

THE CRUEL GAME

4th in a Series on Difficult Sayings of Jesus called, "What Did He Say?"
Matthew 18:1-9

A 19-year-old young man named Charles Robertson was in deep need of money. He was so desperate at one point he walked into the Jefferson State Bank in Virginia Beach with a gun, a bag and a note demanding money. He handed the note to a teller who quickly complied by filling his bag with money, and suddenly he found himself holding a sack full of cash. He dashed out the door of the bank headed for the getaway car that he had parked a block away. Halfway there he realized he had left his note on the counter. He feared it could somehow be used as evidence against him, so he reversed field, ran back to the bank and snatched the note back from the teller. Relieved, but fearing that surely the police would arrive any moment, he ran full speed to the parked car. When he reached it, he realized that when he had gone back to the bank to retrieve the note he had left the car keys on the counter.

At that point total panic set in. Certain that he could not go back into the bank yet again, he went into a nearby fast food restaurant. He went into the men's room where he dislodged a ceiling tile and hid the money and the handgun behind the ceiling. Then he carefully dodged his way through alleys and back streets, doing all he could to avoid being spotted by police, finally reaching his apartment. When he went into his apartment, his roommate, who knew nothing of what he'd been up to, said, "Hey dude, I need my car." It seems that the car Robertson used wasn't his, but one borrowed from his roomie. He could hardly tell the roommate what had actually happened so he said, "Uh, I'm sorry man, but your car was stolen." Then he watched in total panic as the roommate called the police to report that his car had been stolen.

The police officers quickly located the "stolen" car only a block from the bank. By this point word was already out over the police radio that the bank robber had left his car keys. The police figured that a stolen car one block from a bank robbery site could not be a coincidence, so they took the keys, tried them on the car and they worked. So they went to the address of the person who had called in the report of a stolen car. There they found Robertson to question, who quickly confessed to his crime.

I often feel like I'm not very good at what I do. Actually, I feel like I'm not very good at anything. It's easy to get down on myself because of that. Mr. Robertson's story sort of encourages me a bit because I may not be very good at much of anything, but at least I'm better than him. It's always good to know that at least I'm less inept than somebody out there.

Isn't it odd how we compare ourselves to others? We do it incessantly. When I say I often feel I am not very good at what I do, the obvious question is, not good by what scale? The answer is, compared to other people. People everywhere constantly compare themselves to others to see how

they're doing. You may not know this, but there's an epidemic going on right now, and I'm not talking about Covid 19, the Corona Virus. It is an epidemic of depression and anxiety, especially among young teens in our nation. It is actually reaching scary proportions. One element contributing to this problem is social media. Young teens are comparing themselves to others on social media, and it's killing them.

This game of comparing ourselves, of who is better, who is greater, who is more important, has been going on for a long time. It is a cruel and dangerous game. Today we will learn what Jesus has to say about it as we look at Matthew 18:1-9.

IT'S GOOD TO BE CHILDISH

In this series of sermons we are looking at some of the things Jesus said that are hard to understand. This saying of Jesus at first does not seem especially strange or difficult. It is familiar and heartwarming. We love the stories of Jesus and children. However, this one is misinterpreted and misapplied with surprising consistency. Then as it goes on it begins to be a bit strange. Jesus talks about tying a heavy rock around our necks and throwing ourselves into the ocean, and about cutting off hands or feet and gouging out our eyes. It starts out sounding sort of warm and fuzzy and ends up being disturbing. But one thing is consistent, and that is from beginning to end these verses are more often misunderstood than correctly interpreted. And when we fail to understand them we can end up with some seriously guilt-inducing ideas that are terribly unhelpful for actual spiritual growth.

