

Lessons from Matthew 18

In Matthew 18 Jesus teaches about humility and forgiveness. Some of our Lord's Disciples wanted to know who would be the greatest in Christ's kingdom (Mark 9:33-34). Jesus responded by using a small child as an object lesson. He told the Disciples that in order to enter Heaven, we must be converted and become as little children.

The Bible uses a number of words to identify the people of God, but the word used most often is "children." We are called *children of promise*, *children of the day*, *children of light*, *beloved children*, *dear children*, and *children of God*. Believers in Christ are children in a spiritual sense, and in Matthew 18, we notice three major lines of thought—marks of childlikeness (18:1-10); marks of compassion (18:11-20); and marks of forgiveness (18:21-35).

1. The Marks of Childlikeness (Matthew 18:1-10)

The Disciples had just been discussing who should be the greatest when Jesus sets up His kingdom. In Mark 9:33, Jesus said to them, "What was it that ye disputed among yourselves [as you walked] by the way?" Verse 34 says, "They held their peace." And then apparently one of the disciples broke the silence and asked the question stated in Matthew 18:1, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

Jesus called a small child and taught a much-needed lesson on humility (verse 2). Some think that Peter asked the question, because he was quick to speak out, and they were in his home town. At any rate, in verse 3, Jesus says that in order to enter the kingdom of Heaven, one must be converted, and must become as a little child.

The word "converted" means "to turn in the opposite direction." We used to walk away from God, now we honestly seek to follow the instructions of His Word. The phrase "to become as little children" is the opposite of what we usually advise. We are in the habit of calling upon little children to follow the example of those who are older. Jesus did the opposite. He did not say to the little child, "Look at Peter; see what a fine fisherman he is; I hope that someday you'll grow up and become like Peter." Instead of pointing to older people and saying to the child, "You ought to become like them," Jesus pointed to a child and said to older people, "You must become like that child." What are some typical characteristics of small children?

1) A trusting spirit—the child instinctively trusts his parents and believes that his needs will be met. When children set out with their parents on a trip, they couldn't find their way or pay their fare, yet they believe they shall arrive safely.

2) Eagerness to learn—the normal child is fascinated with new ideas; he loves to learn new facts and to share his knowledge with others.

3) Quickness to forgive and forget—small children get into quarrels and squabbles, but minutes later, they play together as if nothing happened. Even if parents treat them unjustly, they are quick to forgive and forget.

Jesus says that these childlike qualities constitute greatness (verse 4). These attitudes are a pattern for us to follow in our walk with God.

The word “receive” (verse 5) means “to love” or “to treat with kindness.” It can be a tiring job to satisfy the needs of a child—to wash clothes, bind up injuries, cook meals, and exercise proper discipline—but it should be done with love and patience.

The phrase “one of these little ones” (verse 6) refers to the small child, but Jesus now begins to blend the concept of the small child with that of a recent believer. He uses the child to represent newly converted people who need a lot of patient instruction and good example.

In verses 6-10 Jesus speaks about the seriousness of causing others to stumble. It is bad to sin, but it is even worse to cause another to sin. The word “offend” (verse 6) means “to cause to sin.” We can allure others into sin by false teaching, but perhaps most of all by wrong example. If we are *finding fault with* the church, *permissive regarding* sexual immorality, or *insensitive to the needs and feelings* of others—we are setting a poor example before others, and could make it easier for them to sin.

Jesus clearly says that there is a place of unspeakable misery in the world to come for those who die without repenting. Hell is an awful place. The last part of verse 8 speaks of it as “everlasting fire,” and verse 9 speaks of it as “hell fire.” These are the words of Jesus, the kindest man who ever lived.

Many Bible teachers say that “cutting off the hand” and “plucking out the eye” are metaphors—statements to be taken figuratively. Removing a hand would not cure stealing, and removing a foot would not keep a person from going into wrong places. Removing an eye would not prevent a person from being lustful and lascivious. The lessons we are to learn, they say, are lessons of the heart:

- 1) The dearest objects in life, if they cause us to sin, must be cut off (laid aside).
- 2) We may have to part company even with a close friend (cut off relationships) in order to avoid compromise and sin.
- 3) It will be worth any sacrifice (even actually cutting off a hand), to escape the punishment of God.

We should not say that it is wrong to cut off a hand; but we agree that actually cutting off a hand is not all that Jesus means.

