

Matthew 18:1-14

Who's the greatest in Heaven... is it Elijah, Enoch, Abraham, or how about David? What about some of the more recent saints, Spurgeon, Billy Graham? In Ezekiel he suggests Noah, Daniel and Job - Ezekiel 14:14. It's like asking who's the best footballer of all time? Bobby Moore, Pele, George Best, Ronaldo - depends on the age of the person you ask. Who's the best guitarist? Who's the richest person in the world?

Jesus stamps on that. Don't worry about who's top dog in Heaven, you need to focus on getting into Heaven and to do that, be converted AND become as little children. What's a little child in this context? Give him a £50 present and he has great fun playing with the box! We're going back here in time when children were seen and not heard, rather than the spoilt brat or the damaged child our teachers have to contend with in schools today.

We tend to teach children to be mature and to 'grow up'. Jesus is turning that on its head. What childlike qualities is Jesus looking for?

Dependence upon parents
Trust
Obedience
Wanting to learn
Forgiveness

From here-on in, whenever Jesus mentions a child, He's referring to an adult who's become like a little child and got those same childlike qualities. He's not talking about children at all. He's talking about you and me, so long as we've been 'converted'.

So to answer the disciples' question, the more you become like that, the higher up the pecking order you go. Contrast that with here on Earth. If you're good looking, extrovert, funny, have strong opinions, a bit bossy, get things done, gifted in some way, you're going to be popular with more friends than you can cope with. Typified in the world of Facebook: likes, shares and comments. Someone 'uncool' can do a really interesting post that gets pretty much ignored whereas a cool guy or girl with 5000+ friends can post, 'I'm not feeling too good today,' and at least 50 people will reply with; 'whatssup hun?' But compare that to verses 4-5.

That's the blessing and on the other side of the coin there's a warning, verse 6. Anyone who does anything to knock one of God's precious ones off the wagon is going to find themselves in it, and deep. Maybe in this life, definitely in the next. In what ways do you think you might offend others? Offend here doesn't mean annoy or upset, rather to cause them to take a wrong path.

V 7 Jesus goes off on a tangent and prophesies about the future where causing saints to stumble becomes normal - Timothy 4:1-4, 2 Peter 2:1, Mark 13:22- and then a more immediate future, Judas's betrayal.

V 8&9. The value of your ticket to Heaven. Philippians 2:12. Do not let anything get in the way of your faith. Relationships, family, addiction, casual sex, career, fitness ... Satan's list of distractions is long and varied. If you feel tempted, get out of there.

V 10-11. We have Heavenly protection. Exactly what form that is, we don't know. In our lives we have a war waging, Ephesians 6:12, 2 Kings 6:17, Psalm 91:11-12, Exodus 23:20-24, Luke 22:3. Acts 5:19, Hebrews 1st: 14. God didn't spare His only son, He isn't going to spare His angels when you hit hard times. Whatever it takes, God will use heavenly intervention to get you through.

Warnings and now great comfort; the parable of the lost sheep. Jesus' raison d'être, He came to save the lost.

V 12. Have you ever lost something that's really important? Like your passport when you're going on holiday? There's a feeling of dread whilst you're looking and a massive, palpable relief when you find it.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep. Yes God's grateful for and loves the 99 but He goes into rescue mode when one goes astray and gets himself lost. He will do all He can to find and recover that lost soul. That sheep is very precious, it's not just, 'well we need to replace that one, easy come, easy go'. When He finds the sheep, He's delighted and not one bit annoyed at the time He's lost or the effort He's spent searching the hills in the pitch black.

Lessons-

How precious am I, and how precious are each other?

Do we look for and pray for the lost, those that used to come to the church?

What can I do to prevent my brother from straying?

Yes we need to preach the gospel but just as importantly we also love brothers and sisters as Jesus loves us, John 13:34. Do we share the pain and the joy of the prodigal's dad or are we more like the brother, indifferent to annoyed?

If a child disappears the whole community organises a search party. In a similar way, is there a church responsibility to win back those who've dropped off?

Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins. James 5:19-20