

VI. Your humility and sensitivity to others is judged by your readiness to forgive or show mercy. (Mt. 18:21-35)

A. Peter's question: "How many times forgive?" (Mt. 18:21)

B. Jesus answers: "No limit: mercifulness is the rule in God's Kingdom!" (18:22-35)

1. Consider the greatness of God's mercy to you. (18:23-27)

2. Consider the smallness of your brother's sins against you. (18:28-30)

3. Consider the consequences of indulging an unforgiving spirit. (18:31-34)

CONCLUSION: You endanger your own position in the Kingdom by unmercifulness and reckless superiority! (Mt. 18:35)

## Section 46

### JESUS TRAINS THE TWELVE IN PERSONAL RELATIONS

(Parallels: Mark 9:33-50; Luke 9:46-50)

TEXT: 18:1-35

#### A. Humility and True Greatness

1 In that hour came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? 2 And he called to him a little child, and set him in the midst of them, 3 and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

#### B. Responsibility

5 And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me; 6 but whoso shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depth of the sea.

## C. Self-renunciation

7 Woe unto the world because of occasions of stumbling! for it must needs be that the occasions come; but woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh! 8 And if thy hand or thy foot causeth thee to stumble, cut it off, and cast it from thee: it is good for thee to enter into life maimed or halt, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into the eternal fire. 9 And if thine eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is good for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into the hell of fire.

## D. Individual Concern

10 See that ye despise not one of these little ones: for I say unto you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven. (Many authorities, some ancient, insert ver. 11: "for the Son of man came to save that which was lost." See Luke 19:10) 12 How think ye? If any man have a hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and go unto the mountains, and seek that which goeth astray? 13 And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth over it more than over the ninety and nine which have not gone astray. 14 Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.

## E. Discipline in the Fellowship of Christ

15 And if thy brother sin against thee, go, show him his fault between thee and him alone: if he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. 16 But if he hear thee not, take with thee one or two more, that at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established. 17 And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church: and if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican. 18 Verily I say unto you, What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my

Father who is in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

#### F. Forgiveness

21 Then came Peter and said to him, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? until seven times? 22 Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven. 23 Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, who would make a reckoning with his servants. 24 And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, that owed him ten thousand talents. 25 But forasmuch as he had not wherewith to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 The servant therefore fell down and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. 27 And the lord of that servant, being moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. 28 But that servant went out, and found one of his fellow-servants, who owed him a hundred shillings: and he laid hold on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay what thou owest. 29 So his fellow-servant fell down and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee. 30 And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay that which was due. 31 So when his fellow-servants saw what was done, they were exceeding sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. 32 Then his lord called him unto him, and saith to him, Thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou besoughtest me: 33 shouldest not thou also have had mercy on thy fellow-servant, even as I had mercy on thee? 34 And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due. 35 So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not every one his brother from your hearts.

(19:1 And it came to pass when Jesus had finished these words, he departed from Galilee and came into the borders of Judea beyond the Jordan.)

#### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

a. Matthew (18:1) says the disciples came to Jesus asking, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom?" whereas Mark (9:34) says that

when they were asked directly about this very discussion, "they were silent." How can both statements be true? Explain this apparent contradiction by showing the proper order in which these took place.

- b. What is the spirit of the Apostles' argument? What would their mental concept of the Kingdom have been that caused them to discuss the question of relative greatness?
- c. What is the point of Jesus' object lesson: what is there about children that makes them a good illustration of what the disciples must become?
- d. What does it matter what attitude one has who would seek to enter the Kingdom?
- e. How does humility so radically affect a man's life as to produce the desired change Jesus indicates as absolutely essential for entrance into God's Kingdom? Explain how it is that the most humble are the greatest in the Kingdom.
- f. How do the principles of Jesus conflict with those of the world as to what constitutes true greatness? Who are the truly great in God's sight?
- g. What are some dangers to avoid in trying to be truly humble?
- h. Does Jesus actually say that it is wrong to want to be great? Did He imply it?
- i. What does "receiving little children" have to do with humility? Do "the great" of this world not receive them?
- j. Does Jesus mean that those who operate orphanages serve God perfectly?
- k. Why were the Apostles mistaken to hinder the unaffiliated worker of miracles?
- l. Why do you suppose Jesus permitted the unaffiliated worker to do his work in His name? So that the disciples would have to encounter him and have to decide about him?
- m. How does building a religious denomination with its great agencies, its shows of strength, its big conventions, its fences of separation, its grand institutions, defy the spirit and will of Jesus? Or does it? If not, why not?
- n. What does judging by harsh condemnation do to this spirit of Jesus?
- o. How does the incident involving the unaffiliated worker of miracles relate to His teaching concerning false teachers? Does this passage instruct us to receive all religious teachers regardless of their teaching, simply on the strength of the fact that "they follow

not with us"?

- p. How can you harmonize "he that is not against us is for us" (Mk. 9:40) with Mt. 12:30: "He who is not with me is against me"?
- q. Does Jesus specify what reward may be expected by any who help the disciples? What do you think it is?  
If you say that "these little ones who believe in me" are young Christians, why then does Jesus call them "little"? What is so "little" about them?
- s. How or why would death by drowning be "better" or "profitable" for the one who causes others to stumble?
- t. Why "must" occasions of stumbling come? How do they come?
- u. If a Christian, despite his pure life in Christ, unknowingly causes others to sin, is he thereby placed under the condemnation of Jesus? What is a stumbling block anyway? Is it best to look for them in our lives, or to ignore them and let others point them out? Are any of your present habits or attitudes likely to become stumbling blocks? What are you doing about them?
- v. What is the relationship between Jesus' dire warnings about one's own hands, eyes or feet, and what precedes as well as what follows them? In other words, what principle is seen in self-discipline and self-mastery that affects the disciples' attitude toward others?
- w. What protection against damning selfishness does Jesus afford His disciples in the very words of our text? (Mt. 18:1-35)
- x. How many weak, sinful, stubborn, abusive, hardheaded church-members are included in the command: "See that you despise not one of these little ones"? How do you know?
- y. How does the illustration about the finding of the lost sheep hold an undisguised threat to status-seeking disciples ambitious to be the greatest in the Kingdom? How does this parable serve as an extremely important context for the teaching on church discipline given later in this same text? (Mt. 18:15-18)
- z. Who is meant by "thy brother (who) sins"? Should we bring "against thee" into the discussion? Is our action toward a sinning brother dependent upon whether he has sinned against us or not?
- aa. Even if we admit "against thee" as having been written in the text by Matthew, does this change anything about the nature and seriousness of the brother's sin? What "sin" is referred to in this command the Lord obviously intended for us: it is *anything* listed in the NT lists of sins? What is the law whereby we know when a person sins? How are we going to apply Jesus' will as He states it here?

- bb. Must this "sin" be a public disgrace before we do anything about it? What if it is a failure in one's Christian faith which needs to be strengthened by privately showing him the lack? Are there sins concerning which one should not make a public issue where it is better to forgive than to publish them by initiating disciplinary action? On what basis should this decision be made?
- cc. Since not everyone is gifted with tact and wisdom sufficient to approach the sinning brother in order delicately to remove the cause of his stumbling, would it not be just sufficient merely to be kind and forgiving toward him without going to him about it? Must we go? Why not just pray for him and stay home? Besides, if we lack the necessary abilities to handle the case right, would we not do more harm than good? What does the Lord say?
- dd. Why go to the sinning brother privately at first? Show the wisdom of this course.
- ee. Why, in the case of failure, should one or two others go too? What is their exact function?
- ff. Why "tell the matter to the church"?
- gg. Who or what exactly is the "church" here? How could Jesus speak of the church before it even existed?
- hh. Do you think that God has nothing better to do than cooperate with the Church on earth by ratifying in heaven decisions made by the Church? Who is governing this world anyway: God or the Church? How are we to understand the "binding and loosing on earth and in heaven"?
- ii. Do you think Jesus should require anyone, much less His Church, to call people names like "pagan" or "publican"? Why or why not?
- jj. Just because two people agree to ask God for something, does this mean that God is obligated to honor the promise made by Jesus in our text? (18:19) Or are there other considerations? If so, what are they?
- kk. In what sense is it true that Jesus is present wherever two disciples meet in His name?
- ll. Do you think an erroneous decision made by the Church, or perhaps one which contravened God's law, would be binding on anyone? What do you think should be done, if the Church does err in a particular disciplinary case?
- mm. When Peter asked the Lord how often "my brother shall sin against me," who does he mean by "my brother"? only Andrew? What had been said in Jesus' previous discussion that would cause

Peter to ask this question?

- nn. Do you think Peter was being generous or Pharisaic to try to ascertain the precise limit to which one should go in forgiving a brother? Why?
- oo. Should we forgive an offender who does not seek forgiveness from us? On what basis do you answer as you do?
- pp. Why should Jesus have to tack onto His demand that we forgive the additional expression "from the heart"? Is there any other kind of forgiveness?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Returning to Galilee from the tour of Phoenicia, Syria, Decapolis, and, most recently, the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus and the Twelve arrived in Capernaum. Now an argument had arisen among the disciples as to which of them was the most important. But Jesus knew what they were thinking. So when He was indoors, He faced them with the question, "What were you discussing on the way home?"

But they would not answer, because on the road they had been disputing with one another about who was the greatest. At that moment some of the disciples came forward to Jesus, blurting out the question, "Who then is really the most important in the coming Kingdom of Heaven?"

Jesus sat down and, calling the Twelve together, told them, "If any one wants to be first, he must put himself last of all and be the servant of everybody!"

At this point He called a child to His side and stood him in the center of the group, commenting, "Truly I can assure you, unless you change your entire outlook and become like children, you will certainly never get into God's Kingdom! The most important man in the coming Kingdom is the one who humbles himself till he is like this child."

Then, putting His arms around the child, He continued, "Whoever takes care of one little child like this for my sake, is, in effect, welcoming and caring for me. And whoever welcomes and cares for me, is not receiving me only, but also God who sent me. You see, he who seems to be the least important among you all, is really the one who is the most important!"

John broke in to say, "Master, we encountered somebody invoking

your name to drive out demons, so we tried to stop him, because he does not follow you along with us."

But Jesus' answer was, "You must not hinder him, because no one who uses my name to do a miracle, will immediately thereafter be able to insult or revile me. In fact, anyone who is not actively against us is on our side. I can assure you that, whoever gives you a mere cup of water to drink on the basis of the fact that you belong to Christ,—there is no way he can miss his reward."

"On the other hand, if someone becomes the means whereby one of these seemingly less important disciples is caused to stumble into sin, it would be better for him to have a millstone tied around his neck and be plunged into the sea and drowned. How terrible for the world that there are things that cause people to stumble into sin! In fact, it is inevitable that such things happen, but woe to the person through whose influence the temptation comes! So, if it is YOUR hand or YOUR foot that proves a snare to YOU, hack it off and fling it away from YOU. By comparison, it is better for YOU to live forever maimed or lame than be thrown with both hands or both feet into the eternal, unquenchable fire of hell! It is the same way with YOUR eye, if this is the cause of YOUR undoing, tear it out and hurl it away from YOU. Entering life half-blind in the Kingdom of God, is better for YOU, than with two good eyes to be thrown into a fiery hell, where the maggots never die and the fire is never put out. The salt with which everyone will be salted is fire. But the "salt" is a good thing only if it has not lost its strength. Otherwise, how will you season it? You must have in yourselves the "salt" I mean, and keep on living at peace with one another."

"Be especially careful not to underesteem—much less despise—one of these seemingly insignificant followers! I assure you that in heaven their angels have uninterrupted access to my heavenly Father. What is your opinion? Suppose a man had a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray. Would not he leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go in search of the one that is straying? Moreover if he manages to find it, it goes without saying that he is happier over it than over the ninety-nine that have not gone astray. So, it is not the will of my heavenly Father that even one of these seemingly insignificant disciples should be lost.

"So, if your brother sins against you, go and convince him of his fault privately, just between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed



by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, present your case to the congregation. And if he refuses to listen even to the community of believers, then consider him like you would a pagan or an outcast. I assure you that whatever action you take on earth will conform to the divine pattern and God will back you up. I intend to underline the fact that, if even two of you agree on earth about anything they pray for, they will receive it from my heavenly Father. This is because, where two or three come together as disciples to meet in my name, I am right there with them."

Then Peter came up with the problem: "Lord, how often shall my brother keep on sinning against me and I have to forgive him? As many as seven times?"

Jesus disagreed, "No, I would not say, seven times, but seventy times seven! This is why God's Kingdom may be compared to a king who decided to settle accounts with his agents. He had no sooner begun than one man was brought in who owed him an astronomical figure. Since he could not pay it, his Lord ordered him to be sold as a slave—his wife, his children and all his possessions—and payment to be made. At this the agent fell to his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, give me time, and I will repay you every cent of it!' Out of mercy for him, this lord not only released him, but also forgave him the debt. But this same fellow, as he went out, happened to meet one of his co-workers who owed him a paltry sum. Grabbing him by the throat, he began choking him and demanding, 'Pay me what you owe!' At this, his companion prostrated himself, pleading, 'Just be patient with me, and I will pay you back!' But the other refused. Instead, he hauled him off to prison till the debt should be paid. Since other co-workers had witnessed the spectacle, all very upset they went to their master and reported the entire incident. Then the king summoned that agent and addressed him: 'You wicked ingrate! I cancelled your entire debt because you asked me to. Should you not have been as merciful to your fellow worker, as I was to you?' His indignant master then turned him over to the prison torturers, until he should pay the entire amount. This is precisely how my heavenly Father will treat every last one of you, unless you sincerely forgive your brother!"

Then, when Jesus had finished this message, He left Galilee and went beyond the Jordan River to Perea which borders on Judea.

NOTES

SITUATION: DISCIPLES DREAMING OF DISTINCTIONS

18:1 **In that hour came the disciples of Jesus, saying, Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?** The opening words link this section with Jesus' discussion with Peter about the temple tax, therefore in the house where He regularly stayed during His now less frequent returns to Capernaum. These two events probably occurred the same day, as there is a definite logical connection between them. (See on 17:24.) This discourse may have occurred upon Peter's return from paying the temple tax (17:27), although its basis lay in an earlier quarrel. Depending on the emphasis placed on the various details, there are three possible harmonizations of the Gospels' approach to this question:

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|--|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Argument on the road home (Mk. 9:33; Lk. 9:46)</li> <li>2. Jesus perceived their thoughts (Lk. 9:47)</li> <li>3. Jesus challenged them to admit it (Mk. 9:33)</li> <li>4. Ashamed, disciples remain silent (Mk. 9:34)</li> <li>5. Jesus' statement: "First is last and servant." (Mk. 9:35)</li> <li>6. Disciples insist: "Who, then is greatest?" (Mt. 18:1)</li> <li>7. Jesus' object lesson: "Be</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Argument on the road home (Mk. 9:33; Lk. 9:46)</li> <li>2. Jesus perceived their thoughts (Lk. 9:47)</li> <li>3. Jesus challenged them to admit it (Mk. 9:33)</li> <li>4. Ashamed, disciples remain silent (Mk. 9:34)</li> <li>5. Disciples, unmasked, ask, "Who, then, is greatest?" (Mt. 18:1)</li> <li>6. Jesus' statement, "First is last and servant." (Mk. 9:35)</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Argument on the road home (Mk. 9:33; Lk. 9:46)</li> <li>2. Disciples ask "innocent" general question (Mt. 18:1)</li> <li>3. Jesus perceives their real meaning (Lk. 9:47)</li> <li>4. Jesus challenged them to admit meaning (Mk. 9:33)</li> <li>5. Disciples remain silent, ashamed. (Mk. 9:34)</li> <li>6. Jesus' statement: "First is last and servant." (Mk. 9:35)</li> </ol> |
| <p>This assumes they either did not understand His statement (5) as the true answer, or in light of its ethical implications, stupidly push Him to indicate His prospective hierarchy anyway.</p>  | <p>This assumes that, faced with His obvious insight into their squabble, they shamelessly request that He settle their dispute, indicating their relative status.</p>  | <p>This assumes they hide their ambition under an innocent, general, hypothetical query, but Jesus reads their thoughts and unmasks their real motive to learn their future status.</p>   |

Drawn out in these bleak terms, their selfish ambition may seem shocking to the reader who has learned to love and regard these very men highly for their work's sake (1 Th. 5:13). In fact, the psychological likelihood of this dispute against a backdrop of Passion Predictions may seem slight, but upon closer investigation, is regrettably harmonious. The argument on the road home from Caesarea Philippi (16:13) and the Mount of Transfiguration (17:1) very likely finds its genesis in certain important details involved in the events that took place there:

1. The promise of special powers to Peter (Mt. 16:17-19). Did this make him greatest?
2. The special privileges of Peter, James and John—was there any self-exaltation among them because of this?
  - a. To witness the resurrection of Jairus' daughter. (Mk. 5:37)
  - b. To pray with Him on the Mount of Transfiguration. (Mt. 17:1; Lk. 9:28)
3. The contrasting failure of faith and miracle-working power of the Nine. (Mt. 17:19f) Did this put them in a bad light with the other three?
4. Perhaps the fact that the temple tax collectors singled out Peter seemed to increase his prestige as spokesman for the group and especially for Jesus. (Mt. 17:24-27) We are not told how many other Apostles knew about the collectors' question, however.
5. From the standpoint of James and John, Peter's impulsiveness and constant rebukes by the Lord might have marked him, not for the highest office, but for some lesser post, a fact that would leave the nicest political plums still on the tree. (Cf. Mt. 16:22f; 17:4, 24f; 14:28-31; 15:15f) Notwithstanding Jesus' lesson delivered here, they return later with their own false ambition. (20:20-28)
6. It is not unlikely that Jesus already perceived the harsh spirit of John and the others (cf. Mk. 9:38ff) and the self-righteous bargaining of Peter (Mt. 18:15, 21).

So, Jesus' question, "What were you discussing on the way?" (Mk. 9:33) was not based upon His ignorance, but upon theirs, because He was very much aware, just as He was aware of Peter's answer given to the collectors of the temple tax. (Cf. Mt. 17:25) How gently He deals with these children! His question which leads their conscience to accuse them is more effective than a direct rebuke and leaves them psychologically readier to study the question with Him.

There are root causes that made it a psychologically easy matter

to begin scrapping over the brightest honors in the Kingdom:

1. Heart-broken over Jesus' insistence that He must die (see on 17:23), they cling for hope to the Kingdom-idea, but it was THEIR Kingdom-concept that led them astray. As Edersheim (*Life*, II, 115f) reminds us,

It was the common Jewish view, that there would be distinctions of rank in the Kingdom of Heaven. It can scarcely be necessary to prove this by Rabbinic quotations, since the whole system of Rabbinism and Pharisaism, with its separation from the vulgar and ignorant, rests upon it. But even within the charmed circle of Rabbinism, there would be distinctions, due to learning, merit, and even to favouritism. . . . On the other hand, many passages could be quoted bearing on the duty of humility and self-abasement. But the stress laid on the merit attaching to this shows too clearly, that it was the pride that apes humility.

If they connected the general resurrection with that of Jesus (cfr. Mk. 9:10), then they may have imagined the apocalyptic last judgment as following hard on the heels of the general resurrection, and the proclamation of the Messianic Kingdom immediately thereafter.

2. They presumed without proof that Jesus' Kingdom would OF COURSE be hierarchical and that someone among them would very likely occupy the highest posts, dignities and honors. They presumed that greatness and position were political prizes dispensed by the King to His favorites, rather than qualities to be developed through ministry and usefulness to others. Further, they were well aware that Jesus intended to create a community of which they themselves were the founding elements. (Mt. 16:18f; Jn. 6:68-70; Mt. 10; 13:10-17)
3. Since their total concern was who among themselves was greater than the rest of them (see Lk. 9:46 = *meizon autōn*), they evidently could not conceive of anyone outside their group as being trusted with such greatness nor even with miracle-working powers which Jesus entrusted exclusively (so they thought) to them. (Cf. Mk. 9:38-41; Lk. 9:49f)
4. From this theorizing and castle-building in which they would all benefit, it was an easy step to begin hypothesizing about who would merit the lion's share, because pride and envy are not far apart.

Their formal question is, "**Who then is greatest in the Kingdom?**" but the question of their heart is: "Lord, is it I?" They were dividing the spoils before beginning the battle. Scarcely anyone is willing to accept inferiority to others as normal, and considering everyone else as fully one's equal is just as difficult to admit for many, but the vast majority can dream of nothing but unrivaled superiority.

In this confusion of motivations, half based on Jewish expectations and half grounded in their brash expectation of honors and positions as rewards for following Jesus, as Farrar (*Life*, 389) says,

The one thing which they *did* seem to realize was that some strange and memorable issue of Christ's life, accompanied by some great development of the Messianic kingdom was at hand; and this unhappily produced the only effect in them which it should *not* have produced. Instead of stimulating their self-denial, it awoke their ambition; instead of confirming their love and humility, it stirred them to jealousy and pride.

While some assert that Matthew plays down the disciples' failures and ignorance, this chapter eloquently corrects that view, since it was written in the perspective of the cross and in the hindsight of several years of Church history. For him to report that any one of Jesus' disciples posed this shameful question is to paint the humiliating truth about them in its true colors. In fact, this detail guarantees its authenticity, for there are few more embarrassing spectacles of the Apostles' unworthy ambitions than that which underlies every syllable of this chapter. If this is not a true, reliable documentation, then to the extent it is self-descriptive, its author must be judged masochistic at worst and possessed of a warped taste at best. In fact, his use of "disciples" instead of "apostles" here is not meant to shield the Twelve, but to underline for the reader that these giants of the faith were one day students in Jesus' classes and in desperate need of the same instruction the Lord lay before them and requires of all His followers. His goal is not demythologizing the Apostleship, but upgrading the discipleship. He does this by warning every disciple not to be surprised at his own ignorance and failure, as though something strange were happening to him, since even the great Apostles have also walked this lowly path of discipleship too.

The point of their question is its obvious demand for an authoritative, definitive pronouncement on primacy and status in the Kingdom, but especially in the Apostolic group itself. These men want to know

precisely what the Catholic Church and all like her have settled for themselves, but it is heresy of the first order to invent human answers and ignore the sort of hierarchy which the Lord actually established by His definite and final answer given in this chapter! It is one of the ironies of Church history that men should so often have deliberately filled in the outline the Twelve had in mind, realizing their ideal of greatness with its high office, its pomp and pageantry, its rod of empire and its submissive subjects, and, in the same motion, robbing Jesus of HIS ideal. Had the Lord ever intended to establish the primacy of Peter or anyone else, this is the time, and this is the chapter. In fact, He could have simply answered their question, settling it for all time and eternity, by saying unequivocally: "First, Peter has the keys of the Kingdom: second, James and John shall share equally as prime ministers, then the other nine will form the Apostolic College under the former." Then, having settled the issue, Jesus could then have preached them a message suited to their particular needs while functioning in their newly announced official ranks. But the very fact that He established NO OFFICIAL RANK when formally requested to do so is satisfactory proof that He had no intention of so doing. This conclusion is rendered almost, if not absolutely, certain by the impact and implications of the message He gave. Jesus knew what structured power would do to men. He also knew that He could establish His Kingdom in the world without the organizational power-structure men believe so indispensable to the accomplishment of such a task. He clearly foresaw just how damaging to the spiritual aims of the Kingdom would have been the establishment of an Establishment. Although at this time the Apostles are ignorant and so ask their question, we have the benefit of historical perspective and cannot claim their ignorance, because we are certain that Christ's Kingdom is not of this world, and the man or church is in trouble who acts as though it were! How amply and how sadly church history has vindicated His wisdom!

The question itself, although confidently addressed to Jesus as King of the Kingdom and, hence, qualified to furnish a definitive answer, is reprehensible, as the embarrassed silence of the Apostles betrays when He quizzed them about their quarrel. (Mk. 9:34) In fact, as will be obvious from His answer, Jesus saw far more at stake than a simple request for His prospective line-up for preferential treatment in the Kingdom. Because He correctly sensed that much more was involved, He went right to the real heart of their problem, leading the Twelve in quite another direction than they expected

when they worded their question. In fact, the very haggling over their own relative importance had not unlikely led to bitterness among them and, consequently, demanded that Jesus answer their question in such a way as to indicate the cure and motivate them to take it. Out of this will come the exhortation to humble efforts to seek reconciliation with a brother and the parable of the unforgiving servant. (18:15-35)

What Jesus *did* at this occasion revealed not only his thorough understanding of the nature of the kingdom and of the way of entering it, but also his tenderness toward the little ones. What he *said* deserved all the praise that has ever been ascribed to it, and far more than that. But was not the amazing glory of the Mediator's soul revealed also in his restraint, that is, in what he did not do and did not say? He did not even scold his disciples for their callousness, their insensibility with respect to this approaching agony, the non-lasting character of their grief, their quickness in turning the mind away from him to themselves, their selfishness. All this he passed by, and addressed himself directly to their question. (Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 687)

It does, indeed come upon us as a most painful surprise, and as sadly incongruous this constant self-obtrusion, self-assertion, and low, carnal self-seeking; this Judaistic trifling in face of the utter self-abnegation and self-sacrifice of the Son of Man. Surely, the contrast between Christ and His disciples seems at times almost as great as between Him and the other Jews. If we would measure His stature, or comprehend the infinite distance between His aims and teaching and those of His contemporaries, let it be by comparison with even the best of His disciples. It must have been part of His humiliation and self-exinanition (=self-emptying, cfr. Phil. 2:7) to bear with them. And is it not, in a sense, still so as regards us all? (Edersheim, *Life*, II, 116)

The task to which He now addressed Himself was at once the most formidable and the most needful He had as yet undertaken in connection with the training of the twelve. Most formidable, for nothing is harder than to train the human will into loyal subjection to universal principles, to bring men to recognize the claims of the law of love in their mutual relations, to expel pride, ambition, vainglory, and jealousy and envy from the hearts even of the good. Men may have made great progress in the art of

prayer, in religious liberty, in Christian activity, may have shown themselves faithful in times of temptation, and apt scholars in Christian doctrine, and yet prove signally defective in temper. . . . No wonder then that Jesus from this time forth devoted Himself with peculiar earnestness to the work of casting out from His disciples the devil of self-will, and imparting to them as salt His own spirit of meekness, humility and charity. He knew how much depended on the success in this effort . . . and the whole tone and substance of the discourse before us reveals the depth of His anxiety. (Bruce, *Training*, 193f)

#### RESPONSE: JESUS' SERMON ON THE IMPORTANCE OF OTHERS

In answer to their question either spoken (18:1) or unspoken (Lk. 9:46f; Mk. 9:33f) Jesus made certain every single Apostle was present in class before beginning the all-important lesson. (Mk. 9:35) Then, in one pithy, paradoxical proverb He stated His text: **If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.** (Mk. 9:35) Everything else He will say will amplify this fundamental idea. Notice how Jesus overthrows earth-bound value judgments by arguing that "the last will be first, and the first last, a theme He will take up again in the Parable of the Eleventh Hour Laborers. (Mt. 19:30—20:16)

Who is **last of all and servant of all**? The wood-choppers and water-haulers of earth! (Josh. 9:27) In short, the lowly burden-bearers in the service of others. Those, therefore, who voluntarily put themselves on this level of ministry to others are the most likely to fulfil the law of the King. (Gal. 6:2) The secret of true greatness is humble, impartial service kindly offered, not on the basis of the worthiness of the recipient or any qualifications other than that of need. This means not merely to serve one's own relatives or friends or social class or religious group, but *all*, like Christ did. (Mt. 20:25-28; 23:11f; Lk. 22:24-27; 14:11; 18:14; cf. 2 Co. 4:5; contrast Jude 9f)

True nobility, in Jesus' view, is not decided by one's notoriety nor his grip on other men to manipulate them at will. The primary reason for this is that, among men, the power to rule over others does not necessarily imply THE ABILITY TO RULE ONESELF. But the man who can successfully serve others by being happy to make others great is a man who has his own spirit under control also. He rules over the citadel of his own soul. (Prov. 16:32; 25:28) Only he who governs himself well is fit to suggest to others how to manage their affairs



for the greatest common good.

Greatness, in Jesus' view, is open only to the free. This is true, because the man who worships greatness, becomes a slave to it, whereas the man who despises this slavery to greatness is above it, hence truly free. But such freedom means the death of personal ambition, personal prestige, personal fame and personal advantage as motivations. But the man who freely chooses to become the servant of others and last in line is truly the greatest, because it requires so much bigness of character to do this.