What sparked these unusual words by Jesus is that the disciples came to him and asked, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" It sounds like they were interested in how they could all be great. That certainly is understandable. Who wants to be average, or even below average? But the word "then" catches my attention. The Greek word Matthew used there is what grammarians call an "inferential particle," implying a conclusion drawn from some previous context. It means something like "consequently" or "therefore," but is usually used when asking a question. Since this is an "inferential particle" we naturally want to look for the connection with a prior context. We want to see what the "then" refers to so we understand why they were asking the question. Oddly, there is nothing that it logically connects to in Matthew's account. However, when we look at Mark's and Luke's accounts of this incident we get a clue as to what was happening. Mark 9:33-34 tell us, "They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the road?' But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest." Luke 9:46 also says they were arguing about which one of them would be the greatest.

Being great doesn't seem like a bad thing. But notice that Mark said when Jesus asked what they were arguing about no one answered. Why not? Because they knew Jesus was not going to be happy about their discussion. They weren't arguing about the good kind of greatness, about things like what makes a great heart or great character. They were talking about the kind of greatness that

we see everywhere in the world, the kind that is all about a system that sucks all of us into its competition. It is about comparison. The disciples knew how the world works. Down at the bottom there are the peons, the serfs, the nobodies, the people who have no power or influence and who count for nothing. They knew what it was like to be that kind of person because many of them were that kind of nonentity in the world's system. On top are the people everyone knows, the people with power, people who get what they want.

In their minds, Jesus had chosen them for his cabinet in his coming kingdom. They were going to be great. They had moved from being nobodies to being somebodies. But just how high up the "somebody" ladder were each of them going to climb? I guess it's a cool thing to be the secretary of agriculture, or the secretary of labor, or housing and urban development. But it's way better to be the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Defense. They are much closer to the top, people with clout, people everybody knows. Do you know who the Secretary of Labor is?

The disciples thought they were jockeying for position. Unfortunately they did that a lot. The night Jesus was arrested, hours before his death, they were still arguing over that same, stupid issue. They seemed dedicated to it. That's because we're all dedicated to it. We naturally, automatically rank people. Maybe we even do it subconsciously, but in every human group we all try to figure out the pecking order and where we fit in it, and we typically are trying to find some way to increase our standing in that order.

Unfortunately this is a competition in which there are no winners. We create immense stress and unhappiness for ourselves when we think we are ranked lower than others. It paradoxically breeds both envy and resentment of those we deem above us. And if we somehow consider ourselves at the top of the heap it creates considerable pride and a tendency to look down on others. No matter where we see ourselves in the hierarchy, that thinking puts the focus on ourselves. It enflames our natural obsession with self. It certainly creates a near total eclipse of the glory of God in life.

Jesus' response to their argument was to call a child to himself. He put the child in front of the disciples and said, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus considerably upped the ante. Did you notice the difference between the disciples' question and his answer? They asked who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said unless they became like little children, they wouldn't even get into the kingdom of heaven! Never mind being great in it. He said if something doesn't change, you won't even get in! In other words, having the attitude that created the argument about who is greatest would disqualify them from even getting into the kingdom. There needed to be a change, a revolution in their thinking. Being obsessed with self and with proving how great one is disqualifies people for the kingdom.

So Jesus said they needed to become like little children. And this is where many preachers and teachers go off track. I have been surprised at how often people I respect seize on this idea of being like a little child and go totally off the reservation with it. Sometimes they wax eloquent on how

full of wonder and how playful children are and they say we need to restore that. Some will talk about the innocence of children and say this is what we need. The most frequent thing I see is people talking about how trusting children are and how they have faith. So, they say, we need to have faith. We need to be like the child whose dad flings him or her high up in the air and the child laughs with joy as dad catches him or her, totally trusting Dad with their safety, and then they say, “Again!” We need to have that kind of faith in our heavenly Father.

Those are heartwarming ideas. They’re also rather altruistic. Think about what we mean when we say someone is being “childish.” It’s not a good thing. It means they’re being self-centered and immature, because every parent knows that’s how kids are. Laurie was taking care of our granddaughters. A difference of opinion arose between Ella and Cara. Cara wanted to have a particular toy and play with it a certain way and this was causing great frustration for Ella. She said, “No, Cara,” and began forcing her ways on her sister. Laurie intervened and said, “Ella, you need to be nice to your sister. She has her own ideas about what she wants to do.” Ella said, “Yes, but my ideas are better.”

