

The Gospel of Matthew
Week Twenty-One
Matthew 18:1-35

Day One

1At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2He called a little child and had him stand among them. 3And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

v. 1 – The disciples were interested to know who the greatest person was in the kingdom of heaven? The answer should have been obvious – it was Jesus Himself. Yet the disciples were interested in greatness, which we know they discussed among themselves on various occasions. Perhaps they were looking for one of them to be named by Jesus, or maybe they were simply curious about Jesus' response. At any rate, this is a good question to consider for all of us, especially in light of Jesus' response.

v. 2&3 – Jesus summoned a child and used him (or her) as the focus for His object lesson. Jesus told His disciples that they must change from being like they are to being like a child. What is a child like? They are trusting, obedient, fun-loving, always ready to learn, humble, dependent and submissive. Can you think of any other traits that are common to children? Whatever you can think of, that is what Jesus wants us to be like so we can prosper in His kingdom.

Jesus warned them that He was telling the truth. Why did He do that? He did that so they would not dismiss what He was about to say, which would seem to be against everything they had been taught up to that point in time. The disciples probably thought that maturity was the goal for success in the Lord. Jesus was telling them that the goal was childlikeness and not maturity. How childlike are you in your present walk with the Lord? What can you do to change, since this is what Jesus told the disciples they needed to do?

v. 4 – Jesus finally focused on the issue of humility as the key element that was missing from the disciples that was present in all children. Humility makes anyone great in God's kingdom. Here are some reminders of the benefits of humility from the Psalms:

see humble

What steps can you take today to be more humble like a child?

Day Two

5"And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. 6But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him

to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. 7"Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! 8If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. 9And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

v. 5 – The question posed to Jesus was who was the greatest. Jesus urged His disciples not to be so rank conscious, but to value and honor each one who puts their faith and trust in Him. Some need to be reminded of this truth, for we have established a elite group of leaders who are often set high above the people. Jesus had a chance here to declare that leaders were a special group worthy of honor, but He did not. Instead He identified with the simplest among His followers and assured the disciples that anyone honoring those “little ones” would also honor Him.

This certainly dealt with the issue of class, economic rank or hierarchy in the Church. It is not acceptable according to Jesus. Do you still maintain thinking that sets one believer above another? If so, I would urge you to reconsider such thinking.

vs. 6&7 – Jesus has great concern for all His followers. It is not a good thing to do something that would cause His people to stumble. Again, I have been in many settings where the feelings and whims of the leaders were of supreme importance to everyone. The leaders could say, do and plan anything they wished. Yet who are the ones who often bring shame upon the Body and scandalize those who simply love and follow Jesus? It is the leaders! Jesus has no use for anyone, especially leaders, who do something that cause His humble “little ones” to stumble, and will deal with them personally.

v. 8&9 – Was Jesus saying here to maim yourself if one of your bodily members is the cause for sin? Absolutely not! He was simply making a comparison that brought His main point home: Sin is a terrible thing and has serious, eternal consequences. Jesus was urging His followers to deal ruthlessly with any sin in their life, for sin is harmful to the sinner and potentially harmful to those who see it and stumble over its presence and effects.

Sin is almost a lost concept in modern culture. The only time the word is used is when describing a rich dessert as “sinful.” Yet sin is why Jesus came, for sin had created a huge chasm between man and His God, and Jesus came to close the chasm and give man the potential to be right with God. What does God think of sin? Someone said you simply must observe Jesus on the cross to understand how God feels about sin.

Sin is not to be tolerated; it is unacceptable. How ruthless are you with sin in your own life? Don't be harder on someone else's sin than you are your own. Yet we are powerless to deal with sin, but the Spirit comes to help us. Are you enlisting the Spirit's full help in your striving against sin, in your own life, in the church and in society?

Day Three

10"See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. 12"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? 13And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. 14In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

v. 10 – I am not sure I have ever paid attention or even notice this particular before today. Jesus warned us not to “look down on” one of his “little ones.” He then warns us that their “angels” watch over them and report to the Father. We would not want those angels giving the Father a bad report about one of us!

