

Matthew 18 • Lessons in Greatness and Forgiveness

Introduction

If we were to watch or read a biography on someone the world considers to be “great” or highly esteemed, the focus is overwhelmingly fixated on qualifications and the juxtaposition of environment and events. In God’s economy, however, the value is placed instead on personal relationships. Even with the original Apostles, those we recognize as the pillars of the Church, Christ established that every Believer is defined by their treatment and love of others rather than their mere position or office. The organizational structure of the Church never compromises the greater principles of love and grace.

¹At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

[Read v.1]

Q: What do you suppose prompted them to ask this question?

A: It most likely stems from the recent events on the Mt. of Transfiguration, but it is important to note that variations of this question were put to Jesus by the disciples on several occasions and it always seems to be a recurring argument among themselves. In the parallel account in Mark 9 it says, “they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest” (Mk. 9:34) and in Luke 9, “An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest”. (Lk. 9:46)

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.

— Romans 12:10–16

Application: Even what seems good in and of itself such as service to God can become corrupted by the original sin of pride.

²And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, ³and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; ⁶but 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.

[Read v.2-6]

Q: What kind of teaching mechanism is Jesus using where the children are concerned?

A: They are an object lesson, an illustration of how Christ defines greatness.

Q: Are children chosen as the object lesson because they are sinless and perfect?

A: No, they are the best example of the characteristics which ought to be present in every Christian’s life: they are teachable, simple in their wants, and depend on their fathers to meet their needs.

Q: As Jesus goes on to speak of the consequences of mistreating a child in v.5-6, is He strictly speaking exclusively only of children?

A: Note in v.5 that it says, “whoever receives **one such child**”. He is not limiting the discussion to only children, but to Believers having these childlike qualities of faith in Him.

And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

— 1 Corinthians 8:12

Matthew 18 • Lessons in Greatness and Forgiveness, Page 1 of 6

Q: What is the “moral of the story”, so to speak, of this lesson?

A: It is really an extension of the “Golden Rule” to “*treat people the same way you want them to treat you*” (Mt. 7:12) The same child-like qualities of faithfulness which we are encouraged to maintain we are in turn to encourage in others and even responsible to engender and promote.

Application: *Spiritual greatness is embodied in not just our personal attitude but in supporting and fostering that same attitude in others.*

[Read v.7-10]

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. ⁹If 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.

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.

Q: How do we know that Christ is not speaking literally when He commands that a member of our body be “cut off”, “cast out”, or “plucked out”?

A: Because sin comes from the heart, not the hands or feet.

Q: What is the point Christ is making with this dramatic imagery?

A: He is telling us that when it comes to sin we are to deal with it seriously and drastically in the most complete and merciless way possible. In today’s terms it is analogous to the way a surgeon would deal with a cancerous growth, to remove it as soon as possible before it can spread to the point of becoming lethal. This is why Scripture repeatedly symbolized sin as “leaven”.

Application: *Christians are not to dally with sin or delay in getting rid of it. We must face our sins squarely and not just ask for forgiveness, but embrace the biblical definition of “repentance” which means to forsake them and never return to them again.*

Q: How might our sin not be strictly limited to our personal life but have an effect on others as well?

A: By not dealing with sin and continuing to abide in sin we become a stumbling block to others and therefore become a kind of multiplier of sin’s effect.

Q: Why the reminder of “these little ones” in the midst of this teaching on sin?

A: It reinforces the previous teaching that we are not only to be like children ourselves but to engender that quality in others. When we continue in a sinful lifestyle, it is especially egregious because we in turn destroy the faith of others around us.

Application: *Just as faithfulness breeds faithfulness among others, so sinfulness likewise invokes the opposite, destructive effects upon others. Our faithfulness – or even faithlessness – affects us both individually and as an influence on others.*

[Read v.11-14]

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? ¹³If 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. ¹⁴So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven

Q: What kind of teaching mechanism does Jesus now employ to reinforce His point?

A: He uses the parable of the Good Shepherd who looks after the sheep.

Q: What has been the basic points made throughout this chapter about children?

1. We are warned not to offend children. (v.6)
2. We are warned not to despise children. (v.10)
3. We are warned not to allow them to perish without Christ. (v.14)

that one of these little ones perish.

In other words, where literal children and fellow believers in the character of children are concerned, we have a responsibility ourselves to act in the character of the Good Shepherd to protect and deliver them spiritually.

Q: What are the reasons Jesus has given in this passage as to why the children are important?

1. They are examples of true greatness. (v.4)
2. They represent Christ. (v.5)
3. The angels represent them before the Father. (v.10)
4. Christ wants to save them. (v.11)
5. It is the will of the Father that they be saved. (v.14)

In other words, where literal children and fellow believers in the character of children are concerned, it is the Good Shepherd's intention to protect and deliver them spiritually.

Application: *Just as backslidden and worldly-minded parents will have much to answer for at the judgment for their children, so will those believers who likewise conducted themselves toward fellow believers in the character of such children.*

Super Application: *In the first half of this teaching Jesus has affirmed that spiritual greatness is measured by the quality of our personal relationships rather than our perceived position or authority.*

[Read v.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. ¹⁶But 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.

¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸Truly 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. ²⁰For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.”

Q: How has the focus changed? What term is now used to identify the subject of the discussion?

A: Previously the discussion was focused on “children”, now it is “your brother”.

Point: *Christ is dealing, so to speak, with “family matters”. Previously He addressed the responsibility to nurture and protect the children, now He addresses relationships between brethren in order to keep our church family not just intact in Christ but holy.*

Q: Why does Jesus steer the discussion to the issue of dealing with sin?

A: This is all a greater teaching about how our personal faithfulness is supposed to engender faithfulness in others around us just as our sin engenders sin in those around us. Just as we are responsible to encourage faithfulness, we are likewise responsible for dealing with sin in others.

Q: So what is the process of dealing with personal sin?

1. First a private interview. (v.15)
2. Then bring two or three witnesses. (v.16)
3. Finally, if necessary, take the issue before the church. (v.17)

Q: What is the goal of the process?

A: “You have won your brother”. (v.15) In other words, the goal of church discipline is reconciliation through love.

Q: Why is an unrepentant brother to be cut off from fellowship?

A: It goes back to the opening teaching of this chapter that allowing unaddressed sin in one person's life influences others around them to sin. One unaddressed cancer cell eventually spreads and kills the whole

body.

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.

— Galatians 6:1

Application: *We are not to take the attitude of a policeman out to arrest a criminal but rather act in the character of a physician seeking to heal a wound in the Body of Christ which, if left unattended, will spread sickness and death.*

Q: Is this the same process we should use with false teachers and false prophets?

A: Absolutely not. Whenever Jesus encountered false teachers He always rebuked them openly and directly. This is a process dealing with personal sin; public sin in the form of false teaching, false prophecy, etc. must be dealt with immediately and publicly. It is a completely different matter altogether.

Q: Is “binding” and “loosing” the Christian equivalent of casting a curse or spell on someone?

A: If we examine its usage in the giving of the keys by Christ (Mt. 16:19) and Paul’s dealing with a sinful brother in Corinth (he “bound” the offending brother in 1 Co. 5 and “loosed” him after he confessed in 2 Co. 2), we understand it is the applying of God’s Word in matters of discipline. It is a biblical expression for holding people accountable to God’s Word.

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.

— 2 Thessalonians 3:14

Q: What is suggested by v.19 to be a very important part of the disciplinary process?

A: Not just prayer, but prayer where there is a premium placed on the union of Believers to pray for some definite thing in the spirit of a family concerned for and desiring the same goal.

Q: Why might the distinction “I am there in their midst” be important?

A: It is not just unity in agenda that is important but unity in Christ. He is essential to both sides of the issue, both for those yearning to restore a brother in Christ and for the sinful brother who needs to be personally restored to Christ. Christ is the essential element for both parties.

Application: *If all Christians were perfect there would be no need for such instructions. But just we have a responsibility to hold ourselves accountable in order to engender faithfulness, so we have a responsibility to hold each other accountable in order to mitigate the effects of faithlessness.*

²¹Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”

²²Jesus 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.

²⁴When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵But 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. ²⁶So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’

²⁷And 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. ³¹So 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. ³³Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And 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.”

[Read v.21-35]

Q: Why might Peter’s offer of “seven times” appear to have been an “extra-spiritual” offering where forgiveness is concerned?

A: A common rabbinical teaching of the time said that three times was enough. Jesus’ use of “seventy times seven” was a way of putting no limit on forgiveness.

Q: Is this a parable about salvation?

A: No, this is a matter of “family forgiveness”, of matters between the siblings of Christ, not matters of sin between a sinner and God. This is not about eternal judgment but treatment of others.

Q: How would we understand the difference between a debt of “ten thousand talents” and “a hundred denarii”?

A: Think of it as someone owing \$12,000,000 and someone owing \$15. That is the kind of scale dramatized here.

Q: If we place fellow Believers in place of the slaves in this story and Christ in the place of the king, how would you articulate the “moral of the story” here?

A: Christians who cannot forgive others have forgotten what Christ has done for them on the cross. One of the evidences that someone is truly a Christian is love for the brethren.

By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother. For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; not as Cain, who was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother’s were righteous. Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?

— 1 John 3:10–17

Q: What is a real danger which the Church must beware of where sin in personal relationships is concerned?

A: The “leaven of malice and wickedness”. It eventually grows to the point of corrupting the entire fellowship.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

— 1 Corinthians 5:6–8

Application: *Although we are to hold others accountable to God's Word, it must always be with an eye toward our own record of accountability, extending to others the grace and forgiveness expressed by Christ Himself toward us.*

Overall Application

Spiritual greatness as defined by God's point of view is characterized first by personal faithfulness that engenders the same in others, and further by the desire to deal with adversity in the same spirit of love by which it was dealt with in them through Christ. If the worst case scenario is realized in someone's refusal to repent and forsake sin, the consequences come about not because of their personal mistreatment, but their rejection of Christ in spite of every effort of love expended on their part.