we are naturally self-seeking. If we want to be great in the kingdom, then we need to listen carefully to Jesus’ words.**

Let’s read part of our passage for this week, Matthew chapter 18, verse 10,

SCRIPTURE PASSAGE

***Matthew 18:10–14 (ESV)***

**10** *“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.*

**12** *What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?*

**13** *And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.*

**14** *So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.*

In this story we see again how valuable God sees his children. Jesus said that his earthly children (the little ones) are so important to God that “their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.”

This is not saying that each person has a guardian angel. The writer of the book of Hebrews states this,

**Hebrews 1:14 (ESV)** (speaking about the Angels...)

**14** Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

God’s children are so important to him that God sends angels out, from his very presence to come to minister to you and other believers.

Slide #4

**If we want to be great in the kingdom, we need to understand how valuable God’s children are to him.**

Then Jesus continued by saying, (verse 12) “What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?”

Jesus used his stories over and over again, in different contexts, to make a point. In the book of Luke, we see Jesus saying something similar, but the shepherd is seeking the lost sheep to show how God seeks for us in order to bring us to salvation. In this story Jesus is saying that God also searches you out when you are already saved but straying from him. God searches to save us, and he searches to keep us saved. God is relentless in seeking us out to keep us from harm.

God sends angels to help us and he himself searches for us when we stray.  
Wow!

#### **Slide #4**

**If we want to be great in the kingdom, we need to understand how valuable God's children are to him.**

Another way to see this is that Jesus is telling the disciples to learn to be shepherds of God's people. They will seek and save the lost, just like he does.

We looked a few weeks ago at Ezekiel 34. In this passage Ezekiel is saying to the leaders of Israel that they are bad shepherds,

#### **Ezekiel 34:2-5 (ESV)**

**2** "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?

**3** You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep.

**4** The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

**5** So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered;

#### **Ezekiel 34:11-12 (ESV)**

**11** “For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.

**12** As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

Each one of us can be shepherds. Not just the disciples or apostles or the pastor, but each of us, can be involved in shepherding others. It is God’s nature, it should be in ours.

Jesus is saying, “Stop thinking about yourselves if you want to be great.” If you want to be great, do what God does; he seeks out the straying! If you want to grow personally, then turn your attention off of yourself and try to help someone else.

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... and do what he does. Let’s continue reading some more instructions from Jesus about what is important to God.

SCRIPTURE PASSAGE, CHAPTER 18:15-20

**15** “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

**16** But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

**17** If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

**18** Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

**19** Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

**20** For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Keep in mind that this passage is known as one of the primary “church discipline” passages. It instructs the believers and church leaders how to deal with sin in the church and do it in a fair and orderly manner all the way through the ultimate discipline of “excommunication,” expelling someone from the church.

But let’s not lose sight of what the real goal is really about: **Maintaining relationships and fellowship in the church.** It is about taking all measures to restore a person and avoid excommunication. Most of the time, perhaps 95% of the time, people when they have hurt someone and are told about it will repent and agree and will love each other more for the embarrassing discussion of it.

Just like the straying sheep story, this is about how to restore a person to fellowship and make sure their relationships stay fixed so that they do not leave the church or that their relationships breakdown and life in the church becomes less satisfying and more difficult for everyone.

We know what it feels like when someone does something to offend us, we have this reluctance to talk to them, or this mental tally that stays in our mind. We are thinking, “when will this thing be dealt with?”

Jesus is telling them to deal with it right then! In the sermon on the mount, Jesus said something similar,

**Matthew 5:23–24 (ESV)**

**23** So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, **24** leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

**God’s concern is that we maintain our relationships so that we always want to go to church and see everyone and have a place of belonging.**

Sometimes, we that are in church work, see this passage as a way to “protect the purity of the church from sin.” I have thought this myself, and I suppose it is true to some extent, but in thinking about this in context, **I think that sort of thinking can really misconstrue the intent. This passage is about people and not so much about the institution of the church.**

In some churches, they might call this room a “sanctuary” meaning a holy place. They might restrict what happens in here to be just holy things. I try to refer to this room as the “auditorium” and not a “sanctuary.” It is not holy, this building is not holy, it used to be a bank filled with the world’s money. But what is holy in here is you. You are holy to God, and he cares for you and your faith. There will not be churches in heaven. They are not eternal. Only people are.

Some religions think that it is the responsibility of the followers to protect the honor of God. They seek to persecute the infidels or non-believers. They seek to kill or imprison those that might make light of their religion or view of God. I know of some Christians in one part of the world that were imprisoned for five years for praying against the holy book of this religion.

We do not have to protect God’s holiness. He can take care of that himself. He has an entire world of sin that is constantly in front of him. He does not hide in church or sanctuary in order to protect himself from it. He came



down to the earth to befriend sinners and get dirty and bear their sin on the cross. We do not need to protect God from sin.

Thus, this passage about church discipline is mostly about how not to have church discipline. It is about how to meet personally with a brother or sister to turn them from their sin or offense so that their relationships can be unhindered. That is God's will for each person, that despite their sins, they will experience forgiveness and have relationships in the church that are free and joyful with no trace of hinderance. He wants all of his children to have a place of belonging.

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... And that are relationships with other believers are important too.

