

Dr. David Turner, Matthew

Lecture 8B – Matthew 18: The Values of the Kingdom Community

Greetings, this is David Turner, and this is Lecture 8b in the Matthew class on Matthew chapter 18, which is the fourth discourse in the Gospel of Matthew, the first three being the Sermon on the Mount, the Discourse on Mission in chapter 10, and the Parables of the Kingdom in chapter 13. Now we come to the fourth discourse, which speaks to the community itself of Jesus' disciples and challenges them on some of their basic values and what their basic concerns ought to be. First of all, let's introduce this fourth discourse and lay out some of its key themes.

First, it's a narrative setting. Just as in the first three discourses, the fourth discourse has a narrative setting in 18:1, where it is mentioned that Jesus' disciples came to him and asked him a question around about the time of the events of the temple tax at the end of chapter 17, not long before the disciples go with Jesus to Jerusalem. So, this discourse, in contrast to some of the others, is in response to a question that they ask him, much like the final discourse will be in chapters 24 and 25.

The discourse concludes in 19:1 with the characteristic statement about when Jesus had finished these words he departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. That is an ominous conclusion when you know what's going to happen to Jesus in Judea and in Jerusalem. So that would be the narrative setting.

It's somewhat vague in that at that time in 18:1 seems to refer only to the general time frame when Jesus had begun to tell his disciples about his death and resurrection. Though the disciples grieved at this announcement according to 17:23, their grief sadly turned to speculation over who is or would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, 18:1. Compare 20 verses 20 to 28. The fourth discourse of Jesus is Jesus' answer to this question and a subsequent question by Peter about forgiveness in 18:21. The unique feature of this discourse is Jesus' use of a child as a visual aid in 18:2, prior to his verbal response to the disciples' question.

The key theme of this discourse then is spiritual greatness, and the key illustration of spiritual greatness is not anyone you would expect, like a military general, like a rich person, like someone like the disciples who gave everything up to follow Jesus. Not a preacher, not a deacon, not a pop star, not a baseball player, but a child. Who'd have thunk that? More on that as we follow through.

Now, the fourth discourse in terms of its structure is not that highly structured. One could divide it into two parts, each beginning with a question, 18:1 through 20, and

18:21 to 35. Or you could divide it with each section ending in a parable, 18:1 to 14, and 18:15 to 35.

Maybe the latter of these two approaches is better. Not sure. So, any event, the discourse holds together through its use of key terms like children in 18:2 to 5, who are identified as the little ones who believe in Jesus, 18:6, 18:10, 18:14. So note how a child becomes a little one.

These children, 18:4, must be mimicked, and they must be received, according to 18:5, as little ones. They must not be caused to fall into sin or to stumble, and they must not be despised, 18:6 and 18:10. The use of this family imagery for the community of disciples is perhaps the most noticeable motif to express spiritual greatness in this chapter. Disciples are children, and even those who sin against them within the community are their brothers, fellow children of the Heavenly Father.

The language of 18:8 and 9 exhibits a clause-by-clause parallelism, which is interesting in the way this is put across, and the repetition of two or three and the juxtaposition of heaven and earth in 18:15 to 20 are interesting. The fourth discourse then concerns spiritual greatness. Jesus uses a child as the ultimate object lesson of humility and the duty of hospitality to fellow disciples, 18:3 to 5. Then he turns to the opposite of hospitality, which is offense, and speaks in vivid language about the horrible end that anyone who causes a disciple of Jesus to fall into sin will have, 18:6 to 14.

Next come instructions on handling brothers who sin in 18:15 to 20, and the answer to Peter's question about long-suffering and forgiveness, which leads to the parable of the unmerciful servant in 18:21 to 35. The discourse holds together along the lines of God's concern for the little ones who believe. Their humble status is zealously guarded by the Heavenly Father.

Woe to those who cause little ones to sin, 18:7. His little ones must deal promptly with sin in their midst, however, and the solemnity of the process of discipline underlines once again the Father's concern for his children in 18:15 to 20. Peter's question with Jesus' answer underlines the absolute necessity of the rule of forgiveness in the kingdom community, 18:35. Now let's look at the matter of greatness in the kingdom being a matter of childlike humility in 18:1 to 14. Once again, in this section, Jesus proves himself to be the master teacher as he spontaneously chooses just the right object lesson to answer a question.

