

# Living for heaven on earth 1:Walk Humbly

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, do turn with me please to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 18. And we've been looking at these middle chapters in Matthew's Gospel, really under the running title of Understanding Jesus and His Church.

And in Matthew, chapter 18, we come to a concentrated teaching about His Church, which we're going to spend a few weeks looking at, and I'm going to call this Living on Earth for Heaven. It's all about understanding the true life of Jesus' Church, of His new community. And today, if you want a title, it's just simply two words, Walk Humbly.

And I'll explain why shortly. Family values has been, I suppose, the great ruin of many a politician. You remember John Major, who was sunk by the hypocrisy. You have members of his government that had harped on and on about flying the family flag. And, of course, many of them were caught with their trousers down or with their hands in the family piggy bank.

[ 1 : 10 ] And the government was destroyed. And Mr. Blair came along saying that his government would be whiter than white. But, of course, it's beginning to look a little bit less than white now, isn't it?

Poor Mr. Blunkett. His tough, moralistic rhetoric as Home Secretary seems not to sit so easily on the airwaves these days, doesn't it?

But, of course, real family values, real family values is not about moralistic pronouncements. It's not about tough discipline.

It's actually all about understanding grace and right relationships. At least that's, at any rate, what Jesus means by family values.

He teaches us that life in his church is a family affair. It's the new community that he's gathering around him. It's the church that he's building, which death and hell itself shall not prevail against.

[ 2 : 13 ] It's not an institution. It's a family. It's tragic that so often that seems to have been forgotten. Instead, the church has been full of crippling formalism, of stiffness.

It's no wonder it's become, in many ways, so dead and so stuffy. But Jesus' church is not an institution. To quote Groucho Marx in another context, who wants to live in an institution?

No, Jesus' church is a family. And that's what Matthew has been teaching us all the way through this central part of his gospel. Do you remember back in chapter 12, verse 49 and 50? Your family has come, they said.

He looked around and said, here is my mother and my sister and brothers. Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, they are my family. They are my mother and my sister and my brothers.

You see, it's a family. And being in Jesus' family means, as we saw last time in Matthew chapter 17, it means that we're following Jesus to live in the family home, in the glorious heavenly kingdom.

[ 3 : 23 ] It means that we are sons of the King. It means that we're free from all the bounds of this world, all its rulers, all their taxes.

Do you remember? To the joy of church treasurers everywhere. It means that we're heirs of the cosmos. But do you remember we also saw that being part of Jesus' family means that we get there by following him here.

All that glory is promised to us, yes, but it's promised not yet. Remember chapter 16, verse 27? It's when the Son of Man comes again in glory to judge the world in righteousness, then, then he will repay each according to what they've done.

Not, of course, repaying them as though they'd earned it, no. But then they will receive the inheritance that is theirs by virtue of the fact that they are sons and heirs, adopted into the family of Christ, adopted into the family of the King through faith in Jesus.

But for now, you see, for now we live in anticipation of that day. We live following Jesus. And that means in this world, we live, as Jesus says, carrying our cross.

[ 4 : 39 ] We live losing our life in this world's eyes in order to gain life, real life, in the glory of Jesus and his kingdom.

But as we walk the way of Jesus in this world, crucially, Jesus is teaching us we don't walk alone. You'll never walk alone. No, as inheritors of the heavenly kingdom, we're living on earth now as his family.

We're living on earth now for heaven. And that's what Matthew chapter 18 is all about. In this fourth teaching block in Matthew's gospel, Jesus, as the head of the family, as the head of the household, is teaching us about how to live in his household, in his church, in the community of faith.

He's teaching us what it means together to be heirs of his kingdom, what it means to live now for heaven on earth. And that's why as we read this chapter all the way through it, we're struck by the family language.

It's introduced at the end of chapter 17 with Jesus talking about the sons of the king. All the way through chapter 18, there's talk about children, little ones, brothers, the father.

[ 5 : 56 ] See, it's all about what God requires of his family. God's family values. And especially, as verse 1 makes clear, it's all about greatness and achieving greatness in that family.