Greatness is psychologically open only to the modest and unassuming anyway. The way into men's hearts is not opened by a bludgeon. In fact, our acquaintances whom we look up to and gladly acknowledge as better persons than ourselves, are usually the people who pour out their lives for others. Since men tend to resist naked power and willingly bow to loving service, we may say that, from a purely tactical standpoint, Jesus is planning the takeover of the world in the only way that it can successfully be done, by creating battalions of the most loving, unselfish, generous servants of mankind the world has ever seen! By equipping them with these character qualities, He readies them to sweep in conquest. What cities would not open their gates readily to winsome, friendly people who are bent on nothing but good for all its citizens?

Greatness depends upon being *last of all*, i.e. ridding ourselves of our proud pretenses. In fact, the man who makes no pretenses falls heir to that which the pretenders claim and by their pretenses cannot obtain! Only God can make us great after all, and it is only to the degree that we bring to Him an empty vessel, empty of pride, selfish ambition, self-importance and demands, that He is able to fill us more fully with eternal greatness, wealth and positions of importance.

Jesus does not deny that there may be those who are *first*. Rather, He simply rectifies every concept of greatness or importance, so that everyone in the new Christian community understands that the *first* duty and *first* place is that of the humble servant. This means that every gift we possess that distinguishes us from each other, whether mental endowments, leisure time, strategic position, possessions, or whatever, is entrusted to us for use in loving service of others. Love, that most fundamental rule of God's Kingdom, abolishes the vulgar distinctions that characterize Satan's realm, dividing it into the status-seekers and the down-trodden, the victors and the victims. Jesus' proverbial rule here calls for a total unconsciousness of rank,

the spontaneous choice of inferiority and the dropping of all claims to consideration and respect, which can be attained only by self-dénial. So, He has maintained His hard-line position on the cost of our salvation. (See on 16:24ff.) Whereas the Apostles' question concerned what PERSON would be declared greatest, Jesus' answer defines what CHARACTER ANY PERSON MUST DEVELOP to be considered greatest.

#### OPENING ILLUSTRATION: THE LITTLE CHILD IN THE MIDST

18:2 **And he called to him a little child, and set him in the midst of them.** Jesus' visual demonstration consisted of two separate gestures, each symbolizing a distinct lesson:

1. He first called the child and **set him in the midst of the disciples.** In this vivid way He centered everyone's attention on the child standing there at His side in the place of honor. If Jesus and the disciples are seated around the room, when the child comes in to stand by Jesus (*étesen autò par'heatò*, Lk. 9:47), it would be standing "in the midst of them" (Matthew and Mark). At this point the child becomes the ideal or standard by which the disciples must judge themselves, a symbol of the disciple honored as great. (Mt. 18:3f)
2. Next, He took the child in His arms. (Mk. 9:36b) This gesture symbolized the truth that "When you embrace a child, you embrace me too." (See on 18:5 = Mk. 9:37ff = Lk. 9:48f)

This *little child* stood in marked antithesis to the dignitaries the self-important Apostles had dreamed of becoming. Jesus is proceeding just as God did when He began the world's redemption, as Thomas (PHC, XXII, 429) eloquently said it:

By the incarnation there was "set in the midst" of the prophets, philosophers, armies, governments of the world, "a little child." The sign that God has come to redeem the world was not in blare of trumpets, volleys of artillery, edicts of emperors, but in the swaddling-clothes that swatched a Babe in a manger.

Surrounded by His self-seeking disciples, He who Himself is the greatest in the Kingdom turns their eyes to the *little child* and begins His lesson.

ONE OF THESE LITTLE ONES: LITTLE CHILDREN  
OR WEAK CHRISTIANS?

That there is a progression in Jesus' thought none would care to dispute. The Lord starts with a little child in the midst and then takes it in His arms. This literal example becomes the basis of His entire message. From "this child" (Mt. 18:4) He will move to discuss "one such child" (Mt. 18:5), and from there He will progress to "one of these little ones who believe in me." (18:6) Later, when He argues that though they go astray like sheep (cf. Isa. 53:6; 1 Pt. 2:25), they are nonetheless precious to Him, it is clear that He is intentionally referring to both concepts indiscriminately under the same expression.

Interesting evidence that this is Jesus' meaning is to be found in the neuter number "one" (*hén*) in 18:14, even though other, later manuscripts miscorrect this to the masculine *héis*. The Lord is probably not referring to the neuter noun "sheep" (*próbaton* = "one [sheep] of these little ones"), but the neuter noun "child" (*paidón* = "one [child] of these little ones").

Then, without the slightest indication of a subject change, His argument fades smoothly into the discussion of what to do when "your brother sins against you" (18:15), a note on which He will end the message. (18:35) But even in the latter section (18:15-35), He keeps developing the "little child" theme of weakness and apparent insignificance, so characteristic of the first half (18:1-14). He does this by underlining the power and importance of just "two or three" united in Christ's name to conduct the business of the Kingdom of God. (18:16, 19f) Again, the "brother" who, because he sinned, proved himself to be "a little one" in need of personal, tender care, turns out to be a fellow Christian whom others and even the Church must help when brought in on the question. (18:15-17)

Therefore, because Jesus does not always distinguish His intended reference to *little ones* when molding our attitude toward them, we are obliged to show the same humility and self-sacrificing helpfulness to both, the little children and the weak Christians, and certainly not neglecting "all that a child represents—the weak, the insignificant, the helpless." (Bruce, *Training*, 196)

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUMILITY THEME

I. YOUR POSITION IN, AND RELATIVE IMPORTANCE TO,  
THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS MEASURED BY YOUR HUMILITY.  
(Mt. 18:3, 4)

A. ENTRANCE INTO THE KINGDOM DEPENDS  
UPON HUMILITY. (18:3)

18:3 **Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven.** "Only the humble need apply for entrance!" In one breath-taking motion He swept these ambitious aspirants out of the throne-room and clear back to the gates of the Kingdom! Their question had been framed as if they were quite certain to be a part of that Kingdom, but He must warn them that, unless they reverse their position completely, they would be entirely excluded from it. Entrance into God's Messianic Kingdom is absolutely blocked to everyone who refuses to submit to His requirements. Jesus' double negative in Greek makes this absolutely certain. Citizenship in the Kingdom means loyal deference to the King, not the insubordination of arrogant self-exaltation, selfish contention, power-grabbing, enjoyment of personal prestige. We must feel the shock and scandal caused by anyone who would dare suppose that he can take his pride, lust and rebellion into God's Kingdom or refuse to bow before His gracious will. (Cf. 18:8, 9; esp. Mk. 9:47) This is why Jesus so emphatically insisted that His discipleship clearly involves denial of self, since this "self" is an idol of the most blasphemous character. He smashes all our hopes of keeping our treasured idol and worshipping the true, living God at the same time. There can be no double-minded servants in God's Kingdom. (Mt. 6:24)

This explains why the only exception admitted for entrance into God's Kingdom is the requirement of repentance (*Except ye turn*) and humility (*become as little children*). If one's aim is individualistic self-fulfilment at the expense of others, he is aiming for the precise opposite of all that the Kingdom stands for. So long as he regards his ego-fulfilment as this world's most precious prize, he has his back to the Kingdom, and only complete conversion (*turn*) can save him. But, unless he willingly acknowledges the sentence of God upon all that in his self-exalting he holds dear, unless he surrenders to God's revealed will and trustingly depends on God to make him what he must become, he has no hope at all of participating in God's Kingdom. But to refuse Jesus' conditions for entrance into the Kingdom is to take the consequences. Refusal to repent and place oneself at the subordinate level and gladly eliminate anything objectionable

in his life leaves only one alternative: an "eternal Gehenna of fire!" (18:8, 9)

In a sense, the *turning* and the *becoming as little children* are the same thing (*hendiadys*), because together they refer to what is elsewhere called "conversion," the "new birth" and "repentance." (Jn. 3:1-10; Ac. 11:18; Tit. 3:5) Unless rebirth takes place, a person will not even comprehend God's Kingdom, much less get into it! To the Twelve here, as to Nicodemus earlier, Jesus must demand that they start all over. What is this but the admission that all their "righteousness" and "worthiness" and merit to be at the top, key posts of the Kingdom is in reality filth, and their sin is so great that they cannot possibly hope to pay their debt to God and society. However, with a fresh start, thanks to the forgiveness and mercy from God, they can begin again. (See on 18:23-35.)

**Become as little children:** what the child is by nature the Lord demands that we freely and deliberately choose to be. But what is Jesus' specific point of comparison as He indicates *children* per se as the standard of excellence?

Since no specific character qualities of *little children* can be pointed to with certainty (like teachability, docility, trust, devotion, desire to serve, etc.), we must interpret Jesus as meaning *little children* as such in their natural inferiority to everyone else. While it is true that this subordinate position may involve other qualities such as those mentioned above, what is uppermost in Jesus' mind and most in harmony with His context is the littleness of the child, his inferiority, his relative unimportance in contrast to adults in making decisions, his dependence upon others, and his subservience as one who must come to terms with adults more often than vice versa. The problem with *little children* is that their very size and lack of experience makes almost anyone bigger and better than they are. The vulnerable situation of childhood with its frustrations with being civilized leads the little person to feel inferior to all the (apparently) successful bigger people around him. He is considered least in importance in a society where respect increases with age. Worse yet, the *little child* is totally dependent. His survival depends on others, because he is not self-sufficient. His nourishment, clothing and care come from his parents.

In fact, one might argue that *little children* IN RELATION TO OTHER LITTLE CHILDREN are not especially more humble, teachable, docile, trusting, devoted or willing to serve, than are adults with their peers. (Prov. 22:15; 29:15, 17; Heb. 12:7-11) Just give one toy to two children

and you have problems! Whereinsofar each *little child* is an adult in miniature, i.e. developing as an individual, he demonstrates many of the same foibles seen in older people. So, Jesus' point of comparison is not children's character qualities, but what it means to be a little child in contrast to being a grown-up.

This is sheer genius to establish the child as the model, instead of, for example, a brutalized slave or an ideal disciple or an oppressed citizen or something else, because, although some people have been or would be some of these at one time or another, hence would know something of these experiences, ALL of them, without exception, know perfectly well what it means to be a child in terms of subordination, imperfection, submission to others and lack of experience in almost every field. (This does not mean that Jesus cannot use slaves, disciples or citizens as models, for He does that too. Mt. 10:24f; 18:23-34; Mk. 9:35)

The Apostles had failed to remember that any concept of hierarchy, rank or status necessarily involves RELATIVE position in the pyramid for everyone but the one at the top to whom EVERYONE IS SUBORDINATE. There are absolutely no citizens superior to the King in God's Kingdom. But this means that even the highest possible ranks just beneath the King are still subordinate positions, even if relatively superior to everyone below them. But, if subordinates, then servants; if servants, they must learn humility! This means that, unless the highest, most honored subordinates of the King possessed the heart of a true subordinate who really knows how to serve, they were unfit for such honors and must with shame begin to take the lower positions. (Cf. Lk. 14:7-11; Prov. 25:6f) This explains why beginning again as a little child is actually the fastest route to greatness!

Paul communicated literally what Jesus is saying symbolically here: "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." Then he furnished the supreme example of what he meant, by pointing to the self-emptying of Jesus who submitted Himself to the death of a human servant on a cross! (Phil. 2:3, 5-8)

## B. RELATIVE STANDING IN THE KINGDOM DEPENDS ON HUMILITY. (18:4)

**18:4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.** "The humblest is

the greatest; the most important is he who admits his deep spiritual need, real inferiority and subordination."

**Whoever humbles himself** must do so in relationship to others. Self-humiliation, as God intends it, cannot take place in a vacuum, i.e. by solitary ascetics. All true humility expresses itself by putting one's own ambitions in the background in order to serve others. This is but the repetition of the teaching of the Beatitudes: the great are not the powerful, the rich, the self-seeking the self-important who, because they are too proud to serve, demand for themselves service from others.

**As this little child** is often assumed to mean: "Whoever shall humble himself as this little child is humble." It is more probable that Jesus means: "Whoever shall lower himself to the level on which this child stands in relation to everyone else, is greatest." That is, whoever freely and willingly places himself on the level of natural subordination occupied by the child in reference to everyone else is **the greatest in the kingdom**. Why should this be true?

1. Because he who makes himself the willing servant of others, helping them to live a joyous, holy life useful to God and their fellows, is, in effect, honoring that gentleman or lady in them which, by his efforts, they can be helped to become. What a startling realization: which is greater? an earthly king or the kingmaker? If the kingmaker can unmake a king as well as make him, then the kingmaker is the greater. If, therefore, a disciple busies himself serving others, laboring unselfishly to help them realize their highest, noblest goals in God's service, helping them, in short, to reign, **HE IS A KINGMAKER and the greatest in the kingdom of heaven**. This, of course, does not mean that he is superior to God the heavenly King who really does not need any of our service to make it possible for Him to rule over the universe. However, since Jesus the Messianic King has chosen to use our service to extend His government on this earth among its people, then by His grace and through our service we make Him our King and bring others under His sway.

To state this concept another way, who is **the greatest in the kingdom of heaven**: the person who tramples down others to fight his way through the higher echelons to sit with folded hands at the top of the human pyramid and press down from the top, or he who is supporting the weight of the entire pyramid on his shoulders, pushes up from the bottom, lifting everyone above him ever higher toward God who rules at the undisputed peak?

2. Because it is only in and because of this genuine self-abnegation, true humility and service to others that one will develop the kind of character qualities Jesus desires in all of His servants. Gibson (*PHC*, XXII, 430) pictures what it meant to the Twelve:

They did not indeed, get over their selfishness all at once; but how grandly were they cured of it when their training was finished! If there is one thing more characteristic of the Apostles in their after life than any other, it is their self-forgetfulness—their self-effacement, we may say. Where does Matthew ever say a word about the sayings or doings of Matthew? Even John, who was nearest of all to the heart of the Saviour, and with Him in all His most trying hours, can write a whole Gospel without mentioning his own name; and when he has occasion to speak of John the Baptist does it as if there were no other John in existence. So was it with them all.

Some have noticed that no worse distortion of our Lord's principle could be imagined than for someone to put himself deliberately in last place or go through the motions of serving others as a means of climbing the ladder of social success to the top. Lenski (*Matthew*, 683) cites "Pope Gregory the Great (who) called himself *servus servorum* ("servant of servants"). He did it in order to be the greatest, did it in a mechanical fashion, by a shrewd kind of calculation, putting on humbleness in order to secure greatness." This description, however, raises the legitimate question whether one can really get to true greatness this way. One of two things would happen first: either one's selfish ambition would soon tire of this game, rip off its mask and hurry to make up lost time in the unabashed scramble to the top of the pile, showing itself for the pride it really is, or else the person would be transformed in the attempt. Since our motives undermine or validate all our actions, cannot those who sought greatness for selfish reasons, change course when faced with the realization that true greatness is only possible to the pure in heart? Can they learn obedience by the things they suffer by emptying themselves, taking the attitude of a servant and becoming obedient even to death (Heb. 5:7-9; Phil. 2:7-9), even with the specific goal of arriving at the crown (Heb. 12:1-3; Gal. 6:9f)? Conversion is possible, but it will not take place until false humility is crucified. Bruce (*Training*, 195) teaches that

The higher we rise in the kingdom the more we shall be like



Jesus in this humbling of Himself. Childlikeness such as He exhibited is an invariable characteristic of spiritual advancement, even as its absence is the mark of moral littleness. The little man, even when well-intentioned, is ever consequential (= self-important) and scheming: ever thinking of himself, his honour, dignity, reputation, even when professedly doing good. He always studies to glorify God in a way that shall at the time glorify himself. Frequently above the love of gain, he is never above the feeling of self-importance. The great ones in the kingdom, on the other hand, throw themselves with such unreservedness into the work to which they are called, that they have neither time nor inclination to inquire what place they shall obtain in this world or the next . . . if only He be glorified.

Humility expresses itself in the following characteristic ways:

- a. An unwillingness to assert oneself at the expense of others, or absence of ambitious pride and self-aggrandizement.
- b. A willingness to forget injuries suffered, no room in one's soul for bitterness, unwillingness to judge harshly.
- c. No shame to admit ignorance, totally unassuming modesty regarding one's own opinions, no falsely assumed intellectual self-sufficiency, an acute awareness of one's own limitations and conditioning.
- d. The presence of a vivid, free imagination, because one does not assume he already knows it all, hence not stubbornly dedicated to limited clichés and stereotypes.
- e. No confidence in one's own merits as a basis for distinctions in rank.
- f. No insistence on one's own rights, no proud demands, unpretentiousness.
- g. Willingness to yield to the Lord's leadership.
- h. Contentment, no sense of loss when others are honored and the recognition that everything one has is given to him. (1 Co. 4:7)

Humility realizes that to God and others goes most, if not all, of the credit for one's attainments in life. In short, to evaluate ourselves as God does is humility. It cannot be degrading to face this reality. Far from being want of proper self-esteem, it is the only proper view of ourselves precisely as we are. It is a willingness to be evaluated as we really are, whether by God or others. This

recognition of our absolute dependence on God and others that admits that our security and future are in the hands of others deflates any desire to compare our talents and accomplishments with those of our peers to their disadvantage. (1 Co. 4:6, 7)

3. Because only an attitude of teachable humility, that admits one's own deep need, can be blessed by the Lord. Remember the examples of deep humility that impressed Jesus:
  - a. The self-confessed unworthiness of the Roman centurion (8:5-13)
  - b. The Canaanite woman who accepted herself as a "doggy under the table" (15:21-28)
  - c. The sinful woman who washed His feet (Lk. 7:36-50)
  - d. The reaction of Zacchaeus to His visit (Lk. 19:1-10)
  - e. The anointing by Mary of Bethany (Mk. 14:3-9)

The kind of humility Jesus insists on is but a proper consciousness of our creaturely condition and a proper fear of God. To ignore this is to make oneself a little tin god, and only as we regain our healthy respect for the true God can we fathom the folly of social-climbing and the wisdom of that self-denial that bows its head to kneel beneath the load of everyone else's burdens to lift.

*Greatest* suggests "great and greater." In fact, since each disciple possesses these character qualities in varying degrees, they would be relatively great according to their relative humility and usefulness to others. So, Jesus leaves intact the concept of relative difference in rank in the Kingdom, a fact that leaves room for consecrated competition and godly ambition and holy aggressiveness. Then, having shown that the name of the game and its highest goal is to be the humblest, most useful servant, He turns our redirected ambition loose to determine to be that servant. It is an entirely different ball game, but there is room for holy aggressiveness and competitive spirit. (See Ro. 12:10: "Love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor!") Jesus did not return their question unanswered, noting, "You ask a meaningless question (18:1), because, in the Kingdom, the distinctions of great, greater and greatest do not exist." Our Lord is no communist who would level everyone to a gray equality that ignores personal differences and stifles initiative. Rather, infinite growth toward maturity is possible in the Kingdom, and its relative realization will unavoidably produce degrees and distinctions in maturity. But while such levels of status do exist in the Kingdom of God just as in earthly kingdoms, the all-important difference between them lies in the basis upon which

these promotions are based. On earth, the prizes go to the self-seeking; in God's Kingdom the truly great are the self-forgetful. This is why Bruce (*Training*, 195) recognizes that

In this sense, the greatest one in the kingdom, the King Himself, was the humblest of men. Of humility in the form of self-depreciation or self-humiliation on account of sin Jesus could know nothing, for there was no defect or fault in His character. But of the humility which consists in self-forgetfulness He was the perfect pattern. We cannot say that He thought *little* of Himself, but we may say that He thought not of Himself at all: He thought only of the Father's glory and of man's good.

## II. YOUR HUMILITY IS MEASURED BY YOUR OPENNESS AND SENSITIVITY TO THE SO-CALLED "INFERIORS" IN THE KINGDOM: "THERE ARE NO UNIMPORTANT PEOPLE IN THE KINGDOM!"

(Mt. 18:5; Mk. 9:36b, 37; Lk. 9:48-50)

### A. RECEIVING THE LEAST IMPORTANT MEANS RECEIVING THE KING (18:5)

At this point Jesus took the little child into His arms for the second phase of His visual lesson: "To get to me, you must get to the child too—love me, love my little one!" Jesus' thought naturally flows from becoming what a child is, to welcoming what in older people the child's weakness stands for, because there is but little distance between conflicts over greatness and contemptuous harshness toward one's inferiors. Cruelty and aggression are congenital defects of selfish ambition. Where there is this aspiration, this will to power, wanton trampling on others cannot help but follow as a matter of course. Therefore, the Lord must furnish a motive adequate to stop the mad climbing to the top of the pile that pushes everyone else out of the way. Jesus knows how tempting it is in our highly competitive world to admire the self-confident, aggressive, ruthless people who, in the worldly sense, succeed in life.

**18:5 Whoever shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.** *Whoever* means that the inimitable privilege of being host to the King is open to anyone who takes seriously the condition Jesus lays down. The condition is *receiving one such little child in my name*.

1. *Receiving* the child and *receiving* Jesus must be the same kind of reception, for the word is identical for the one as for the other: *déxetai* (= "take, receive, accept, treat as a guest, grant access to someone, show oneself open to, receive favorably, welcome, embrace"; cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 176; Thayer, 130; Rocci, 430). To treat Jesus and/or the child as a guest properly means to be sensitive to what he considers his needs. It is to dispense with stereotyped categories and notions about what he has to be or like, and to take him seriously as a person, to listen to him as if no one else mattered. To be able to do this sincerely requires putting oneself on his level and seeing things through his eyes.
2. **One such little child** means that Jesus intends to be understood literally, at least primarily, because there was *one such little child* right there in His arms. (Mk. 9:36) Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 196) helps us to see Christ in the child:

To teach unruly, disobedient, restless little children can be a wearing job. To satisfy the physical needs of a child, to wash his clothes and bind his cuts and soothe his bruises and cook his meals may often seem a very unromantic task; the cooker and the sink and the workbasket have not much glamour; but there is no one in all this world who helps Jesus Christ more than the mother in the home. All such will find a glory in the grey, if in the child they sometimes glimpse none other than Jesus Himself.

Ironically, these very disciples shortly after this lesson started hustling little children away from Jesus, not improbably frowning upon them as insignificant and unimportant to Him, just getting in the way of the more important aspects of His ministry! But the child is a practical beginning point for the disciples' practice,

- a. Because a *little child* lacks experience and, because of his weakness and dependence, can more easily be appreciated despite his mistakes. We tend to show tender compassion to the naturally weaker.

Jesus could say this to disciples trained in revealed religion, because it is by no means a matter of course for humans to treat children as little human beings and worthy of respect. Brutality to children, whether in child sacrifice or social contempt, is in stark contrast to the practice of peoples governed by God's revelations of the importance of others, especially the weak.

- b. It is at this point that Jesus implies the kind of character one must have in order to arrive at the ideal He symbolizes in the stature of a child. Since to the little child every one else is literally physically, morally and spiritually greater than he, the disciple must develop in himself those characteristics which will enable him to appreciate the greatness and importance to God that is there in every human being. This is the genuine humility of the old gentleman who tipped his hat to young boys, and when asked about this unusual gesture, he responded, "It is not to the boys as such that I tip my hat, but to that gentleman that each of them will become." What a majestic concept of the preciousness and potential greatness of everyone else, Jesus would have us hold!
- c. Then, having learned to consider *a little child* important in his own right and treat him with the same cordiality and respect one would show the Lord Himself, one can see more clearly how to apply the same principles when dealing with grown-ups whose similar weaknesses and imperfections would formerly have bored or disgusted him. What ramifications is this principle going to have in husband-wife relationships, especially where the wife is no longer the beautiful, sweet young thing he married, or her weaknesses no longer seem to offer him scope to protect her, but rather merely bore him? See Jesus' approach to this practical problem. (19:1-12) In the process of transferring our knowledge gained in working with children to working with older people, we learn that we are all ignorant merely on different subjects. We all lack certain experiences, we are all dependent and need help, that we are all just older children struggling toward maturity. Contrarily, the person who "has arrived" is damned to stagnation, self-righteousness and the ulcer he developed fighting to get to and stay at the top.
- d. Luke (9:48) confirms this conclusion: "For he who is least among you all is the one who is great." This paradoxical statement may mean:
- (1) He who willingly makes himself the least and servant of all is by that act truly the greatest. This harmonizes with Mk. 9:35.
  - (2) He who by nature is the least among you is the most important. Because of his greater needs, his natural weakness, his moral or spiritual fragility, he is the most in need of the attention of the strong. (Ro. 15:1; Gal. 6:1) This harmonizes with Mt. 18:10-14.

3. **In my name** limits the reception of the King (*receiveth me*) to those who, because Jesus tells them to, open their heart and life to little children. Jesus is not automatically blessing all orphanages and adoptive parents merely because they take in children to raise and educate. Non-Christians who do this in the name of philanthropy or human parent love will receive a human parent's reward or a philanthropist's satisfaction, but no more, since they did not do it "on the basis of Jesus' authority and instruction." (*epi tō onómati mou*, see Arndt-Gingrich, 575; Rocci, 1339; Thayer, 447) Not fondness for children is the question, but welcoming and caring for them because they represent Christ. (See on 10:40-42; 7:22; 12:21; 18:20; 21:9; 23:39; 24:5; 28:19; Mk. 9:38f)

4. **Receives me.** No one is qualified to receive Jesus as the Guest of his life and serve Him in whatever capacity at whatever level of status in the Kingdom (18:1) who has not learned to consider people important and treat even the least with respect. Even if Jesus had never affirmed His intense concern for and personal identification with weak, straying sheep (18:10-14), we could understand how dear they are to Him, because, here, He identifies Himself with them in a manner so close that whatever is done for or against them is done for or against the Lord Himself. (Mt. 25:40, 45; Ac. 26:9-15) In fact, the moment was coming for these disciples when neither they nor anyone else could serve Jesus, except by the useful service they rendered to the sick, hungry, naked and imprisoned—the little ones.

There is another sense in which the servant of children *receives me*. Every generous self-forgetful act opens his life to understand his Lord more fully, to assimilate His spirit more completely and to live in closer communion with Him. This is why this kind of ministry is the path to genuine greatness in God's Kingdom, which is contingent upon how much of His character has been developed in our life.

With this simple declaration Jesus drives us all back to the wonderful children's land of make-believe! He says simply: "Try to imagine now every person whom you are tempted to consider as your inferior. Now, let's play like that person were I, your King. Now, offer him the consideration and respect you would have shown me." What an act of faith this would require, what imaginativeness, what creativeness! Most of us will have to drop all of our stereotyped categories and nice little labeled boxes into which we have stuffed others. But since to all superficial observers we are serving not the King of the universe, but just our little neighbors, no one can praise us but He,

because only He knows better! And in our child's play, we have arrived at a greatness to which the selfish of the world are all blind. We are the only ones who can see it now, because we dare to make believe. Is it any wonder Jesus takes this approach? By so doing, He intends to develop our likeness to our Creator by making us seek creative ways to serve. But to be creative we need a vivid imagination like that of a child who sees everything and everyone with fresh eyes. If it seems irreverent to conceive of Jesus' development of a fertile imagination which reorganizes everyone's mental filing cabinets, reclassifying everyone else as a personal embodiment of Jesus Christ, then reconsider His use of creative fancy in the Golden Rule of which our text is but an illustration. (See notes on Mt. 7:12.)

Had not Jesus Himself already seen possibilities in His followers that even they dared not dream were there? Had He not received them in humility despite their outward rudeness? Had He not known, for example, that there was an Apostle under the rough exterior of that fisherman, Peter? Could He not see through the marble exterior of a hard-nosed publican and make out the facial features of a Christian teacher who could organize the very Gospel we are reading together? And did He not call these rough-hewn stones and lovingly sculpture them by His own company, patient instruction and endless repetition, until He found them ready for the final polish by the Holy Spirit? And the rest of the mixed bag of followers around Jesus seemed unreliable material out of which to make anything, much less the Kingdom of God! But He welcomed them, He served them, He built them, He made them great! Is there any doubt that, because of this, HE is the greatest in God's Kingdom? And it is to this, His ministry and method that He calls us.

