

## Matthew's Gospel - Chapter 18 Problems and Forgiveness

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New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Today we will look at Matthew's Gospel Chapter 18 under the title of Problems and Forgiveness. I want to use four headings for my talk, True Greatness, True Judgement, True Behaviour and True Forgiveness.

### **True Greatness (verses 1-7)**

Our questions can be a window into our minds and hearts. Matthew 18 begins with the disciples coming to Jesus with a question.

"At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'" (v.1).

It is obvious that the disciples had been discussing this question amongst themselves and decided to ask Jesus for His answer. His reply was surprising. In verse 2, He called a little child and placed him at the centre of his group of disciples.

"Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them."

It seems the child felt quite safe and comfortable in the presence of Jesus. The publicans and sinners at the beginning of Luke 15 were despised and avoided by the Pharisees and Scribes, but they were comfortable in the presence of Christ.

"Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him (Jesus) to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, 'This Man receives sinners and eats with them'" (vv.1-2).

Jesus drew people towards him by grace and gentleness. So, the little child was comfortable being a spiritual object lesson. *Then in verses 3-6, Jesus explained,*

*"Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea."*

The Lord does not use the word "converted" in verse 3 as having the usual meaning we attach to it. Instead, it conveys a change of status from self-confident independence to smallness and faith. The child's smallness contrasted vividly with the men standing nearby, representing humility and

faith in God. This was not the answer the disciples were expecting. Their idea of greatness was being better, more powerful, and superior to others. It was an attitude that could develop into the self-righteousness of the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14,

“Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.’”

The Lord was teaching them a vital lesson, but it would take them a long time to understand and apply His teaching. On the night Jesus was betrayed, arrested, and led to the Cross, His disciples argued again about who should be the greatest. They were not thinking about Christ’s greatness but their own.

“Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest. And He said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called ‘benefactors.’ But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves’” (Luke 22:24-27).

Jesus wanted them to understand and then be characterised by the same features that He displayed in Matthew 11:28-30,

“Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

This position was not one of weakness but the basis of spiritual power.

Christ’s most extraordinary illustration of humility is found in John 13. On the same occasion when the disciples argued about who should be the greatest,

“[Jesus] rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded” (John 13:4-5).

Afterwards He explained,

“You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not

greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (John 13:13-17).

When we compare the opening words of John's Gospel describing the deity of Christ with the lowly Saviour about to go Calvary, washing His disciples' feet, we begin to understand what true humility means.

Yet these words did not sink into Peter's heart, and Jesus had to warn Peter that he would deny the Lord he loved. He contradicted the Lord.

"Simon Peter said to Him, 'Lord, where are You going?' Jesus answered him, 'Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward.' Peter said to Him, 'Lord, why can I not follow You now?' I will lay down my life for Your sake" (John 13:36-37).

Jesus explained where Peter's self-reliance would take him.

"Jesus answered him, 'Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the cock shall not crow till you have denied Me three times" (John 13:38).

Self-confidence and pride precede failure, even when our desires are noble. The child Jesus placed at the centre of the group of disciples represented smallness and dependence and, at the same time, complete trust, and faith. When the disciples failed to understand that Jesus could feed 5000 people, a child brought his small resources whilst everyone else brought nothing but doubt. A child often sees solutions when adults see only problems. Children are naturally dependent and trusting unless wicked people rob them of these qualities. A Christian's life begins and continues by faith. We become like little children looking up not to an earthly father but to our heavenly Father sensing our frailties but confident in His power. The way into the Kingdom of God is by faith; such faith is illustrated in a child's smallness and trusting nature. Sadly, trust can be destroyed or misdirected by having confidence in ourselves, our possessions, religion, and many other things. The disciples had to learn the humility of Christ, and he used a child to teach them. "Little child" is used to refer to all Christians. The 'child' of verses 2-4 represents 'the little ones' of verses 6,10,14. We also see this meaning in the "little ones" of Matthew 10:42 and "babes" of Matthew 11:25. Just as we care for and protect our children, we are to "love one another" and not act in a way which causes harm to fellow Christians. "Little ones" can have a particular reference to young or weak Christians but can also include all Christians.

Peter objected to Jesus washing his feet. He proudly thought he could follow Jesus to the death but discovered what he was really like and denied his Lord. But in resurrection, Jesus called him not only to be a fisher of men, an evangelist (Mark 1:17) but also a shepherd of the flock of God, a pastor in John 21:15-17. We see the transformation of grace in the life of Peter in his own writings in 1 Peter 5:1-4, he writes,

"The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away."

