

## *The Church of the Servant King*

### **Thursday Night Bible Study**

#### ***The Gospel of Matthew***

(Thurs\_Matthew 18)

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Matthew 18 contains the fourth of five discourses in Matthew's gospel. The five discourses in Matthew are:

- The Sermon on the Mount [chps 5-7]
- The Commissioning of the Twelve Apostles to Israel [chp 10]
- Parables regarding the Kingdom [chp 13]
- Teaching regarding humility [chp 18]
- Teaching regarding His 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent [chps 24-25].

In His discourse in Chapter 18, Jesus examines the principle of humility using different dimensions of the Kingdom life.

#### **RANK IN THE KINGDOM (MATT 18:1-5)**

1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2 And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, 3 and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 "And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me.

The disciples (v 1) are the men who had been commissioned as the twelve apostles to Israel. The child (v 2) may have been Peter's if the house is his (17:25 & Mk 9:33). Humility in this passage is total trust in the Lord's provision and not one's own. The parallel passages in the other Gospels are Mark 9:33-37 & Luke 9:46-48.

33 They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, "What were you discussing on the way?" 34 But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. 35 Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." 36 Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, 37 "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me." (Mk 9:33-37)

46 An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest. 47 But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side, 48 and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great." (Lu 9:46-48)

When combined, these passages paint a picture of disciples who were disputing along the way and when challenged, they became silent. Luke (9:46-48) says that Jesus discerned their thoughts. Most likely, Jesus detected their rivalry (Luke), challenged them, and thereby silenced them (Mark), after which they blurted out their question. Their question was not without some basis:

- Jesus had said that there would be distinctions in the Kingdom (5:19 – “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven”).
- Three of the apostles to Israel (Peter, James, & John) appeared to have been the recipients of special revelation (i.e. the Mount of Transfiguration in 17:1-3).
- Peter had been repeatedly singled out even if some of those occasions also included a rebuke:
  - 14:28-29 – Peter walks on the water
  - 15:15 – Peter speaks on behalf of all apostles – “Explain this parable to us.”
  - 16:16-19 – Jesus gives Peter special authority – the keys to the kingdom of heaven.
  - 16:22-23 – Jesus rebukes Peter for stating that he will prevent Jesus from being killed and in so doing, Jesus highlights that Peter’s statement was aligned with Satan’s designs, not God the Father’s designs.
  - 17:4 – Peter speaks on behalf of the apostles at the Transfiguration – “It is good for us to be here.”
  - 17:24-27 – Peter is singled out to pay the temple tax.
- In the case of James & John, their ambition had most likely been set in motion by their mother (see 20:20-21) and it had sparked the jealousy of the other ten (20:24).

In verses 3-4, Jesus uses the child as representative of an ideal – an ideal not of innocence, purity, or faith, but of humility and unconcern for social status. A child is not in a position to advance someone else in society or position or status. So, to “receive” a child – likely an orphan in Jesus’ example – was equivalent to a display of true servant-leadership.

- A servant-leader does not do for others with the expectation of what will be gained personally.
- A servant-leader exercises agape love toward others.
- Humility is teachability, but it is also defined in terms of character and integrity that acts towards others without the motivation of personal gain or benefit.
- Teachability is the passive side of humility; servant-leadership is the active side of humility.

Jesus has taught His disciples humility of mind, but not childlike thinking (cf. 10:16 “...be wise as serpents and harmless as doves...”).

*What does it mean to be “converted, and become like children?”* If the disciples (more than just the 12) do not trust only in Him as Savior, they cannot enter the Kingdom. The Kingdom (and eternal salvation) cannot be gained by personal merit (or by violent force as those who establish kingdoms of this world – 11:12). Conversion amongst the Jews of that day would have manifest itself through a change, i.e. becoming humble.

#### **JESUS WARNS AGAINST OFFENSES IN THE KINGDOM (MATT 18:6-9)**

6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. 7 "Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes! 8 "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. 9 "If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell.