What a shock it must have been to these Apostles who, in their day-dreaming, had seen themselves as pompous officials, now hear themselves reduced to baby-sitters for children and other feeble, fumbling folk! But, as events proved, they were to learn that the social contract of the Kingdom of God requires that the "strong," the mature Christians and the "weak in the faith," the overscrupulous Christians, must accept each other's existence and take a specific stance of mutual concern for each other. The weak must not condemn the strong, nor the strong despise the weak, but *receive* one another as Christ has welcomed them to the glory of God. (Ro. 14:1—15:7) Even before Jesus terminated His discourse, the implication for the Apostles is immediately obvious: rather than despise other disciples as potential rivals jockeying for position, they must see them

as marked by Jesus Christ for potential greatness and usefulness to God. And, as He will say in 18:6, 10, they dare not trample that greatness nor hinder its development by their own blind rush to realize their own unworthy ambitions!

As did the Apostles, so every Christian congregation must learn that not only the weak need the strong, but the strong cannot do without the weak. The weak offer us so many excellent opportunities to learn the spirit of Christ by our helping them, strengthening them, lifting them, encouraging them. The strong are capable, efficient, self-confident, polished, needing nothing but the experience that can only come by plunging into the service of the little ones. Is it possible for anyone to be more important to the growth of the strong, than the weak and insignificant who lay the privilege of serving them within the grasp of the strong? Who on earth could be greater than those who, because of this fact, are the veritable ambassadorial representatives of Jesus Christ Himself?

Right here begins the ministry of mutual edification as each disciple seeks to develop that unique likeness of Jesus Christ latent in each of his brethren. (Ro. 12:5; 15:14; Eph. 4:16; Heb. 3:12, 13; 10:24, 25) Because true greatness lies in serving others to help them be what, by God's grace, they may become, our Lord has practically turned every one of His disciples into amateur artists to use the painter's palette and brushes or the sculptor's tools to bring out by creative artistry all of the best and the beautiful and the God-like in his fellows. Now this concept of the to-be-completed master-piece will develop in us that tolerance that honors each human being as a unique representation of God's and one's own handiwork in varying stages of development!

James (2:1-13) has painted the best satire on the kind of partiality Jesus is attacking here. Whereas men customarily welcome certain persons of importance on the basis of their wealth, talents or power, or because they belong to the same clubs (cf. Mt. 5:46f), Christian disciples are to be equally concerned about the usually unimportant, commonly unnoticed members of the Christian community, as well as the children, because THESE are the true VICARS OF CHRIST on earth. How ironic that in the only context where Jesus was asked to announce His projected hierarchy, He bypassed Peter and all the rest and enthroned the child! Later, when He announces the special authority and honor of ordinary believers (18:17-19), He establishes the common local congregation as His visible, earthly expression, and men will despise this too in favor of something more impressive,



like an episcopal college or synod, and dethrone the ones whom Jesus promised to bless with His presence and concern.

And yet the graciousness of Jesus' promise seems almost unbelievable, for what an honor would we esteem it to be permitted to welcome Christ into our home for even an hour! Is there anything more splendid than the true greatness of ministering vicariously to the King by our reception of and ministry to His choicest representatives?

## B. THE UNAFFILIATED WORKER OF MIRACLES: A LESSON ON EXCLUSIVENESS AND BIGOTRY VERSUS TOLERANCE (Mk. 9:38-41; Lk. 9:49, 50)

### WHY INCLUDE THIS SECTION IN MATTHEW?

The question of the unaffiliated worker of miracles is a lucid illustration of what it means to **receive a little one in the name of Christ** (18:5) and to **cause one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble**. (18:6) John and the others had blocked the path of this isolated disciple on his way to serve God. They choked off his enthusiasm for Jesus' discipleship. Stunned, he could have wondered, "If these are special disciples of Jesus and they treat me like this, I wonder whether the scribes and Pharisees would have given me any worse treatment!" So the disciples would have been responsible for a disappointment so deadening that he might never have recovered. Also, we include this section here because it so adequately illustrates the difference between the real inferiority of littleness and the greatness of magnanimity. The great ones have no fear that God could fail even when His work is done by imperfect and otherwise irregular means; the small-souled nervously challenge and check everything and everyone, blocking everything they cannot totally approve, no matter how glorifying to Christ it might be. (Study Nu. 11:24-30 and Phil. 1:15-18.)

Mark 9:38 **John said to him, "Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name; and we forbade him, because he was not following us."** Luke (9:49) says: ". . . because he does not follow with us." The Apostles may have encountered him during their own evangelistic tour months before, but only bring it up now. (Mt. 10—11:1) What was the connection in John's mind that spurred him to interrupt the flow of Jesus' thought by this question?

1. Jesus had spoken earlier of humility as the absolutely essential condition for entrance into the Kingdom (18:3, 4). Had they acted with arrogance in interfering with the miraculous ministry of the other?
2. Jesus had just spoken of the greatness and blessing of receiving the lowliest child, whatever his weakness, imperfection or need. This stirred John's memory and pricked his conscience, leaving him half wondering, half fearing whether their actions were justifiable. So sure before, he is now plagued with misgivings, because, rather than "receiving" him and encouraging him in the good work he was accomplishing in Jesus' name, they had ordered him to stop altogether. Could it be that this very disciple they had intercepted was not an opponent to be stifled, but "one such little child" after all, to be warmly reassured and taken to their hearts? Perhaps he had deserved more sympathetic treatment.
3. Plummer (*Luke*, 259) sees John as possibly seeking to qualify Jesus' previous, apparently universalistic statement: "Whoever accepts a child embraces God."

His words are those of one who defends his conduct, or at least excuses it and might be paraphrased, "But the principle just laid down must have limits, and would not apply to the case which I mention. . . . One who remains outside our body is not really a follower of Thee, and therefore ought not to receive a welcome."

The only justification John can muster in defense of their procedure is **because he was not following (with) us**. They were probably actuated by a mixture of motives:

1. They were jealous of their official prerogatives.
  - a. THEY had been established as Apostles, not he. (Mt. 10:1-4; Lk. 6:12-16) What right had others not of the Apostolic company to furnish divine credentials for a ministry which, as far as they knew, had not been authorized by the Lord?

They remind us of the zeal for Moses' prerogatives shown by Joshua, when Eldad and Medad received God's Spirit and prophesied in the camp, although they were not personally present among the group of seventy elders who "officially" received the Spirit and prophesied at the Tabernacle. The response of the great-hearted Moses is remarkably similar to that of his Lord here. (See Nu. 11:16-30.)

- b. They probably deceived themselves by mingling their own interests with those of Christ, so that their concern for the honor of His name was only a veil for their personal pride.
- c. The less important fact that the isolated miracle-worker did not follow them, completely blinded them to the far more important fact that he honored their Lord.
- d. They were sincerely jealous for the good name of their Master in whose service they labored and whose authority gave their ministry power. They may have argued, "How can anyone be sincerely devoted to Jesus and actually enjoy being isolated from His disciples?"
- e. Bruce (*Training*, 224) thinks that

In so far as the disciples acted under the influence of jealousy, their conduct towards the exorcist was morally of a piece with their recent dispute who should be the greatest. The same spirit of pride revealed itself on the two occasions under different phases. The silencing of the exorcist was a display of arrogance analogous to that of those who advance for their church the claim to be exclusively the church of Christ . . . In the one case the twelve said in effect to the man whom they found casting out devils: We are the sole commissioned, authorized agents of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the other they said to each other: We are all members of the kingdom and servants of the King; but I deserve to have a higher place than thou, even to be a prelate sitting on a throne.

- 2. They ignored the live possibility that Jesus had authorized the man without informing them. The very fact that he was succeeding in Jesus' name should have been presumptive evidence of a commission from Jesus. Was the man's power from God or from Beelzebul? (Study Mt. 12:22-36; 1 Co. 12:3; 15:10; Phil. 2:12f.) Where was their moral sense? Were they ready to declare that power to work a miracle came from any other source than God? If not, is not he who has the God-given ability to cast out demons in the name of Christ, therefore, a true supporter of Christ? In absence of proof to the contrary, his God-given miracle-working power should be thought evidence that he was not among the enemies of Jesus, and could not be an antagonist of the Apostles.
- 3. His only fault was his lack of affiliation with "the officially authorized true believers," and THEY claimed a monopoly on the Messiah!

It never seemed to occur to them to invite him to join them in following their common Master, or give him the right hand of fellowship. They apparently did not inquire about his allegiance to Jesus or his character. Their superficiality was satisfied by the fact that he was outside their charmed circle, as if all inside it, even Judas Iscariot, could do no wrong, and anyone having the misfortune to be caught outside it were a lesser breed of follower, if not downright damned. They are motivated by sectarian pride.

The importance for our understanding of Matthew 18 lies in the fact that John and his associates, in cruelly silencing the man, had acted in perfect sincerity. As Bruce (*Training*, 224) taught,

In so far as the intolerance of the twelve was due to honest scrupulosity, it is deserving of more respectful consideration . . . That the scrupulosity of the twelve was of the honest kind, we believe for this reason, that they were willing to be instructed. They told their Master what they had done, that they might learn from Him whether it was right or wrong. This is not the way of men whose plea of conscience is a pretext.

But it is for this reason the more dangerous, because the very devotion of mind and the tender, intense attachment to Jesus and the scrupulous conscientiousness in their actions when void of the humility and mercifulness Jesus inculcates here, made them bigoted and intolerant. Their suppressing this nonconformist was of a piece psychologically with their persecuting spirit that was ready to call fire from heaven to consume the Lord's enemies. (Cf. Lk. 9:51-56)

### C. JESUS' ANSWERS

#### 1. Mark 9:39 **Do not forbid him.**

- a. This means that Jesus is Lord and giver of commissions and He can empower whomever He will. They are not at the helm; He is Chief of Operations and if He desires to empower a thousand such miracle-workers not belonging to the apostolic group, without ever informing them, what was that to them? (Cf. Jn. 21:21f)
- b. This command is an implied rebuke of their past attitude and an order for the future. The over-protective spirit toward Jesus shown by John and others in the case of the isolated disciple is

identical to that which provoked Jesus to rebuke them later in the case of the little children: "Forbid them not!" (Mt. 19:14 = the verb is the same: *mè kolúete autón, autà*) Hindering the weak, unknown, unimportant disciples in any way when they are feebly struggling to please Jesus is dangerous business! The Lord forbids this kind of forbidding. They must forbid, if at all, only those who maliciously slander Christ. To every other, even if he has not arrived at a perfect understanding of truth, they are to offer kind leadership and patient understanding. However imperfectly each has begun to stammer Jesus' name, he is to be loved and instructed for that flicker of discipleship he confesses.

2. **No one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me.**
  - a. Since the man was succeeding, whereas the nine Apostles had just miserably failed because of their little faith and prayerlessness (Mt. 17:17, 19f; Mk. 9:29), it should have been obvious that he really believed in the efficacy of the name of Jesus and was, by their own admission, making use of it for good. (Cf. Mt. 12:22-28) Such great faith is proof against quick apostasy. Further, a man who would abandon the religio-magic enchantments of the Jewish exorcists and stand up for Jesus of Nazareth in the teeth of a Jewish society growing more disenchanting with Him could not be too far from the Kingdom.
  - b. While later apostasy is always possible even for miracle-workers (Mt. 7:22f), it would probably not occur contemporaneously with their miracles, otherwise God would seem to be furnishing divine credentials to confirm their apostasy. (However, see Dt. 13:1-5 and "How to Avoid Becoming a Pharisee" after 15:1-20.) Jesus' main thrust here is that a person is not likely to be a traitor and a devoted follower simultaneously.

For this reason it is unlikely that the question discussed in this section has anything to do with the problem of objective criteria for distinguishing true from false prophets. Jesus' counsel of tolerance has nothing to do with prophets who are not expressly or implicitly disciples of Jesus, hence members of the Church. (Cf. Gonzalez-Ruiz, *Marco*, 171)

This warns the disciples to pause before judging, hastily and on so little evidence, that any man could be chargeable with unfaithfulness to God. Until valid reasons for changing their minds appeared, He would have them consider the fruit of the others'

lives as proof of the sincerity of their faith and belonging to Him. (Cf. Mt. 7:15-20)

- c. The tragedy of it all was that, if we may decide on what little grounds we have, the Twelve had silenced a sincere, honest man, "whose heart had been impressed by the ministry of Jesus and His disciples, and who desired to imitate their zeal in doing good"! (Bruce, *Training*, 224)
3. Mark 9:40 **For he who is not against us is for us.**
- a. "Whoever is not actively opposed to you, permits you to work!" Everyone who is not hindering you is giving you every opportunity you need to do my work. They may not be an immediate, positive assistance to you, but if they give you no trouble, rejoice and do my work! But the man, however imperfect may have been his discipleship, was not neutral. Jesus argues that unless a person is openly hostile, he should be considered an ally. In a time when intensified opposition makes discipleship difficult, any assistance should be welcomed by disciples who would need every friend they could find. "Learn who your friends are!"
  - b. The barely noticeable difference between Mark's "against us . . . for us" and Luke's "against you . . . for you" is to be explained by thinking that Luke is emphasizing the Apostles' ministry, whereas Mark quotes Jesus as speaking of "us" in a general way, probably referring specifically to the Apostles, because they (He and the Twelve) labored in the same cause.
  - c. There is no contradiction between this saying and that recorded in Mt. 12:30 ("Whoever is not for me is against me."), because Jesus is not discussing here the problem of feigned neutrality or aggressive refusal of His ministry, but the question of methodology among those obviously committed to Him. Mt. 12:30 refers to inward unity with Christ; Mk. 9:40 and Lk. 9:50 discuss external conformity to a group of His people. Inward unity with Christ may exist independently of outward conformity with other groups. It is this inward unity that unites real Christians, whatever their affiliations and external distinctions. The difference in the texts is the question of methodology versus allegiance: in the one case it was a question of not being with Christ; in the other a question of being not against the disciples in their work. (See note on 12:30.)
  - d. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 118) has it: "Not that it is unimportant to follow with the disciples, but that it is not ours to forbid any work done, however imperfectly, in His Name, and that only one

question is really vital—whether or not a man is decidedly with Christ.”

4. Mark 9:41 **Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward.** “Whoever helps you in the smallest way will be rewarded.” Appreciation for Jesus’ disciples even in the common, mundane things of life, convenient to whatever circumstances they are in, is appreciated by the Lord who accepts this as helpfulness shown directly to Him. (See note on 10:42; 18:5; cf. Heb. 6:10) **Whoever**, while certainly including the humblest, poorest in His Kingdom who show their love for Jesus by doing good even with the feeblest assistance, is not limited by our Lord. Our sectarian reaction is to limit Jesus’ promise to bonafied members in good standing of the church of Christ, but Jesus rejoices in righteousness and generosity wherever He finds it. (Cf. 1 Co. 13:6) Acts of love done by any man who helps Christians, because they are Christians, though often curtly turned out of the Kingdom by the orthodox, will not be forgotten by the Lord. His reward is not stated, but since our attitude toward him is to be tempered by Jesus’ magnanimity and openness to him and interest in him, we will long to bring such a generous contact all the way to the Lord whose name he honored in us.

It is worthy of note that here it is the disciples themselves who are on the receiving end of the generosity of others. Jesus is not at this point instructing them to share generously with the little ones. Rather, they themselves belong to that group, and, ironically, they will need the sympathetic assistance from these very outsiders whose ministry they had so arrogantly decided to impede!

Merely because Matthew omitted the incident of the isolated miracle worker, many assume that Jesus’ answers to John’s question given in Mark and Luke ended with those texts. However, the disciples present would have heard the complete discourse without break. This means that the successive material might well have been considered by the Twelve as further amplification on the general question of John. If so, then, in addition to the above, Jesus’ answers continue:

5. Do not despise little ones who believe in Jesus (18:6-14)
6. If your brother is wrong, go to him and seek his salvation (18:15-17)
7. The power of fellowship and unity must not be underestimated. (18:18-20)

A man who loves good for its own sake and God for His, will

joyfully welcome and approve all the good that is accomplished by others and rejoice that the Kingdom of Christ is advanced. Although this entire context demands that we do everything in our power to edify the weak, instruct the ignorant and be patient with everyone's failings and infirmities, our Master lets us rejoice in every good thing done in His name, no matter how imperfectly or irregularly it might be done. (Cf. Phil. 1:15-18!) Regardless of our fears that some will not be resolute in their goodness and efforts for Jesus, we may permit them to continue, when they seem to be at all useful and desirous to please Him. God Himself authorizes these workers and it is He who performs the good they do. (Study Mt. 12:22-36; see also Phil. 2:12; 1 Co. 12:3; 15:10.) The first century Jewish readers of the Gospels desperately needed the instruction of this incident and the Lord's reaction to it. They would certainly have seen practical applications of its teachings as they reacted to the liberating, limit-bursting universal Christianity of Paul.

It is right that we should identify ourselves emotionally WITH the Lord's work in some area to get work done. It is wrong when we identify ourselves AS the Lord's work, i.e. the exclusive expression of it in that place. True greatness does not depend upon "following us and our brotherhood," but upon faithful service to Jesus, and, whether we like it or not, those two things CAN BE exclusive! A man MUST know Christ, but he does not have to know or follow along with us to be Jesus' servant. We must keep in mind that others may read the Bible and obey the Word without following our traditions. (We even have the tradition of saying that we have no traditions!) With these Apostles, we assume too readily that "affiliation equals fellowship," but this is the "loyal church" fallacy (= "We are the one true, authorized church of Christ!") Too often we do not care how badly mistaught a man may be, or how dead his zeal, or how polluted his morals, just so he is in "our company," hence has a ticket out of hell. But men do not have to be approved by us to be our brethren! We are to invite men to Christ: it is He that they must obey to be pleasing to God and in the Kingdom. Has anyone a monopoly on Christ and Christian service? We must beware of jumping to conclusions about a man's spiritual condition based on merely superficial shibboleths and titles, without being concerned about his zealous allegiance to God and the Bible. We have the duty to recognize and willingly encourage all who truly love Christ and avail themselves of His help in combatting evil within and around them.

So, while Jesus did not teach a universalistic indifferentism toward



those who do not belong specifically and openly to the Church which would eliminate any need for evangelism or correction, yet He did emphasize the openness which the Christian community must show those who show an attitude of benevolent sympathy toward it. And in showing Himself a model of excellence in His gentle treatment of John's wrongness and sectarianism, He shows us how to be of service to all men, especially the denominationalists. Our business is to minister to the needs of people and extend the reign of God (not the rule of our sect) in men's hearts.

### III. YOUR HUMILITY IS MEASURED BY YOUR CONCERN ABOUT YOUR OWN SINS AND LIABILITY TO SIN AND WHAT THIS DOES TO OTHERS (18:6-9)

#### A. THE ONE WHO CAUSES STUMBLING IS BETTER OFF DEAD. (18:6)

18:6 **But whoso shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depth of the sea.** This is the antithesis of 18:5, since to harm or hinder **one of these little ones** is to attack Jesus! (Cf. Ac. 9:4; 5:39) The reason Jesus brings this up is that the Twelve must see that their vying with each other must necessarily tend to produce bitterness, provoke anger and offend one another.

By saying **one of these little ones that believe on me**, Jesus enlarges the range of His principle. Without excluding little children, He now includes weak Christians for our thoughtful service. Tolbert (*Good News From Matthew*, 155) asserts that "the little one is by definition weak and vulnerable. He looks to others for leadership. To be a leader involves a special responsibility, for his actions may damage those who come under his influence." (Cf. Jas. 3:1ff) New Christians especially need proper direction and careful reorientation. O my soul, am I such a guide: would it really benefit the progress of a weak Christian to move in beside me, or block it? Would I merely, however unconsciously, drag him down to my own miserable plane? Faithfulness to God is measured not only by the welcome given His messengers (see on 10:40-42), but also in the conduct we show toward the weakest and most lacking, the most incompetent and those without resources, the slow students, the unaware and the unprepared,

in short, the "bruised reeds and the smoldering wicks." (Mt. 12:18-21) Whoever takes up the work of unifying humanity in the Kingdom of God, but forgets those who suffer because of the divisions among men or are what they are as a result of these barriers, is on the wrong road. The greatness and utility of our programs and projects must be judged by the prominence they give to the weakest and most undefended, those who are of no use to the powerful nor even to those who struggle to dethrone them to grab their place. Jesus Himself took this latter road, beginning with the nobodies, the **little ones who believed in Him**, mere babes. (Cf. Mt. 11:25ff) Unfortunately, the disciples are always in danger of forgetting that their position and strength has been given them by Jesus. (2 Pt. 1:9; Eph. 2:3-10; Tit. 3:1-7; 1 Co. 6:9-11; Col. 1:12) Constant reminder is necessary for those who are themselves in danger, to keep them helping others in similar peril, since zeal to rescue others is an excellent antidote to complacency. (1 Ti. 4:16; Heb. 12:12f) From this standpoint, there is a lot of "little one" in every one of us! (See on 18:8, 9.)

**Cause to stumble** (*skandalizein*) means to be the bait in the trap which allures the unsuspecting into the trap and ensnares them. (See on 18:7.) In our context it means to have no regard for others' weakness by refusing to adapt ourselves to their intellectual and ethical ignorance and inconsistencies. It is to make a life that is holy and useful to God more difficult for them to live. It is to destroy their innocence by being their encouragement to do the wrong thing, hence push them along the road to forbidden things. To teach another to sin must be the worst sin of all. A stumbling-block is anything in my conduct that causes another to be so shocked, so shaken in conscience that he yields to the temptation to act in some way inconsistent with his principles, and, therefore, sin, and, in so doing, miss the right way to life. It may be some act of mine that violates his conscientious scruples. Whether or not he be over-scrupulous is not the primary question. Rather, the issue is whether or not his conscience has been horrified or shaken from its foundation by what I do. For example, **one of these little ones that believe in me**, because he knows nothing of our liberty to do what we do, may suppose, without conviction of his right, that he too has that liberty, and in following our example, he sins, because he did not follow his conscience (upon which he will be judged), but our example (on which he will not be judged). For a full discussion of this principle, study Romans 14:1—15:7 and 1 Corinthians 6:12—11:1. In these extended texts Paul's amplified argumentation covers both neutral conduct about which

some could be scandalized as well as that openly sinful conduct which is wrong for everyone. In Jesus' sermon here (18:6) it is clear that He sees as potentially scandalous also for others the disciples' selfish ambition to be the most important figure at the expense of others beneath them. The Lord's own example in paying the temple tax "lest we cause them to stumble" shows that situation to have contained a risk He chose not to run. So, Christ-like deference means limiting our freedom so as not to shock the conscience of those little ones to whom Christ has called us to minister. Any habit or action of mine could become a stumbling-block to anyone, with or without my knowledge. It is when I become aware of it that I can and must eliminate the occasion of stumbling. (See on 18:8f.)

**It is profitable for him** has been understood in two different ways:

1. His deserved punishment. Bruce (*Training*, 198) explains this view:

It were better for him—or, it suits him, it is what he deserves and it is implied, though not expressed, that it is what he gets when divine vengeance at length overtakes him. The mill-stone is no idle figure of speech, but an appropriate emblem of the ultimate doom of the proud. He who will mount to the highest place, regardless of the injuries he may inflict on little ones, shall be cast down, not to earth merely, but to the very lowest depths of the ocean, to the very abyss of hell, with a heavy weight of curses suspended on his neck to sink him down, and keep him down, so that he shall rise no more.

2. Comparative value to the offender. **It is profitable for him** in comparison with the severity of the punishment he would receive for causing the loss of those whom he considers inferior to himself. There is "a fate worse than death" to which even the most gruesome execution would be preferable before being able to carry out the scandalous deed. (See on 18:8f.) The particular execution pictured here is that of a convicted man around whose neck a donkey-drawn millstone has been hung, who is then taken by boat to a lonely, particularly deep expanse of sea and there pushed overboard to drown. (Cf. Revelation's use of a similar figure: Rev. 18:21) That drowning was not a Jewish punishment does not mean that it was never utilized by Jews nor by others! (Cf. *Antiquities*, XIV, 15, 10; XV, 3, 3) For the man who looks kindly toward anything in himself which proves the ruin of his brother, the millstone would be a profitable investment! Better a millstone than

a stumbling-block!

Have you ever heard Jesus use stronger language than this? The great crimes against humanity and social sins are not denounced in sterner language. The heinousness of putting a temptation to sin in the path of weak disciples surpasses the outrageousness of murder or suicide, in that, in the same act of wounding the conscience of the little one, the person dooms the soul of the other and actually defaces all that is Christlike in his own nature. Jesus must speak frankly, because most would tend to consider it a minor thing to **cause one of these little ones to stumble**, because of the relative unimportance of the person against whom the offence is committed. ("What I did won't matter much, because the other person is only a . . .") Jesus' purpose in pronouncing the death sentence preferable is to bring the careless up short face to face with God's justice: if the smallest kindness shown the least disciple will not go unrewarded (Mk. 9:41; cf. Mt. 10:42), then the apparently most insignificant scandal ruining the least disciple will not go unpunished either. We must feel the outrageous barbarity and heinousness of ruining a person's character by being the reason they do what they know is evil! What a horrible reality to which to awaken! The question is not, what if only one lowly person should be damned because of my bad influence, but, how many have already gone down the drain because of my warped representation of Jesus Christ? How much do I already owe my Lord? (See on 18:24.) But there is hope of mercy: that such a fate can be avoided is evident from what follows.

That Jesus has not left the theme of true greatness in the Kingdom is evident from the consideration that, although **these little ones** are to be cherished for Christ's sake, yet to be in any sense the enemy of even one of them is to be judged worthy of the most horrible death, and none on earth are to be more highly respected than they! Can anyone reasonably aspire to an importance or greatness superior to this?

## B. THE WORLD IS BAD ENOUGH WITHOUT YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS TO ITS DEATH-TRAPS (18:7)

**18:7 Woe unto the world because of occasions of stumbling! for it must needs be that the occasions come; but woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh!** In what sense does Jesus pronounce the first woe unto the world? His anguish over the sorry state of the world

is caused by the fact that the world as such is both cause of its state and victim. And worse yet, it has no hope—there is no way out but His. The cause of the world's plight is the **occasions of stumbling** (*tà skándala*). This word pictures a trap whereby animals are snared. The *skándalon* is the bait-stick that holds up the dead-fall cage, so that when the animal goes for the bait, it knocks the stick out, causing the trap to fall around it, capturing it inside. The allusion, then, is to anything whereby the unsuspecting are led unconsciously into sin and entrapped.

But the world's plight has its cause in the very nature of the case: **for it must needs be that the occasions come.** There is no avoiding it, since this necessity is bound up in the very nature of the creaturely human condition. (Cf. 1 Co. 10:13) In fact, when just two personalities meet each other on a collision course, with their contrasting wills, contradictory desires, varied consciences, diverse recall, differing value systems and unequal tastes, can there be anything but hurt, distress, grief and offense in the resulting clash? And the world is made up of billions of people all different, colliding everyday! Should it be any surprise even to the casual observer that Jesus should have said this? The greater surprise would be to learn that there is any possible way of avoiding the inevitable!

Two important conclusions arise out of Jesus' observation that *it is necessary that temptations come:*

1. This very sentence is proof that Jesus was no child of His age. He believed in no earthly Messianic utopia where people could look forward to the day when there would be no necessity for strength against temptations and stumbling-blocks. Rather, He realistically fortified His disciples to face and eliminate them, because His theology of the Messianic Kingdom involves the presence of evil in the world right down to the judgment. (See notes on 13:36-43.)
2. The very existence of personality differences is precisely His reason for leading His people toward like-mindedness and unity of spirit. (Cf. 1 Co. 1:10; 12:24-26; Eph. 4:13; Phil. 1:27; 2:1-5; Col. 2:2; 3:14) He knows that if He can create in us the same tender consideration for one another, the same forgiving spirit, the same earnestness of mutual love, the same patient forbearance, He can neutralize all the negative aspects of our creaturely condition and make us blameless, i.e. having no cause of stumbling in us, irreprehensible. (Cf. Col. 1:21-23; 1 Ti. 3:2, 10; Tit. 1:6f; Phil. 2:14f; Jude 24; Rev. 14:5) This not only lessens the tensions created

by scandals, but goes a long way to eliminate them altogether. (Ro. 14:13)

From this it should be obvious that **the necessity for occasions of stumbling** is there, not because God desires it, but because selfishness, carelessness and ambition make men susceptible to the shock of others' selfishness, carelessness and ambition. It is this fragility that makes it inevitable that **temptations to sin come**.