Jesus does not choose a child out of a sentimental notion about children being innocent or subjectively humble, since children may already exhibit, in early years, in seed form at least, the traits which Jesus speaks against here. Sometimes children seem to be anything but innocent or humble. Why does he choose this metaphor,

then? He chooses this, and he points out this child coming to him in a sort of enacted parable to stress that a child is at the mercy of adults and lacks social status.

A child depends totally on adults, particularly their parents, for their welfare. Thus, turning to God as a disciple of Jesus involves humbling oneself as a child before the Heavenly Father. Such humility amounts to total dependence upon the Father's mercy.

It renounces any power, position or status one might claim from human resources, and compare this to 5:3 and 5:5. This perspective is nothing less than a total renunciation and reversal of the ways and values of this present world, where the drive to get ahead leads to all sorts of sinful strategies to achieve greatness. Look at 20 verses 26 and 27, and 23:11 and 12. The opposite of humility is pride, which by implication would make one least in the kingdom of heaven, if humility makes one the greatest.

Humility or genuine greatness leads to treating kingdom disciples well, since it is tantamount to treating Jesus himself well. 18:5, compare 10:40. But mistreating such disciples has eternal consequences. Verse 7. No sacrifice is too great, not even the spiritual equivalent of cutting off one's hand or foot or even an eye, if that sacrifice leads to the kingdom.

18:8 and 9. Compare 13:44. In light of this polarity of reward and punishment, disciples must carefully scrutinize themselves and make very sure that they don't despise one another. 18:10. Instead of holding one another in contempt, they must have the same concern for one another that motivates the shepherd to rescue a straying sheep. 18:12 to 14.

Sadly, modern culture continues the devaluation of children, which was evidently the norm in Jesus' day. Of course, the holocaust of abortion is Exhibit A of that, and the way so many children are treated in single homes, particularly where the mother's boyfriend treats the child very badly. And of course, even many of the seemingly storybook homes with two parents living in seeming peace and serendipity, sadly, all too often we hear horrible stories about child abuse during those times.

Modern culture then fits into what Jesus is speaking of here, that children tend to have no status, no value. And thus, when we come to God as his children, we acknowledge that all we have and all we are, we owe to him. And apart from our status in Christ, we have no status.

Regarding oneself, then, as a child before God continues today to demand deep humility. And treating children or disciples well is not likely to win the world's applause. But such behavior is only walking in the steps of Jesus, who himself epitomizes humility and concern for children or disciples.

11:25, 12:18-21, 20:28, and 21:5. Walking in the steps of Jesus in this fashion is countercultural behavior, which is used by the Spirit to convict a world obsessed with power and status due to the root sin of pride. Compare 5:13-16.

Also, humility and concern for fellow disciples will ensure that when church discipline does become necessary, 18:15-20, it'll be carried out with proper motives. Compare Galatians 6:1 and following. It's clear that the disciples have many lessons still to learn.

Jesus has already made it clear that his own destiny is suffering, death, and resurrection, and that they will share in his destiny. Suffering has to come before reward, according to 16:21-28. Thus, it's highly ironic that the disciples' question in 18:1 is who is the greatest? How can they be so preoccupied with greatness so soon after Jesus' clear teaching on his own destiny and theirs, the way of the cross? This preoccupation simply doesn't go away.

Look at chapter 20, verses 20-28. Still today, the disciples of Jesus must constantly remind themselves that their Lord's experience, suffering and cross before glory, is the paradigm of their own experience. 10:38, 11:29, 16:24, 20:28.

Compare a host of other passages, including Philippians 2-5 and following, Colossians 1:24, Hebrews 10:32-38, 1 Peter 2:21 and following, and Revelation 1:9. You say, well, that's a lot of verses, and you're right, but it seems to me this is perhaps the most difficult problem facing the church today, just getting it through our heads that we have to be humble people. Next, we turn to Matthew 18:15-20, where we have a three-step process in correcting a sinning believer.

Matthew 18:15-20 contains a procedure for discipline in verses 15-17, followed by its theological basis in verses 18-20. There are three steps in this procedure, and the basis of the procedure involves three truths, the authority of the church, the promise of answered prayer, and the presence of Jesus. The procedure spelled out here in these verses will be a necessary one, since Jesus has just taught that offenses are inevitable.

The Father is totally dedicated to his little ones, and this dictates that offenses between members of the community be dealt with promptly and fairly. After the model of the rescue of a straying sheep, the offended person must take the initiative to bring the offender back into the fold, 18:12, and 15. There's no place for the offended person to become bitter or to gossip about the offender to another person.