Actually, that sounds like something all of us adults think. But we know that being childish is not a good thing because kids need to be taught how to no longer be childish. Yes, but what about the innocence and trusting nature of kids? Those are nice, but they have nothing to do with what Jesus meant. To understand what he meant by becoming like little children all we need to do is keep reading. He specifically tells us in verse 4: “Whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” The New American Standard translation accurately represents what Matthew actually wrote in Greek. “Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

What were the disciples arguing about? Which one of them was the greatest. The problem was self-focus and pride. Being innocent, being playful, having wonder, even having faith and trusting the Father, do not speak to that problem. Jesus said, “You need to humble yourself.” That’s what will end that argument about who matters the most.

In our society children are often glorified. It’s for the kids. Oh, well, okay then, if it’s for the kids then we should do whatever we can. At least that’s the sentiment. But the truth is that the message of the elites of our society is actually that children *don’t* matter, that they must be sacrificed. The career, self-fulfillment, quality of life, all of these come first, and children must take a distant back seat to them all.

Children were definitely not put on a pedestal in the first century. In his commentary on Matthew, Mike Wilkins wrote, “In the ancient world, children were valued primarily for the benefit that they brought to the family by enhancing the workforce, adding to the defensive power, and guaranteeing the future glory of the house. But they had no rights or significance apart from their future value to the family and were powerless in society.” It was not uncommon in those days for children to suffer

from cruelty and neglect because they were so lightly regarded. Children even today are not asked for their opinion on the economy. They are not invited to speak before Congress. They have no power in our society. They can't even vote. They don't even get to sit at the adult table at Thanksgiving dinner.

To humble oneself as a child is to say, "I don't care about position, influence, power or status even a little. I do not care at all what other people think of me." It is to say, "I am happy to take a position where people take no account of me whatsoever. I don't care if anyone thinks I'm unimportant. These things don't matter to me at all." In his commentary on Matthew, William Hendrickson wrote of those in God's kingdom, "The only way to ascend is to descend. Do they wish to become great? Then let them become little! Do they wish to rise? Then let them sink!"

In Isaiah 66:2 the prophet quotes the Lord saying, "These are the ones I look on with favor; those who are humble and contrite in spirit." Who does God give grace to, who does he favor? Those who are humble. Jesus said that the kingdom of God belongs to those who are poor in spirit. Those who humble themselves.

BE CHILDISH OR DROWN YOURSELF

In verse 6 Jesus begins talking about how serious it is if someone causes one of these little ones to stumble. Again, people don't pay attention to what Jesus said and start talking about how we have to care for children, and how we have to make them important, how we must protect them, how the church should make children a priority. Again, these are all nice ideas, but they have nothing to do with what Jesus was saying. He tells us explicitly what little ones he was talking about, and it wasn't children. He says in verse 6 he means "those who believe in me." *He's not talking about kids, he's talking about those who humble themselves and believe in him. He's talking about his followers.*

He refers to them as "little ones" because he just said they have to humble themselves like little children. They start their life in the kingdom of God by not caring what the world thinks of them. Choosing to truly follow Jesus means they likely will be rejected, or at best will be regarded lightly by the world. That is increasingly true in our society. It was definitely true in Jesus' day. How did the world think of Jesus' little band of disciples? They were no-names, country bumpkins and worse. They didn't count for anything.

Jesus said if you have a choice between making one of his followers stumble on one hand, and on the other hand tying a heavy rock around your neck, then jumping off the end of a pier into the ocean, you should choose to drown yourself because your eternal soul is at stake.

Jesus says some more things that are often misinterpreted. The things he says in verses 8-9 are intended to illustrate the enormous importance of your eternal soul. If your hand or your foot cause you to stumble, cut it off, for it is better to enter life, enter the kingdom of heaven where eternal life

is found, missing a hand or foot, than to have all your limbs and be doomed to eternal punishment. If your eye makes you stumble, gouge it out, for it is far better to go into eternal life with only one eye than have both eyes but miss out on the kingdom of God. These are illustrations. The point they are meant to illustrate is being in the kingdom of God is of ultimate importance.