Rather than attack society en masse for its disorders that contribute to the ills of its members, since He knows that "what is everybody's business is nobody's business," and therefore cannot count on society as such to do anything significant toward renewal, He begins grass-root reform by making His disciples aware of their own constant personal responsibility for the total impact of their lives on others: **But woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh!** The inevitable can be avoided only if one is aware of the horrible fate of those responsible for being the cause of others' loss. Jesus has already warned that a terrifying drowning is preferable to the fate of such callous individuals. (18:6) The man who is insensitive to the vulnerability of the weak is a man who is dangerous to everyone! If he can trample the children with lighthearted unconcern, how can he be consistently and authentically gentle with the undeniable and inevitable fragility of everyone else around him? That some men are deadly traps for the world's people is certainly a monstrous injustice, but is it not even more unthinkable outrageous that the men themselves should do their dirty work of their own free will and with pleasure? The irony is that Jesus is not discussing Nazi war criminals, but reasonably good, decent folk who are members in good standing of His Church! (18:8f; Ro. 14:13ff; 1 Co. 8:10-12; 10:32)

Is it best to look for stumbling blocks in our lives, or to let others point them out? Jesus will answer this by saying, "Both!" In 18:8, 9 He will insist on the most rigorous introspection to eliminate all that we can see for ourselves as hindering to our godliness and service. In 18:15, if we ourselves are the offending brother who is approached by him against whom we have sinned, then it is implied that we listen to him and eliminate the cause of the problem.

It is almost as if Jesus were responding to those who would evade their personal responsibility for the effects of their lives on others: "Your objection, that the world contains temptations so numerous, human nature is so weak and fatal stumbling blocks so certain that your own conduct cannot be significant enough to make a sickness out of worrying about its effect on others, has no basis." Rather,

black terror awaits the individual who blocks the realization of the moral possibilities latent in every creature of God. How little we understand the human atrocity of stunting and stifling the development of the character of Jesus Christ in every *little one*! What monstrous wickedness it is to be the inducement that twists the dynamic possibilities of others into a power for evil unleashed on the earth!

Can the Lord stand impassively by while people with warped minds use tricks, menaces, persecution, persuasive arguments and other seductions to induce His people to abandon Him? Can He have no judgment of those who in every age and in every community derive twisted pleasure from the employment of their riches and culture, their achievements and professional influence to approach and seduce the unsuspecting into infidelity, sin and consequent ruin? No, His *woe* has in it the distant rumble of certain judgment and no one on earth has a more terrible responsibility to answer to God for it than they!

### C. NO SACRIFICE IS TOO GREAT (18:8, 9)

18:8, 9. At first glance, it would seem that Jesus has suddenly introduced irrelevant material, since He was discussing the danger of trapping others, not the disciple's own peril. But this is precisely the point: to sin against even **one of these little ones who believe in Jesus** is to sin against one's own soul. To cause another to stumble is to stumble into sin, taking one's own weaker brother down too. So, Christ must make men sensitive to that **IN THEMSELVES** which proves to be a seduction to **THEMSELVES** and to others. Another reason for His inserting this paragraph is the fact that to recognize the weaknesses and mortal dangers in one's own personal character is devastating to his exaggerated sense of self-worth, or pride. The status-climbing disciples must face the horrid truth: their own weaknesses and liability to sin dogs their steps even to the top of the pile and mars their supposed worthiness and nobility of character! Worse, without forgiveness and mercy from God and others, they must instantly and forever surrender all claim to such greatness and honors.

In two pithy sentences the Lord's focus zooms in on each disciple's personal responsibility for his own degree of temptability, and therefore for his own stumbling into sin. Nine times (count them!) He hammers on the personal pronouns "YOU and YOURS." He had

pronounced fearful woes on the world in general for its multitudinous threats to one's soul security, and to particular tempters through whom those seductions come, but now He rips aside the veil to unmask that hotbed of temptations in the heart of each disciple. This time it is YOUR hand, YOUR foot, YOUR eye. Is Jesus discussing only our liability to temptation from the point of view of our fleshly members named? (See notes on 5:29, 30.)

1. He definitely includes whatever in our fleshly desires would render a holy life useful to God difficult for ourselves and others. Our selfishness and its passionate desires must be crucified. (Ro. 6; Col. 3:5ff; Gal. 5:24) But these temptations to sin are probably already thought of as forbidden under other precepts. Nevertheless, should anyone forget his own liability to lust, Jesus leaves nothing to guesswork on that point. What would not be so obvious would be actions that would be otherwise perfectly justifiable, which, because of the weakness of others, would become for them temptations to sin. **Hand, foot and eye** are gifts of God, therefore good and not intended simply to be disposed of. Rather, they are fit instruments of service to man and God, and the source of unsullied joy to their possessor. But their use can be subverted into abuse, in which case they must be sacrificed. This means that God has placed some things within our reach which, in most circumstances, are positive blessings, while in other situations, deadly instruments for seductions to evil. (Study Paul's argumentation about our members, in Ro. 6:12-14.) Man dare not let himself be deceived by his most useful, justifiable elements of his person or personality. (Cf. Jas. 1:13-15) To be true to himself and his Lord he has only one live option: dispense with such things completely.
2. But since the illustrations He uses are of perfectly legitimate, justifiable members that, when normally and rightly used, are blessings to the well-rounded, happy life, the Savior may be pointing to what is symbolized by the **hand, foot or eye**: one's practice, pursuits or research. (Edersheim, *Life*, II, 121) Thus, He is also pointing to what we have a normally legitimate right to use, which, for the sake of our own salvation and the weak conscience of others, may be dispensed with. He means anything that compromises a person's virtue, Christlikeness, leaves him less humble, less determined to live with God.



An illuminating case in point is that of the rich young ruler. (Study Jesus' comments on his case: Mt. 19:16-30.)

It could be personal taste, emotional attachments, partnerships, any kind of employment, occupation or hobby, the pursuit of some physical or intellectual culture or art. If these lawful things, however perfectly innocent in themselves and quite permissible for others who are not hurt by them, cannot be pursued without self-injury to our likeness to God, then, out of regard for our best self, that self for which Christ died, they must be stringently sacrificed. They may be perfectly innocent pleasures which we are unable to keep within their proper limits, pleasures that sap the strength out of our concern for the Lord's work. However dear they may be to us, to enjoy the things that cause us to sin here on earth and be lost can never match the sheer delight of eternal life.

The all-important word here is **IF**. Such self-severity is recommended **IF** our soul is endangered, but if not? Here is a fundamental principle of Christian liberty. The decision about such matters must rest in our hands and be limited to our own case. This is the point of the repeated use of the second person **SINGULAR** pronoun. Other people may be able to keep their members, even if we cannot. They are responsible for their own decision, but their experience cannot be our guide. Nor may they decide for us, or we for them. The restrictions we find obligatory for ourselves are not to serve as a basis for condemning them for not adopting them, nor can we impose them on them. For fuller information on Christian liberty, study Romans 14:1—15:7; 1 Co. 6:12—11:1; Gal. 5:1-6, 13-15; Phil. 4:8f; Col. 2:8—3:4; Jas. 1:25; 2:8-12; 1 Pt. 2:16.

**Entrance into life** is only possible for those who are willing to do without what they may most easily justify, but for whom the use of which would hinder their living a holy life useful to God and men. The direct consequence of this drastic severity is the salvation of two souls: the one who would have stumbled by abuse of his own liberty and the other, "the little one who believes in me" who would have been caused to stumble by the abuse of the first. Unconditional eternal security is just not available to earth-bound believers. Our possibilities for eternity are rigorously conditioned by the decisions we make as to whether we will make these sacrifices or not. (Heb. 3:6-14; 4:1, 11; 6:4-8; 10:19-39; 12:14-17, 25; 1 Jn. 1:7-10; 2:1f, 9f, 15-17; 4:20; 5:16f, 21) The phase of **the kingdom of God** into which we enter by such self-sacrifice (Mk. 9:47) is equal to the **life** (Mt. 18:9)

and is co-extensive with it. Thus, the Lord refers to **life in the kingdom of God**, here and hereafter. Evidently Jesus is not troubled here to distinguish this life from that, because death is not going to make all that much difference. In fact, just as **the kingdom of God** is in existence now and continues on out into eternity (Col. 1:13; 2 Pt. 1:11), so eternal life has already begun and we know that we enjoy it because we love the brethren enough to make these essential sacrifices for ourselves and them. (1 Jn. 2:25; 3:14-16; 5:11ff; 2:15-17; Jn. 5:24)

These two verses taken together prove that **the eternal fire** and **the hell** ("Gehenna") of fire are identical and what is affirmed of one in Scripture is true of the other also. They stand together across the abyss from what it means to be **in the kingdom of God** (18:3, 4; Mk. 9:47) and eternal *life*. (Cf. Mt. 25:46) On *Gehenna*, see on 5:22, esp. 10:28 notes. Jesus is not just frightening folks with imaginary fears and medieval scarecrows! If JESUS informs us that there is a hell, then it really exists. Should not the garbage-heap of the universe be the proper dumping ground for those pompous individuals who, because of their self-assured insensitiveness to their own temptability, offend a child and sow the world solid with stumbling blocks? When talking about other people, even the most hardened have no difficulty with this doctrine. ("There would have to be a hell just for Hitler!") Their hedging and objections begin when Christ begins insisting that even they could end up there too.

This painfully severe self-examination is the only spirit in which to begin to correct another. (Mt. 18:15-17; 7:1-5) In our liberty to select objects for prayer, have we sinned in ceasing to pray for our brother? (Cf. 1 Sa. 12:23) Have we been a misleading example to him? (Ro. 12:1-5) While restoring such a one in the spirit of meekness, we must consider ourselves because of our own vulnerability to temptations. (Gal. 6:1-5) If our own bad attitudes, offenses or neglect are factors contributing to our brother's offense, then we cannot proceed to settle the problem according to 18:15-17, but according to 5:23f.

#### D. HOW DO YOU WANT IT: SAVED BY THE FIRE OR SAVED FOR THE FIRE?

At this point in the Synoptics' narrative Mark (9:48-50) inserts the following: **48 where their worm does not die, and the fire is not**

quenched. 49 For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

The allusion is simply to the process of salting meat to preserve it. Jesus says that EVERYONE indiscriminately will be salted to preserve them. However, rather than with literal salt, **everyone will be salted with fire.** (Mk. 9:49) **The fire** itself, thus, is the preserving agent for everyone.

1. The previously mentioned unquenchable fire of punishment (Mk. 9:48), intended for everyone who, contrary to the demands of severe self-discipline just given, refuses to present himself as a sacrifice to God, rather than just burn him up, will actually keep him perpetually in a state of severest suffering, or "eternal punishment." (*kólasin aiónion* of Mt. 25:46) It is an **eternal fire** (Mt. 18:8) and **unquenchable fire** (Mk. 9:43).
2. The Christian, on the other hand, who willingly submits to being a spiritual sacrifice to God, cost him whatever it may, by his embracing this very fire, will be preserved for eternal life. (Ro. 12:1, 2; 1 Pt. 1:6-9; 2:11; 4:12ff; 5:9f)

The Lord concludes with a caution and an exhortation: (Mk. 9:50)

1. CAUTION: The preserving power of this chastening fire for the Christians only operates where men permit it to work by making every sacrifice necessary. **Salt is good.** Otherwise, it would be like saltless salt, useless in their individual lives. The very same chastening, disciplinary fires come to the ungodly too, but it does them no good, because they do not respond to it with the same spirit of self-sacrifice as the godly. The self-same fire to them is like **salt that has lost its savor**, and the corruption continues.
2. EXHORTATION: **Have salt in yourselves**, i.e. let the aforementioned fire which preserves you do its work. Welcome the purifying, preserving principle of self-denial, enduring trials, removing stumbling-blocks, pride, ambition and contention. Welcome the severity of self-discipline, self-judgment and self-sacrifice. This cannot but restore peace and fellowship among you.

Another way of arriving at this same conclusion by another route is the following:

ANATHEMA = DOOMED AS A SACRIFICE = DAMNED

The point of this text may lie in the concept of sacrifice which God

has taught us in the Bible. The philosophy behind any sacrificing is the unworthiness of man. He has no right to live, because the image of God in him has been marred by sins and character defects. Unfit to live, he should be destroyed. Mercy, however, offers man the privilege of sacrificing, the life of an animal for the life of the man, an object of value for the value of the giver.

Now, because of the preservative power of salt to stop corruption, the orientals used salt as a symbol of perpetuity and permanence. (Cfr. Nu. 18:19; 2 Chron. 13:5; Ezek. 16:4 = immortality?) So, in the symbolism of sacrifice it seems that the Lord chose salt as an absolutely essential preparation for every offering, in order to impart, among other things, this meaning to the sacrifice. (Ex. 30:35; Lev. 2:13; Ez. 43:24) This sacrifice is hereby given permanent, eternal value, even though the thing offered is itself dead.

So, every human being, because he is a sinner is destined for the fire as a sacrifice, a victim of his own sins. From the fire there is no escape and no exception. But precisely at this point a merciful choice is given to humanity: (1) the opportunity to be a personal, willing, living sacrifice to the honor of God's grace, or (2) the fiery punishment in hell, serving as fuel to the honor of God's justice. Man, damned by his sins, is already doomed, hence *anathema*. But mercy gives him the choice of accepting his own damnation as God's righteous judgment and freely sacrificing himself as an offering to God. Thus, he becomes *anathema* in the sense of an offering.

*Anathema* (from the verb *anathēmi* "to place upon (the altar), to put upon (the walls of a temple as a votive offering)" means "what is offered up to God." (Arndt-Gingrich, 53f; Rocci, 112, 133; Thayer, 37) This is the common LXX translation of the Hebrew concept of *cherem*, "a thing devoted" to God without hope of redemption. It can be either consecrated or accursed, depending on the point of view required. (Gesenius, 305)

Unrepentant sinners who refuse to come to repentance and soul preservation by accepting the punishment for their sins in this life, must face eternal preservation in the midst of an eternal, fiery hell. The eternal fire is that which would burn them as sacrifices. Since the wicked accepted no substitute, rather than suffer as a living sacrifice in honor to God on earth, they burn as the victims of their own corruption in hell.

Christians, because they accepted the perfect Christ as their substitute sacrifice, do not themselves have to die the second death in the

destruction by fire, because they will have already sacrificed themselves willingly on the altar of Christ's service in this life. (Ro. 12:1, 2; Gal. 5:24; Col. 3:3, 5; Ro. 6:1-11) They have accepted their damnation as God's righteous judgment and have been permitted to die spiritually to their sins. Thereafter, their life is to be considered as one continuous living sacrifice. Though it might seem a hell on earth, its fire not only purifies their dross, but preserves them eternally. (Cf. Heb. 12:4-12)

The fire of the Christians which preserves ("salts") them, then, is all the discipline that comes to them in the normal course of their living the Christian life, all that purges them of their impurities (1 Pt. 1:6f; 4:12f) and makes them like Christ (1 Pt. 2:18-25; 4:1f; Ro. 5:3, 4; Jas. 1:2-4, 12) The man who has no fear of the blazing wrath of God is the man who has had all that is combustible in himself burnt away, who has already submitted to the fire, the purification that God directs. (Cf. Isa. 33:14f) Living according to the will of God, he lives in the love of God, so he has no need to be alarmed at the judgment of God upon sinners.

Christians are preserved from destruction in hell by their willing submission to suffering for Christ in this life, by humble contrition and removal of stumbling blocks in their lives and by maintaining peace with others by a loving, forgiving spirit.

What is the *good salt*? (Mk. 9:50) It is the spirit of humble self-sacrifice for God and others which keeps Jesus' followers united together in a common covenant whereby they can live in peace with one another. Should this "salt" lose its power to work its transformation, the individuals involved would not be sacrifices truly acceptable to God. The ensuing corruption would doom them to the other fire. The wicked treat their "salt" as worthless and so must suffer the consequences of their own corruption.

Thus, everything Christians give up for Christ's sake is considered as offered up in sacrifice to God (*anathema*) because damned (*anathema*), if sinful, and consecrated (*anathema*), if a fit object for offering to God. No wonder a Christian lives forever! His self-denials, subduing his desire, his enduring trials and removing offenses for Christ's sake is just another way of saying "getting rid of all that is objectionable to God," so why should God destroy him?

IV. YOUR HUMILITY AND SENSITIVITY TO THE WEAK  
IS MEASURED AGAINST HEAVEN'S CONCERN FOR THEM.  
(18:10-14)

18:10 **See that ye despise not one of these little ones.** *Despise* (*kataphronésete*) means "look down on, despise, scorn, treat with contempt; think lightly of or have the wrong ideas about; care nothing for, disregard, be unafraid of." (Arndt-Gingrich, 420) In their striving for position, the Twelve HAD to *despise* others of their number as *little ones*: it was the only way to get ahead in this world, but not in that of Jesus. Ironically, any disciple who had never indulged in the kind of status-seeking power-play that motivated the Apostles here would be tempted to sneer at others' lack of maturity and murmur like a true Pharisee: "Thank God I never made their mistake!" Temptations to despise those who live below their own standard of righteousness or level of maturity are the peculiar scourge of "the righteous," precisely because they have lived highly moral lives. This explains why Jesus shows that **one of these little ones** is but a straying sheep (12-14) and a sinning brother (15). **These little ones** now has a larger meaning since verse 6 where the least believer is indicated, so that, although Jesus is not excluding little children, He now includes weak disciples, the slow learners. To *despise* them is to consider them not worth our attention enough to take the time and trouble to turn aside our important business to assist them, patiently supporting them as they stumble forward toward perfection in Christ. To *despise* them is to think them beneath our notice, but to do so is sinful folly! (Prov. 11:12; 14:21) There are two reasons for this: first, there are so many of them that they are actually the world majority! Jesus presents the other: the problems of "inferiors" immediately involve the active, sympathetic concern of Heaven. He supports this with three arguments. Some see a crescendo of greatness in Jesus' ordered argumentation:

1. Angels, the servants of God, are concerned about little ones.
2. Jesus, the Good Shepherd and Servant of Javéh, is dedicated to their rescue.
3. God Himself, the eternal Judge of all, is unwilling that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

A. THE "INFERIORS' " MINISTERING ANGELS  
HAVE GOD'S IMMEDIATE AUDIENCE. (18:10)

**For I say unto you, that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.** Several details lie right on the surface of Jesus' statement:

1. Jesus Christ affirms the existence of the *angels*. His argument stands or falls on the truth (or untruth) of their existence, since He argues: "Do not despise little ones, because their angels have immediate access to God." If His reason were not true, then any fear of negative consequences for despising them would be groundless.
  - a. If He were honestly in error because of His human limitations, then every other revelation of His would be undermined by the same argument, because there are no objective criteria by which one may separate revelations of truth from God and ignorant trash.
  - b. If He were merely adjusting His teaching to popular Jewish beliefs, although He knew that what He affirmed was not true, then we must impute deliberate falsehood to Him who is "the Truth." (Jn. 14:6)
  - c. The only other viable alternative is to see in Jesus' word a guarantee that angels exist, and for those who trust Him the question is settled.
2. Jesus affirms that *little ones* have *their angels*.
  - a. The **little ones** are not merely children, but also struggling Christians (v. 6; see note on 18:2: "One of these little ones: little children or weak Christians?") The one does not exclude the other. Since this expression collectively takes in both categories, there is no internal necessity to assume that the latter expression, "**their angels**," be distributive either. In fact, thus far we have angels equally for little children and weak Christians.
  - b. **Their angels** does not affirm or deny anything about "others' angels," as if only children or only new converts were the object of special "guardian service." In fact, other Scriptures inform us that angels are considered as God's ministering spirits to help the people of God. (See Heb. 1:13, 14; 2:2; Psa. 91:11; cf. Mt. 1:20, 24; 2:13, 19; 4:11; 24:31; 26:53; 28:2; Lk. 1:11, 13, 18f, 26, 28, 30, 34f, 38; 2:9f, 13, 15, 21; 12:8f; 15:10; 16:22; 22:43; 24:23; Ac. 5:19; 7:30, 35, 38, 53; 8:26; 10:3, 7, 22;

11:13; 12:7-11, 15?, 23; 27:23; 1 Co. 11:10?; Gal. 3:19; 1 Pt. 1:12; Rev. 1:1; 22:6, 16; perhaps also 1:20; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 5, 7, 14 and many more.) These texts speak of the keen interest God's messengers, the angels, have in the salvation and conduct of His people. Even their participation at the judgment implies their interest and function as God's servants. (Mt. 13:39, 41, 49; 16:27; 25:31; 2 Th. 1:7) Also, from the point of view of our personal weaknesses and imperfection, each of us is in need of all the help he can get. Rather than leave us to face a bleak, empty universe alone, Jesus Christ has given us the heavenly vision of ministering angels ascending and descending upon every son of man, caring, ministering, protecting, until we lay down our weary clay to be carried by the angels to our Father's house. (Cf. Gen. 28:10ff; Jn. 1:51; Lk. 16:22) Who would dare despise the friendly assistance of these supernatural helpers who watch with sympathetic eyes the fortunes of Apostle (1 Co. 4:9) and repentant sinner alike (Lk. 15:10)? So, if God sends angels to help the whole people of God, then Jesus' affirmation includes a portion of the larger body of angels. Without denying that anyone else has angels assigned to him, Jesus merely reminds the Apostles that the very **little ones** whom they in their own bid for greatness had been tempted to **despise** are the special concern of **their angels**.

3. Jesus affirms that **their angels do always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.**

- a. There are angels who stand in the presence of God. (Gabriel: Lk. 1:19, 26; cf. Dan. 8:16; 9:21-23; Michael: Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9; Rev. 12:7; 8:2; Isa. 63:9) Are these the ones **who do always behold the face of my Father**? But do not all angels, in a certain sense, stand in God's presence? (Cf. 1 Kg. 22:19; Rev. 5:11; 7:11)

It is no small temptation to follow Edersheim (*Life*, II, 122) who sees in Jesus' words a contrast to the standard Jewish angelology: "We seem to see Jesus still holding this child, and, with evident reference to the Jewish contempt for that which is small, point to him and apply, in quite other manner than they had ever heard, the Rabbinic teaching about Angels. In the Jewish view, only the chiefest of the Angels were before the Face of God within the curtained Veil . . . while the others, ranged in different classes



stood outside and waited His behest. The distinction which the former enjoyed was always to behold His face, and to hear and know directly the Divine counsels and commands. This distinction was, therefore, one of knowledge; Christ taught that it was one of love." (See also his Appendix XIII, 748ff, where he concedes this view as based on Talmudic references, not necessarily held by Jews of Jesus' day, although the roots of such views may well have been.)

- b. In what sense is it true that these dwellers of the heavenly world **always** (*dià pantòs*) **behold the Father's face**, even during their missions on behalf of His people? Does it not mean that while they execute their service they have instant audience with the Father, so that, even while ministering on earth to the little ones, they are in simultaneous communication with the Throne? They are never out of "radio contact" with God.

The main thrust of Jesus' argument, then, is that God's highest, most glorious messengers (*ángeloi* as opposed to *profétai*) and who have immediate access to the great God of heaven, are commissioned with the humble service to the weakest disciple or little child! And if these dwellers of heaven, great in might and power, intercede for the lowliest before the Most High, who is the man who would dare despise them? Bruce (*Training*, 199) thinks that Jesus is utilizing an argument similar to that of Peter (2 Pt. 2:10f; cf. Jude 9):

The inhabitants of heaven . . . are loving and humble; ye are selfish and proud. What hope can ye cherish of admission into a kingdom, the spirit of which is so utterly diverse from that by which ye are animated? Nay, are ye not ashamed of yourselves when ye witness this glaring contrast between the lowliness of the celestials and the pride and pretensions of puny men?

Whereas Jesus speaks here of angels, He implies how precious every single little one is to God who grants ready access to **their angels**. So, even here, it is God who values them so highly that no man may safely treat any of them as if they did not count. Is this not true greatness? If He is aware of all that happens to His little weak ones on earth, He certainly sees what we do with them, and whether we treat them with tender care or neglect.

**B. THE GOOD SHEPHERD CAME TO SEEK  
THE LOST LITTLE ONES. (18:11-13)**

18:11 is omitted in the better manuscripts, because Matthew probably did not write it. The owner of a manuscript copy rightly saw in Lk. 19:10 an edifying parallel thought: "For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost," and so wrote it onto the margin of his copy of Matthew. Then, it was undoubtedly inserted into the text by mistake by some scribe who mistook the excellent marginal note for a textual correction. But to purify Matthew's text by removing it once more does not rob us of its beauty and connection, as its words may best be summarized in verses 12, 13 anyway.

18:12, 13 This is the second reason we should never "despise one of these little ones." (v. 10) Compare Jesus' use of this same story in another context where Pharisees and scribes sneered at the "sinners" Jesus associated with. (Lk. 15:1-7) His sub-parable of the proud elder brother is devastating. (Lk. 15:25ff) Some blame Matthew for inserting this parable here without regard for its "original context," and then when they get to Luke they blame him too. But if Jesus can repeat 5:29f in 18:8f, cannot He repeat the lost sheep story in different situations with equal appropriateness? After all, the proud, self-seeking Apostles were in serious danger of the same insensitivity and arrogance toward inferiors as were the Pharisean theologians in the other context.

**How think ye?** With this attention-getting question, Jesus hooks into the moral judgment of His listeners and turns on their emotions as they become absorbed in this story which is really a low-key rebuke of their callous disregard for the weak and straying. The basic mechanism is to push them to commit themselves to a value-judgment: how would a shepherd feel about the loss and recovery of just one of his lambs that had strayed?

**If any man have a hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray.** So often, when "our brother sins against us," we are tempted to think of him as a ferocious beast ready to rip and tear us. This is why Jesus must give us another perspective, His, to be ready to envision our erring brother, not as a wolf, bear or lion, but as a lost, wandering *sheep* that belongs to God. From the point of view of the shepherd and from that of the potential damage a given lost sheep can do to the flock, he is relatively innocuous, so that we may see that any real damage we have suffered by our brother's offense is so very slight, compared to the sheep's loss to the Shepherd, hence his value to

the Lord. (= 18:23-35!) Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 191) notes

Sheep are proverbially foolish creatures. The sheep had no one but itself to blame for the danger it had got itself into. Men are apt to have so little patience with the foolish ones. When they get into trouble, we are apt to say, "It's their own fault; they brought it on themselves; don't waste sympathy on a fool." . . . Men may be fools, but God in His love loves even the foolish man who has no one to blame but himself for his sin and his sorrow.

Sometimes sheep go astray by following false shepherds. (Jer. 50:6; Mt. 15:14; 2 Pt. 2:1f) But their choice of shepherds and pastures is free and for which they are responsible. (Jas. 1:13ff; 2 Ti. 4:3f) Nevertheless, the little ones may be unimportant to the selfish who cannot use them, since they have no influence, power nor wealth. They are only an embarrassment to the pious, because they are unable to keep up. They represent only 1% of the flock anyway, so why bother? Jesus answers eloquently: "Because they are precious to God, that's all!"

**Doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and go unto the mountains and seek . . .**

The Greek of both Matthew and Luke (on 15:4) states that the 99 were left "upon the mountains" or "in the wilderness" (Lk. 15:4). These prepositional phrases modify the preceding verbals, not the following verb preceded by *kai*. Obviously, the ASV translators of our text felt that the shepherd would not have abandoned the large flock in the hills to the greater danger of scattering during his absence in search of the one lost sheep, so they render the verse so as to have the shepherd go into the mountains. (But even ASV in Lk. 15:4 has: "doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost . . .") The translators failed to see the other shepherds with whom our shepherd left the 99 while he went searching. And, if we are not at liberty to invent fellow shepherds, must we add equally unmentioned dangers like wolves, thieves and robbers, or scattering? Let us give Jesus credit for not creating a ridiculous parable, which, if pushed to its logical extreme would picture the Good Shepherd as abandoning His people to their fate while He goes traipsing around in search of strays! In fact, since the setting of the story is the hilly country of Palestine, unless the shepherd took the 99 clear back to town before beginning his search, he would have had to leave them right there where they

were grazing *on the mountains*, since the major portion of Palestine devoted to pasture land is hilly.

**Does he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go in search of the one?** (RSV) "Of course, he does," is the answer Jesus expects. (*ouchi afesei* . . .); Although there are sheepfolds out *on the hills* in Palestine, Jesus does not seem to refer to them here. Rather, the picture is that of the anxious shepherd who no sooner than the sheep is missed, leaves the remainder of the flock in good hands right where they are and begins the search at once.