Compare Proverbs 25:9, and 10. The three stages of the confrontation spoken of here in this process in verses 15-17 assure the fair treatment of both the offender and the injured party with as little fanfare as possible. Even though church discipline

is often taken lightly in evangelical circles, it's an ominous matter, an aspect of letting God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, 6:10. Successively rejecting the overtures of a brother, and second stage, two or three people with the brother, and finally the church as a whole is tantamount to rejecting Jesus and the Father themselves.

Notice other passages in the New Testament on discipline, Galatians 6:1-5 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-6:11. Second stage, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, 13:1-2. 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15. 1 Timothy 5:19-20, 2 Timothy 4:2, Titus 2:15, 3:10. 1 John 5:16; 2 John 10, 3 John 10, and Jude 20-23.

How can we be sure we continue to take so lightly the matter of dealing with sinning believers in our churches when the New Testament has so much material that stresses that this has to be done? The opposite danger of laxness in discipline is being over-severe with it. So, it's interesting that immediately after verses 15-20 on discipline or correction, there is sort of a, if we might put it this way, a contextual cushion.

Matthew 18:15-20, as Davies and Allison say in their commentary, is embedded in a section filled with kindness. Jesus has been speaking of his disciples as humble children and little ones in 18:5-6, as lost sheep in 18:12-13. He will go on to stress the necessity of forgiveness in his community in verses 21 and following. The sinner is described as a brother, a fellow child of the heavenly Father, in verse 15.

Even the discipline process allows the sinner three chances to repent, and those who are involved in it are to view themselves as agents of the Father, who is like a shepherd seeking straying sheep. The goal is reconciliation and return to the flock, not severance of the relationship. Jesus himself solemnly promises that when we're involved in the process of church discipline, and we do it his way with prayerful hearts and humble spirits, whatever we decide, verse 18, binding or loosing, will be confirmed in heaven.

And that when two or three of us even agree on earth about some matter involved in this, God will respond in ways to bless his people when they take seriously this responsibility. Indeed, according to verse 20, Jesus himself will be present with the community in these kinds of situations, even if there are only two or three people gathered together, sincerely desiring to correct a sinning believer, with all due humility and with all the best motives. During these types of situations, Jesus promises that he will indeed be present with his people.

In light of the solemnity of these verses, 18 through 20 especially, it's really sad the way in which many times we cite 18:19 about Jesus being with us when only two or three are gathered together. It seems to me we're altogether too flip about this. We

often just use this whenever there's a small meeting of Christians to assure people that God is with them.

Well, certainly God is with them, but this tendency we have just to toss this verse around lightly is very disturbing, because it twists a solemn passage into a humorous cliché. No doubt God is present with any legitimate meeting of his people, whatever the size of that meeting. But in spite of that, there's no need to mishandle scripture to prove that.

Taking this solemn passage out of context, it seems to me, cheapens the passage and profanes the sacred duty of the church to maintain the harmony of its interpersonal relationships. Now we turn to what we might view as the second half of the chapter, Jesus' teaching, which also involves a parable, on the necessity of forgiving a sinning believer. This tends to balance the need to correct such a believer in 18:15 through 20.

As it's plain to see in 18:21 to 35, this passage begins with a question by Peter, and Peter's answer to this question and Jesus' answers to the question are two different ways. The first answer is prose, that is to say, just simple propositional speech, and the second answer is poetry, or more specifically, a parable, which answers it not so much through rational propositions, but through vivid dramatic pictures, verses 23 to 34, with the application or conclusion in verse 35. Now, both of these answers, both the prosaic answer and the poetic answer, contain striking hyperboles.

Peter thinks that it's quite remarkable, evidently, that he is willing to forgive someone seven times, the way he phrases his question in 18:21. But Jesus tells him, depending upon the text you read, that it's 77 times. Some would read it 70 times seven.

Either way, the point is that forgiveness within the community when there has been repentance is an ongoing thing, and we don't put notches in our belt for how many times we forgive our brothers. God has forgiven us of an immense sin. Nothing that our brothers do to us could be comparable to that.

Therefore, we ought to be willing to forgive someone any number of times. So, after this prosaic answer, Jesus tells a story in verses 23 and following. This story contains the striking contrast of a servant who has been forgiven a vast amount, which would take the earnings of several lifetimes to repay, and then refusing to forgive a paltry amount owed him, which could be repaid in a few months.