So what does God require in his family? Well, it's no surprise if you know anything about the Bible. It's very clear all the way through the Old Testament.

It's especially clear in the little summary given by the prophet Micah, chapter 6, verse 8. He asks the question, what does the Lord require of you? But to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before your God.

And in this chapter, Jesus is saying, that is exactly what is to be fulfilled now in my family, in my church, among you. That's how you are to live together on earth for heaven.

We're going to spend three weeks looking at this chapter under those three titles. First of all, today the first 14 verses are all about walking humbly. Then the next section, verses 15 to 20, are all about doing justly.

[ 7 : 08 ] And then the final part is all about loving mercy. But they're all linked and related. And today, the first thing Jesus focuses on as essential to the values of his family is that we are to learn to walk humbly before our God.

Well, what does that mean? Well, he explains it in verses 1 to 14. It falls really into three sections, although the paragraph divisions in the church Bibles is not especially helpful.

But it's all about walking humbly as the only way to achieve true greatness in the family of God, in the church of Jesus Christ. And it means three things.

These are our three headings today. It means, first of all, receiving Jesus himself. Second, it means not rejecting Jesus' brothers and sisters.

And thirdly, it means reflecting Jesus' father. First of all, then, verses 1 to 5 tell us that walking humbly and the way to greatness in Jesus' kingdom is receiving Jesus himself.

[ 8 : 19 ] It means that true greatness in the kingdom of heaven means having been humbled ourselves by God's grace and become utterly dependent upon Jesus for everything.

trusting him because we know that we have nothing in ourselves. First of all, look at verse 1.

It's vitally important here to see the connection with what goes before. Verse 1 says, At that time, the disciples came to Jesus. In other words, it was immediately after the teaching of chapter 17.

And particularly, after Jesus' teaching about his followers being heirs of the kingdom, sons of the royal king, far greater than any earthly kings or governments.

And that's what makes sense of the question they ask, you see. It begins with a so in the original manuscript that's missed out here. So, in the light of the fact that you're telling us that we are lords of the universe, sons of the king, so, so who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

[ 9 : 25 ] If you read Mark's account of this in Matthew chapter 9, he makes it clear that the disciples had been arguing among themselves along the way as to which one of them was the greatest. Isn't it astonishing?

You've got chapter 17 where we read last time that their own failure and faithlessness had been shown up. They couldn't heal the demon-possessed boy.

They lacked the spiritual power and authority. Jesus had taught them clearly about his own humiliation, his journey to death on a cross and still the only thing that's occupying their minds is

which one of them is the greatest.

Which one of them gets the greatest honor? But, we shouldn't be too harsh on the disciples, should we? After all, we've got more understanding of the gospel and its implications today than they did then, haven't we?

And isn't it true that often we are still far more concerned with our own status, with our own proper recognition for ourselves than self-humiliation and sacrifice?

[10:37] I think so. The Holy Spirit must think that we need to learn that too because he's recorded the lesson for us here. and Matthew records it so that we will listen and so that we'll learn so we better do that.

And when the disciples ask about greatness and when we in our hearts harbor similar pretensions, Jesus, do you see, Jesus immediately turns the tables. He puts the spotlight right back on the questioners.

You see, Jesus is never in the dock. He's never the one being interrogated. No, we're in the dock with Jesus. He turns it on us. And what Jesus says is, do you see verse 2?

What Jesus says is, never mind about being the greatest in the kingdom, unless you turn, unless you change fundamentally your attitudes, you'll never even enter the kingdom.

Never mind be the greatest. Now we've got to grasp the shock in those words. That's just as shocking as when Jesus turns to Peter in chapter 16 after Peter's confession.

[11:46] And says, get behind me, Satan. Jesus is speaking here to his closest disciples. He's speaking to those who are already following him.

He's speaking to those who are within the community of his church. And he's saying to them, unless you change, you'll never enter the kingdom of heaven when it becomes a final reality.

Isn't that staggering? That is, what he's saying is, you can profess faith in Jesus as Peter did. You can have all the sound teaching in the world as Peter and these disciples certainly did.

