

## Be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven! Matthew 18:1-10

**Introduction:** When I was a child I had to learn to make up a lot of my own fun, games and things to do. One thing I did whether on my own or with a mate would be to get a wooden box out of the garage, a fine stick the was just strong enough to hold it up at one end, some bread and a ball off string.

Can you guess what it was that I was planning on doing?

Trapping birds by enticing them with placed food under the box, hoping that an unsuspecting bird might brush the stick on the way in so that I didn't even have to pull the string. For me and my mates I can testify, it never happened. No matter how long we waited with every passing minute seeming like an eternity, no matter how quiet we were - never caught a bird let alone have one come close. Perhaps if I have only known how they did it when Jesus was a boy. They had a better design with wooden basket, stick and double string from the base of the stick threaded through the back of the basket and the bait placed underneath too.

Kids hey. Kids can have fun but they can also play up and fight and argue and are not backward in coming forward to do this. Jesus has a bunch of them to deal with, they were called the disciples, now playing up possibly because three of them had been shown favouritism by Jesus in selecting them to accompany him up the Mount where he was Transfigured and met with none other than Moses and Elijah- two BIG name OT Prophets. What's been festuring now pops out in the question, "Who then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

Jesus looks around the household they were staying in Capernum, and calls one of the preschoolers over placing him in the middle of the disciples. I wonder how much they took on board before Jesus even spoke, launching with a big Amen! That's what the word truly means, but with an added emphasis of "I'm God therefore I have absolute trust and confidence in what I'm about to say". He then goes on to explain his object lesson using the child who is a represenative of all believers, his little ones- those who believe in him, with that same sincerity and modest nature combined with absolute trust and confidence. And unless they converted-changed their minds, along with their current course of conduct. Turning from self serving motives, and in reverence turning to God, to take on the heart and spirit of a lowly servant which flew in the face of

the world's values and structure. Then, they would become great in God's sight and in Christ's name enter the kingdom of heaven where they are welcomed as the child, just like the one standing in middle of them.

But should they choose not to, then they were on the road of their own making, built on their human perspective, not on God's concerns. What a skandal; a so called disciple of Christ setting themselves up to trip and stumble on their very own sin of foolish human thinking, feeling and pride - a trap of Satan.

This week the word stumble reappears again *skandalizo* [to sin] In my last message from Matthew 16 it meant to put a stumbling block or obstacle in the way upon which another may trip and fall. This week we add another dimension because it also means - to entice to sin - to cause a person to fall away. To cause a person to begin to distrust and desert the one whom they ought to trust and obey. It is described as the bait stick in a trap. It was the arm or stick on which the bait was fixed. The animal for which the trap was set was lured by the bait to touch or set on the stick; the stick touched off a spring; and so the animal was enticed to its capture or death. In Jesus' words here it is just that- an enticement to lure someone to their destruction. In this case causing one of these little ones to stumble into sin and be trapped by it, including the younger and the more impressionable people to sin.

My brother in law who used to attend Harvest Church in Papakura told me once that their Pastor Ken Harrison had began noticing a certain pattern developing in his church in the 80's or 90's, which was this. A regular committed family who attended service would all of a sudden have Dad beginning to miss the odd service. Over a period of time the father's attendance would become more and more sporadic until he no longer came. Entwined with his sporadic attendance was perhaps an older child, especially a boy attending less, until he was gone. Eventually the wife and any remaining children stopped coming to Church.

So do you know what Ken Harrison found when he investigated? Do think it was that the family had moved to another Church? No, as it turned out the common factor in each of these Christian families was that they had bought a boat. "Great", the couple had thought when they purchased it. We can use this for our pleasure, fishing, waterskiing and exploring.

And maybe we could even use it to the glory of God because we can invite non-Christians to enjoy our boat with us or boat with them and build relationships – the whole friendship evangelism thing on Saturdays and Sunday afternoons, as well as the holidays of course.

In reality this is what happened. Time, tide, good weather and fishing conditions wait for no man, especially on a Sunday morning when church was on. Knowingly or unknowingly these families had chosen through the course of their conduct to no longer follow Jesus. The enticement or the bait in the trap to snare them all- was the boat, having been bought for some good reasons, but still under certain false pretences, to end up being used primarily on Sunday's. The man through the boat lead his family away from what is most important, and that is following Christ as his little ones – those who believe in him. Such families weren't going out on the water to do devotions but instead to their own detriment, to shipwreck their faith.

So, I ask the question of you this morning - What then is your boat? What is the thing that causes you to stumble? What is it acting like bait that has enticed you to be so passionate about that thing, not having remotely the same passion and enthusiasm for following Jesus, that you would even go so far as, either knowingly or unknowingly, to lead people away from following Christ as a member of his living body, the Church? Leaving you lacking in the desire to have anyone follow him in the first place. What is it?

It is important because in no uncertain terms Jesus, who you should never confuse as one of the Beatles singing 'All you need is love' or 'Love Love me do...', in fact he's singing a completely different tune here as he speaks the truth in love... vv6-9.

These verses begin with the drastic action of not putting a life jacket over your head and around your neck and shoulders before you jump into the sea but instead a very heavy circular stone with a hole in the middle. Jesus then lightens his language somewhat when he states the necessity of cutting off a hand or plucking out an eye if either is the cause of you stumbling. In other words, if the desires of the hand and the eye are a bait to sin- then they must be eradicated! I want to be clear to you here that Jesus **is not** really telling you to pluck out an eye, cut off a hand or to go jump in the sea, he's simply using what we call.... Hyperbole.

He is greatly exaggerating to make a very very important point:

**Deal as drastically as necessary with sin in order to remove it from your life.** In reality this will require self-discipline, the very character trait that we each will be growing in and developing as we have chosen to fast and pray during Lent on the road to Easter.

This is so important because the last thing you would want to do after experiencing the revelation and experiencing the mercy of God, is to lead someone else astray. As a parent I have had to repent and seek to lead a child in the right way when I have seen a negative character trait displayed in my own child that they have obviously picked up from none other than me, the little sponges that they are. They are the last ones you want to take the bait to be snared and trapped by stumbling into sin just like you- a stumble that leads to destruction. There is no other day like today to address the issue and begin praying, calling out for God's mercy, forgiveness, leading and wisdom to start anew or on a new track. You might want to ask yourself, in any of your current relationships are you being led astray? Or worse, are you attempting to lead someone else through your friendship into the same mischief?

**The Question of 'How do I be the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven'** just like Jesus wants me to be, but because of our human frailty, I believe the question or challenge for us now becomes:

**How do I defeat the power of sin to become the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?**

Jesus says to each one of us today:

1. Spiritually become like a child – trusting and unpretentious! Jesus has told you and me that what is required is that we sincerely look away from self to revere Jesus and his Father in Heaven – God, in whose holy presence everything else pales in insignificance.
2. A step in the right direction is when you turn from sin to God, Turn your back on your own stubborn pride and self-centred thinking and feeling -Repent of Sin! Whatever your 'boat' or 'bait' is Confess your need for forgiveness- Keep short accounts with God.
3. Lastly, The warning Remains
  - a. Do not be lead by others to stumbling into sin... and
  - b. Do not lead or entice others to stumble into sin.

Because if you do your eternal destination is the fire of hell!  
Jesus this morning has spoken to us the Truth in Love –  
Let's now respond. Let us pray with faith and belief, having  
absolute confidence and sincere trust in God for his mercy by  
approaching him in the spirit of an unpretentious child –  
**Praying** 'The Lord's Prayer...