Maclaren (*PHC*, XXII, 435) avoids the problem of the shepherd's leaving the 99 out on the mountain, by imagining the flock of 100 sheep as the totality of God's creations of which man is only one, however, the one that went astray: "Not because man was so great; not because man was so valuable in comparison with the rest of creation—he was but one among ninety and nine unfallen and un sinful—but because he was so wretched . . . so small, . . . so far from God, therefore the seeking love came after him, and would draw him to itself." But Jesus is picturing only the crisis of this one sheep now, but tomorrow the lost sheep might be another one. He is not discussing lost man as against unfallen nature, but one lost man as opposed to others who, at the moment of the story, did not need seeking.

The 99-1 emphasis is obviously on the *one that went astray*. This means that the Lord would have us understand how much He cares about each one personally. For the shepherd the one lost stray was not lost in the crowd: he missed it because it mattered to him. (Cf. 1 Pt. 5:7) Nobody is unimportant to Jesus. (See on 18:5.) Everyone is significant to Him. He thinks in terms of persons, not humanity en masse, and by making individual concern for individuals the center of this story, He furnishes us motive and power to evangelize.

There is in this parable a tacit comparison between the attitude of the Good Shepherd and that of everyone else toward the straying. To the extent that this comparison sours into a contrast, to that degree the single disciple does not share the mind and heart of his Lord. The disciple is often tempted to harbor resentment and revenge at the misbehavior of his brother. In fact, he may calculate how much trouble and anxiety it costs him to be bothered by the other's conduct that forces him to have to seek him. The Lord, on the other hand, reacts quite differently to the same situation, being moved to

compassion to help the fumbling, stumbling, faltering man. (Cf. Mt. 9:36)

**Doth he not leave . . . go . . . and seek?** Jesus Himself is the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:11ff) who does everything divinely and humanly possible to rescue those left to the prey of wolves and hirelings, thieves and robbers. His mission was to seek and save the lost. (Lk. 19:10) This is why He stopped at Zacchaeus' house. This is why He chose Matthew! (Mt. 9:12f) He longed to save the wayward Jerusalem. (Mt. 23:37) And He found profound, genuine joy every time He succeeded. Bruce (*Training*, 200) sees that His love shows that

. . . there was not only no pride of greatness in the Son of God, but also no pride of *holiness*. He could not only condescend to men of humble estate, but could even become the brother of the vile . . . the charity of the Son of Man, in the eyes of all true disciples, surrounds with a halo of sacredness the meanest and vilest in the human race.

A Pharisee can never understand this. (Cf. Lk. 7:36-50)

**And if so be that he find it.** There is always the realistic possibility that even the Good Shepherd could fail to bring the lost sheep back, since the will of the human sheep is left free. (Heb. 6:4-6; Mt. 23:37) If the wandering one refuses to be found, he will not be compelled against his will, because the Kingdom of God is entered freely, not by constraint. (See on 13:9, 10; also "Apologetic Value" after 13:43, esp. point 2.) Judas wandered away from the flock never to return, and he was not alone. (Jn. 6:66-71) Some are recovered. The formerly incestuous man was reclaimed for the Kingdom and the whole Corinthian congregation was held together around Jesus. (1 Co. 5; 2 Co. 2:1-11; 7:1-16)

**He rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.** The ninety-nine just had not gone astray yet! This did not mean that one, two or ten of them could not do so the very next day. But the Shepherd's gladness is unmarred because they have given Him no particular difficulty. In fact, this paradox is Jesus' point: the one sheep that gave him the most trouble brought him the most happiness! The Shepherd lavishes special attention upon the lost one, not because he is worthy, or because he loves him more, or due to a supposedly greater intrinsic worth of the lost one. His greater rejoicing and special care is lavished on the one, just because he so desperately needs it.

In chapter 20 Matthew will illustrate what He means by picturing this Shepherd who hears the lost sheep's cry, as hearing the appeal for help by two stumbling blind men over on the edge of a pushy, arrogant crowd that was trying to hush them up. (20:29-34) But Jesus stopped everything and mercifully healed them, enabling them to join the flock on its way to Jerusalem.

**He rejoices:** without recriminations, grudge-holding, lecturing or superior contempt, He rejoices to have His child back safe again. (Cf. the Father's attitude in Lk. 15:20, 22-24) Lenski says it beautifully (*Matthew*, 695): "Jesus is simply stating what we constantly experience: a sheep, a jewel, a child, any treasure takes on greater dearness when they are lost and then found or when they are endangered and then brought to safety."

This parable hits hard at the problem of grabbing for greatness in the Kingdom. Since the Son of man came to save what was lost, this which had been His clearest self-humiliation is also His most glorious exaltation. He who had laid aside His celestial splendor to don the slave's garb and undertake the world's greatest man-hunt must be the greatest of the race! And if He care that much for the morally degraded and wicked, how much must He care for little weak ones? It is far harder to love the self-righteous, the calloused and cold-hearted ungodly than it is to interest oneself in relatively good people. (Ro. 5:6-8) But can He who did the more difficult fail to do the simpler?

Can the power-hungry disciples see themselves yet as like "sheep gone astray and turned every one to his own way"? (Isa. 53:6; 1 Pt. 2:25) The major question is one of identification with Jesus' story: what if I had been the lost sheep and those who held my attitude toward the little ones had despised me and left me out there to die?

As in the case of the angels' care for the little ones, God's watch-care looked over all, so also here God's great Shepherd-heart goes seeking the lost. (Ezek. 34:12-15) We must admit that Jesus did not identify the Good Shepherd. He is probably Ezekiel's "David," the Servant of Javéh, the prince and shepherd for Israel. (Ezek. 34:23f) We are right to think of Jesus in this capacity, because He proved it over and over again. (Jn. 10) Nevertheless God had already written an angry chapter on self-interested, self-serving shepherds whom He accused in words that sting the complacent of every age: "The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought

back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them." (Ezek. 34, esp. v. 4) With compassion Javéh lovingly sought them wherever they strayed and brought them to safe pasture. (Ezek. 34:11-31; cfr. Isa. 40:10f) Jesus must be God come in the flesh therefore.

C. GOD HIMSELF HAS NO DESIRE TO LOSE ANY  
WE MIGHT DESIGNATE AS "INFERIORS!" (18:14)

18:14 **Even so**, in the same way angels have the interests and needs of these **little ones** on their hearts, in the same way Jesus the Good Shepherd came to seek and save the least wayward one, so also **your Father who is in heaven** cares about each single one: And the man who can be arrogantly indifferent to them sets himself against Almighty God! When the Father spends so much effort to rescue a lost stray, how monstrous it must be to be the cause of his loss, the stone over which he stumbles! (18:6-9) Does this not indicate how great, how important and how exceedingly precious **one of these little ones** must be?

**It is not the will of your Father . . . that one of these . . . should perish.** This affirmation sheathes a threat. While it is **your Father who is in heaven** who cares for you with a tenderness unequalled anywhere in the universe, it is, however, His will that not one of these, who are the special objects of His concern and care, be lost through neglect or deliberate mistreatment by those who deem themselves their "superiors." Anyone who would dare despise their "inferiors" and block their salvation and so imperil their soul, will find themselves in the extremely dangerous position of endangering their own! (Cf. Psa. 10:1-18, esp. v. 14; 68:5f; 94; 146:5-9) God is the special defender of the weak and feeble. (Psa. 82) He who knows the number of hairs on our head, could He fail to be personally interested in each single one of us? (Cf. Mt. 10:30) He personally rejoices when even **one of these** perishing ones is redeemed. (Lk. 15:7, 20-24) He longs for His people's return. (Dt. 5:29; Psa. 81:13; Isa. 45:22; 48:18f; Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11; 2 Pt. 3:9)

But, because **one of these little ones** is a sinning disciple, God has far more right and reason to despise him than do we who so closely resemble him. Nevertheless, He against whom our brother has sinned does not hold him in contempt, but gladly sacrifices Himself to redeem him. Because **these little ones** are dear to God's heart, each

disciple must test his own spirit by God's personal attitude and relation to them. With these lines Jesus just wipes out the cocksure, proud person who is always comparing his talents and accomplishments with those of his peers to their disadvantage, because, according to Jesus, every single proof he can adduce of their limitations and imperfections is reason for him to build them up, care for them, endeavor to develop in them all that is high, holy and godly!

**Perish.** Then, is anyone correct to teach that God wills the salvation of babes, and, therefore, they ought to be baptized? No, because while Jesus is adamant that the little children must be tenderly cared for and no death-traps set for them by unthinking disciples, lest they **perish**, He intends that they be cared for according to the means He has actually established for them, rather than misapply what was not intended for them. The false assumption of inheritable sin pushes desperate people to "save" what was not lost. Jesus came to seek and save what was really lost. This chapter is itself illustration, for it was not until the unforgiving servant was apprised of his debt to the king that he really needed to seek mercy, although his debt had been piling up long before that moment. (18:23-35; also notes on 19:13-15)

Right here is our basis of security and contentment: are there any other honors equal to belonging to Jesus Christ? And, if this dream be ours, how could such earthly distinctions enrich us? But, if we were not the special objects of God's concern, to what extent would earthly glories fill up our loss? What would our real loss amount to, if God be ours, if we were only partially to reach earth's highest prizes? Is it then thinkable that all their bright allurements and noblest excellences would even be missed, if God's concern and care for us is guaranteed? (1 Co: 3:21-23)

To this point Jesus has been dealing mainly with the question of not seeking one's own greatness, not being haughty or conceited, but Christ-like or God-like, so as to be able to live in harmony with one another, give oneself to humble tasks and associate with the lowly. (Cf. Ro. 12:16) Now, He must clinch it with that other Kingdom principle of self-forgetfulness which looks not only to its own interests, but also to those of others by seeking the good of an offending brother. (Phil. 2:3f)



V. YOUR HUMILITY AND SENSITIVITY TO OTHERS  
IS MEASURED BY YOUR CONCERN ABOUT OTHERS' SINS:  
DOES IT REALLY MATTER TO YOU IF A BROTHER  
IS LOST TO THE KINGDOM? (18:15-20)

A. MAKE A PERSONAL EFFORT TO GAIN HIM. (18:15)

Although some believe that Matthew is collecting together in this chapter paragraphs out of other incidents, the following considerations show that Jesus is presenting one very tightly connected discourse:

1. From His discussion of an unforgiving mercilessness toward whatever in ourselves is the cause of others' stumbling (18:6-9), He moves to discuss the merciful seeking of a little one who wanders away (18:10-14), and now He pauses to discuss a forgiving mercifulness toward a sinning brother whose stumbling must always excite our patient attempts to bring this little one back. (18:15ff) Now, He must instruct His disciples on how to act when they are not the cause, but the victim, or even the witnesses, of wrongs.
2. Jesus knows that recovering the lost and straying and maintaining the unity of the Church is the most difficult, most demanding job in the Kingdom, so He judges His disciples' greatness (18:1), not by their ability to expose the inferiority of others, but by their demonstrated ability to restore and edify them! So, He is still discussing the criteria of true greatness.
3. What follows is the practical application of the Good Shepherd Parable. There is a natural tendency, **if thy brother sin against thee**, to consider him as less worthy of our attention and care. But his offense is but proof that he is the one sheep that has gone astray, the very alarm that sends one who has a shepherd's heart out to find him. His sin causes him to be looked down upon ("de- pised," v. 10) as an inferior ("one of these little ones" vv. 6, 10, 14) by the brother against whom he has sinned. Nevertheless, Jesus intends that even our temptations to despise someone should become the signal to recognize him as "one of these little ones" for whom Heaven shows the tenderest concern. Then, guided by our heavenly Father's example, encouraged by the angels' humble ministry and stimulated by Jesus' loving concern, and sharing His shepherd's heart, we hurry off in search of our **brother**.
4. The original dispute out of which this discourse arises was one

which could not help but be marked by a loss of fellowship among the Apostles, by sharp words and angry looks. Irritated, each Apostle no doubt felt that, in varying degrees, the others had sinned against him. They all need instruction on how to deal with offences that touch them personally. To this point they could all see how the Lord's stern warnings against offending others would apply to the others, since others had offended them, but now they must learn how to heal the broken fellowship by removing the offense in the other.

5. The disciples must also learn how to forgive. They cannot even begin rightly to gain their brother unless they are moved by a generous spirit of forgiveness. Without the ability to forgive, no one can ever hope to be great, because greatness and forgiveness are intimately connected. Look at God's magnanimity to pardon our sins. (18:23-35) It is the glory of the truly great to forgive. (Prov. 19:11) But man's ambitions to be great leave him usually too busy with self-interested pursuits to care much about the deepest needs of those who sin.
6. If the disciples have sensed the depth of God's wrath against those who cause others to stumble, they must now see that no hatred on their part can be harbored against those who have severely hurt them. Rather, love must send them to seek and save their lost brothers.

So, Jesus is not introducing new material, but developing ideas already expressed.

18:15 **And if thy brother sin against thee.** If he is **your brother**, then he is bound to you by the closest ties of love and loyalty. (1 Jn. 3:16; Gal. 6:10) **Your brother**, contextually, means "your fellow Christian" (18:17), but must never be thought to exclude from your love and desire for reconciliation your fleshly kin. (Ro. 12:18) In fact, how far would a merciful, reconciling spirit on our part help toward bringing our unconverted neighbors and kinfolk to long for the secret power that moves us, and desire to surrender themselves to our Lord too? (Cf. 5:44-48)

**And if thy brother sin . . .** Significant ancient manuscripts do not include the words "against thee," but their loss to the text does not seriously affect Jesus' meaning. Morgan (*Matthew*, 232) rightly sees that "Our responsibility (for) our sinning brother is not created by the fact that he has wronged us, but by the fact that he has sinned and harmed himself," and, let us add, wronged God. The presence

or absence of this phrase in Greek manuscripts makes no real difference, since a disciple's every sin dishonors his Lord and makes it difficult for his fellow Christians to live a constantly holy life. (Cf. 2 Sam. 12:14: "You have given the enemies of the Lord occasion to blaspheme . . ."; Ro. 12:15; 1 Co. 12:26) Nor does **against thee** have to be in the text to enforce our personal, individual duty to be responsible for every other Christian. (See Eph. 4:25; Heb. 3:13; 10:24f; 12:14f; Ro. 14:19) The Lord is concerned about our attitude toward sin as such, since, too often where someone else's sins do not wound us personally, we can live so easily, so loosely with them. This criminal tolerance of his sins that stands by in silence while he goes down for the third time, disclaiming all the while to be a "self-appointed fault-finder," cannot be a true representation of the spirit of Jesus! (Cf. Eph. 5:11; Gal. 6:1-3) There is no psychological virtue or social grace in refusing to find fault, since many cannot see their own faults. (Cf. Ps. 19:12; Jer. 17:9) Jesus wants to develop in us a love for taking care of others, a love that is superior to the sterile orthodoxy that is only concerned to save itself. (1 Th. 5:11; Phil. 2:4)

**If thy brother sin . . . go.** The great Shepherd of the sheep (Heb. 13:20; 1 Pt. 5:4) commissions every single disciple to act at once. Whereas the Twelve had been motivated by wrong ambitions, Jesus redirects their ambition, lifting them up to the level of His own ministry to save the lost, and makes them truly great! (See notes on 9:36—10:6; Jn. 4:35) How liberating is this order! When we are burdened down with the problem of frustration caused by sins, both our own and those of others, wondering what to do, Jesus shouts: "Take the initiative!"

1. Earlier He had said, "If your brother has something against you, take the initiative to restore fellowship with him." (Mt. 5:23ff)
2. Now He says, "Although you are innocent, take the initiative anyway. The responsibility to correct the situation does not rest only on him but also on you. You, my peace-making disciple (Mt. 5:9) are in the business to bring about reconciliation, and no logic is good enough to shift onto him your responsibility for getting results."

In other words, when in doubt, attack! (Ro. 12:21) Jesus releases us from the frustrating doubts of stalemates by furnishing practical steps to eliminate the barriers that separate one Christian from another and reunite them in a congregation that loves and cares for each of its members. The Master knew that many of us would be

fearful and double-minded, wavering between "mountains and mole-hills," real sins and imagined offenses, fearful that we blunder and fail to produce the desired result. His "go" puts holy boldness into us by giving us the confidence that what we do or say will bring lasting good to everyone concerned. His "go" gives us that decisiveness that moves out despite these difficult choices, because He has already decided for us what our course shall be.

If he is *your brother*, then you are a brother to him. Your brotherly spirit involves:

1. Making it plain to him that you have no desire to make him suffer unnecessarily for his offense. (2 Co. 1:23—2:4)
2. Showing your willingness to keep his fault private will do much to persuade him to confess and abandon it, making it as easy as possible to admit his fault and request reconciliation and forgiveness. (Prov. 17:9)
3. Your desire to know accurately the facts and the ground for his attack on you shows him your sense of fairness and that loyalty which seizes adversity as an opportunity to prove your moral obligation to him. (Prov. 17:17)
4. Humility (cf. 1 Ti. 5:1f especially in private relations.)

At this point many are tempted to withdraw into their shell and hope to stop any quarrel by refusing to talk about it, especially with the offending party. Among worldlings that procedure might be the only way to handle wrongs, but what a miserable shortage of brotherly love it would be for Christians to take this route with their brethren! Overlooking affronts is indeed better than harboring resentments, but Jesus intends to "show us a still more excellent way" (1 Co. 12:31—13:13) He desires to unveil a method that will bypass this stoic indifference and eliminate grudging resentment, by inspiring us to intelligent, active concern for the offender's welfare.

**If thy brother sin, go, show him his fault.** There is in the commentaries a carefulness to note that only real sin is referred to here, i.e. only what can convincingly be shown to be such. It must be something that would endanger Christian fellowship, hence not merely some weakness or fault, not mere, trivial irritations, some personal slight or embarrassment, which would be better off simply ignored, swept aside, excused and forgotten. In fact, other Scriptures seem to suggest that there is a class of petty grievances which would be better resolved outside of the disciplinary measures stated in our text.

Prov. 10:12: "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offences."

Prov. 12:16: "The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent man ignores an insult."

Prov. 17:9: "He who forgives (covers) an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter alienates a friend."

Prov. 19:11: "Good sense makes a man slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense."

1 Co. 13:5 (TEV) "Love does not keep a record of wrongs."  
1 Co. 13:7 affirms that love bears and endures them.

The very notion of Christian forbearance and tolerance implies the existence of minor irritations that strain good fellowship.

It should be pointed out, however, that ignoring an insult, forbearance and tolerance, in Scripture, are not antithetical to action as such. They are the contrary of violence and vengeance, not synonyms of inaction. Loving tolerance and patient forbearance do not ignore petty irritations in every sense, but rather choose wise courses of action to deal with them. The virtue of tolerance is not inaction, but refusal to strike back, harming the offender with self-defensive anger. Wisdom and self-mastery, backed up by these positive qualities, is able calmly to choose the intelligent approach, rather than let the situation degenerate through instinctive brute reactions. This is why Jesus, in wisdom, indicates the one right way to meet the difficulty.

Lives there a Christian or a local congregation that has not faced the dilemma of deciding whether they were being over-sensitive about a triviality or indifferent to a major problem? How trivial must a thing be to justify our calling it an excusable weakness, or how injurious must it get before we think of it as sin? And, the question cannot be decided simplistically by saying, "Let the Bible define *sin*: whatever it calls *sin* is worth being concerned about. Everything else is a matter of opinion." Such over-simplifying merely ignores the fact that, while the Bible is final, definitive and authoritative, it covers far more complicated factors than are intended in the quoted suggestion above. The Bible is clear in furnishing long lists of sins. (Mt. 15:19; Mk. 7:21-23; Ro. 1:28-32; 13:13; 1 Co. 5:10f; 6:9, 10; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 4:31; 5:3-5; Col. 3:5-9; 1 Ti. 1:9f; 6:4f; 2 Ti. 3:2-9; Tit. 3:3; 1 Pt. 4:3; Rev. 21:8; 22:15 AND many more besides.) Sin is transgression of the law (1 Jn. 3:4), true, but the Christian law is not merely a new code, but a question of attitudes, a government of the Spirit by the law of love. (Gal. 5:5f) Any failure

to love perfectly is sin. (See notes on 5:44-48.) So, the sins of commission are not the only cause for concern, but every instance where love has been omitted is sin. Again, would anyone dare fail to admit that the more subtle sins of the spirit are no less serious than overt acts of the flesh? What about self-satisfied cocksureness that is confident it has nothing more to learn? What about the imperturbable cool certainty of one's superiority over his fellows? Is blindness to one's own faults not culpable? Should we be irritated at others' loving the limelight and delighting in the deference shown them as if it were their natural right? Is moral blindness which stresses ritual over ethics, the letter more than the spirit, the traditional custom over truth, somehow less blameworthy than stealing chickens or a sex scandal? The point is that some things appear on the surface to be but irritations, but in reality there may be root causes far more deadly and serious. It may be criminal negligence to overlook some things that seem trifles, because the wounds we feel which are caused by someone else's offense may be our only way of recognizing that they need help. Cannot their irritating ways be God's way of drawing our attention to the stress they are under, the pain they bear, the frustrations, the hopelessness, in order that we might mercifully minister to them in the way He will indicate? Thus, the Lord would have us show even greater concern for our offending brother AFTER he hurts us than before!

By what criteria do we decide to do something about what appears to us as sin? Jesus answers: **Show him his fault.** (*élenxon autòn*) If the problem is as serious as you think, prove it.

*Eléncho* is a vigorous word with a wide range of classical meanings:

"1. To shame someone, to despise; to reject, to nullify. 2. To convict someone of his crime, mistake or error; to unmask; reprove, criticize or accuse; confute, refute; make ridiculous; furnish proofs, demonstrate, prove; to beat or conquer; to inquire, investigate; put to the test; bring a charge against; decide a question." (Rocci, 598)

Even though many of these definitions flatly contradict the spirit of Christ, there is a core of meaning that is comprehended in them all, and is essential to do successfully what the verb denotes: "to demand an explanation from someone for his actions by proving satisfactorily that he has actually done that of which he is accused." (See Arndt-Gingrich 248f and Thayer, 202f) If it is not the sort of thing that can be demonstrated to be *sin* either to the offender himself or to

objective observers (18:16), then, no matter how much pain his action has caused you, he cannot repent of that about which he has no conviction. (He could certainly regret the pain and seek to heal your hurt, but he has no basis for repentance if he has not objectively sinned.) **Show him his fault**, thus, requires objective proof of fault presented in the spirit of tender love. This may include a rebuke that has real character (Lk. 17:3f), because tenderness in treating him does not mean weakness and uncertainty. Readiness to forgive must always be present, but actual forgiveness cannot occur until the sinner arrives at the point of wanting to be forgiven. Nor can he actually wish to be forgiven until he admits his guilt and repudiates his action, for without repentance, forgiveness is impossible, and, if granted, absurd and immoral.

1. Some of the worst outrages have occurred because of what someone has said, unaware of the meaning their words had for others. Therefore, if we give him the opportunity to learn what effect his expressions produced on us, not only would he be assisted in enlarging upon his original statements but would also see the need to be more careful and precise as he talks to others. To assume without proof from the person himself that he intended to produce the negative effect on our mind that he did, and then tear into him on this basis, is unjust.
2. Sometimes the wrongness of a brother does not involve wicked acts, but impure or incorrect ideas. (Cf. Ro. 16:17f; 2 Ti. 3:5ff; Rev. 2:14-16, 20) Again, private, painstaking presentation of the proper proof is perfect for promoting perception. It is not necessary to confute publicly mistaken concepts that were aired publicly, until every effort has been made privately to correct those who made them. (Cf. Ac. 18:24-28; 19:1-7) After this, of course, we must evaluate publicly doctrines proclaimed publicly. (1 Ti. 4:6, 11; 5:20; 6:2b-5; 2 Ti. 2:14; Tit. 1:9, 13; 2:15) Confutation of those who contradict sound doctrine is proper. (Tit. 1:9; 2 Ti. 2:25)
3. Division or separation from a brother for anything less than disobedience to Christ is itself sinful. (Ro. 16:17f) Therefore, personality clashes and disagreeableness ("agreeing to disagree") which violates Christian tolerance and unity of spirit are themselves sins, hence no excuse for disregarding the Lord's order to **go show him his fault**. Not even prayer can replace obedience to do this.

4. **Showing him his fault**, when done properly, is proof of your love and loyalty to him; failure to do so, of hate. (Lev. 19:17; Prov. 24:23b-26; 25:12; 28:23)
5. Putting our accusation before him saves us from poisoning our lives by silent suffering and brooding. Stating it openly, courageously to the accused may reveal our complaint to be insignificant and trivial. We may not be able to prove it: it may be nothing after all but a case of over-sensitiveness on our part. At this point, since we have no case, because our brother is able to convince us, we may rejoice that he had not sinned after all. Our goal was not the barren triumph of winning a cause or getting satisfaction. Our own personal sense of injury or embarrassment was secondary. What really counted was losing the joy of fellowship with our brother.

So, Jesus' premise, **If thy brother sin**, includes everything that erodes fellowship and may include what would seem to be petty grievances and trivial irritations as well as graver matters. In fact, lack of consideration for the offended can be evidence of deeper insensitivity elsewhere. This is not to make a mountain out of a molehill, but to begin treating a small problem in a manner consonant with its relative gravity. A small shovel is a proper tool for removing a molehill, while only dynamite can blast away a mountain. Drastic action is unnecessary to remove petty problems, but decidedly friendly reproof is in order to nip the problem in the bud. (Lk. 17:3; Lev. 19:17) The other's carelessness may be the tip of the iceberg. True discernment helps us to realize that our brother's visible actions are decided by causes further down inside him and it is these problems which may be the real sins we need to be dealing with.

**Between you and him alone.** God has warned that to share damaging information about another with those who are neither part of the problem nor of the solution creates more problems. (Study Lev. 19:15-18!)

1. To narrate it to others at this point is to involve people who would perhaps never have needed to know about his sin. (Study Eph. 5:3f, 11f.) To expose the offender before granting him the privilege of personally explaining his actions or of confession and repentance, is to convince others that he is not genuinely loved and is, rather, just a thing to be hated and exposed, rather than a brother to be gained. (Prov. 10:12; 1 Pt. 4:8)
2. To relate his sin publicly would perhaps incite the hearers to feel



menaced by him too. There is also the danger of undermining a long-standing friendship between him and those who hear about his sin. (Prov. 16:28)

NOTE: Paul's rebuke of Peter at Antioch was never a private question but a public landslide involving a number of Christians. (Gal. 2:11-14)

3. It unnecessarily exposes you to being thought of as a slanderer and a betrayer of secrets of everyone involved, especially by the one who offended you. (Prov. 11:12f; 25:8-10) Our plainest, most objective tale of his offense, told to a third person, becomes, in that person's mind, an automatic exaggeration of the reality, merely because we are telling primarily the offense and he may be unaware of the other's virtues and certainly his motives. Then, when the truth later comes out, all who passed on the supposedly "objective facts" will be exposed as guilty of slanderous gossip.
4. To fail to discuss the offense privately with the interested party means to rush into court with partial information and superficial, one-sided views, whereas the supposedly offending brother may be in the right and present valid objections and irrefutable arguments we never thought of. (Prov. 25:8-10; 18:13) So, to ask him in private for explanations is to do ourselves the favor of rightly understanding the situation before going off half-cocked, causing untold damage to ourselves, our brother and possibly others. It is true justice to look at a question from the point of view of everyone involved; any other approach is partial.
5. The only possible justification Jesus gives for informing others about the situation is when asking them to join us as witnesses of our second effort to redeem our brother. (18:16)

**If he hear you**, several results are yours:

1. **You have gained your brother.** This is the fundamental purpose. Surprisingly, the motivation Jesus now places before His listeners is not merely or only the salvation of a man for his own sake, as noble a goal as this is. Rather, He pleads with His disciples to imagine the value to themselves involved in restoring a brother to righteousness. Morgan (*Matthew*, 232) feels this keenly:

When presently we have done with the shadows and mists of the little while, we shall understand in the light of the undying ages that if we have gained one man we shall be richer than

if we have piled up all the wealth of the world and never won a human soul. What a blessed thing to gain a man, to possess him for oneself, for the fellowship of friends, for the enterprises of the Church, for the programme of high heaven.