Jesus says that even the angels become deeply offended if we mistreat those who are new believers in Christ (verse 10). The Bible teaches that angels are very real, and that for every child, for every believer, for every “heir of salvation”—there are angels who minister day and night in our behalf (Hebrews 1:14). Angels protected Daniel when he spent a night in the den of lions. Angels delivered Peter when he was locked in a prison cell. And all of us are under the scrutiny of angels. We are in much closer touch with Heaven than we often dream. One of the reasons we are to be a good example for little children, and for new believers in Christ, is because the angels are watching.

The marks of childlikeness include a trusting nature, an eagerness to learn, and a quickness to forgive and forget. These are characteristics of greatness (verse 4), and to do anything that encourages a breakdown of these qualities will bring punishment from Heaven (verses 6-10).

2. The Marks of Compassion (Matthew 18:11-20)

Compassion is a sympathetic concern for the needs of others. The genuine Christian tries to understand and enter into the feelings of those who are experiencing hard places in life. A girl in high school whose

mother had died was out of school for a week. When she returned to school for the first time after her mother's death, it was a hard day. She choked back tears most all day. Another girl (who had been a close friend of hers) was telling her mother that evening how hard it was for Jenny to come back to school again, and how she tried to comfort her. The mother said, "Ann, what did you say to Jenny?" Ann responded, "I didn't say anything; I just cried with her." That's compassion—entering into the feelings of another who is experiencing difficulty along the path of life. As we read on in Matthew 18, we discover a few marks of compassion:

1) Compassion seeks to rescue the lost from the snare of Satan (18:11-14). Using the illustration of the lost sheep, Jesus shows the value of each person in the eyes of God. If just one sheep goes astray (verse 12), the shepherd seeks that sheep. Oriental shepherds had small flocks, and they knew each sheep by name. And just so, God deals primarily with individuals—one person at a time. It is not His will that even one should perish. And thus, if we have the love of Jesus in our hearts, we will make an effort to befriend those who are lost and seek to win them for Christ. Jesus is speaking especially in this parable about trying to reclaim those who were once part of the fold, but became wayward and wandered away.

Sheep are typically foolish creatures. They aimlessly wander into all kinds of difficulty, sometimes falling into crevices and caves. Sometimes they get tangled in weeds and underbrush. And so it is with people. But Jesus has a tender compassion for those who go astray, and like a shepherd on the hillsides of Palestine, He rejoices over just one sheep that had gone astray, and then is later recovered. Each of us should be moved to tears when we see one more soul come to Christ.

2) Compassion tries to work harmoniously with other members of the church (18:15-20). Jesus knew that conflicts would arise between fellow Christians; and in these verses He outlines the procedure for dealing with differences that crop up between us. What should a Christian do in case another brother or sister wrongs him?

a) We should go to visit the brother or sister alone and attempt to straighten out the matter privately (verse 15). Nine out of ten cases of hurt feelings among Christians could be avoided, if each of us resolved not to tell others about a wrong done to us (or about a conflict that arose between us), until we first honestly and kindly approached the offending person. It is possible that the brother or sister does not even realize that he or she caused an offense.

b) If the offending person will not listen, then we are to take one or two others with us, and see that person again (verse 16). Sometimes the entreaty of other Christians will help the offending brother or sister see the seriousness of the conflict, which so far has not been reconciled.

c) If the offending person still will not listen, then the matter is to be taken to the local church (verse 17). The church as a body should consider the problem—and if the offending brother or sister fails to hear the decision of the larger church—he or she should be excommunicated from the fellowship and treated as an unbeliever. The excommunicated brother or sister will likely for a while ridicule the action of the church. But if the person is shown love and appropriate respect, there is a strong possibility that he might be led to a penitent frame of mind later on. Surely the instruction "Let him be unto thee as an heathen," is not a command to abandon the person (verse 17). Instead, it is a challenge to show compassion and to win that person with the kind of love that can touch even the most hardened hearts.

In verse 18, our Lord Jesus says that the assembled church is endowed with internal administrative authority, and that if a decision is made by the church, with an honest attempt to observe the standards of the Word of God, then God has already willed the decision which the church has made.

The word “bind” means “to retain.” The word “loose” means “to let go.” The tense of these verbs is future perfect passive. In other words, the action taken by the gathered church on earth, after prayerfully seeking the Holy Spirit’s direction, shall have already been the action taken by the Lord in Heaven. It is no light thing to act on the membership status of individuals who comprise the congregation. It must be done prayerfully and carefully, but neither is it a light thing to be put forth from the assembly.