This was not the brash, self-confident, questioning disciple of the Gospels but the humble shepherd who cared for God's people.

Peter goes on to write,

“Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:5-7).

Through the grace of Christ, Peter learned humility and encouraged it in others so that the people of God would be properly cared for and protected from harm. The secret of this transformation is described in Peter’s final words,

“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen” (2 Peter 3:18).

It is the same grace that teaches us.

In Matthew 18 verse 7, we read,

“Woe to the world because of offences! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offence comes!”

Offences here mean enticements to sin, and these abound today. But within the church, the flock of God, we are supported and protected against such temptations and encouraged to live holy lives. But God is not unmindful of those who actively encourage sinfulness.

### **Self-judgment (verses 8-14)**

The Lord also raises the matter of self-judgement in verses 8-9. He uses the graphic illustration of amputation to deal with sin in our lives. This is not a subject we discuss very often, but it is vital. Paul uses similar language in Colossians 3:5,

“Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.”

Christ and the apostles teach us to deal with things that endanger our spiritual well-being. We are not to compromise with or try to reform what God has judged but “put to death” in our lives what Paul calls the “works of the flesh.” These are listed in Galatians 5:19-21. It doesn’t make for good reading.

“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

In 2 Timothy chapter 3, Paul also lists the predominant features of the behaviour of people who distance themselves from God and live self-focussed lives in “the last days” preceding the return of Christ.

“But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power” (vv.1-5).

We still find within ourselves that which responds to temptation and constantly tests our faith. Like Joseph in the Old Testament, we must confront such things and distance ourselves from the temptation to ensure we and others are not harmed by giving way to sin. Joseph’s faith was tested by temptation. Potiphar’s wife becomes infatuated with Joseph and invites him into her bed. Joseph consciously lived in the sight of God, and his response was powerfully direct. He never considered taking advantage of his position or the power of his attractiveness. He strips everything down to one simple question, “How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” Joseph lived in a world so different from the home where he grew up. The guiding principle of his life was being led by the God who had shepherded his father all the days of his life. He never turned his back on God or allowed himself to be sucked into the moral corruption of the world where he was a slave. Later in the Old Testament, King David, for all his greatness, was led by idleness to look on Bathsheba and made a decision that brought his kingdom close to ruin. How many lives have been damaged, and testimonies have been destroyed by one act of disobedience. Joseph did not make that mistake because he looked immediately to God and, by doing so, protected himself from spiritual harm. We can only overcome temptation by recognising its destructive power. Joseph teaches us that temptation is a constant battle, and we are repeatedly confronted by it. It comes in many forms, and we often face the same temptation. Joseph was not afraid to flee temptation by physically removing himself from the situation. He is a vivid example of Psalm 119:11,

“Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.”

Christ teaches us the power of this practice at the outset of His public ministry when He was tested in the wilderness. He resists Satan by the power of the word of God (Matthew 4:1-11). The word of God in our hearts identifies and confronts sin and moves us away from its influence.

In contrast Paul describes the features of our life in Christ seen in the Fruit of the Spirit.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another” (Galatians 5:22-26).

And in Philippians 4, the apostle lists the things we should reflect on and be characterised by.

“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you” (vv.8-9).

In Matthew 18 verse 10, we read,

“Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.”

Christ uses the term “little ones” to describe how His disciples are viewed in the world. The Christian faith has always been despised and persecuted, but in heaven, it is honoured. God’s care and protection for His people should not be underestimated. God will hold to account those who have persecuted His people. The phrase “one of these little ones” guards against individual Christians being overlooked or ignored.

Matthew was a tax collector and far from God. He knew the truth of Christ’s words,

“The Son of Man has come to save that which was lost” (v.11).

In Luke 19, Zacchaeus, another tax collector is brought to Christ. And the story of his conversion ends with the similar words,

“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost”  
(Luke 19:10).

The story of the lost sheep resonated deeply in Matthew’s soul.

“What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (Matthew 18:12-14).

Matthew knew what it meant to be lost and what it meant to be found. He was despised as a tax collector and despised as a disciple of Jesus Christ. The secular and religious worlds are equally resentful of simple faith in Christ, but the same faith is honoured by God.

### **True behaviour (verses 15-20)**

The Lord goes on to address one brother being injurious towards another brother. He is not specific regarding the wrongdoing, so this teaching applies to various behaviours. But the Lord describes a spiritual process which is rarely followed.

“Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector” (vv.15-17).