2. **If he hear you**, it will mean you used true words fitly spoken. (Prov. 25:11f, 15) Your success in bringing this dangerous situation to a happy solution means you are growing toward that greatness Jesus longs to see mature in you! Your persuasiveness helped guide vital truth around any mental roadblocks he might have had.
3. Your problem is settled, no one else has been hurt by it, and you are at peace.
4. **If he hear you**, he will prove his conviction of sin by admitting it and sorrowfully begging your pardon. His repentance will be apparent as he seeks to make amends as far as possible (Lk. 19:1-10) as well as in the fruits of a penitent life lived thereafter. (Lk. 3:7-14) Unless he accepts repentance and restitution as the conditions of forgiveness, forgiveness is a morally spineless farce. However, Jesus offers no blanket guarantee he will not sin against you again. (See further notes at 18:21; cf. Lk. 17:3, 4)

Therefore ALL PROBLEMS based on a personal offense involving only two people are to be solved at the person-to-person level.

1. If you are successful in recovering the brother at this level, the problem is solved.
2. Only if you are not successful at this level are you then justified in involving other helpers.

It may well be that the definition of what is petty and what is major is only relative to this success or failure at the personal level. Any failure of love is serious, but may not be serious enough to justify bringing in others until the single disciple is no longer able to cope with it alone, i.e. he cannot get the offender to recognize, regret and repudiate his sin.

## B. GET OTHER HELPERS AS WITNESSES (18:16)

18:16 **But if he hear thee not**. If God Himself cannot make people hear Him against their will, how much more problematic is it when a disciple attempts to recover his sinning brother? If his will is left free, he can continue to refuse to be convinced. No compulsion can force

him. However, the war is not lost merely because of an unfavorable first skirmish. **Take with thee one or two more, that at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established.** Curiously, Jesus did not specify the duties of these witnesses, perhaps intending to leave His statement general enough to permit flexibility according to the circumstances:

1. Since Jesus' reason is practically a verbal quotation of Dt. 19:15 (LXX), it would seem that these witnesses must have seen the sin committed which requires this effort. The Mosaic Law required a plurality of witnesses against anyone incriminated. (Dt. 17:6; Nu. 35:30; cf. 2 Co. 13:1; 1 Ti. 5:19) Paul's reprimand of the Corinthians was based on such a plurality of witnesses. (1 Co. 1:10f; 5:1; 7:1; 11:18; 16:17f) The problem arises whether Jesus intends His words to refer to proof before the offending brother that others know about and can substantiate his guilt, or whether He means that the offending brother would be more readily convinced, since he knows that these two or three others will, by their presence here, become witnesses to stand before the Church to give their testimony there of what takes place here. The latter is the better choice, since Jesus did not specify that they be witnesses of the sin, but rather implied that their ability to confirm every word would grow out of their being present here.
2. Just as two or three gathered together form a small fellowship (18:19, 20), so here, the opportunity to talk things over in the presence of a few thoughtful, tactful acquaintances creates a new atmosphere in which the problem can be aired with a greater amount of fair-minded objectivity. The others' own impartiality is to assure the sinning brother of fair treatment. By their presence they become witnesses to the wronged man's efforts to recover the other, and attest that the one has sincerely made every effort to convince the other, and whether the sinner responded positively to his attempt. They can certify whether the attempts were made in a harsh, vengeful, demanding manner, or whether they represent an honestly Christian effort to restore fellowship. It may even happen that they realize that the accused is actually innocent while the accuser is clearly in the wrong. Therefore, they can confirm or deny that a real sin is involved, not merely a question of opinions or relative judgment. If the sin was something said, they can verify what he actually intended to say. They can convince the complainer that he has no real basis for taking offense, especially where he

has inflated an imagined hurt all out of proportion.

While the obvious purpose of other witnesses is their testimony to what transpires during the encounter, the spirit and approach of these brethren must be the same as when the first brother went it alone: to gain the brother by showing him his fault in order to bring him to repentance, but done in the same brotherly comradeship shown by the first. From the following verse we learn that the offender must "hear them." Thus, they, too, may add their voice to appeal to him to abandon his sin. The collective warmth of their love is intended to melt his heart in contrite tears and thanksgiving that people cared enough about him to come looking for him, even when he did not know or care that he was lost.

### C. ENLIST THE STRENGTH OF THE CONGREGATION (18:17-20)

18:17 **And if he refuse to hear them**, he has already failed a test that determines just how sincerely determined he is to remain with Christ and His people. He has not shown that humility and concern for his brethren that is absolutely essential to remain in the Kingdom. (18:3-5) Regardless of how valid he considered his self-justifications, the appeals of his brethren should have outweighed them all, and now he needs to repent more than ever! Jesus assumes now that the offended brother (18:15) and the witnesses (18:16) are dealing with what any objective Christian observer would unquestionably call "sin." Even if, earlier, the quarrel between the two had been a question of over-sensitiveness and trifles, the fact that one of them refused to bend to the loving efforts at reconciliation of his fellow Christians is evidence of deadly sin. (Jas. 3:17; He is not "open to reason"; Tit. 1:7: he is "self-willed, arrogant" = 2 Pt. 2:10) The root cause of the previous irritation has now been uncovered and what might have appeared on the surface to be a harmless fault has turned out to have roots deep in self-complacency and pride that cares more about itself than fellowship, reconciliation, the Church and Christ. From this standpoint, the procedure Jesus prescribes does deal with a problem of first importance, since the life of the individual sinner and the strength of the Church is at stake. If that brotherly love that holds one's Christian brethren dearer than one's own self is missing, there is an open wound that no amount of brotherly patience and forbearance can heal! Can this be left to fester untreated?

**Tell it to the church.** Here, for the second time in his book (cf. 16:18), Matthew uses the word *church*, which, because the Gospel containing this reference appeared after the establishment of Christ's new fellowship, must refer to that and no other. Plummer's objection (*Matthew*, 253) is plainly mistaken when he insists:

Evidently "the Church" here cannot mean the Christian Church which Christ intends to build (16:18). It means the Jewish assembly, and probably the local assembly, the elders and a congregation of the synagogue in the place where the parties live . . . The directions here given are applicable to the Christian community, but, at the time, they must have been spoken of a community of Jews.

This forgets that the establishment of the Church of Christ was but a short half-year away. (See on 16:13, 18.) This fact, in the context of the hurried, busy ministry of the following six months, would have left little leisure for the settled kind of life in a Jewish community such an interpretation of these steps would require. Then, after the founding of the Church, there could be little or no application of this procedure to a community of Jews. If the Lord meant "synagogue," why did He avoid using the word instead of *church* (*ekklesia*)? No, He speaks proleptically, by anticipation, i.e. representing the future fellowship as if it were even then a present reality. However, it would be mistaken to believe that Jesus' words could have no immediate meaning for the Twelve or for other disciples, since they were thus given concrete practical direction for solving their quarrels even then as they grew in the immediate fellowship of Christian discipleship. Further, these words anticipatory to the establishment of Christ's Church presumed its imminent realization, hence offered valid grounds for beginning to think and act in the manner prescribed.

1. **Tell it to the church**, then, means that the fellowship of believers must hear the accusation, the evidence for it and the progressive attempts to rectify it. To enlarge the circle of those who know about the problem, even to the peripheral limits of the believing community, is not done with the intention of making an exposé, but has the purpose of involving the full, persuasive power of the whole family of God. For the person who can be recovered, the fact that an increasing number of decent, godly friends are finding out about his sins, people whose good opinion he cherishes, now

- leaves him at the most critical moment of his entire spiritual life: can he fight the dearest, best friends he has, people who care enough about him to plead with him to abandon his self-justifications, and who obviously love him even though they all know all about his problem? This, admittedly, is powerful, public pressure, but absolutely essential, given the present state of the case. Shame is an appropriate motivation. (2 Th. 3:14f) But the fear of loss of fellowship can only be real and meaningful where he has felt the power and reality of good fellowship! If you have not been having fellowship with a brother, you cannot make him feel the loss of it through disfellowshipping!
2. **Tell it to the church** implies that our personal problems are not to be dragged before the courts of the unbelievers. Legalistic, Christless argument cannot really solve the issues at stake, because pagans have nothing on their lawbooks or in their procedures that can give the kind of sentence or settle the problems the way Jesus intends. (Study Paul's arguments in 1 Co. 6:1-8!) It is only when we examine our problems in the light of Christian love, earnest prayer and heart-gripping appeal in the name of Christ, that there is any real hope of Christian solutions.
  3. The Church must act as a united group. (1 Co. 5:4)
    - a. The congregation must agree that the specific transgression in question is really wrong. There can be no division among the members if the leaders have taught God's standards. No congregational agreement can ever be expected over matters of opinion. Unanimity is only possible among Christians where God has spoken and they know what He says and respect Him for it. (1 Co. 5:11, 13; Ro. 16:17-20; 2 Th. 3:6-15; Tit. 3:8-11; Cf. 1 Ti. 6:3-5; 5:19f)
    - b. Should objections arise to this disciplinary action because of the existence of other undisciplined folk in the congregation, then unity must be achieved by dealing honestly and Scripturally with those problems as well. They must never be left as protective cover for any sinners. (1 Ti. 5:19-22)
    - c. **Hear the church** means that the Church must speak, giving him directions for correcting himself and removing the scandal. This means that the Church will speak through its recognized leaders who act as spokesmen for the entire group, but the sinner must feel the entire weight of the congregation, for only "the punishment by the majority is enough" (2 Co. 2:6; cf. 1 Co. 5:4; "When you are assembled.")

4. **The Church** can continue to labor for his restoration even after excommunication.
  - a. An excluded member is not to be considered an enemy but admonished as a brother. (2 Th. 3:14f) Total abandonment is out of the question for the Church that accepts the challenge to break his heart with a love that refuses to give up. At least, face the facts and hope for the best.
  - b. There remains the corporate responsibility to reaffirm the Church's love which the believers have never withdrawn even though their fellowship is denied him as punishment. (Cf. 2 Co. 2:6-8, 11) We are never ordered to hate "pagans" and "outcasts" among which he has taken up active membership by his attitude.
5. The final court of appeal for the Christian is the congregation, **the Church**, whose immediate, personal contact with the erring member is felt most keenly, not because of its authority to enforce boycotts, but because of the immediacy and power of its persuasive personal love. Lenski (*Matthew*, 703) argues:

Those who would place above (the congregation) a still higher authority: the pope, a bishop, some church board, a house of bishops, or a synod composed of clerics, or those combined with lay delegates, go beyond the word of Christ and the teachings of the apostles . . . False greatness and authority have often been arrogated to themselves by high officials in the church who have robbed the congregations of their divine authority; and congregations have been remiss in exercising the Lord's will; but that will stands as it is.

**And if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican.** If he willfully and perversely refuses to comply with what every one of his brethren considers right and reasonable, how can he be considered as belonging to this congregation? His obstinate attitude is divisive, separatist, dismembering, because he resists every try at dealing with the mini-schism separating him from one brother! Why should this virtual pagan contaminate the rest by his obstinate impenitence? (1 Co. 5:6; Gal. 5:8, 9) How can he be embraced further, when his whole demeanor is that of a heathen (*Gentile*) and an excommunicate (*the publican*)? From this standpoint, any action taken by the Church is but the formal recognition of the stand that he has taken by his blatantly willful refusals. This separation of the sinner from the congregation is the last resort

of hearts broken over their failure to restore him. After all, doctors do not make their rounds of housecalls planning amputations! They, and so must we, desire to heal the whole body.

**Let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican.** This sad sentence is the Lord's verdict whereby the Church must exercise her authority to maintain herself divinely pure and demonstrate to everyone that she does not tolerate sin. (1 Ti. 5:20ff) He must be thought of and treated as having the identical relation of fellowship to the Church that those renegades and pagans had to the Jewish community, i.e. none! If *Gentiles* were not considered the people of God, and if *publicans* are not the sort of people one hobnobbed with, *let him be so to you.*

If this decree sounds merciless, let the impenitent brother's mercilessness be seen for the injustice it is. He tenaciously clutches his yellowed reasons for not giving in, justifying himself to the bitter end. Why should the Lord's Church show him an unjust pity, when the Lord Himself has here condemned him? Further, He will condemn him even more severely for his mercilessness. (18:23-35) Lastly, when he flagrantly disobeys Jesus' order to "go and be reconciled with (his) brother" who has something against him, how can he escape the punishment of paying the last penny? (Mt. 5:23-26) When people continue sinning by repeated ingratitude, constant deceit and flagrant dishonesty, they make the kind of fellowship and affection that Jesus has in mind not only impossible, but unjustifiable. Could Jesus maintain arm-in-arm fellowship with the scribes and Pharisees who blocked the Kingdom of God to others and refused to enter themselves? Could He be the affectionate companion to the wily Herod or the greedy Caiaphas? Even so, this severe sentence has as its goal the salvation of the person excommunicated. (1 Co. 5:5; 1 Ti. 1:20; 1 Pt. 4:6) In fact, the moment he is outside the shadow and shelter of the Church fellowship, he becomes a person to bring to the Lord with whom alone he can find unbelievable grace and total forgiveness. The hope is slight (Heb. 6:4-6), but it is there. Consider these classic words by Bruce (*Training*, 204f):

The words . . . also plainly show that Christ desired His church on earth, as nearly as possible, to resemble the church in heaven: to be holy in her membership; and not an indiscriminate congregation of righteous men and unrighteous men, of believers and infidels, of Christians and reprobates . . . Such rigour, pitiless in appearance, is really merciful to all parties. It is merciful to the



faithful members of the church, because it removes from their midst a mortifying limb, whose presence imperils the life of the whole body. Scandalous open sin cannot be tolerated in any society without general demoralization ensuing; least of all in the church, which is a society whose very *raison d'être* ("justification for existence") is the culture of Christian virtue. But the apparently pitiless rigour is mercy even towards the unfaithful who are the subjects thereof. For to keep scandalous offenders inside the communion of the church is to do your best to damn their souls, and to exclude them ultimately from heaven. On the other hand, to deliver them to Satan may be, and it is to be hoped will be, but giving them a foretaste of hell that they may be saved from hell-fire for ever . . . It is this hope which comforts those on whom the disagreeable task of enforcing church censures falls in the discharge of their painful duty. They can cast forth evildoers from the communion of the saints with less hesitation, when they know that as "publicans and sinners" the excommunicated are nearer the kingdom of God than they were as church members, and when they consider that they are still permitted to seek the good of the ungodly, as Christ sought the good of all the outcasts of His day; that it is still in their power to pray for them, and to preach to them . . . though they may not put into their unholy hands the symbols of the Saviour's body and blood.

Since Christ's intention behind every part of this discourse is to anticipate and guarantee Himself a fellowship of believers that would be worthy of His name because of their holiness, love and unity, He rightly demands that we never tolerate any circumstance in which a break-down in personal relationships exists in the Christian community. This is why the aforementioned procedure is the only way to deal with our fellow disciples. Can there be any other right way to treat them, when the Prince of Peace Himself reveals this one as perfectly suited to encourage peace and unity in His body?

#### 1. THE SPECIAL WEIGHT OF THE COMMON JUDGMENT OF COMMON BELIEVERS (18:18)

**18:18 What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be lost in heaven.** (See fuller notes at 16:19.) This majestic declaration

affirms simply that God Himself will recognize Church decisions rightly taken! Why this should be true for the lowly congregation becomes apparent when its action to expel the impenitent member is seen as an act of faith. Since God has indicated His will in His Word, faith is discerning what God plans to do about a particular situation on the basis of what He said, and then playing one's own part in conformity with it. This avoids presumption, because the Church on earth lets God tell her what He intends to do in a given situation. Thus, Jesus gives the Church the go-ahead to act with confidence, aware that God will be faithful to the commitment expressed in His Word. We may be sure that this is the proper meaning for the following reasons:

1. **Ye shall bind:** mark that plural, for all the Apostles are in it. (Mk. 9:35) Here Jesus repeats, but this time addressing it to all, what He had already affirmed to Peter. (16:19) But, let it be said, He takes nothing away from that Apostle to give it here to all, since, as we noticed at that text, what was said to Peter was addressed to him as typical Christian. Consequently, what is here guaranteed for all the Apostles is but the normal, expected out-working of what had been affirmed of that model believer. There (in 16:19) He was working with the first model Church member; here (in 18:18) He deals with twelve of them.
2. **Ye**, while indisputably referring to the Twelve present, listening to Jesus' discourse, means all the body of His disciples. (Mt. 18:1 says that "his disciples" raised the problem which evoked this discourse. Moreover, Matthew's purpose seems to be to underline the typical discipleship of the Apostles by avoiding the word "apostle" except in 10:2. So this "ye" is addressed to disciples.) In fact, the Twelve and a few hundred hardy souls were all the "Church" He then possessed. Pentecost would begin to correct this, but until that time came He spoke to the only people He had. The point is that He is not conferring on the Apostles powers so exclusive that the whole Church can in no sense participate in them.
3. **Binding and loosing**, as noted in the fuller notes at 16:19, refers to the Church's teaching responsibility to decide authoritatively on what is to be thought or done about a given case. This is true because THE APOSTLES BELONG TO THE CHURCH. Along with other helpers, Christ has given them to her for her complete outfitting. (Eph. 4:7-16) Through them AS PART OF THE CHURCH He revealed

God's will to the rest of the Church. (Jn. 14:26; 15:26f; 16:13-15) So, only whereinsofar as she is guided by the Word of God given through the Apostles, the Church is really authorized to do or say ANYTHING. No one has any authority to speak for God on earth but what Christ has granted through His Holy Spirit. But since these very Apostolic directives are perfectly in accord with God's will, their application by the Church is approved by Him and binding. It cannot be repeated too often or too vigorously: NO CHURCH CAN RIGHTLY CALL ITSELF APOSTOLIC THAT DOES NOT HUMBLY SUBMIT TO THE APOSTLES' DOCTRINE AS THIS IS DOCUMENTED IN THEIR WRITINGS. BUT TO THE DEGREE THAT IT DOES, IT CAN! (See Notes on 10:19, 20, 40.)

So there is a sense in which only Christ's authorized, inspired spokesmen *bind* and *loose*. But these established once for all the guidelines whereby every single congregation of Christ can, without recourse to any other authority, *bind and loose* by specific application of the inspired doctrine to particular cases, and, Jesus says, God will back it up. It is in this sense that Morgan (*Matthew*, 234) is right to say:

That is the Church's ethical authority in the world. The Church teaches the standard of morality, and what the Church says is binding, is binding; and what the Church says is not, is not. But that is only true when we link it with what follows—the Church gathering in the name of Christ.

Such authority, thus, is locally and congregationally expressed. (See on 18:19, 20.)

From the foregoing it should be clear that it is not a question of the unanimous vote of the church determining God's actions, but a following of Christ's divine guidance in the midst of His Church that humbly seeks to discover what her Lord desires and then seeks God's help to do what He asks. (18:19, 20) The actions of the body of believers then conform to God's will only if they follow the pattern He has expressed authoritatively through His Apostles and prophets, and He is glad to recognize their decisions made on this basis. And why should He not? The Church is obeying Him!

Jesus obviously put this declaration here as a serious warning to that defiant sinner who refuses to bow to the Church's exhortations and as comfort to anyone who abandons his sinful conduct. Nobody may have any further doubt that when they are dealing

with a local body of Christians, they face final authority. They cannot hope to go over their heads and be tried by some higher or other court. The grave weight of an impartial decision of the local Christians is not something a genuine disciple would nonchalantly ignore or arrogantly disobey. In fact, this promise endows the act of excommunication with special solemnity for the believing fellowship and with ominous rumblings of eternal judgment for the offender. There is eternal consequence in the censure righteously administered by those responsible for the ejection of the impenitent. But, bless God, there is here a solid guarantee of divine mercy to those who bow to exhortations of the smallest congregation of Christ's people.

The extension of such powers to all the Church is the more impressive in this context where Jesus is deliberately discussing greatness and rank in the Kingdom. This fact implies, therefore, that Peter the man had no ecclesiastical supremacy or exclusive right to govern the Church any more than they all.

## 2. THE SPECIAL POWER OF THE COMMON PRAYER OF COMMON BELIEVERS (18:19)

**18:19 If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father who is in heaven.** Why *two of you*? Because two is the least possible number of people required to create a fellowship of any sort.

What will be the special application of this declaration to the problem of marriage where two people are to agree on earth? (See on 19:3-12.)

Christians are people in fellowship together, and seek to agree on God's will together. Autonomy, independence and individualism are the ultimate heresies. (Ro. 14:17; 2 Co. 5:15; 1 Th. 5:11; 1 Co. 12:21; 2 Co. 3:4, 5) The *two of you* could be those two brethren who earlier (18:15) were at odds with each other, but now, restored to fellowship and agreement, unite in prayer to God. They have the assurance of being heard about whatever else they request because they have honestly sought to obey God in what for them might have been the hardest question of their life, i.e. repentance and restitution, forgiveness and restored harmony with a brother. (Mt. 6:12, 14f; cf. 1 Pt. 3:7, "that your prayers be not hindered . . .") And if the smallest possible congregation is sure of God's audience, certainly

the united prayers of a larger congregation are certain to be heard. This is critical, because the more authority Christ gives to His community (18:18), the more imperative it is that the brethren seek His guidance and depend upon His instructions and act responsibly as in the presence of Christ. (18:20; 2 Co. 2:17; 12:19; 2 Ti. 4:1) This stands in counterpoint to the faithlessness and failure evident earlier due to prayerlessness. (17:17, 19-21; Mk. 9:29)

**If two of you shall agree.** Jesus is addressing disciples caught in the tawdry parade of self-importance that disparaged others' importance and usefulness to God. In this connection, then, He is flailing their jealous disputing: "So long as you agree to disagree, you will be powerless. God cannot take your prayers seriously, because to answer your prayers, He must frustrate others, while to give ear to someone else would leave you disappointed. For the prayers of one to succeed, God must necessarily work the downfall of another of His children. No, you must wipe out your own selfish individualism, come to agreement among yourselves before praying. An egotistic focusing on your own personal ambitions and necessities pretends that the world be arranged for you personally. Prayer, to be effective, must be with a sense of belonging to a fellowship, as members of a community and for the Church as a whole. So, if you agree in heart and mind, God's power will be yours!" Remember how Jesus' prayer for the unity of His disciples (Jn. 17) contrasted with the Twelve's feud about precedence (Lk. 22:24-27) and called for the lesson on humility (footwashing, Jn. 13:1-17) The agreement intended cannot refer to perfect unanimity on matters of opinion, otherwise we would never pray successfully. Christians, rather, must consent on the goals they pray for and be united in altruistic dedication to reach them. (1 Co. 1:10) **Two . . . on earth** stands in contrast to **Father . . . in heaven**. The omnipotence of the Almighty stands ready to meet the many needs of His people. **On earth** jogs our memory to recall that we are dependent in this earthly condition and that we need each other for mutual help, as much as we need Him and His heavenly power.

**Anything that they shall ask, it shall be done.** In this apparently blank-check promise, it is understood that what these agree to pray for together will be what God desires according to His expressions of His will in His Word. (Cf. 1 Jn. 5:14f; Mt. 26:39, 42) In fact, unless these two permit themselves to be guided by God's Spirit, even close agreement on spiritual matters would be impossible anyway. Naturally, their request must harmonize with other conditions

of acceptable prayer. (Jas. 1:5-8; 4:3; 5:16-18) Since Christians' agreement in prayer grows out of their meeting together in His name (18:20), it is clear that they pray "in His name," consequently depending upon His intercession on their behalf.

### 3. THE SPECIAL HONOR OF THE COMMON MEETING OF COMMON BELIEVERS (18:20)

18:20 **For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.** *For* introduces the explanation why harmonious praying is so effective: Jesus Himself will be present and personally interested! It also explains why what the believing fellowship binds or looses on earth shall also be recognized by God: Jesus Himself acts with His people as they obey His directives, seeking the blessing of His presence and help. **Gathered together in my name** means "gathered and thinking of me, i.e. so that I am the reason for their assembling." (Arndt-Gingrich, 575)

**Two or three**—think of that! Greatness in the Kingdom is not measured by the strength of numbers. The Lord has always taken particular delight in using a mere handful of dedicated, usually insignificant people to accomplish an incredible amount of good. (Jer. 9:23f; Psa. 8:2)

1. Moses, that herdsman from the backside of the desert, with a shepherd's rod routed the might of Egypt and freed a nation of slaves. (Ex. 1-15)
2. Israel, with the blowing of rams' horns made fortified enemy cities collapse. (Jos. 6) Thus, one nation began the conquest of many nations mightier than they. (Dt. 4:37ff)
3. Gideon, with but 300 men armed with torches and jars, defeated unbelievable hordes of enemies in one battle. (Jdg. 7, 8)
4. Samson with an ass's jawbone slew a thousand men. (Jdg. 15)
5. The stripling David, with sling and stone, felled the proud Goliath. (1 Sa. 17, esp. vv. 46, 47)
6. The intrepid Jonathan and his armor-bearer pushed to the attack and started a rout that ended in victory for Israel. (Contrast 1 Sa. 14:6 with 13:7, 16, 22!)
7. Elijah alone, by prayer, brought on an economic crisis, humbled the king, then challenged 850 prophet-priests that had led God's people into apostacy and won when fire fell from heaven. (1 Kgs. 17, 18)

8. Hezekiah, despite crippling psychological warfare and certain defeat threatening, defended Jerusalem with prayer! (Isa. 36, 37)
9. The 120 praying disciples (Ac. 1:12-14) and the 3,000 (Ac. 2) were but a handful facing Jewish bigotry and all the powers of paganism, but the events of all later centuries have justified their faith.

However, as in these classic cases in the history of Israel, so in the Church, the greatness is not in the minimal number per se, as if God has some partiality for meagerness. Rather, the minimum is His choice to show that "the battle is the Lord's," and that "the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." (2 Co. 4:7) **Two or three** united with the Lord are already a majority! It may have been to teach them this, that Jesus sent out His disciples "two by two." (Lk. 10:1; Mk. 6:7) What victories they had too!

The *two or three gathered together* must be in agreement. (18:19) The spiritual strength of *two or three* united in purpose is greater than twelve or many thousands sundered by infighting and jealousies. It is the unity around Christ that assures us of His presence and direction. The actual number of believers met together is of no consequence, since Jesus' purpose here is to underline in the most emphatic way possible the significance of brotherly love, understanding and unity, for if the *two or three*, united around Jesus, be mighty, then of what would legions of Christians be capable? Jesus is not interested in small numbers due to lack of love and a breakdown in understanding, but in humble harmony and mutual love living in the highest number possible.

Grandeur in the Kingdom does not depend upon the mass assembly of all of God's people in one place for a show of power. The electrifying psychological effect that can be generated in mass rallies is not essential for Jesus' disciples to experience the power of Christ at work among them. No more pilgrimages to Jerusalem to be able to savor the presence of God. Here is His grand concept of the new temple of God. As Morgan (*Matthew*, 233) portrays it,

How spacious and gracious and wonderful it is! First of all it breaks down all idea of localized meeting place with God. We have gained a temple everywhere by the loss of the temple in a locality. Mark the significance of it. It is not the temple that makes the place of worship, but the gathering "in my name."

Gone are the yearly feasts when obligatory worship gathered half-hearted millions at an earthly worship-center. Without being opposed to mass assemblies, Jesus upgrades even the smallest of them. Unlike those who put forth their finest only on certain "grand occasions," Jesus esteems even the minimum number of followers met in His honor to be a festal assembly, and He pours all the fulness and grandeur of Himself into it!

Nor is importance and usefulness to God based on being among "the chosen few in the upper echelons" or the elite at the top of the pile, because where just a handful of disciples, however humble and unknown, meet in Jesus' name, the Lord Himself considers them important enough to concern Himself personally with THEM! The insignificance of the tiniest group is no objection to Him. Here is the "little ones" theme again. (18:3-6, 10, 14) So far from despising or ignoring them, He honors every assembly, enriching it with His gracious power to bestow authority and effectiveness upon all they undertake for His sake. (Rev. 1:13; Eph. 1:23) He is still serving the least and the weakest to make them mighty! In fact, concentrated in them is now something more than their collective human strength. There is all the concentrated might of God in Christ who dwells in their hearts by faith. (Eph. 1:19; 3:16-21; 6:10ff) But notice that the incisive influence and invincible authority of Christ invested in His Church is not entrusted to a hierarchy, nor to a tightly organized and neatly structured body. Rather, all the power of the living Christ is in every single cluster of believers wherever in the world they are met together to worship and serve Him.

Notice how positively Jesus ends this section on corrective discipline: the goal to be sought is every member united with each other and with Christ in the midst. But the unity with Christ is the supreme issue, not the formation of a mutual admiration society without Him. Any ecumenicity satisfied with a false emphasis on great numbers of partially converted people is here rebuked by the Lord who can be found in the smallest assembly of two or three genuinely dedicated to Him!