Verse 20 makes it clear that Christ is in the midst of the assembled body, and the decisions of the church, are in effect, the decisions of Christ. Verse 19 relates especially to prayer for wisdom in dealing with matters of discipline. We must not take this passage out of its context, and encourage people to believe that they can get anything they want if they simply agree to ask for it. The emphasis in verses 19-20 is that one person all alone has no right to exercise church discipline. It must be the decision of the gathered assembly of believers. One bishop or elder has no authority to decide, all by himself, who shall be retained and who shall be loosed. That must be done by the assembled body.

Lack of discipline in the church is not compassion. It is a curse to any church. It is the privilege and duty of the local body to teach New Testament principles, and to require that its members apply them in everyday living. And continued violation of God’s laws, without repentance, simply cannot be tolerated.

In the eyes of immature church members, such action—the process of exercising discipline and the process of binding and loosing—is considered unloving. But when painful discipline is done in a careful way, it expresses really the deepest kind of love. It helps the erring person correct his ways, and become accountable before God. It supports the integrity of the church, and lets a clear witness in the community.

3. The Marks of Forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35)

Beginning at verse 21, the Apostle Peter had a question about the frequency of forgiveness. He said to Jesus, “How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?” Forgiveness is one of the highest of human virtues, because it reflects the character of God. God has freely forgiven us, and He expects us to be quick to forgive others. Jesus taught that Christian compassion forgives over and over and over again.

In verses 23-35, Jesus told a parable about an Unmerciful Servant. There was a man who owed a king an enormous debt (\$12 million by today’s standard), and when the king demanded that the huge debt be paid, the man who owed the debt begged for mercy. In response to the man’s pleading for mercy, the king forgave his debt. But this debtor, the man who was forgiven of twelve million dollars, went out and dealt harshly with another man who owed him a mere \$20. He went to the man who owed a trifling \$20, and began to choke him (verse 28). The man who owed the \$20 got down on his knees and begged for mercy, and promised to pay the debt, but the unmerciful servant threw him into prison and demanded payment of the debt (verse 30).

Jesus clearly condemned the spirit of unforgiveness. All of us have received boundless forgiveness from our heavenly Father. We should never be slow to forgive even the smallest infractions committed

against us. From this passage in the latter half of Matthew 18, we learn some of the marks of true forgiveness:

1) True forgiveness should have no limits (18:21-22). We are to forgive, not merely seven times, but 70 x 7 times. The Jewish practice was to forgive only three times. The rabbis said, “If a man commits an offense once, forgive him. If he commits an offense a second time, forgive him. If he commits an offense a third time, forgive him. The fourth time, do not forgive.” In light of the Jewish practice, Peter thought that forgiving a man seven times was being pretty generous. But in our lesson, Jesus says that there should be no limit to our forgiveness. We are to forgive (even the same person) over and over again, 70 x 7 times. Forgiveness must be a constant attitude.

2) Forgiveness should make us generous toward those who wrong us (18:28-30). God has forgiven every one of us a great debt of sin, and therefore we should graciously forgive those who offend us. We are to forgive, as God has forgiven us. Ephesians 4:32 says we are to be kind and tenderhearted, “Forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake, hath forgiven you.” It is this awareness of the tremendous cost of our own forgiveness, which keeps us from acting arrogantly, and refusing to forgive those who mistreat us.

3) Failure to forgive others will bring terrible consequences (18:34-35). In Matthew 6:15, Jesus says “If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” We can attempt to water down those words if we want to, but God is going to bring judgment upon those who are unwilling to forgive the wrongs that others have done toward them.

Every one of us is indebted to God. He forgives when we repent, but only if we practice forgiveness toward others. If we are holding grudges and malice and bitter feelings toward another person, we had better quickly take some steps toward making peace.

To “forgive” is not necessarily “to forget.” The truly forgiving person will refuse to dwell on the offense and to keep bringing it up, but sometimes there are reminders that we can’t control. We say, “Forgive and forget.” That phrase is not found in the Bible. When a matter is forgiven, then we must not dwell on it, and keep on bringing it up—but it is possible that the scars will never be forgotten.

To “forgive” does not mean either that we excuse the sinful offense. When I forgive another person, it doesn’t mean that I’m excusing his sin. Sin is always sin, and true love never tries to make sin anything less than what it is. But forgiveness *ends* the bitterness, the anger, and the resentment which usually accompanies an offense against us.

It is our prayer that God will open in our hearts the springs of forgiveness, and that each of us will more and more be characterized by a forgiving spirit. In Matthew 18, Jesus teaches about humility and forgiveness.

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