It is common to encounter preachers who pick up on that business of “if your eye causes you to stumble gouge it out” and they apply it to men lusting. So they preach about how you’ve got to watch out, men, be careful what you look at. It’s so important that you not lust that if you must, gouge out your eye. So you’d better get rid of those magazines, that site on the Internet, those shows on television.

I certainly think men absolutely should not be looking at stuff that enflames lust, but could we note that that has zero to do with what Jesus was talking about? Just a little bit of logic will tell us that. If a man has a problem with lust and he gouges out one eye as Jesus said here, is that going to solve the problem? He can still see with the other eye so he is still going to lust! Similarly, consider this: exactly how is your foot going to cause you to sin so badly that you need to cut it off to keep that from happening? I feel pretty confident in asserting that neither of my feet has ever caused me or anyone else to sin.

Jesus is using exaggerated illustrations here. He is not talking about lust or thievery or whatever sin one commits with his or her foot. He is illustrating one idea. Let me say that again. He is illustrating one idea. He means nothing else. His one idea is that entering into the kingdom of God and having eternal life are the most important thing in life. That’s it. Nothing else. He went to the extreme here in his illustrations, cutting off body parts and gouging eyes, not because he literally thinks we should do any of that, but to pound home vividly how utterly crucial eternal life is.

Now let’s go back to the real problem that Jesus was addressing. Remember the context. The problem is the pride that makes us want to be somebody, to be important, to be noticed, to be cheered by the world. Pay attention to the fact that Jesus warns in verses 6-9 about causing his followers to stumble, particularly in this context of comparing and pride. How would one cause others to stumble in that context? Usually people will talk about making life hard for them, about persecuting them, or maybe even tempting them in some way. But that would be kind of out of left field in this discussion, wouldn’t it? It would have nothing to do with the context.

Jesus was talking about something else entirely. Notice how often the word “stumble” appears in these verses. The warning is about causing his believers to stumble, but then he also turns to warning us about stumbling ourselves. That’s because he has one thing in mind, and it both causes others to stumble and causes us to stumble ourselves.

The Greek word translated “cause to stumble” is *skandalizo*, we get the word scandalize from it. One of its meanings is “to set a trap.” Look at Psalm 140:5. “The arrogant have hidden a snare for

me; they have spread out the cords of their net and have set traps for me along my path.” The Greek translation of the Old Testament used the word skandalizo there. Proud men have set traps for me along my path. They are trying to cause me to stumble. How do they do that?

Back in Matthew 18, they do it by using their pride to lure me into their game. They set up the whole system of ranking people, of one-upmanship, of comparing and competing in order to prove they are better than others. What does it do to us when proud people are playing that game? It draws us right in. We either start feeling down and bad about ourselves because we don't measure up, or we envy them, or we start tearing them down to make them look worse so we can think better of ourselves, or even worse, we can do everything in our power to prove how great we are so we can look down on them. Whatever we do, when we get sucked into that game we destroy our own souls. We aren't living to honor and serve God, we aren't really thinking about him at all, and we are wandering far from his kingdom, totally focused on ourselves and our kingdom. And when we play that game ourselves we suck them in and cause them to stumble by playing the pride game.

The awful thing about this is when we play that game it destroys God's people, for it sucks them into having a mindset that is the exact opposite of what one needs to enter the kingdom of God. And not only does it scandalize them, it does the same to us. It causes us to scandalize ourselves! To cause ourselves to sin. The solution is to become like a little child. It is to be completely unconcerned with our image, with status, with what people think of us. In the end, as we will see, it is to be totally unconcerned with ourselves.

Think for a few moments about why humility is so important. I will point out three salient thoughts about why that is so.