The first step in dealing with the situation outlined is a face-to-face meeting. How often do we tell a host of other people about how we have been wronged without ever addressing the issue privately with the person involved. By doing what the Lord asks, the matter is confined to those involved and with mutual humility and brotherly affection, the ground is set for resolution and reconciliation. If this fails and the one appealed to will not hear, other respected, impartial, and spiritual witnesses can be invited to help resolve the issue. It is envisaged that this wider group would encourage the right course of action. If this also fails, the wider church becomes involved in the pastoral ministry of getting the offending brother to listen to the appeals made and to put matters right. To resist overwhelming spiritual guidance reveals a hardness of heart inconsistent with the Christian faith. It dishonours Christ by refusing His divine instruction, and fellowship is broken.

The people of God, whether a large company or the smallest company (vv.19-20), are subject to the word of God and the action of “binding” appear to describe restrictive measures and “loosing” of releasing or setting free. We have an outstanding example of this in the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, which confirmed Gentile believers should not be bound by Jewish customs but enjoy the liberty they had in Christ.

Verse 20 is remarkable,

“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

So often, we are impressed by large numbers, but the reality of Christ’s presence in the smallest company demonstrates that the Lord does not disregard the few. Throughout the Bible, the presence and power of God are shown in the smallest numbers of His people. He worked in and through individuals like Abel. Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. We read in Deuteronomy 7:7-8,

“The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you.”

Gideon’s army had to be made smaller to do God’s will. And David was judged for counting the people. The Lord knows them that are His, and every one of us is precious in His sight, and when we gather in His name, He is with us.

### **True Forgiveness (verses 21-35)**

Peter came to Jesus with another question in verse 21.

“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”

Jesus replies,

“I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven” (v.22).

The Saviour was not limiting our forgiveness to 490 times but explaining to Peter we should not be keeping count. To impress this on Peter, he tells him The Parable of the unforgiving Servant.

The parable centres on a king who arranged to settle his accounts with his servants. During the process, he discovers one owed him ten thousand talents. A talent was the largest denomination of currency, so ten thousand talents was a staggering amount of debt the servant could not pay, and the judgement was for him to lose everything to offset the debt. The servant fell before the king, begging him for time to pay for everything he owed. The king was moved with compassion, released him from his debt, and set him free. You would have expected such an act of grace to be life-changing. Instead, the servant found a fellow servant and, with physical violence, demanded the repayment of a hundred denarii. This was a tiny sum compared to the immense debt the first servant had been released from. The debtor appealed for time to repay the debt but was imprisoned. This injustice caused fellow servants to tell their master what had happened. And the forgiven servant found himself in the presence of an angry king judged for failing to show others the compassion he had received.

The lesson is simple, but we must always remember it. Our life in Christ began with experiencing the forgiveness of God. It filled us with love and joy. It warmed our hearts towards others and gave us the desire to share the wonder of the Gospel. It brought us into the family of God and a fellowship of life and love. But sadly, it is still possible for us to become unforgiving. That is why Paul has to write to the Ephesians,

“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour [loud quarrelling], and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31-32).

Then in Colossians chapter 3:12-14, Paul also writes,

“Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, long-suffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.”

In these two passages, we understand how bitterness takes root. Wrath is the strongest outward expression of the anger which begins in our hearts. Loud quarrelling and spreading bad reports about fellow Christians were also in evidence in one of the most blessed churches in the New Testament. All this demonstrates how far we can stray from being an expression of the power of God's forgiveness. Paul encouraged them, and also challenges us, to judge such behaviour in ourselves. To replace bitterness with kindness, wrath and anger with tender-heartedness and forgiveness. Not superficial forgiveness but the depth of forgiveness God shows us in Christ.

Colossians starts from our position in Christ, “elect of God, holy and beloved.” He encourages action, “put on.” And he highlights features of the Saviour character: tender mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, and long-suffering. What God has shown to us, we are to show to others. Bearing with those we find difficult and testing. Rejoicing in the grace of forgiveness. Forgiving someone does not mean we have not been hurt, felt belittled or suffered pain. It means bringing that hurt, humiliation, and pain to the Saviour, who knows those feelings deeper than we ever could. At the cross, we see the cost of our salvation and reap its blessings. And these begin with the first words of the crucified Saviour,

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34).

In returning to the place of our forgiveness, we discover our complaints can be left there, and we can be empowered by grace to forgive as Christ forgave us. And more than this, we learn “above all these things” to put on love which binds us together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

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