You can be part of the church of Jesus Christ on earth. You can even be pillars of the church like these apostles were going to be. And yet, you can be barred entry into the kingdom of heaven.

You will never enter, says Jesus. Those are identical words to Matthew 5 verse 20 where he says, unless your righteousness exceeds those of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

[12:58] Unless, he says, verse 3, you become like little children. What does Jesus mean by that? Well, I have to say some of the scholars have very strange ideas as to what that means.

They go on talking about children's innocence, children's natural goodness, children's natural unselfishness. You either have to assume that these scholars have no children themselves, or are so cloaked away in their ivory towers that they've never come across anybody else's children if they can possibly entertain that kind of idea.

What a lot of nonsense. Of course, it's nothing to do with that. It may be harder for us to grasp this in the 21st century because we've become so utterly sentimental about children, haven't we?

We treat children as though they had all the responsibility of adults. We're obsessed with children's rights and all that kind of thing. It's ruining the chances that our teachers have of doing anything useful with children in school, wrecking the sense of order that we have in family life and society today.

But it was quite the polar opposite in 1st century Palestine. Absolutely no sentimentality at all about children. Children, especially small children like this little child Jesus talks about, they had no rights at all.

[14:18] They had absolutely no recognition. They had no status. The rabbis used to speak of a triad of incompetence, the deaf and dumb, the weak-minded, those underage.

That's how children's status was regarded in Jewish law. They were absolutely nothing. They were those having no status in the eyes of the world.

And that is what you must embrace for yourselves, says Jesus. That's the pill that you must swallow and not gag on it.

Not just when you come to Jesus first and when you have to admit everything that has gone before in my life has been a mistake. It's all been a waste.

It's been nothing. I've got to begin all over again. And that is a very bitter pill to swallow, isn't it, when you're first confronted with Jesus because that's what he asks us to do.

[15:16] That's what becoming a believer means. That's why John describes it as being born again. It's like starting from scratch, admitting everything you've ever stood for before has been wrong. Terribly hard for proud humanity.

But Jesus is not just saying that's what we must be when we first come to Christ. He's saying that every step of the way after that continues that same attitude.

That that's the only way of discipleship. Embracing the reality that I am nothing, that I have nothing, that I have no status at all except that which I receive from the arms of Jesus.

Jesus. And that's what Jesus has been saying over again since Peter first exposed his identity in chapter 16, 16 with his confession you are the Christ.

The way of the Christ is the way of the cross, says Jesus. The way of claiming no status. The way of the Christian is the way of the cross. It's death to all earthly pride.

[16:19] It's being utterly humbled. It's accepting the status of nothing. It's losing your life in the world's eyes in order to gain true life in the kingdom.

It's becoming like little children in the eyes of a disdainful world having no status at all and therefore becoming willingly dependent on Jesus, on trusting him totally and his welcome of us as being the only status and acceptance that we need.

You see verse four? Whoever humbles himself, not now just like the status of children in general, but he says like this little child. Whoever humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Well what had this little child done? This little child had come when Jesus had called him. He'd come through the crowd of the disciples to be right in the midst with Jesus. Mark tells us Jesus had his arms around him.

This little child trusted Jesus when he called him. He put himself in totally carefree dependence on Jesus despite no doubt the dirty looks and the murmurings from the disciples.

[17:34] You read on to chapter 19, you'll find that the disciples were hardly a very child-friendly bunch. They didn't like children. Go away. And this little child come through all of that and put himself in the arms of Jesus.

And Jesus says unless you are like this little child willing to come boldly to the arms of Jesus even though you may be viewed as nothing, even though you may be scorned by the world and society around about us, unless you are willing to come boldly to Jesus because you trust him to give you all the value that you need.

Because you trust him to make you great. Because you trust Jesus to accept you even though you know that you have no status of your own.

No service that warrants a welcome. No greatness other than the grace greatness that comes from him. Unless you are truly like that, says Jesus, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

heaven. But if you are like that, well, that's true greatness in the kingdom. In other words, true greatness in the kingdom only can come to those who will receive it.

[18:53] And you receive it by receiving Jesus personally. But you only receive Jesus if you've turned, if you've changed, if you have been truly humbled.