It is probably best to view verse 5 (“*And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me*”) with verses 6-9 for two reasons: 1) verse 4 concludes verses 1-4 with a summary (v 4 seems to conclude Jesus’ response to the disciples question whereas verse 5 begins a separate, but related discourse); and 2) verses 5-6 are closely related much like a proverb of warning. This division or segregation affects the interpretation of the passage as follows:

- In verses 1-4, the “little child” is literally a small child or children.
- In verses 5-6, the “little child” and the “little ones who believe in me” is a reference to the believing disciples whom Jesus is addressing.
- Most likely, the disciples included more than just the 12 and that group could have included both believing and non-believing disciples.
- The one who welcomes “a little child like this in my name” (v 5) is not welcoming literal children, but “children” defined in the previous verses – those who humble themselves to become like children, i.e. Jesus’ true disciples.
- The one who welcomes the disciple does not do so because the disciple has great social status, occupies a position of influence, or is mighty in a worldly sense, but simply because they come in Jesus’ name.
- The phrases “in My name” (v 5), “who believe in me” (v 6), and the necessity of becoming childlike to even enter the kingdom (v 3) supports the view that those referred to in verses 5-6 are simply Jesus’ disciples, not literal children or some smaller group of especially humble disciples.
- The period of time at issue is determined by the phrase “kingdom of heaven.”
- The phrases “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” in the Gospel of Matthew is always a reference to the Messianic reign of Christ on earth.
- “Enter the kingdom of heaven” implies that Jesus is teaching the determining criteria for entry into that kingdom, therefore actions and attitudes reflected prior to the Messianic reign of Christ on earth is begun.
- In the future, those actions and attitudes will be manifested during the period we know as the Tribulation, i.e. Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel 9:20ff.
- The “little ones” (i.e. the disciples) can stumble and still enter the kingdom (Matt 14:28-31; 26:30-35).
- The one who “causes one of these little ones who believe in me “to stumble” is an unbeliever as manifested by their attitude which rejects Christ (10:14-15; 25:45-46).
- The person who welcomes one of these “little ones” simply because they are His welcomes Jesus Himself (10:42).
- More than just hospitality of a human good origin is in view, rather it is a hospitality linked with Jesus’ name
- To “sin” or “stumble” (v 6) means that as a result of their rejection by the unbeliever, the disciples become discouraged and sin (i.e. sins of omission or commission).
- These verses are aimed at encouraging the disciples who will face the world’s opposition.

The principle behind verse 7 is this – because man has a volition and can choose, many men of the world will not believe; however, this does not mitigate a person’s responsibility before God (cf. Isa 10:5; Matt 24:9-14).

*8 "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. 9 "If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell. (Matt 18:8-9)*

In verses 8-9, we see that the disciples have a responsibility for themselves also. Failure to deal with sin in their own lives reflects an allegiance to the world that in those cases where the disciple has never believed in Christ as the Messiah, he/she faces eternal banishment from the

kingdom. (Remember, a disciple just meant a student. It did not necessarily imply belief. Some were disciples just out of curiosity).

### **THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP (MATT 18:10-14)**

10 "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven. 11 ["For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.] 12 "What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? 13 "If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. 14 "So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.

Some have used this verse to support the concept of guardian angels. No where in Scripture or Jewish tradition of the NT period is there any suggestion that there is one angel for one person. I believe that the best explanation for this passage is that the "angels" are the angels of heaven who observe believers here on earth as an object lesson. The "little ones" would be equivalent to the disciples who are new in their faith.

The point of verses 12-14 is that the Father's concern for the one wandering sheep is so great that he rejoices more over its restoration than over the ninety-nine that do not stray (v 13). With a God like that, how dare anyone cause even one of the sheep to go astray? If it is the Father's will that not any of the little ones be lost, then to lead one of them astray is contrary to the Father's will.

### **DEALING WITH A SINNING BROTHER IN THE ASSEMBLY (MATT 18:15-20)**

15 "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. 16 "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. 17 "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. 19 "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. 20 "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst."

The key to understanding this section of Scripture is the word "church" in verse 17. As we have seen in Matthew 16:18, the word church is the Greek word ἐκκλησία (ekklesia) and it literally means "assembly." It has specific reference in context to the assembly of believing Jews who accepted the gospel of the kingdom, recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and who would form the basis of the Messianic kingdom had the nation en masse accepted the offer of the kingdom.

Context, context, context – Jesus' teaching in verses 15-20 is not directed to the Church Age believer who is a member of the Body of Christ. He is setting forth principles regarding conduct within the Messianic community of believers, i.e. the kingdom of God on earth. The context is still within the period in which the gospel of the kingdom is being proclaimed. It would be totally out of context for Jesus to have been teaching his disciples regarding the attitude that would characterize the person entering that kingdom (18:1-14) only to jump to a set of governing principles within the Church Age. His disciples would have had no way of understanding His teaching.

**Similarity with C.A. Truth** – As in much of Jesus' teaching regarding kingdom life and conduct, there is similarity to be found with Church Age teaching. For instance, we find similar teaching regarding the treatment of a sinning brother in such passages as Galatians 6:1-5; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15; James 5:19-20 cf. Romans 16:17.