The disciples who originally heard this statement must have been puzzled over the physical contradiction this promise entails: "How can Jesus be physically present in so many scattered groups, however small, united for prayer in His name?" If logically followed through, such a presence would imply physical absence in all but one of the places on earth where He would be physically present with His disciples. Otherwise, His presence, if really taken seriously, must



be spiritual. Their minds would be jarred to learn of His physical absence before they understood the meaning, purpose and wisdom of the ascension. However, during the Last Supper discourses, He would explain how He intended to be *in the midst of them* for that period in which He would be physically absent from the world. (Study John 14-17.) After the coming of the Holy Spirit, therefore, the Apostles must have drawn great comfort from these words which, in retrospect, sounded so much like the great Scriptural assurances of Javéh in the midst of His people to bless, console, direct and protect them. (See Gen. 28:15; Dt. 31:6; Josh. 1:5; Judg. 6:15f; 7:7; Psa. 20:7; 46:5; Isa. 1:9; 7:14; 8:10; 12:6; Jer. 14:9; Hos. 11:9; Zeph. 3:5, 12, 15, 17; Zech. 2:10) Despite the smallness or weakness of God's people, despite their being despised as insignificant by the world, God had promised to be really, however spiritually, present in their midst. (See also Mt. 18:10; Lk. 12:32.) The disciples would therefore experience what it means to believe Jesus to be "Emmanuel—God with us!" (Mt. 1:23; Isa. 7:14) Barnes (*Matthew-Mark*, 188) senses the global implications of this:

Nothing could more clearly prove that Jesus must be omnipresent, and, of course, be God. Every day, perhaps every hour, two or three, or many more, may be assembled in every city or village . . . in almost every part of the world—and in the midst of them all is Jesus the Saviour. Millions thus at the same time, in every quarter of the globe, worship in His name, and experience the truth of the promise that He is present with them. It is impossible that He should be in all these places and not be God.

## VI. YOUR HUMILITY AND SENSITIVITY TO OTHERS IS JUDGED BY YOUR READINESS TO FORGIVE OR SHOW MERCY. (18:21-35)

### A. PETER'S QUESTION: "HOW MANY TIMES FORGIVE?" (18:21)

18:21 **Then came Peter, and said unto him.** With the same freedom that John earlier broke into this discourse to ask his question about the isolated miracle-worker (Mk. 9:38-41), Peter may have arisen from his seat to confront the Master with what he may have thought was a limitation on something said earlier. There is no need

to assume that Matthew glued the following section onto the sermon because of its supposed appropriateness. (See also on 18:35; 19:1.) **Then came Peter** may be nothing but a glimpse into the freedom permitted in Jesus' class sessions.

**Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? until seven times?** This question is based on Jesus' statement in verse 15. Beyond what Jesus had said there (v. 15), was there a deeper problem getting to Peter? Had he been personally abused by comments from the sidelines by some of the others, jealous of his apparent promotions and prominence? At Caesarea Philippi Jesus had indeed promised him a key role in the establishing of the Kingdom. Were others, bitter at him because his presumed importance blocked their own hope of glory, casting aspersions on his worthiness? It is not impossible that some personal uncertainty made unlimited forgiveness seem extreme to Peter. There are two sides to his question: mentality and mechanics.

1. **MENTALITY.** Since the wronged person who attempts to recover his sinning brother must approach him in the spirit of forgiveness and without any intention to be vindicated, Peter may be wondering whether there should not be some limit to this open-ended long-suffering and forgiveness. The basic fallacy of Peter's question is that it assumes that forgiveness robs us of the right to cease forgiving and start demanding justice at least in certain cases. This is why Jesus' supporting story (18:23-34) must illustrate how God's demand that we forgive does not ask us to surrender a proper right to vengeance. Rather, His demand is based on the fact that, due to our own sin and need for mercy, we never possessed that right in the first place. The very act of asking that justice be waived and mercy granted in our own case is an implicit justification of mercy in all similar circumstances, like the case of our offending brother. There is just no time when we may claim a right to be vindictive. (Ro. 12:19) To cease forgiving and start demanding justice for others is tantamount to asking that justice be demanded in our own case too. But to beg mercy for oneself and justice for others is a hypocrisy that a holy God cannot overlook.
2. **MECHANICS.** Since, according to Jesus' formula, *if your brother hear you* brings the controversy to an end, Peter, seeing the possibility that some brother might repeat his sin, asks, "At what time should I simply stop forgiving my brother and bring the grievance before other witnesses, before taking the question before the

assembly?" Jesus' answer will imply that if this be the case, where the offender repents, there need be no second or third step in the reconciliation (cf. Lk. 17:3f) since all procedure would be blocked at the first step in an indefinite cycle of sinning and forgiveness involving only the two original brothers. (Mt. 18:15, 22) The only exception to Jesus' formula of forgiveness is, "If he does not listen."

In fact, delight in repeating sins may be the real sin of which the others are but superficial symptoms and, until this is eradicated by confession and forgiveness, the first step toward true reconciliation has not yet been really made. Jesus is not covering the diabolical desire to repeat the other sins "just to see how much that fool brother can take or forgive." No one is asked to be taken for a fool by another Christian under the guise of easy forgiveness, for just as soon as it becomes apparent to the offended brother that the other is stepping on his toes, not merely by excusable accident, but for love of tormenting, then this root problem is the sin with which the offended must deal. If he does not listen at this level, then the question should be aired before witnesses. (18:16) The secret to Jesus' meaning is to get at the right sin the first time.

**Until seven times?** In later Judaism the Talmudic rule only admitted forgiving one's offender three times, basing its argument on Amos 1:3 and Job 33:29, as if God Himself only forgave so far and no more: "Should a mere mortal be more amenable to forgive than the Almighty?!" It is not impossible that this same bad exegesis and grudging spirit had roots in thinking and practice in Peter's time too. If so, he had doubled the cautious, calculating scribal scrimping of love and even added one more time of forgiveness for good measure—was this not enough? But what went wrong?

1. Peter was moving in the true spirit of legalistic formalism, since he sought ANY numerical, outside limit at which mercy and forgiveness must stop. Rather than manifest a godly spirit, this is really a vindictive temper that wants to know how much longer it has to forbear before letting the offender feel the full brunt of its vendetta.
2. It had not occurred to him that, in the very process of counting wrongs, he had crushed the very spirit of forgiveness. To tally forgiveness can have only two justifications: to pamper one's pride in great magnanimity or to arrive soon to the outside limit when all mercy is withdrawn and vengeance can finally take over! The

spirit of mercy recognizes that we only forgive our brother ONCE. Then, however many times he offends us thereafter, each time he repents, we forgive PERIOD, not "once more," because we are not counting.

Whatever else may be criticized about Peter's steel-cold question, there is a heart-warming touch of reality in it: this is a real man wrestling with his desire to enter honestly into the spirit of his Master's teaching by offering generously the seven pardons, his desire that the offender learn to stop giving him trouble, and his desire for balance that does not make a mockery of either justice or mercy. Peter does not come to us on the sacred page as a fully perfected Apostle who makes no theological blunders, but as a man who is growing.

#### B. JESUS ANSWERS: "NO LIMIT: MERCIFULNESS IS THE RULE IN GOD'S KINGDOM!" (18:22-35)

18:22 **Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven.** On another occasion Jesus actually did say, "If your brother sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." (Lk. 17:3, 4) There is no contradiction between the two texts, since there the forgiveness is proportioned to the number of sins and repentance, so that the "seven times a day" means "as many as necessary, infinitely." (Cf. Psa. 119:164 where the same expression means "availing oneself of every available impulse and opportunity.") Jesus' memorable requirement of reasonableness and mercy stands in contrast to the unreasonable mercilessness of a Lamech who demands vengeance "seventy and seven" for what he personally suffered from others! (Gen. 4:23f) Although Jesus' quantitative expression harmonized with Peter's question about quantitative mercifulness, it unquestionably left in wreckage the basic assumption that love, mercy and forgiveness could be measured in numbers. With numbers He eliminated the meaning of numbers! The state of one's heart, his readiness to forgive, his longing for the restoration of his brother, his hoping for renewed fellowship—these are not things to tally. Hendriksen (*Matthew*, 704) puts it succinctly: "One might as well ask, 'How often must I love my wife, my husband, my children?' as to ask, 'How often shall I forgive?'" Jesus' answer,

in the light of the following parable, might be paraphrased: "How many times should you forgive? As many times as it will be necessary for God to forgive you—not one time more!" (18:35) God Himself is not keeping score of the times He shows us mercy, because if He did, who could stand? (Psa. 103:8-14; 130:3f; Ezra 9:13; Lam. 3:22) Dare a sinful mortal be more severe in justice than the Almighty? Rather, nothing could bring us more into harmony with the character of our God than to do good to those who have ignored, injured or despised us. (See on 5:44-48 and notice esp. Luke's variations, Lk. 6:27-36.)

There are several connections between this section on mercifulness and what has gone before:

1. Jesus is still dealing with selfish ambition (18:1), in the sense that vindictiveness, the attitude condemned here, is but a side effect of ambition. The person who tramples others in his rush to the top makes himself the target of his victims' offenses. It is an unavoidable part of his psychological armament to react quickly to the offense and be slow about forgetting an injury. Longanimity is just not his style. He is far more at home grabbing his debtor by the throat and demanding instant retribution.
2. Since in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant Jesus pictures that servant as refusing to dispense with his undeniable legal right to throw his debtor into debtors' prison, a fact which scandalized his fellow servants, He may have intended the parable to respond also to that harshness that can despise weaker disciples and be oblivious to one's own obligation to do without what is perfectly justifiable if it hinder one's own access to life in the Kingdom or cause the loss of others. (18:6-9)
3. Jesus needs also to say that true greatness in the Kingdom (18:1) embodies a forgiving spirit.

### 1. CONSIDER THE MAGNITUDE OF GOD'S MERCY TO YOU (18:23-27)

18:23 **Therefore** means: "What I have just said about the need to forgive indefinitely is the reason the Kingdom is like the following story." **Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king who would make a reckoning with his servants.** The moral procedure of this king and the justice of God as He rules His Kingdom

are similar. The way God will treat His people is illustrated by the king. (18:35) The picture of **the kingdom of heaven** drawn in this parable is that which includes the life decisions of a given sinner who has been forgiven by God, but refuses to show similar mercy to a fellow. Arraigned before God once more, presumably at judgment, he is actually cast to his final fate. Therefore, the point of view from which the Kingdom is here viewed is the rule of God over all men anywhere at any time clear down until final judgment. (For notes on the Kingdom, see comments after 13:53.)

**Who would make a reckoning with his servants.** In the parable this reckoning could well have been normal administrative procedure, but it only became critical for the story's protagonist due to his gross indebtedness. The fact that this oriental king's debtors are called *servants* should not surprise, for, though they might be powerful executives in their own right, nevertheless, because they are under the absolute authority of their potentate, in his eyes they would be considered his slaves.

In the reality, God operates His Kingdom with a strict accounting in righteousness. The basic ethical principle of His rule is uprightness. The *reckoning* in the parable does not stand for the final accounting, which actually comes later when the servant is rearraigned before the king. (18:32ff) This audit, based upon a strict account between God and man, intends to bring each of God's servants to the painful awareness of what he had previously ignored, the depth of his failure to meet the rigid standard of absolute truth and righteousness. No gospel of mercy and forgiveness can make any sense until the solemn sense of God's perfect law probing our inmost being awakens in us a horrified consciousness of our imperfection, unrighteousness and sin. (See "Jesus' Purpose For Preaching This Sermon," Vol. I, 188ff, also notes on 5:48.) There can be no desire to put ourselves in a position to receive God's generous forgiveness until we hear our sentence read and are conscience-driven to admit the justice of His decision. God mercifully brings us up short, ending our careless security, by making us face our sins. Sometimes this occurs when we hit our point of despair, up to our neck in adversity. He would rather we see ourselves in the light of His law. This is why it is a perversion of both the Gospel and compassion to offer salvation in Christ as something that eliminates a severe arraignment before God to give an account. It is this very reckoning of strict justice that makes us see that our standing before God can never be a question of strict legal merit or contracts, but a gift of grace. (Cf. how Jesus

upsets the usual, worldly value judgments in His later parable of the Eleventh-Hour Servants. 20:1-16)

18:24 **And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought to him, that owed him ten thousand talents. One was brought to him,** perhaps because the guilt of his negligence or embezzling his king made him reluctant to come willingly face-to-face with his victim, the king whom he had been damaging. It is not unlikely that, had this reckoning not interfered, the self-assured sinner would have gone on doubling and tripling the indebtedness for which he must at last give account. (Cf. Ro. 2:5)

**Ten thousand talents.** The value of money mentioned in the Bible is difficult to establish in precise dollar equivalents, because of the fluctuating purchasing power of our own money. Therefore, all the estimates given in the Bible encyclopedias have to be continually updated, because the sums given there represent world economic conditions in the times of the editors. However, to form some idea of his debt, the following calculation can be made: (See on Mt, 20:2.)

$$\begin{aligned} 1 \text{ day's salary} &= 1 \text{ denarius} & 100 \text{ denarii} &= 1 \text{ mina} \\ & & 60 \text{ minas} &= 1 \text{ talent} \end{aligned}$$

If this servant were a common day laborer, he would have to work at least 100 days to earn one mina, 6,000 days to earn one talent. Since he **owed him ten thousand talents**, he must work 60,000,000 days or just a little over 164,384 years. On the other hand, supposing him to have been more likely a royal minister who could have earned a 1000 times the pay of a day laborer, he would still have to labor 164 years with no overtime and no weekends off! This is merely the time required to earn that amount, not the time required to save that much, since, if he supported himself and his family while trying to earn the required amount, he would have to work that much longer.

To put it into dollars, if the common laborer could earn as much as \$2 an hour for an eight-hour day, his denarius would be worth \$16. In a 100 days (= 1 mina) he could earn \$1600. In 6000 days (= 60 minas or 1 talent) he could earn \$96,000, but since he must pay 10,000 talents, he must earn \$960,000,000 over the 164,834 years. In other words, our appreciation of the value of the talent is dependent on the average sum the laborer receives as pay per day. (= denarius)

To illustrate the magnitude of his debt another way, this 10,000 talent figure represented the amount Haman hoped to be able to

pour into the royal treasury upon confiscating the Jewish properties after exterminating their race in every part of the empire! (Est. 3:9, 13) When the Romans under Pompey took Jerusalem in 63 B.C., tribute was imposed on the Jews amounting to about 10,000 talents. (*Antiquities*, XIV, 4, 4 and 5) Or, back in 220 B.C. the sum of the taxes together for Coelestria and Phoenicia, Judea and Samaria, came to 8,000 talents. (*Ant.* XII, 4, 4) So, the man's debt was larger than the national budget for four different provinces! How he got himself so hopelessly in debt is not important for the point of the parable, although it is not impossible, if he be thought of as a financial agent through whom royal funds flowed from which he could siphon off a private reserve of considerable proportions to squander over a number of years. This debt could have been incurred as a loan. (18:27)

Bruce (*Training*, 211) argues that the particular type of service involved here is another contextual connection with the basic theme of Jesus' entire discourse:

That it was some such unscrupulous minister of state, guilty of the crime of embezzlement, whom Jesus had in His eye, appears all but certain when we recollect what gave rise to the discourse of which this parable forms the conclusion. The disciples had disputed among themselves who should be greatest in the kingdom, each one being ambitious to obtain the place of distinction for himself. Here, accordingly, their Master holds up to their view the conduct of a great one, concerned not about the faithful discharge of his duty, but about his own aggrandizement. "Behold," He says to them in effect, "what men who wish to be great ones do! They rob their king of his revenue, and abuse the opportunities afforded by their position to enrich themselves; and while scandalously negligent of their own obligations, they are characteristically exacting towards any little one who may happen in the most innocent way, not by fraud, but by misfortune, to have become their debtor." Thus understood, the parable faithfully represents the guilt and criminality of those at least who are animated by the spirit of pride, and deliberately make self-advancement their chief end. . . . It is impossible to overestimate the magnitude of their guilt.

**18:25 But forasmuch as he had not wherewith to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.** The royal minister evidently had



nothing salted away with which to repay such an astronomical debt, so the king sentenced this agent to be sold into slavery along with his family possessions to meet the obligation. Who can affirm that such a sale would have totally liquidated the debt? Was the king salvaging what little he could by confiscation and sale of his property?

Jesus' mention of this sale of people into slavery gives us pause. Some commentators brush it off as mere scenery needed to complete the story, but not typical of God, "for He would never approve of slavery, especially of innocent people like **his wife and children.**" Accordingly, Jesus only pictures the classic procedure among oriental potentates with whatever rigor they judged proper, however unjust their decisions might be judged to be on the Christian balance. But it is only the commentators who assert that the man's wife and children were innocent, whereas the king knew better and acted accordingly. Their collusion must not be excused. In fact, the OT Law ordered the sale of the insolvent thief or thieves. (Ex. 22:3)

Not one other OT text justifies the sale of debtors into slavery.

1. Lev. 25:39, 40 admits the possibility of voluntary indenture in extreme poverty, but this lasted only until the year of jubilee and the servant was to be considered as a hired servant temporarily sojourning. Strict humanitarianism governed the treatment of such "slaves" (Lev. 25:39-55).
2. 2 Kgs. 4:1 reports without approval the case of two children taken as slaves by their deceased father's creditor.
3. Neh. 5:1-13 reports the desperation of people mortgaged over their heads who must force their own children to serve as slaves, after many of these same people had been repurchased from pagan slave-owners. Nehemiah condemned this slavery for debts on the basis of the Levitical law. (Lev. 25:42)
4. Isa. 50:1 in figurative language argues that God had not been forced to sell Israel to creditors for any supposed insolvency on His part. Their present condition was that of someone who had been sold into slavery because of their own indebtedness.
5. Amos 2:6 and 8:6 condemns the harsh, heartless sale of the righteous poor into slavery, whereas the Law had only permitted the sale of the unrighteous thief, but permitted voluntary indentured service for a limited time and under humane conditions. (Lev. 25:39-55)

The case before us in Jesus' story is that of an entire family that conspired together to use the influential, lucrative position of the man

of the house to use for their own purposes what really belonged to their king. Theirs is culpable insolvency and theft, and the proper verdict is: "Sell them!" (Ex. 22:3)

In the reality of which the selling into slavery was but the symbol God in perfect justice has every right now in this life to punish His debtors and all that is dear to them by turning them over to those who would make them feel the full force of their iniquity. In fact, the implication of Isa. 50:1 is that God would indeed sell His people into slavery for their iniquities. He did it historically in the captivities of sinful Israel, and should the Church not learn therefrom? (Ro. 3:23; 6:23; Jn. 8:34; Ro. 6:16; 2 Pt. 2:19; Ro. 1:24, 26, 28) He can abandon man, destroy him, sell him, torture him or anything else, because the enormity of man's sins require that divine justice be satisfied, and no sinner has even the slightest chance of repaying what he has already squandered, nor any right to complain about the severity of the sentence!

The creeping tragedy of this royal minister's sin is that it enveloped his whole family, because he could not limit the ramifications of his dishonesty to himself. Even those who might have been innocent at first were drawn slowly, inexorably into the web of his self-seeking and, therefore, must share the consequences of what at first may have been only his sin. A sinner's contaminated character casts its evil influence upon all around him and, imperceptibly, draws others into his guilt.

18:26 **The servant therefore fell down and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.** The royal verdict had been pronounced, but before its sentence was carried out, the now terrified ex-official acts:

1. He cannot deny the reality of the debt: the incriminating evidence is too clear.
2. He offers no excuses or rationalizations for his responsibility in this outrageous imbroglio.
3. He has nothing with which even to make even a down-payment or even a token payment of the debt. He is bankrupt!
4. In typically oriental style, he threw himself on his knees, touching his forehead to the ground in front of his lord in abject obeisance and made his incredibly impossible request:
  - a. **Have patience with me** (*makrothúmeson ep'emoi* = "Be long-suffering with me.") Obviously this wretch has not really calculated the debt in terms of CENTURIES required to repay it

(as we did at 18:24), because he needs this much long-suffering from his lord and no less. He cannot imagine that he would actually erase the debt, and so trembles to think he must repay it.

- b. **I will pay thee all.** How absolutely impossible it was to fulfil such a promise! (See on 18:24.) His promise of mountains of gold is the wild desperation of the absolutely hopeless. It would have been ridiculous to have taken him seriously.

However, are any of us actually cognizant of the gravity, the multitude and the heinousness of his sins to the extent God is? Is not this man's promise the very wording of the hypocrite's prayer, "I promise to be good enough to resolve every claim you have against me, God!"? To make such a promise is proof that we hope that any amount of future goodness could somehow compensate for past iniquity. Such a sinner would gladly amass any number of good works to pay for his sins. A righteousness outside himself but imputed to him by faith is, to him, an incredible doctrine. (Romans!)

18:27 **And the lord of that servant, being moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.** Impressed with the servant's total impossibility to repay such an incredible amount, totally unimpressed by his promises and confident he would never be repaid, perhaps touched by the servant's evidence of a right purpose and determination to meet his obligations, and moved to pity by the man's abject despair, the generous lord acted. He consented to far more than the servant dared dream: not only did he *release him* from sale into slavery, but he completely erased all indebtedness.

**The debt** (*dáneion*) means "money given or taken on loan with interest; a loan," Rocci, 413; Thayer, 125; Arndt-Gingrich, 169) Apparently, the king had loaned the man money for an ill-fated enterprise which had not paid off but left him totally bankrupt, hence he is now exposed as a thief, having misappropriated his lord's loan for his own ill-fated projects which could not pay off the handsome profits promised, but rather left him penniless and broken, a debtor to his king. As in other parables, the idea of *debt* reminds us that what we think of as our own is actually but a loan from God who expects repayment. (Cf. Mt. 25:14-30; Lk. 16:1-9; 19:11-27)

In the reality of God's Kingdom the severe demand that the standard be absolutely respected is followed by the mercy necessary to help those who fail. In fact, God mercifully cancels sin the instant it is morally possible to do so. God is not reluctant to forgive, but He

must first make the sinner realize how much he is being forgiven, and where there is the sincere request for grace, He is glad to respond immediately and generously with forgiveness. Like the forgiven servant, we start out anew, born again as a little child with a clean slate and imputed righteousness. (Jn. 3:3-5; Mt. 18:3, 4; Ro. 5:1f; Phil. 3:9) Our moral debt is reduced to zero and although we owe a debt of gratitude to our Lord, we can begin again. (See on 18:3, 4.) Lenski (*Matthew*, 716) rightly sees that

The king's word of release and remission is forensic: God on his throne declares the sinner free from guilt, as free as though he had never incurred that guilt. This is Biblical justification, the central doctrine of the Christian faith.

There is another sense in which this principle applies to God's dealings with every man on earth, Christian or not. Because this is not the final reckoning, but rather the crisis of conscience that comes when man, as man, becomes aware of the gravity of his sin against the Almighty, the very sense of relief that comes even to the most unbelieving when we realize that God exacts of us less than our guilt deserves (cf. Job 11:6) and even suspends the sentence temporarily to afford us time to accept His mercy and live (Cf. Lk. 13:1-9; Ro. 2:4), is personal, subjective evidence to every sinner that he is only on probation. So, whether we be Jew, facing the demands of Moses' Law (Ro. 2:12f), or pagan, feeling the accusations of conscience (Ro. 2:14f), or Christian trained in the doctrine of Christ, the rule applies to us all. From this standpoint, we all stand halfway between mercy received and mercy yet needed. (Cf. Trench, *Parables*, 59)

## 2. CONSIDER THE SMALLNESS OF YOUR BROTHER'S SINS AGAINST YOU (18:28-30)

18:28 The cutting satire of Jesus' story becomes even more incisive as He throws the forgiven servant's conduct into a series of contrasts with that of his lord.

1. The forgiven official as creditor stands in relation to his fellow servant as debtor where his king stood not long before in his own case. He is now lord of the situation with powers to exact justice or show mercy.
2. The king had considerably summoned him to assist at the grand

audit. Here the functionary curtly and completely excludes any honest reckoning and all further opportunity to pay. There is no opportunity for a calm, reasoned accounting, verification and admission. **Pay what thou owest** (*apódos ei ti opheilais* = literally: "If you owe me something, pay it!") There is no doubt here that his fellow owed something, although he may have been in doubt about the exact amount. The main point is: Pay up whatever you owe me. (Cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 219)

3. The king freely cancelled his enormous debt, but this unbelievable chance of a lifetime which rescued him and all that was dear to him from certain disaster left no sense of obligation nor even the slightest trace of gratefulness and brotherly love on his soul. No sooner had he left the warm, sunny love of his king than his heart froze over solid! The man who had owed his sovereign billions was let off, but now he has his brother, his peer, by the throat for a contemptibly insignificant sum! Jesus' main contrast is here: the astronomical debt forgiven and the paltry figure demanded here. **Hundred shillings** attempts to translate 100 denarii = 1 mina = 1/60th of 1 talent = 1/600,000 of the 10,000 talents remitted the avaricious creditor. Admittedly the debt amounted to just over three months' work for a common laborer, but for a big-time operator like this creditor, it was small change.
4. The king had shown polished, regal dignity in his composure despite his enormous loss due to the maladministration of his subordinate. Crassly ignoring his own high nobility, this functionary stoops to a rudeness and brutality unworthy even in serfs. Grabbing his fellow by the throat, perhaps even without greeting him properly, he began to choke him, demanding moralistically, "Pay your debts promptly; follow the rules!" His refusal to do for his fellow servant as he had desired be done for himself evidences his hatred. (See on 7:12 and 5:44.) He refused mercy to a subordinate and would not receive a little one in the name of the king's mercy! (Mt. 18:5, 10)

Precisely similar to Nathan's treatment of David (2 Sam. 12:1-5), Jesus deliberately provokes our sense of outrage at the abusiveness and consummate arrogance of this ruthless, close-fisted legalist. ("Grace for me, Lord, but the letter of the law for my neighbor!") In no sense must He be understood to affirm that others' sins against us are somehow unreal, because the indebtedness of 100 denarii is fully as real as the debit of 10,000 talents.

18:29. Note the similarity between the two cases: both debtors

1. Humble themselves before their creditors
2. Beseech their creditors for mercy
3. Request additional time to gather money
4. Promise to pay what is owed.

This similarity of circumstances should have awakened pity for his peer and gratitude for the privilege of being so soon able to treat someone else with the same kindness he himself had been shown.

In the reality, Jesus' demand that we forgive indefinitely is conditioned by the willingness of our debtors to request forgiveness, just as this debtor sought to be shown mercy by his creditor. (See Lk. 17:3: "If he repents")

18:30 Rather than sell him into slavery, as he himself had been sentenced (18:25), **he went and cast him into prison**, probably because of the small amount of the debt, **until he should pay that which was due**. This latter phrase does not reveal whether a jailed prisoner had any possibility by forced labor to work out payment or not. It is more likely that discovery of his imprisonment would force relatives and friends to scrape together enough money to pay his debt and secure his release. If so, the punishment inflicted was in proportion to the debt incurred. The severity of the merciless creditor is not in his choice of penalty.

The Lord's point is another, far more significant one. The severity of the pitiless servant is manifest in the fact that **HE DID EVERYTHING ACCORDING TO THE BOOK**. Note that he did not necessarily go beyond the letter of the law in force in his country. He was well within his legal rights and could plead absolute strictness as his right to exact his due from his debtor. But this very appeal to strict justice must be his condemnation in the eyes of his lord, who, waiving absolute justice for him, had magnanimously forgiven him completely. It was, in fact, his holding to the letter of the law that would damn him! (18:33f) In fact, the concept of a divine rigor determined by human mercy toward equals is not at all new for Jesus. (See on 5:7; 6:12, 14f.) Sure, the servant had roughed up his customer a bit, but his great sin was his score-keeping, his holding him to the book, his legalism. Since only the absolutely perfect can rightly demand every personal right, for a sinful humanity the only just course left is humble humaneness. Compassion, sympathy and sincere consideration for other human beings is the only justice left open to us. We must never suppose that no one could be so cruel as to exact the last penny from

a petty debtor. Anyone who thinks so is just not a good student of mankind nor of church history.