The Greek word for “looking down” has the connotation of “thinking down,” which connotes pride and condescension. Paul gave us the antidote for this kind of pride when he wrote:

Phil 2:3

This does not mean that everyone has a guardian angel, nor does it mean that the angels talk to God about you and me. Jesus is simply reinforcing that we are to treat one another with the appropriate honor and humility as befitting anyone who is so well connected to the Father in heaven.

v. 11 – There is no verse 11 in the NIV and it is missing in the most reliable manuscripts, so we won't pay any attention to it here, since that same verse is included in two other gospels.

vs. 12&13 – Jesus likened the Father to a good shepherd who would leave the 99 sheep he has to go and look for the one sheep who wandered away. What is Jesus trying to say? He is reinforcing His point that God cares for all His sheep, not just the “special” ones, however you would define special. In our modern church society, it is often either the rich or the leaders. Jesus was making a statement eliminating all class distinctions in the Church, yet we work constantly to reinstate them.

The point here isn't that the Father seeks the lost. The point is that He is a good shepherd and He cares for the weakest and “youngest.” When I consider this passage, I see church leaders who set themselves off in special clothing. When I consider this passage, I see some church leaders surrounded by people who fawn and “protect” them. When I think of this passage, I see some church leaders who believe they are more spiritual than those they lead. When I think of this passage, I wonder about the money that some church

leaders make and wonder how they can justify it and what they do to reinvest that money into God's people.

v. 14 – God doesn't need angels to tell Him how some people are treating others. He already knows. And what's more, He is concerned about how some of His saints treat their fellow saints. What is your attitude toward your other brothers and sisters? Are you arrogant toward some and respectful toward others? Are you doing things for your church leaders that you would not do for "ordinary" people? If you answer yes to the last question, then you need to repent, for you have your priorities mixed up.

Day Four

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." [c] 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

v. 15 – Jesus had said that it was unacceptable to bring offense any of His sheep, for God cares for them. He expects us to care for one another as well. Then He addressed the issue of relationships from the offended party's perspective. Yesterday He told us not to offend; today He tells us what to do if we are offended. What should we do?

We should always choose to talk to one another when there is an offense or the potential for an offense. Yet this can be the most difficult rule to follow in the Church. It is so much easier to talk to someone else about your problem with another person. And it is much easier, although hypocritical, to act like there is nothing wrong when you are with the person who offended you.

And the most difficult confrontation can be with someone over you. When a leader exercises authoritarianism, they usually don't respond well to confrontation. They can become angry, defensive or give you the cold shoulder. Worse yet, they can retaliate. Realizing the implications, Jesus still instructs you to go and see the offending brother or sister.

Not all confrontations turn out badly, however, and there is nothing better than communicating what is bothering you and then have the offender communicate in return. Often I have found that I didn't have all the information concerning what I perceived as an offense. The one-on-one time gives us both a chance to reflect and listen. Yet I have been in some confrontations that turned sour quickly and it can be a painful process. Is there anyone you need to lovingly confront about some offense between you?

v. 16 – The goal is reconciliation and not being "right." If the one-on-one doesn't go well, then you should take others with you, who can help sort out the disagreement. By the way, I don't think this process that Jesus outlined is a literal process. By that I mean I don't think Jesus was implying that you should only go one time to the offender. You

may go several times before you opt to get others involved. Is there anyone who is ready for a committee visit from you since the one-on-ones didn't go well?

v. 17 – Jesus then instructed His followers to use the whole church as a last resort to resolve the conflict. If that would not work, then the offender is to be shunned by the entire community, for a breach with one member is a breach with the entire Body of Christ. Notice, however, that this is the ultimate step only after the other steps have been tried, preferably more than once.

What lengths are you willing to pursue to obtain reconciliation with a brother or sister? Are you willing to involve others, knowing that this in some ways establishes binding arbitration of the dispute, realizing that they may side with your adversary and recognize some fault or issue in your life?

Yet it seems that broken relationships are with us due to our fallen state of sin. Even the apostle Paul had his broken relationships and there didn't seem anything he could do about it. Sometimes others can be downright unreasonable, and no amount of meetings with resolve that. At times, you just have to trust the Lord and move on, hoping that time will heal the wounds.

As far as it depends.

Day Five

18"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be[d]bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be[e] loosed in heaven. 19"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

v. 18 – There is that “I tell you the truth” phrase again. What else could Jesus say, yet what He was about to say was so strange to the subnormal spiritual climate in Israel, that it would be considered abnormal instead of just normal. Does that makes sense? Things were so bad that Jesus tried to raise the level to normal and He was considered a madman!

This statement is similar to the one we read in Matthew 16:19 and it is in the context of reconciliation. It seems that Jesus was saying that if the Church decided that the offending brother who refused to be reconciled should be out of the church, then that decision is binding in heaven as well. This is contingent of course upon the people coming together around the Lordship of Jesus and not just to advance their own agenda. Many have been “condemned” by the Church who were political enemies. The agenda was not truly a spiritual one, but one of power and control.