If you have truly understood the reality about sin and about grace. If you really understood about your own sin. What that really means before a holy God.

God. If you've really understood about the grace of God and what that really means in the face of your own pride. And you see, Jesus goes on to say here that whether or not that is true of you is not something that's invisible.

It's not just something that's deeply personal and private and something in your heart. No, look at verse five. It's very clear. If that is true, says Jesus, if your heart is changed like that, it will be visible.

If you have truly received Jesus, if you have truly welcomed him as Savior, if you have truly embraced his life-giving grace, then that is going to be evident in your welcome of fellow believers.

[20:20] Whoever receives one such child in my name, he says in verse five, welcomes me. Whoever welcomes them has welcomed me. He's not just talking here about being kind to children, is he?

Of course, Jesus wants us not to despise children in the church. Chapter 19 will make that clear. But the parallel of verse five and verse six is clear. One such child in verse five is one little one who believes in me.

Verse six. What Jesus means is that if we recognize our Savior as the head of our family, we will recognize and welcome brothers and sisters. And we do so on the same basis as that which Jesus has welcomed us.

We receive them because Christ has received them. And Christ has given them status. We love them for Christ has loved them.

We're family. We're one with others who have been brought into the same family. We are one with all the rest of those who have nothing, who have no status but have been given everything by Jesus Christ.

[ 21 : 28 ] Who have been humbled by the grace of God in their lives. And to receive them, says Jesus, is to receive him. To love them is to love him.

And it is if we do receive them and welcome them and love them, that shows whether we've received Jesus or not. Whether we love Jesus or not. Simple as that.

That's a very strong warning to all of us in the church, isn't it? All of us in the community of Jesus. A real challenge to our scale of values, is it not?

What's the evidence that we have received Jesus? us? Well, who do we receive? Who do we welcome into our homes, for example? The Bible commands us to have an open home.

It places hospitality very high. Do we share our lives with all Christ's children? Or actually, is it that we're not really hospitable, but we're just entertainers?

[ 22 : 35 ] our homes are open to our own kind of people. Who do we welcome into our hearts? Who do we befriend and truly give ourselves to?

Is it just those like us in the world's eyes, those that have the status that the world confers? Yes, they're all very similar people. Or is it every little one who belongs to Jesus?

Maybe who are despised in worldly eyes. Maybe they're feeble. Maybe they're struggling. Maybe they're a misfit in the world's eyes. Big challenge, isn't it?

We need to read James chapter 2 much more often than we do, I think, in the Christian church. Who do we really value? And the answer to that question tells the truth about whether we really value Jesus.

That's what Jesus is saying here. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. And unless we truly receive Jesus, we may spend our life in the church, but we may not enter the kingdom of heaven.

[ 23 : 44 ] It's tough talk, isn't it? Jesus goes on. He doesn't stop there. In verses 6 to 9, he says the same thing, but he puts it the other way around. He puts it negatively. And he tells us what it means not to walk humbly, not to be great in the kingdom of heaven.

Talks about the very opposite. It's one of those necessary negatives that the Bible's full of. It makes the point for the avoidance of all doubt, as the lawyers say, doing it the other way around.

Verses 6 to 9, you see, Jesus talks about not rejecting his brothers and sisters. True greatness in the kingdom means that we will never risk ruin to Jesus' brothers and sisters, including ourselves.

verse 6, I think, in the NIV begins a new paragraph. And I think that's right. It begins with a but.

Because Jesus shows us for the avoidance of all doubt that just as receiving his brothers and sisters with real grace and love shows that we've received him, so also we reject Jesus himself.

we scorn him, we disdain him, when we risk ruin for his precious brothers and sisters. In verses 6 to 9, one idea predominates.

[ 25 : 04 ] You'll have grasped it, I hope, as I read it. It's all about causing believers to sin. The verb there, scandalon, to scandalize. In verses 6 and 8 and 9, causing someone to sin.

Things that tempt people to sin. Literally, it means cause to stumble. To be brought to a downfall. The noun is used three times there in verse 7.

Temptations to sin. Literally, it means a trap, a snare. Something that causes the stumbling.