1 Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ. 3 For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4 But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. 5 For each one will bear his own load. (Gal 6:1-5)

14 If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. 15 Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. (2 Thess 3:14-15)

19 My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, 20 let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (Jas 5:19-20)

17 Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. (Rom 16:17)

**Examination of the Passage** – In this passage Jesus gives His disciples a **step by step** approach to dealing with a sinning brother in the “assembly.” **First**, discuss the issue with the brother one on one (v. 15). Jesus assumes that the individual who personally confronts his brother will do so with true humility (see verses 3-4). If it is hard to accept a rebuke, it is harder still to administer one in humility. The background for Jesus' instruction is found in Leviticus 19:17-18 – “You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

**Second**, if private confrontation does not work, take two or three witnesses (v 16). The Scriptural background for this instruction is Deuteronomy 19:15 which states in part that “by the mouth of two or three witnesses the truth shall be established.”

Doubtless this Deuteronomic law was designed for what we would call “secular” cases. But the distinction is artificial and should not be pressed for the Israelite nation understood itself to be not a nation like others but a theocratic nation, God's chosen people. In conformity with his customary interpretation of the Scriptures, Jesus perceives the link joining his messianic community with ancient Israel.<sup>1</sup>

The two or three witnesses were to provide testimony in the event that the case had to be escalated and presented to the entire “assembly.” It is less likely that they were to be present to bring additional testimony about the sin committed by the erring brother. Deuteronomy 19:15 deals with judicial condemnation which is a step taken by only the entire assembly not attempts to convince a brother of his fault.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank E. Gaebelien, Expositor's Bible Commentary, general editor, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976-1992), electronic edition.

**Third**, if he refuses to hear the argument against him after the second confrontation, then the matter was to be presented before the entire assembly (v 17). The remainder of the verse indicates that Jesus had excommunication in mind. The Jews despised and ostracized "heathens" and "tax collectors," the latter of whom were considered traitors.

*Verses 19-20* – These two verses should not in this context be understood to be a promise regarding any prayer on which any two or three believers agree. Rather, in context, these two verses refer to a judicial matter in which agreement has been reached by two individuals in the "assembly" and the individuals are gathered in Jesus' name, then the heavenly Father will allow the judgment to stand and satisfy the righteous principles by which the Messianic kingdom is to be governed.

#### **THE PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT (MATT 18:21-35)**

21 Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. 23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 "When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 "But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. 26 "So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' 27 "And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. 28 "But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' 29 "So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' 30 "But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. 31 "So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. 32 "Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' 34 "And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. 35 "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

Seventy times seven (490) is probably not the number of times to which Jesus refers. Rather, the Greek text follows the LXX rendering of the same phrase in Genesis 4:24 which is a translation of the Hebrew for seventy-seven (77).

23 Lamech said to his wives,  
"Adah and Zillah,  
Listen to my voice,  
You wives of Lamech,  
Give heed to my speech,  
For I have killed a man for wounding me;  
And a boy for striking me;  
24 If Cain is avenged sevenfold,  
Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold." (Gen 4:23-24)

Jesus' point is not that 77 or even 490 is the upper limit. Neither is Jesus' point that forgiveness should altogether take the place of the discipline and procedural steps just taught in verses 15-20. Rather, Jesus' point is that all of them have been forgiven far more than they will

ever forgive. Those in the Messianic kingdom serve a king who has forgiven far more than they can ever forgive one another.

The value of ten thousand talents (v. 24) cannot be exactly measured in today's dollar; however, 1 Chronicles 29:4 & 7 notes that David donated three thousand talents of gold and seven thousand talents of silver for the construction of the temple and the princes of Israel donated five thousand talents of gold and ten thousand talents of silver. Some have estimated the value of ten thousand talents to be between \$12 million and \$1 billion depending upon inflation and fluctuating metal prices.

Such an amount of indebtedness could not even be paid by selling the family into slavery (v 25), a practice which was sanctioned in the Law (Lev 25:39; 2 Ki 4:1). Such slaves had to be freed in the year of Jubilee (every fiftieth year). The top price for a slave was only about one talent.

A hundred denarii (v 28) represented a hundred day's wages for a foot soldier or a common laborer. Yet, the amount is trivial compared to what he has already been forgiven. Even an inexpensive slave sold for five hundred denarii and it was illegal to sell a man for a sum greater than his debt.

**The Point:** Because God is such a God of compassion and mercy, He cannot accept those who are devoid of compassion and mercy in His kingdom.