I believe in this principle. I believe in the church gathering and Jesus being in her midst. When that happens I believe God can direct the decisions and there be unity between

heaven and earth. I also believe this principle has been and can be abused. Once example of this dynamic functioning properly in Acts 15:

Acts 15

v. 19 – It is interesting that this principle of two-or-three-gathering has been applied to prayer, but in this context it applies to reconciliation or dealing and resolving conflicts. We want this to be true about prayer and I have quoted this many times when referencing prayer, but this promise doesn't seem to have anything to do with prayer! It has everything to do with the ability of the Church members and leaders to have wisdom from heaven to deal with problems, as Paul expected:

resolve don't go to court

v. 20 – Jesus is in the midst of those who come together in His Name – for the purposes of doing and resolving His business. The Church today is anemic and usually only convenes for Sunday service and meaningless annual meetings, so there is no concept of problems or issues between believers actually being resolved by the Church. After all, that is why we have the court systems! Yet Jesus seemed to promise that He would be present with believers who convened with the purpose of carrying out the business of heaven. Do you agree with my assessment of the present state of the Church? Do you agree or disagree that the Church should be involved in disputes among believers? Can we ever recapture this dynamic in the modern church? What would it take to do so?

Day Six

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." [f] 23 "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents [g] was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. 26 "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27 The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

v. 21 – Peter asked a related question that is critical to reconciliation among believers and that question was related to forgiveness. Peter was a product of his age, so he was looking for a legal answer to the question of how many times he should forgive his brother. The rabbis sat and deliberated those kind of questions, so Peter was simply trying to start a rabbinic-style debate. Legalistic debates about God's word and will almost always look for the boundaries and not the fullness of God's commands and expectations for mankind.

v. 22 – Peter threw out a number that he thought was generous. Jesus had in mind a much larger number, which really wasn't a limitation. Peter recommended seven times and Jesus recommended 77 times, not intending it to be taken literally. He was saying that you must forgive your brother time and time again on an unlimited basis. Unlimited forgiveness! What a radical concept!

Why would the Bible and Jesus talk about forgiveness as much if we weren't going to need to apply it so much? God knows we would need it because our tendency is to offend one another, sometimes when we are unaware that we are offending.

Forgive one another

Is there anyone you need to forgive today? Is there anyone you need to forgive again today?

v. 23 – Jesus went on to teach Peter and the disciples about forgiveness by using a parable, as was His custom. This parable was divided into two parts. The first could be called the master and the master's debtor servant. In this first part, we learn that the master's servant owed the master quite a large debt. The master wanted to clear this up and the servant was unable to pay, so the master moved to liquidate the servant's assets – which included his wife and children!

The servant begged for mercy and the master relented. That part of the story has a happy ending, because the master didn't give the servant more time to pay, but forgave the debt in its entirety.

Jesus told such good stories that helped illustrate and reinforce the point He wanted to get across. Lord, I want to be a good teacher, too. Help me to be a good teacher like Jesus was and is. Do you do any teaching? If not, is it time to begin? If so, what you can do to improve?

Day Seven

28"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii.[h] He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. 29"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' 30"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. 32"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 35"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

v. 28 – Jesus then completed the second half of the story. The servant, fresh from his encounter with the master who forgave him a large debt, then encountered a fellow slave who owed him a little debt. The forgiven servant did not return the gracious favor toward him and had the man arrested! Just reading that, without knowing the moral of the story, makes me angry! How could that servant been so inconsiderate and hardhearted?

v. 31 – The other servants saw the injustice and reported it to the master, who then summoned the forgetful servant to remind him of the master’s kindness that was not reciprocated. The master rescinded his forgiveness and turned the servant over to the debtor’s jailer to be tortured. Just reading that, not knowing the moral of the story, makes me happy! Justice was served.

v. 35 – Now for the moral of the story, which every parable has. The lesson is that the heavenly Father will treat each one of us in the same manner if we don’t forgive our brothers “from the heart.” God has forgiven us a huge debt by forgiving our sins; He expects us to forgive others, whose “debt” to us isn’t nearly as large. In some ways, when we forgive others we are really doing it for the sake of our relationship with the Father, recognizing His grace and mercy in our lives. We can forgive because we have been forgiven!

So I close this week’s study by asking if there is anyone you need to forgive from the heart? Don’t forgive because you feel like it. Don’t do it because you the pain of their offense is any less. Do it because the Father has forgiven you and set an example of how He wants you to act toward others.