Something that causes the falling, the downfall, the apostasy away from faith.

And Jesus' message is absolutely crystal clear because his family is such a precious thing. sin against his family.

Sin against the little ones who believe in him. His brothers and sisters is the most serious kind of sin. And the marks of true greatness, the marks of true humble greatness in the kingdom of heaven is that we never jeopardize any of Jesus' little ones.

[ 26 : 12 ] Is that we never cause any to stumble. However much it may cost us personally to ensure that. There's another clear link to the end of chapter 17 when in verse 27 Jesus says, He is free as

an heir of the kingdom.

He's not subject to any, but nevertheless, so as not to cause offense. Same word. Cause to stumble. not to risk any loss of any one of these little ones.

He will humble himself. He will submit himself to others. He will deny himself to avoid any possibility of causing stumbling.

stumbling. And those who will be great in his kingdom must be the same. Bearing any cost rather than ever, ever by our words or by our actions, rejecting brothers and sisters in Christ.

Causing them to fall and to stumble into spiritual ruin. Verse 6 shows how serious this sin really is. Jesus says it leads to eternal punishment.

[ 27 : 19 ] Do you see that? It's far better to be drowned in the sea now than to live to bear that. That's the force of a large millstone, a huge great thing that a donkey would have to turn.

Tie that around your neck and fall in the sea. There's no possibility of escape. And that's how seriously Jesus takes sin. That's how seriously he takes those who jeopardize his church.

You see, because we scorn and we reject Jesus himself when we scorn and reject his church, when we scorn his children. And of course, scorn and reject of Jesus himself is inevitably to consign ourselves to eternal loss.

It's a real warning. What it means is that we have huge responsibility for one another, for brothers and sisters in Christ. And it means that those that have positions of authority and responsibility and influence, well, they have all the more responsibility.

There are all kinds of things, aren't there, that can cause spiritual ruin in our brothers and sisters. And verse 7 is very plain and realistic, isn't it? There will be many such things in the church right till the end.

[ 28 : 41 ] Temptations will come. It's necessary. The church will never be free from ruinous influences. But Jesus says, be warned.

Do not let yourselves be one of them. Do not let it be you. Because that's the way to certain judgment. woe to the one by whom temptation comes.

Friends, there are many ways to make little ones stumble. Sometimes it can just be having a disdainful attitude. Careless words. These things alone can wound and crush a little one.

These things alone can make someone feel despised, drive them away from the family of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's a terrible thing. There's a special challenge here for church leaders.

It's so easy for an inflated sense of status to lead us to be high-handed and proud and cause others to stumble. Peter remembered that.

[ 29 : 48 ] That's why he writes in his letter in 1 Peter 5 that leaders are not to be domineering over those in their charge, but to be examples to the flock. It's even more of a stiff warning to teachers.

That's why James chapter 3 says, not many of you should aspire to be teachers because those who teach will be judged with greater strictness. He says, for we all stumble in many ways.

And we can be so easily the cause of others stumbling if we teach falsehood. There's a huge capacity for Bible teachers, for pastors, for elders, for others to cause people to stumble.

The New Testament warns us so clearly for that reason against false teachers. 2 Peter 3 talks of those who exploit others with words and cause them to stumble. He especially talks about those who entice those who are just being saved from the world by sensual passions.

Vulnerable new Christians, little ones trusting in Jesus, but being led by leaders in Jesus' church, led away to stumble by being told, well, indulge your sensual passions in any way you like.

[ 31 : 00 ] It doesn't matter. Do as you please. Sexual behavior doesn't matter. That kind of thing. And Jesus says to all who teach like that, beware. Especially to those churchmen who have high profile, who appear in the newspapers, who have influence.

Jesus says these things will be in the church and we will see them, but woe to those who do it. A horrible drowning would be far better than that woe.

Because that woe, he says in verse 8, means eternal fire. It means, verse 9, the hell of fire. What Jesus is saying is if you destroy my church, I will destroy you.

Because by rejecting them and disdainning them and these little ones, you're rejecting me. You're heaping scorn upon me and my cross and my salvation.