### 3. CONSIDER THE CONSEQUENCES OF INDULGING AN UNFORGIVING SPIRIT (18:31-34)

18:31 **So when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were exceedingly sorry.** Did these fellow servants know about the unmerciful servant's having been forgiven? Are they incensed by his gross insult to the royal great-heartedness shown him by the king whose example he had refused to imitate? They are definitely shocked at the unreasonableness and brutality shown their fellow by this ingrate so pitiless in his adamant refusal to understand. Nothing is necessarily implied about the personal righteousness of the fellow servants, because, as McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*, 161) wrote, "No matter how much we are inclined to deal harshly with men ourselves, we are always indignant, when, as disinterested witnesses, we behold such conduct in others."

**They came and told unto their lord all that was done.** Rather than take the law in their own hands, they denounced the incident to their lord. Foster (*Middle Period*, 292) considers the detail of the fellow servants simply part of the scenery, not intended to represent some spiritual reality, because God does not need to be informed by men. On the other hand, assuming that these *fellow servants* are men, two other views are possible:

1. Could they not represent the common conscience of mankind that approves the sentence of God and appeals to Him for vengeance for the tyranny which they are powerless to do anything about? (Cf. Rev. 6:9-11; Gen. 4:10 and McGarvey's comment above.)
2. Although an omniscient God needs no human explanations of earthly events, it is true that He lets men reach the end of their human resources and turn to Him in their helplessness and need. (Mt. 6:8 does not preclude 6:9-13 or 7:7-11.) Legally powerless to stop their fellow servant's brutality, in their sorrow these take the matter to him alone who can bring justice. Jesus Christ is now Lord of the Church and as He rules we may appeal to Him to resolve the difficulties that perplex us.

What if these *fellow servants* are angels? (Cf. 13:27, 28 notes) Jesus warned that these fellow servants of God (Rev. 22:9; 19:10) have

His immediate audience with respect to little ones who are ill-treated. (18:10) If so, we see one more subtle tie with all that precedes in Jesus' discourse.

18:32 **Then his lord called him unto him.** In the parable it is not clear how much time elapsed between the appeal of the fellow servants and the summons of the unmerciful servant, but any apparent brevity between the events is typical of the extreme brevity of our earthly life, so that what happens at once in the parable, in the life of the sinner may have taken place over a span of years. The certainty of the divine summons, not its immediacy, is the point. So we have here a picture of man haled before his final judgment from which there can be no appeal and for which there can be no repentance and restitution. This is not another confrontation with God during the life of the servant somewhat on the same plane as the first confrontation (cf. 18:24ff) merely for the purpose of making him conscious of the monstrous wickedness of which he is now guilty. This is the final accounting, because the servant is sent away to his fate at the hands of the torturers.

In Greek the lord's accusation flashes with fire: **"You evil slave! All that debt I forgave you since you begged me to!"** Note the state's evidence sustaining the verdict of "Wicked!":

1. *I* (your king) underscores the high, royal authority by which he had benefited.
2. *forgave you* emphasizes the mercy received; he did not have to pay it all back even in time-payments.
3. *all that debt* reminds him of its enormity and impossibility of payment.
4. *because you besought me* indicates the simplicity and ease by which he obtained so magnificent a forgiveness.

His wickedness, so far as his king is concerned, consists in thinking so little of the mercy his lord had granted him and in demonstrating himself so unmistakably undeserving of such grace. (Ro. 2:1-11)

18:33 **Shouldest not thou also have had mercy on thy fellow servant, even as I had mercy on thee?** Does my example mean nothing to you? His question expects an unqualified "yes" answer. The king's mercy should have been the servant's ideal for his own imitation, but the despicable handling of his fellow servant reflected this standard only by its violent contrast to it and its negation of it. Note that the lord does not scold the unmerciful steward for wanting to get back his 100 denarii or for calling his own fellow servant to account. His only



accusation is leveled against the legalistic unmercifulness of his treatment.

In the reality, this question is the whole point of Jesus' illustration. (See notes on 5:45; cf. Lk. 6:32-36; Eph. 4:31f; Col. 3:12f.) God's mercy extended to us is intended to make us His sons and like Him in character. (Ro. 2:4; Lk. 6:35f) God promises to forgive our iniquity and remember our sin no more. (Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:12; 10:17) This exposes the hypocrisy of the person who voices forgiveness but does not really cancel the offense. But the man who honestly faces his own weakness, presumption and ignorance with the realization that God will forgive him even these sins, cannot but be moved to imitate his Father by caring for his fellows no matter how or how much they stumble. But this is not just an emotional reaction. It should be the demand of an informed conscience. (1 Pt. 1:13-17; Col. 4:1; Eph. 5:1)

According to God's rules, man's inhumanity demonstrates the futility of showing him any mercy, because the only way man can even come close to repaying God for His kindness is by merciful helpfulness to His creatures. But the man who will not do even this much just proves how useless it is for God to grant him further leniency. To show him further mercy would only contribute to his delinquency. As Brown (*PHC*, XXII, 441f) said it:

The most serious block to your salvation may emerge after your forgiveness rather than before it. After you have received forgiveness you enter on a new probation. What are you going to do with it? When you know Christ has died for you, and that God forgives you, what influence are these facts going to have upon your life?—that is the question on which your ultimate salvation hangs.

18:34 **And his lord was wroth, and delivered him** only, since his family had apparently not been party to his unmercifulness as they had been to his wasting his master's goods. The clemency unquestionably enjoyed but never merited nor understood by this short-sighted ingrate is now revoked. From the moment of his earlier forgiveness until this, he was a free man, forgiven of his great debt. Now, however, the dreaded punishment ordered earlier is carried out as if nothing had ever happened in the meantime. He who had so gloriously tasted the great-souled magnanimity of his lord, must now taste the lash of his indignation and wrath. He is turned over to the court-appointed torturers (*basanistais*, inquisitors, executioners whose task

is to elicit the truth by torture) to exact everything possible from him. **Till he should pay all that was due** = never! Could he hope to live long enough to earn and save enough to pay his debt while he was free? (18:24) What hope has he of so doing, now that he is stripped of his liberty and earning power? The expression, **till he should pay all**, offers no hope of freedom thereafter. Lenski (*Matthew*, 723) perceives that

The "until" clause thus really becomes the strongest proof against the idea of purgatory and for the eternal duration of punishment. Saying "until an impossible thing takes place," simply says "never."

But for what is he being punished: his most recent unmercifulness toward his fellow alone, or the original, unthinkable great indebtedness or both? Trench (*Parables*, 58) sees this problem:

It is strange that the king finally delivers up the offender, not for cruelty, but for the very debt which would appear to have been entirely remitted to him. The question is here involved, Do sins once forgiven, return on the sinner through his after offenses?

The answer lies in the fact that his own appeal to law and strict justice in his treatment of his fellow, in effect, condemned his lord's recourse to mercy and waiving strict justice in his own case earlier. By condemning his king's decision to forgive him, he himself literally reopened his own case for rejudgment! Now the king simply obliged him by reversing the former decision of mercy and letting the man's own sense of justice be the measure whereby he himself would be judged, even if this meant that the full force of the king's justice must now be meted out upon him. Further, if he would refuse mercy for so miserable a debt, then, in proportion as 10,000 talents exceed the 100 denarii, continued mercy must, in justice, be denied him for his own vast debt.

In the reality, God simply lets every man choose by what standard he would be judged. This is no new doctrine. (See notes on 5:7; 6:12; 7:2; 9:13; 12:7) In fact, if a man rejects grace, mercy and forgiveness as a way of dealing with offenders, then God one last time lets that blind sinner have his way by permitting him to be judged by his own standard and face the consequences. So, in the long run, God has absolutely nothing to lose in terms of strict absolute justice by being patient, long-suffering, merciful, kind and generous with

even the worst of sinners. He can show them new mercies every morning. (Mt. 5:44-48; Lk. 6:27-36; Ro. 2:4; 9:22; 2 Pt. 3:9, 15) But if by inhumanity men reject the standard by which they themselves are blessed and forgiven far more times than they can count, He can still treat them in absolutely perfect righteousness and let them face the consequences and go to hell.

Some, determined not to believe that a child of God, once saved, can ever be lost thereafter, when faced with the eternal punishment of some Bible character, simply affirm, as, for example is this case, that this servant was a fraud, hence does not represent a genuine, believing Christian after all. But such an interpretation misrepresents the purpose behind Jesus' telling this story. Would any deny that Jesus' conclusion (v. 35) included the Apostles to whom it was specifically addressed? Would any affirm that these same Apostles were not genuine, believing Christians? No, there is no doubt that the unmerciful servant had actually enjoyed a period of grace before being brought to judgment for post-forgiveness sinfulness.

*Tormenters* is not a reference to a hell full of hideous devils whose unique mission it is to rack or afflict the condemned. They themselves are going to be too busy suffering, and probably will not have Saturdays off to torture others! (Cf. Mt. 25:41; 8:29; Lk. 8:31; Rev. 16:13f; 19:20; 20:10) It probably refers, rather, to all the suffering Jesus refers to in other contexts as "eternal fire," "Gehenna (of fire)" "eternal punishment," "torment," etc. (Cf. 18:8, 9; 25:41, 46; Lk. 16:23ff) Since the guilt involved a sin against grace and mercy, a sin which by its own dictates demanded that there be no mercy, but only harsh, pitiless application of the letter of the law, then there could be no end to it. (Heb. 10:26-31) And since sin ammasses a *debt* that can never be paid, the suffering that is its punishment would logically have no end either. (Mt. 25:46)

### C. CONCLUSION: YOU ENDANGER YOUR OWN POSITION IN THE KINGDOM BY UNMERCIFULNESS AND RECKLESS SUPERIORITY! (18:35)

18:35 **So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if you forgive not every one his brother from your hearts.** So concludes the comparison begun in 18:23 which has continued to this point. Jesus means that God's dealings with men will proceed exactly as pictured in every part of the story now ended. McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*,

162) wrote that

The comparison has reference only to the last act of the king, that of delivering the unforgiving servant to the tormentors . . . We are not to infer, from the fact that the king retracted the forgiveness first granted, that God will do so with us. Our sins, once forgiven, are remembered no more. (Heb. 8:12)

But our forgiveness is conditional, as also God's willingness to forgive and forget. (Heb. 10:18, 26; see on Mt. 18:34) Implied in Jesus' threat are the following points:

1. We are all debtors to God. (18:23; Ro. 3:22, 23; Mt. 6:12) What an argument for humility! (18:4)
2. Our debt is so enormous that none can possibly pay it alone. (18:24, 25a) What irony: our only indisputable claim to greatness is our great indebtedness! (Cf. 18:1)
3. Justice requires that it be paid. (18:25b; Ro. 6:23; Ez. 18:4)
4. When each asks for mercy, God is happy to concede it, fully and completely, because it is His nature. (18:26, 27; Ez. 18:30-32; Psa. 103; Ro. 5:8)
5. Our hearts must feel how easy it is to forgive our fellow's small debts when what God has forgiven us is so infinitely greater. (18:28ff)
6. The mercy of God in forgiving us is the standard for treatment of our fellows (18:33; Eph. 4:32)
7. Fear of severity when we are judged will push us to be merciful when we judge others. (18:34)

In short, God will punish with eternal punishment everyone who refuses to be genuinely merciful to his fellow. God just cannot forgive an unforgiving heart! "Judgment is without mercy to him that has shown no mercy!" (Jas. 2:13) This parable illustrates the logical antithesis of the fifth Beatitude: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Cursed are the unmerciful and unforgiving, for they shall be treated with unmerciful severity." (Study also Psa. 18:25f; Jas. 5:9; cf. Sirach 28:1-12) Any disagreement with Jesus on this point, any qualification of His severity undermines our discipleship, yet people are not in the habit of acting as if keeping careful books on others' wrongs against them were a far more serious sin than anything registered on their books. It is far more common to think of "dirty sins" as sex scandals, and "heinous sins" as murder, high treason or something else. Barker (*As Matthew Saw the Master*,

94) comments:

We call the unforgiving man "strong-willed," "a person who sticks by what he thinks," perhaps on rare occasions "stubborn." "Sinner"? Never! The unforgiving man is excused on the grounds that "a man has to keep his self-respect."

**So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you.** This careful wording crushes out every hope that the announced severity might possibly be mitigated for some. Bruce (*Training*, 213) said it best:

This very doom Jesus, in the closing sentences of His discourse, solemnly assured His disciples awaited all who cherish an unforgiving temper, even if they themselves should be the guilty party . . . Stern words these, which lay down a rule of universal application, not relaxable in the case of favoured parties. Were partiality admissible at all, such as the twelve would surely get the benefit of it; but as if to intimate that in this matter there is no respect of persons, the law is enunciated with direct, emphatic reference to them. And harsh as the law might seem, Jesus is careful to indicate His cordial approval of its being enforced with . . . (strict) rigour. For that purpose He calls God the Judge by the endearing name "My heavenly Father"; as if to say: "The great God and King does not seem to Me unduly stern in decreeing such penalties against the unforgiving. I, the merciful, tender-hearted Son of Man, thoroughly sympathize with such judicial severity. I should solemnly say Amen to that doom pronounced even against you if you behaved so as to deserve it. Think not that because ye are My chosen companions, therefore violations of the law of love by you will be winked at. On the contrary, just because ye are great ones in the kingdom, so far as privilege goes, will compliance with its fundamental laws be especially expected of you, and non-compliance most severely punished.

**If you forgive not every one his brother from your hearts.** The plurals (*afête* and *tôn kardiôn humôn*) are individualized: **every one his brother**. Whereas in the parable the relationship between the two servants was one of equality ("your fellow servant" v. 33) despite their creditor-debtor relation, in the conclusion Jesus underscores their common human bond: **every one his BROTHER**. This is the "brother who sinned against you" (18:15), and about whom Peter asked, "How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive

him?" (18:21). Jesus answers, "You who have received the mercy of God in ocean-sized quantities, dare you dispense it to others with an eye-dropper, carefully measuring and calculating each precious drop? Does your love keep books? Is there a mad mathematics to forgiveness? Nothing that men can do to you or that you must forgive can begin to compare even faintly or remotely with what you have done to God or that He must forgive you!"

**From your hearts.** Jesus began this discourse in answer to a question from His disciples, whom Mark identified as "the Twelve" (Mt. 18:1; Mk. 9:35), and now He concludes it with a most piercing conclusion aimed right at their *hearts*, the very source of their selfish ambition, their status-seeking, their jealousy of official prerogatives, their stumbling blocks, their callousness toward others' weaker conscience and their limitations on forgiveness. Forgiveness cannot be limited to using the right words nor to going through the correct formal steps. It must be rightly motivated. In fact, unless our spirit is first freed of bitterness and unfriendly feelings, our facial expressions and "body English" will betray the aching for vengeance seething under our skin. This merciful spirit will seek in every way to restore the former, friendly relations. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 297) asks:

How often is our forgiveness in the heart, as well as from the heart narrowed by limitations and burdened with conditions; and is it not of the very essence of sectarianism to condemn without mercy him who does not come up to our demands—ay, and until he shall have come up to them to the uttermost farthing?

Is there someone whose outrageous conduct you cannot forget or for whom you cannot thank God?

And so ends the Lord's most remarkable discourse on the value of every single person. Although it echoes truth already taught in the Sermon on the Mount, it differs in emphasis. Whereas the other message emphasized the personal character and problems of the citizen of the Kingdom of God, this discourse highlights his relation to others, especially those whom he would see as his debtors, his inferiors. In Jesus Christ has the value of every single human being come to its greatest importance. He knows that this view of human personality will profoundly affect our evangelism, our institutions, our personal relations, our congregational life, our sense of values, in short, all else. But in all these areas He furnished us the key that opens up to us the secret of true greatness: self-giving service to

others, mutual edification, conscientiousness about one's own faults, mercifulness, self-discipline, and tender, considerate love.

19:1 **Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.** Chapter 18 should end here, because Matthew indicates hereby that he has terminated the record of one connected discourse and the arguments given before for this conclusion are also valid here. (See on 11:1; 13:53 and notes on the "Unity of Chapter 18.") Chapters 19 and 20 will furnish a series of living illustrations of applications of the truth of this discourse in chapter 18: look for them!

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Outline or summarize all that Jesus taught when the Apostles disputed about which was the greatest among them. What does Jesus teach about men's ambitions to be great? Which verses would you choose from Mt. 18 which contain the kernal of the teaching of the entire chapter?
2. Where and when in the ministry of Jesus did this discussion about relative greatness in the Kingdom occur? List all the events and topics of Jesus' teaching from the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi up to this time and show their connections.
3. What various factors seen in the previous events might have formed the motivation back of this discussion? That is, what might have tended to elevate certain Apostles above their fellows?
4. How was the question brought before the group: did the Apostles ask about it first, or did Jesus bring it up? Harmonize Mt. 18:1 with Mk. 9:33, 34 and Lk. 9:46, 47.)
5. Where had the argument about greatness among the disciples taken place?
6. What is the meaning of "unless you be converted" or "unless you turn"? "Converted" or "turn" to what? Why bring that up here?
7. What is the principle characteristic of children that Jesus intends to serve as a model for disciples? How do you know?
8. How long did this argument about greatness in the Kingdom continue among the Twelve?
9. What other passages of Scripture bear on the question as to how we should "receive one such little one in my name"?
10. List the various situations in Jesus' life that illustrate how He

steadfastly showed the kind of humility He teaches here.

11. What is the connection between Jesus' discussion of humbly receiving lesser disciples in His name, and John's question about the unaffiliated worker of miracles? (Mk. 9:38-41; Lk. 9:49, 50)
12. What other incidents or statements of Jesus show that one is blessed (or acceptable to God) on the basis of his own faith and deeds, and not necessarily on the basis of his affiliation or close association with "the right people" or "the one true church"?
13. What other Biblical incidents prove that God does not have to work with or through a chosen few, and at the same time show that the greatness of the power is of God and not of the chosen few?
14. List Jesus' answers to John's question about the unaffiliated miracle worker. Explain how this information should apply to us and our relations with other religious workers not affiliated with us.
15. What is a stumbling block? Is it best to look for them, or ignore them and let others point them out?
16. Who are "these little ones that believe in me"? Little children? New Christians without maturity in the faith? Could it be both?
17. What is a "great millstone"? How big is it? For what is it normally used? Why would it be so effective when used as Jesus suggests here?
18. In the expression "Woe to the world because of occasions of stumbling!" is the "world" the victim or the cause of these things that cause people to sin?
19. What is the lesson involved in the illustrations about the removal of hands, feet or eyes?
20. What does the word "despise" mean? What attitude is meant by "despise one of these little ones"? How or why do we tend to despise them?
21. If the reference to one's own hands, feet or eyes is only an illustration of something else in our lives, what does Jesus mean? What Scriptures indicate what Jesus means, i.e. that He does not intend for us to practice bodily amputation?
22. What other Scriptures help us to understand Jesus' comments about "salt" and "fire"? (Mk. 9:48-50) What is the meaning, then, of "every one shall be salted with fire"? How could the disciples "have salt within" themselves and "live at peace with one another"?
23. What does Jesus imply by His warning, "their angels always behold the face of my Father"? What may we learn about the



ministry of angels from this text? What other texts corroborate it or elaborate upon the angelic ministry? Why does Jesus say "their angels"?

24. What is the main point of the story about the lost sheep?
25. After discussing true greatness, self-renunciation and individual concern, Jesus seems to change the subject to church discipline. Show how He has never left the fundamental problem posed at the very beginning of the discussion, by indicating the logical connections.
26. Outline the basic steps given by the Lord for settling problems among believers, explaining the wisdom of each step. What other Scriptures provide additional information on each of these steps and their purpose?
27. What is the meaning of the phrase: "you have gained your brother"?
28. Explain: "let him be to you as the heathen (or Gentile) and the publican."
29. Explain the sentence: "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Tell where it is found and to whom it was addressed. Explain the terms "bind" and "loose," and their particular application in this sentence by showing from other Scriptures exactly what is to be bound or loosed. Indicate any parallel passages that help to interpret its meaning. And, finally, demonstrate whether what God binds or looses in heaven has already been bound or loosed by the disciples, or vice versa.
30. What did Jesus promise about the agreement of two disciples in prayer? What other Scriptures describe the secrets of successful praying?
31. What is involved in the disciples' gathering "in (Jesus') name"? What does it mean to meet "in His name"?
32. What is the main point of the story of the two debtors as it is seen as Jesus' answer to Peter's question: "How often should I forgive my brother"? Are there any secondary issues or points brought up in this same parable? If so, what are they?
33. Describe the psychological mechanism of forgiveness: how do we forgive someone?
34. Why must we forgive seventy times seven? After the 490th time, what do we do then?

## DO YOU HAVE THE WORD IN YOUR HEART?

## Matthew 16-18

Who said the following? What is the context? Are there parallel passages? Give the variant manuscript readings, translations, and other possible interpretations (if any). What do you think is the true meaning?

1. "There shall no sign be given . . . but the sign of Jonah."
2. "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."
3. ". . . upon this rock I will build my church."
4. "There are some of them that stand here, who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom."
5. "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him."
6. "Elijah is come already, and they knew him not, but did unto him whatsoever they would."
7. ". . . nothing shall be impossible unto you."
8. ". . . the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."
9. "for it must needs be that the occasions come; but woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh!"
10. "See that ye despise not one of these little ones."
11. "Be it far from thee, Lord; this shall never be unto thee."
12. "Therefore the sons are free."
13. "Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."
14. "So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not every one his brother from your hearts."
15. "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."
16. "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" "Who say ye that I am?"
17. "Thou art a stumbling block unto me."
18. "Whosoever would save his life shall lose it."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN OUTLINES

- Section 47. In Perea Jesus Teaches on Marriage, Divorce and Celibacy (19:1-12)
- Section 48: Jesus Blesses Little Children (19:13-15)
- Section 49. Jesus Tests Rich Young Ruler and Encourages Apostles (19:16-30)

## STUDY OUTLINE

## CHAPTER THEME:

"THE LORDSHIP OF GOD IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS"

- I. MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS (Marriage, Divorce, the Single Life: 19:1-12; Mk. 10:1-12)
- A. GENERAL SITUATION: Great popularity of Jesus in Herod's territory, Perea. (19:1, 2)
- B. IMMEDIATE SITUATION: Pharisees endeavor to embroil Jesus in controversy that would destroy His credibility and bring Him into conflict with the adulterer-divorcees, Herod and Herodias. (19:3) "For what reasons may we get rid of our wife?"
- C. JESUS' RESPONSE: (19:4-12) "Start looking for reasons to keep your wife!"
1. "Adopt God's original intention which was marriage, not divorce." (19:4-6) God, not man, is the Lord of marriage.
  2. "Mosaic legislation on divorce was permissive because of the inhumanity of unregenerate men, but does not reflect God's original design for the family." (19:7-8)
  3. "Any divorce for any reason other than unchastity encourages adultery through marriage of divorced persons." (19:9)
- D. THE DISCIPLES' STUNNED OBJECTION: "Better never to marry!" (19:10)
- E. JESUS' REACTION: "Only those who have the gift to live the single life are able to accept your conclusion; otherwise, no. Celibacy should be a personal choice based upon one's gifts and how one can serve God in the Kingdom." (19:11, 12)
- II. ADULT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS (19:13-15; Mk. 10:13-16; Lk. 18:15-17)

- A. SITUATION: Parents bring children to Jesus for blessing.
  - B. DISCIPLES' REACTION: They hinder the parents, rebuking them for the nuisance. "Children do not count, are not important to progress of the Kingdom!"
  - C. JESUS' ANGRY REACTION: "Children are so important to the Kingdom that they are the only sort of folks of which the Kingdom is made!"
    - 1. "God's Kingdom belongs to such humble, trusting, teachable people, and to NO ONE ELSE!"
    - 2. "Permit the children to come to me" and He took them into His arms and blessed them.
- III. RICH-POOR RELATIONSHIPS (19:16-30; Mk. 10:17-31; Lk. 18:18-30)
- A. SITUATION: Rich young ruler questions Jesus on the one, all-essential good deed to inherit eternal life. (19:16)
  - B. JESUS' RESPONSE (19:17-19)
    - 1. He challenged the young man's understanding of Jesus' position and his own comprehension of what is really good: "On what basis do you call me what is true absolutely only of God, and desire to know from me what only God can know?"
    - 2. He furnished the commandments God had already revealed.
  - C. THE YOUNG MAN INSISTS ON PERFECTION (19:20)
  - D. JESUS OFFERED PERFECTION THROUGH ABSOLUTE CONSECRATION (19:21)
  - E. THE YOUNG MAN, HOWEVER, BALKED (19:22)
  - F. JESUS' COMMENT ON THE INCIDENT AND TEACHING ON WEALTH (19:23-30)
    - 1. "Entrance into God's Kingdom is difficult for those who have wealth." (19:23)
    - 2. Apostles are staggered, but Jesus repeats Himself even more emphatically (19:24)
    - 3. Dumbfounded (Mk. 10:24), the disciples ask, "If a rich man cannot be saved, who can?!" (19:25)
    - 4. Jesus answered: "God is Lord of all possibilities."
  - G. PETER'S WRONG-HEADED QUESTION ANSWERED (19:27-30)
    - 1. "We have done what the rich young ruler would not, i.e. we have left everything: what shall be ours?"
    - 2. Jesus' answers:
      - a. PROMISE: "In the new world, you will reign with me,

- judging all Israel." (19:28)
- b. ENCOURAGEMENT: "All who have sacrificed for my sake now will receive in this time a hundred times what they give up, and eternal life in the time to come." (19:29)
  - c. WARNING: "Watch for a reversal of earth's value systems: positions of relative importance will be reversed. Many big names will become nobodies, whereas the nobodies will then be important." (19:30)

### CHAPTER NINETEEN AND TWENTY: ILLUSTRATIONS OF CHAPTER EIGHTEEN?

In Matthew 18 Jesus presented a marvelous discourse on human relationships among disciples in the Messianic Community, the Church of Christ. While treating the Twelve's question about relative greatness in the Kingdom, He touched themes such as mercifulness, humility, self-sacrifice, self-discipline, concern about the weak, the children, and stumbling-blocks. It would appear that this discourse was, for Matthew, as significant in the revelation of Jesus as the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, much as he did for the Sermon on the Mount in the chapters that follow it (Mt. 8 and 9), Matthew seems to spend the two chapters following the Sermon on Human Relationships (Mt. 19, 20) to illustrate this sermon's great themes, by selecting out of Jesus' encounters in Perea those events which illuminate them. Consider the following illustrations:

1. Male-female relationships, or the divorce versus marriage question. Do we not have here the larger question of male superiority versus tender concern for one's mate? What about reconciliation after offences? (18:15-20)
2. Adult-child relationships: how should children be treated? Jesus answers: "Blessed!" Apostles had treated them as if they did not count. (Cf. 18:5)
3. Rich-poor relationships: the rich young ruler, an "ideal disciple" who refused to sacrifice his own stumbling block for the Kingdom's sake, and so was lost. (18:6-9) Disciples, aghast that rich men hardly enter the Kingdom, ask, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus answers that salvation is by grace. (Cf. 18:23-35) Peter responds, "We sacrificed everything: what will that get us?" Jesus answers, "Much, however, all the present values and proud pretensions will

- be overturned.” (Cf. notes on 18:1-14)
4. Grace-merit relationships: the eleventh-hour servants equal to all-day workers by a gift of grace. Our standing before God is not a question of strict, legal accounting but the gift of undeserved favor. (Cf. 18:23-35)
  5. Passion Prediction: the Messiah will serve others even to the point of death at the hands of highest authorities in the land. (See note on Mk. 9:35 after Mt. 18:1.)
  6. Refusal to establish a power structure: greatness is measured by service (20:20-28; cf. 18:1-5)
  7. Jesus is not too busy to heal two blind men who desperately appeal to Him for help (20:29ff; cf. 18:10-14)

### Section 47

## JESUS TEACHES IN PEREA ON MARRIAGE, DIVORCE AND CELIBACY

(Parallel: Mark 10:1-12)

TEXT: 19:1-12

1 And it came to pass when Jesus had finished these words, he departed from Galilee, and came into the borders of Judaea beyond the Jordan; 2 and great multitudes followed him; and he healed them there.

3 And there came unto him Pharisees, trying him, and saying, Is it lawful *for a man* to put away his wife for every cause? 4 And he answered and said, Have ye not read, that he who made *them* from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh? 6 So that they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. 7 They say unto him, Why then did Moses command to give a bill of divorcement, and to put *her* away? 8 He saith unto them, Moses for your hardness of heart suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it hath not been so. 9 And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and he that marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery. 10 The disciples say unto him, If the case of the man is so