We are not talking about having some sort of inquisition here where we drag out all sorts of secret sins. We are all sinners. But when we sin in such a way that people hear about something that we did that reflects badly on Christ or that we do something, or don't do something that we should have done, and it hurts people, then something needs to be said. That is what Jesus said, "If your brother sins against you."

Most people are not going to want to do any of this. They might say, as is common in our culture, "well if that is the way they want to be, then to heck with them!" Many people at first sign of trouble leave a church and go look for another one.

That option is not open to us. If people do that, they are cowardly and are also disobeying God and his will for them. He wants to take our relationships with our brothers and sisters so seriously that he does not want us to come to worship anywhere, until we have dealt with it. He

wants you in worship regularly, every week, so go and deal with anything that keeps you from having a clear relationship with your brothers or sisters in Christ. He is calling you to see the importance of your relationships as he does.

But for those that are courageous, there are four steps: 1) first tell the brother and sister their fault or sin against you. If they repent of it, you have won your brother. This is the desired ending point. It is personal, it is loving, it restores and preserves the relationship. Conflicts and misunderstandings and even sin are inevitable. But I can say that the people that I argue with the most are my best friends; just ask my wife. Those that don't let me get away things are my best friends.

2) If that does not work, then take one or two others. Sometimes other people can help to clarify and also to press the importance of the offense and its implications. Hopefully it ends there and the problem is dealt with understanding, compassion and forgiveness.

3) Step three says take it to the church. This is something that has to be carefully considered; how to bring it to the church. We don't want everyone to know every detail, but the basic nature of the issue. This is like bring a problem to the family dinner table when everyone is there. The goal is again that through the pressure of the various relationships that the person will repent and be restored.

Again, for most people this is way beyond what they signed up for when being part of a church. Our modern way is to be independent and consequently, unfortunately, alone. But most people would rather be alone than have anyone "mess with them" or be involved in their business. That is not a biblical value and it not how God sees it. If you are his child, you are part of his family and families know things about you.

4) the final step if a person does not repent with one person or two people or the whole church, is that they are “put out” of the church or “excommunicated.” Jesus says in verse ,

*<sup>17</sup> And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

The Apostle Paul in teaching the church at Corinth about how to deal with sin in the church, finally does come to the place where the purity of the church is to be considered. He tells them to remove the leaven (or sin) from the church. This is a sin that is known and is notorious, bring shame to the gospel.

### **1 Corinthians 5:9–13 (ESV)**

**9** I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— **10** not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. **11** But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. **12** For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? **13** God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

This is why it is called “excommunication.” This person has come to the place where they are not listening to the church and being put out and the Apostle Paul says not even to talk to such a one.

Cruel? Well, they are the one that says they don’t want to hear what the church is saying. It has gone through three rounds of intervention. They are not listening so why talk to them? The sin is to such an extent that there is

nothing else left to talk about. But still this practice, while it seems cruel, is for the purpose of restoring them. **They are meant to be so heart-broken that they repent of their unrepentant, impenitent heart that they return.**

Ultimately, the only grounds for a person to be removed from the church is “impenitence” – or the lack of repentance. There is no sin that cannot be repented of, though there might be sins that need to be punished by civil authorities (like murder or abuse or thefts at a certain level).

Usually when dealing with this issue of excommunication, we also talk about the verses in 2 Corinthians where the impenitent man in 1 Corinthians is re-admitted back to the church because the excommunication had the desired effect – repentance.

### **2 Corinthians 2:6–10 (ESV)**

**6** For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, **7** so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. **8** So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. **9** For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. **10** Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive.

### CONCLUSION

These verses in Matthew are a clear call to think like Christ; to think like a Christian in terms of how we see our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are so important to God that Christ died for them. That means that we cannot follow Christ if we do not see how important they are to God.

This is why that it is not really possible to follow Christ apart from being in a church and knowing other Christians and interacting with them. As they say, “You cannot love Christ, and hate his bride” (the church).

God loves each believer so much that he sends his ministering angels to minister to them. We don't know how this happens, but it does.

God so loves a straying believer so much that he seeks them out until he finds them. This should encourage anyone that has a "prodigal" son or daughter.

God also loves the fellowship of the church so much that he wants each one of us to stand up, be courageous, and talk to one another about our offenses to each other, whether we think they caused it or whether we think they have something against us. God wants all of the clouds of hurt feelings, and desires for us to "distance" ourselves from each other, to be removed. He wants us to love each other as he has loved us.

We have to be careful in bringing up each other's sins that they really are sins, and not just small offenses; that they are giving offense and that we are not just "taking" offense. The Bible says in

**Proverbs 19:11 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.

We should overlook offenses when we can.

Also, we need to be aware that some sins are so serious that if they leak out into the church that they can cause real damage. We need to ask church leaders to be involved in such cases so that the needs of the church can be considered too.

The Apostle Paul's words are good encouragement,

**Galatians 6:1-3 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. <sup>2</sup> Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

I think we can see Jesus' heart here.

Next week, we are going to talk about forgiveness in Matthew 18:21 and following. It is also part of Jesus answer of how to be great in the kingdom of heaven.

Maybe I'll use this slide again...

**Slide #4**

**If we want to be great in the kingdom, we need to understand how valuable God's children are to him.**

We don't get to be "transmogrified" we instead have to learn to love one another and forget about ourselves.

Please pray with me.