And we all need to take that seriously. We reject Christ if we put our brothers and sisters at risk. But also, verses 8 and 9 are clear, do you see?

[ 32 : 11 ] We reject Christ when we put ourselves at risk of spiritual ruin. Our hands and our feet and our eyes can become huge stumbling blocks to us, can't they? Stumbling blocks to our salvation.

The places we go. The things we do or don't do. The things we look at and discuss. They can cause us to stumble. They can cause our downfall.

We know that. And unless we are careful, Jesus is saying we stand under the threat of eternal fire. Of the hell of fire.

What he's saying is we're not just responsible for others, we're responsible for ourselves. We are valuable to Jesus. Paul says you're not your own, you're bought with a price.

And so we must know and fear the consequences of sin in ourselves. Friends, I doubt if many of us take nearly as seriously as we ought to the warnings of the New Testament.

[ 33 : 10 ] The warnings that are written to clearly active people in the church of Jesus Christ. Listen to Peter in 2 Peter 2 warning the living New Testament church about the dire consequences of those who profess Christ and then stumble and drift away.

Listen. If after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ our Savior, if they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse than the first.

For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of right righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the Holy Commandment delivered to them. That just reflects Jesus' language here.

So we need to be careful, don't we? There are all kinds of stumbling blocks that we can put in our own way. The things our hands are taken up with, the things our feet take us to, the things our eyes look at.

It can seem very innocent, can't it? Maybe it begins just with a right ambition to do well in our profession and we want to climb up the ladder at work. But the pressure becomes greater and our weekends begin to suffer and we're less and less in church, less and less sharing fellowship and nourishment of God's Word and we begin to stumble.

[ 34 : 30 ] Maybe it's sport. These days, especially for young folk, that has become such an all-consuming passion. And it's a good thing.

Unless it begins to squeeze out our spiritual life, our church life. It can be wealth. 1 Timothy 6 warns us about the entrapping power, the snaring power of wealth that leads to ruin and to destruction. It can be something as simple and innocent as a lovely holiday cottage. Wonderful place of rest and relaxation, but it can become one of the most dangerous things to spiritual life.

Because if more and more of your weekends are taken up and the lovely relaxation of your holiday cottage, and less and less are taken up with playing your part in the heart of the mission of the church, inevitably you begin to go astray, to drift, to stumble.

Can I ask us to go home this week and to meditate upon verses 6 to 9 each day and ask ourselves whether we really are respecting Jesus' family values?

[ 35 : 48 ] Rejecting Jesus' family is rejecting Him and there can be no place in His kingdom for those who reject Him. But finally, walking humbly, Jesus says, does not just mean receiving Jesus Himself.

It's not just not rejecting His brothers and sisters. Finally, in verses 10 to 14, He says it's more. It's reflecting His heavenly Father. True greatness in the kingdom of heaven means having hearts aligned with our heavenly Father, whose love is so great, so deep, so wide, that He's willing to give everything to those who deserve nothing and who rejoices with great joy over the wandering little one that's restored to their place in the true family.

That's the heart of the Father. Verse 10 sums up verses 6 to 9 and gives a further reason. We're not to despise Jesus' brothers and sisters for that's to reject Him.

Yes, but not only that. We're not to despise them because they're precious in the eyes of a heavenly Father. They're so precious that each one has their own ministering angel that sees His face all the time.

Do you find that hard to believe? I suppose the whole idea of guardian angels has become so trivialized, hasn't it, with fairy stories and so on. And some scholars go to great lengths to seem to explain this away, but it seems to me quite clear.

[ 37 : 17 ] Hebrews 1, verse 14 says that angels are a ministering spirit sent for the sake of the heirs of salvation. Do you find it hard to believe in such angels? Read Acts chapter 12 when you go home.

Find out what Peter's angel did when Herod stuck Peter in prison. Find out what he did to Herod later on. No, it's a mark of God's family care that He does have heavenly child minders for every one of His little ones.

And they see His face. That is, they have access to God Himself. And they call God Himself into action when any one of these little ones is under threat. So beware of despising these little ones because their angels always see the face of the Father.