It is the only way to relate to God correctly

In 2 Chronicles 7:14 we see God saying, “If my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and heal their land.” What is the first step in being forgiven, being restored to a relationship with God? “If my people will humble themselves.” That's where it starts. That's why Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit, to the humble.

As long as you think you are doing reasonably well or better, you are not going to need a savior. Your journey to restoration with God starts with humbling yourself and admitting that need. If you don't humble yourself, the journey never begins. Years ago when I was just out of college I came with the ministry group I was with to San Diego for a retreat. One afternoon we had some free time so a few of us went to Mission Beach. The guys in the group went swimming even though there was a pretty big swell that day. In addition there was a strong southerly current and significant rip currents. Fairly quickly we all found ourselves struggling to swim back in. One of my friends was having an especially hard time and was being pulled toward the rock jetty at the south end of the

beach. He was in trouble. He couldn't get back in, he was growing tired and weak, and he was heading for those huge rocks. My friend, who was a very funny guy, ended up having to be rescued by a life guard. He had us in stitches as he related the story, in part talking about how humiliating it is to have to be saved by the life guard with everyone on the beach interested in what was going on. But it came down to a simple reality. His life was seriously in danger. At that point being proud and insisting he could take care of himself would have been idiotic and likely fatal. So he had to humble himself and allow himself to be brought to shore safely by a life guard with the whole world watching.

If we want to be restored to God, it starts with admitting our desperate helplessness and need. Another thing to remember about the need for humility is that our pride, our obsession with ourselves, fights with what life is all about, which is God's glory. As long as we are focused on ourselves we will not be seeking to bring him glory. Bringing God glory is what life is about. It is the reason you and I exist. It is the only thing that counts. It is the scoreboard of life. If you focus on anything else, you will get shut out. Your life will sum up as a big fat zero. It turns out life is a zero sum game. You can be about proving your greatness or about proving God's greatness, **but you can't do both. It is one or the other.**

It is the only way to have peace

There's a scene in the movie *The Greatest Showman*, that we should watch on a regular basis. In it Jenny Lind, who is known at the time as the greatest singer in the world, proclaimed and applauded everywhere she goes, sings the song *Never Enough*. The words are powerful. "All the shine of a thousand spotlights, all the stars we steal from the night sky, will never be enough, never be enough. Towers of gold are still too little, these hands could hold the world, but it'll never be enough, never be enough, for me. Never, never, never, never for me." Then she sings repeatedly "never enough, never enough." She's world famous, talented, wealthy, adored, and she says it's not enough, and will never be enough. What a powerful message. She's at the top, and it's not enough. She's still not at peace.

We have gone to the beach at Grandview in Leucadia many times. If you've been there you know that to get to the beach you have to go down a very long set of stairs to get to the sand at the bottom of the bluffs. The hard part of that is when you leave the beach you have to go back up those long stairs. Half way up you are starting to breathe hard and your legs are feeling the effort of climbing because it's a long way up. You soon start asking yourself why you chose to come to this beach. Imagine yourself climbing stairs longer than those stairs. This long stairway is the stairway we climb to get to the top where we are the greatest. Only, climbing these stairs proves to be a cruel game. It is cruel because no one ever tells you that the stairs are infinite. There is no end to them. There are just more stairs that never end. You never get to the top where you can finally stop climbing because there is no top. That's a pretty cruel trick to play on someone. You'll be climbing forever, you'll grow exhausted, weary, but you'll never reach the end. The other part of the cruel

joke is there is a way to finally be able to rest. It's a fairly obvious one, but somehow we resist it. It is to go down the stairs to the bottom where you can finally get off and rest. It is only at the bottom of the stairs that you will be at peace and get some rest for your weary soul.

It is the only way to truly love others.

The unavoidable reality is that as long as you are playing the cruel game of who is the greatest, you absolutely cannot love other people. Your focus is on yourself, not on others. Others are either wittingly or unwittingly your competitors. If you are competing with them, you are not loving them. You are trying to beat them.