They have His ear. Don't think that you can hurt any of His little ones anonymously. It's seen. And by the way, that is a disgraceful and shameful way, isn't it, of putting the boot into a brother or sister or a group within the church anonymously.

Anonymous phone calls, anonymous letters, that kind of thing. I hope none of us would stoop to that kind of thing. But Jesus says there's nothing anonymous in heaven. God knows.

[ 38 : 37 ] And what a comfort that is to us, isn't it, when we're up against it. And when the heavenly Father hears of one of His little ones at risk, at risk of stumbling, at risk of going astray, as He calls it in verse 12, He cares.

Verse 14 says, it is not His will that any of these little ones would go astray. And Jesus here, unlike in Luke 15, where He's talking about lost sheep who are outside being brought in, here He's telling this parable to those who are in the church.

It's believers in the church community who are beginning to go astray, to wander. He uses the word three times. And He's saying that if they're not found, verse 14, they may indeed be at risk of perishing.

That just confirms the teaching of verses 8 and 9, that there is indeed a very real risk of apostasy, of falling away under final judgment of those who are within the professing church of Jesus Christ.

That is, people who appear to have all the marks of salvation are at risk of being eternally lost, of perishing. That's what Jesus is saying.

[ 39 : 51 ] Now, that is not a conflict with God's sovereignty or with His election, which is irrevocable. But it is to say that the New Testament deals with the visible and the tangible reality, not with theological speculations.

The New Testament writes to real people in real church pews, and it says that little ones who believe in Jesus can be made to stumble and fall away on account of others or on account of their own actions.

And that if they are not brought back, they may perish. And what we are to do as Christian brothers and sisters is not to try and plumb the depths of the mind of the eternal God and ask foolish questions about whether or not they ever were saved in the first place.

That's all academic. No, we are not to do that. What we are to do is to plumb rather the heart of God and plumb the depths of His love which is laid open and plain to us in the Gospel and reflect that heart and reflect that love and concern of determined effort to be like Him and to restore the little one that's wandering because His will is that not one of such should fall away.

And we are to be willing to give even that which is most precious and costly to us in order to bring back the one who's straying and to rejoice with the extravagant joy of heaven when one such little one is brought back into their proper place in the family.

[ 41 : 26 ] That is what it means to share the greatness of the kingdom of heaven. To weep over the wonder, to rejoice with the restored. That's why it can't ever just be evangelism that drives us in our mission in the church, bringing people in from the outside, although of course that must drive us.

It's not just bringing people into the kingdom, it's keeping them in the church of Jesus Christ so that they grow and develop and mature and become great ones in the kingdom.

That must be our priority if we want to share the heart of a heavenly Father so that everybody in the church will reflect his heart more and more and share more and more of his heart of love.

So that we're all more and more true receivers of Jesus Christ with a deeper and deeper grasp of his grace and with a deeper grasp of his gospel and all its implications for our lives together here.

And the evidence of that, the evidence of that will be that more and more visibly we care and love and preserve one another.

[ 42 : 47 ] That's true greatness in the kingdom of heaven according to Jesus. So do you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven? Do we in this fellowship want to be great in the kingdom of heaven?

Well, says Jesus, you must determine to walk humbly before your God. To receive Jesus as those who know that we have nothing except what we receive day by day from him.

To receive and not reject Jesus, brothers and sisters, every little one who has come to him. And to reflect our heavenly Father who weeps over the wonder and rejoices over everyone who is restored.

That is living on earth for heaven, says Jesus. That's what it means to be part of Jesus' family. That's what it means to be the church.

Well, much food for thought. Let's pray. heavenly Father, we confess that when we look into our hearts with even a fraction of the probing light with which your word searches us, we find ourselves humbled and in the dust because we know that we have not sought greatness your way.

[ 44 : 15 ] so teach us, we pray, to aspire to true greatness in your kingdom in our own lives and in our church fellowship and help us to walk that way, the way of humbly seeking all from your arms and of humbly sharing all with our brothers and sisters motivated from a wellspring of love that reflects the heart of the Father who loved us and sent the Son to be our Savior.

For we ask it in his name. Amen.