Laurie and I often play tennis together when we are on vacation. Typically I give her some advantages to even things out. After all, it wouldn't be fair for her to be matched straight up against a superior athlete such as myself. Yeah, right. I'm a guy, she's a girl, have to even the playing field. So I don't hit with full power at any time, I let her use the wider doubles court to hit into and we start each game with the score 30-love in her favor. One time she beat me in the set, and she had the temerity to start trash talking at me. I almost said, "Uh, did we forget about those advantages I gave you? Do you want to play me straight up?" But I didn't. I may have reminded her of those advantages. But the main point is when we play tennis together my desire is not to beat her. It is to love her. Of course, in tennis, "love" means nothing, but you see what I mean. I don't care if she "beats" me. I care about her enjoying playing the game and being with me. I want to love her, not compete with her and try to prove something.

CONCLUSION

REMEMBER THE POWER OF HUMILITY

In Philippians 2:3 in the New American Standard Paul said we should "consider others more important than ourselves." Well that sounds like worm theology. I'm nothing. I'm a worm. Everybody else is more important than me. However, that's not what Paul meant. He didn't say, "Believe that everybody else is more important to God than you because you're a nothing." He said, "You consider them more important." More important than whom? Than you! You choose to put them first. This says nothing about our worth before God. It says everything about what we think matters.

He's saying we should say, "It matters more to me that this other person gets noticed, gets affirmed, gets praised, gets the credit, gets their needs met than that I get any of that. God gives me all the notice, affirmation, encouragement I need. He meets my need so I can care for them."

This is a powerful way to live. Jesus humbled himself like no one else ever has. Wouldn't you say he was and is powerful? No life has ever come close to the power he has had in this world. In his

book, *Authentic Power*, John Avant has a chapter titled, "The Giant Journey Into Smallness." In it he wrote, "God allows me to experience the greatest power in the places where I am noticed the least." If you want to have power, humble yourself. Become like that little child. Consider others more important than yourself.

PURSUE TRUE HUMILITY

Humility is not self-abasement. It is not beating ourselves up, seeing ourselves as worthy only of taking up some space in a landfill somewhere. Neither is it acting humble or just being modest. Real humility is being unconcerned with self. It is being free of the burden of image, status, proving our worth. It is going to the bottom of the stairs and getting off so we can rest. It is a beautiful way to live.

As a grandfather I find Jesus' picture of the little child appealing. I watch my granddaughters. What I have noticed about them is they seem to have no sense of embarrassment. Ella will talk to anyone, she'll say just about anything, she'll sing, she'll dance, she'll imagine and play because it never occurs to her to fear what people might think. Cara will happily approach almost anyone, especially guys, babbling her little nonsense talk, completely at ease with who she is. Become like a little child, utterly unconcerned with climbing the stairs, never worried about what people will think. As we are more and more possessed with the desire to glorify Jesus Christ, as that becomes all we care about, we will become free of ourselves. We will be truly humble. In so doing we will avoid luring others into the cruel game of who is greatest, causing them to stumble, even as we trip ourselves up.

The way to be truly humble is to be utterly consumed with the desire for God to be honored, glorified, worshiped. When we care only about his glory, we will forget about ourselves.

APPLY THE CROSS TO YOUR LIFE

In his book, *The Cross of Christ*, the late theologian John Stott wrote, "Nothing in history or in the universe cuts us down to size like the cross...It is there, at the foot of the cross, that we shrink to our true size." The cross says, "You want to prove how great you are? Well remember this is what it took to rescue you." We could not rescue ourselves no matter how hard we tried. What it took to save us was a sacrifice so awful, so enormous that we will never be able to truly conceive how terrible it was. That is how bad off we were.

But the cross also says that God was willing to make the sacrifice to save us because we were worth that much to him. The cross is the measure of our worth, and it is a measure that nothing else we ever do can get close to. When we try to found our worth in anything else, all we do is diminish it. We should never forget that **our efforts to establish our greatness in the eyes of others are a denial of our worth before God**. Climbing that long, cruel staircase is saying the worth we have in Christ is not enough. So let's get off the stairs and rest.