The forgiven servant proves to be unforgiving and is severely judged by the master. So, as this familiar story plays out, verses 23 through 27, the first scene has the master repaying the seemingly repentant servant this humongous debt. As scene

two unfolds, the servant who has just been forgiven the humongous debt goes out and refuses to forgive a fellow servant who owes him a very trivial debt.

Scene three in verses 31 through 34 has the colleagues of these two servants reporting the matter to the king, who gets extremely angry and revokes his forgiveness of the seemingly repentant servant, because his repentance is shown to be bogus by his lack of forgiveness of anyone else who has sinned against him. He is handed over to the prison to be tortured until he comes up with the amount, which would be impossible for him to earn. It's so great.

The point of this parable is much like that of Matthew chapter six, that we have no right to pray to God to forgive our sins, Matthew chapter six, verse twelve, if we are unwilling, verses 14 and 15 of Matthew six, to forgive the transgressions that others have made against us. This is not some sort of a works situation in which our forgiveness merits God's forgiving us, but rather the way we treat our fellow believers shows whether we have truly experienced the forgiveness that's offered to us in the gospel. The point is that someone who is unforgiving to his brothers and sisters in the Christian community probably has never been forgiven by God, or that person would be enabled and empowered to be a forgiving person himself.

The unforgiving character of this servant indicates that his entreaty to the master in 1826 was a hoax and that his forgiveness was obtained under false pretenses. Those who have been forgiven, genuinely, are forgiving to other people. Check out Matthew 6:14 and 15, also Luke 6:36, Ephesians 4:31 to 5:2, James 2:13, and 1 John 4:11.

All these passages and this particular parable before us at the moment clearly portray to us the infinite grace of God in forgiving us our many trespasses against him, and this is contrasted against the refusal of a disciple to forgive a minor offense against him. The incompatibility of the two situations couldn't be clearer, and the resulting teaching is that those who have been forgiven by God can and must forgive their fellow believers. To be forgiven is to be empowered to forgive.

No matter how offensively one has been treated by a fellow human within the community of believers, there's no comparison to the heinous rebellion of wicked humans against a holy yet loving God. Anyone who has truly experienced the compassion of the Heavenly Father would have little problem in showing genuine compassion to a fellow brother who has received that same forgiveness and compassion of the Father. Perhaps, as you think about this chapter as a whole, it's difficult to reconcile the process of discipline in 1815 through 20 with the very careful way in which we are taught to handle other believers in the early part of the chapter and also in the last part, where forgiveness is stressed.

But both 18:15 through 20, where correction is needed, and 21 through 35, where forgiveness is needed, can be tied back to the controlling motif of this chapter, that the disciples are the little ones of the Father. They are brothers and sisters of one another. They are together in the first family, children of the Heavenly Father.

Disciples in this family dare not allow it to be disrupted by offenses. They can't. Yet, they cannot resolve offenses without a forgiving spirit.

You can't allow disharmony to divide the family of God. You have to correct it. But correction can't really be accomplished without a forgiving, humble spirit, or it will only worsen the problem.

In terms of another metaphor found in this chapter, a straying sheep can't be left alone in the wilderness. But those who seek the straying sheep must be willing to humbly receive it back into the flock by forgiving it its trespasses. So, there's a very delicate balance here between discipline and forgiveness that has to be faithfully maintained.

And if this is the case, whenever one will not respond to the discipline and correction process, that person's excommunication from the church is in reality a self-imposed exile, not one forced upon that person by the church in a harsh, unforgiving way, but an exile which is accomplished against all the faithful, humble efforts of the church to reconcile that individual. Now to conclude our discussion of Matthew chapter 18 and speak in terms of how this fits into the preceding and following contexts, a few summary and transition comments. In one key sense, the journey to Jerusalem had already begun when Jesus announced his suffering and death in 16:21, and the disciples realistically have to face the grim prospects that await them there.

This will be impossible if there is a selfish preoccupation with greatness and an accompanying devaluation of others. In other words, if we keep the cross of Jesus in Jerusalem in mind historically, as the disciples should have been at this point, and if we keep ourselves as bearing the cross in mind as Jesus taught us we must in 16:24, we will receive each other as we would a child, 18:5 through 10. We will shepherd each other like a lost sheep, 18:12 through 14.

We will deal humbly and patiently yet decisively with unrepentant sinners in our midst, 18:15 through 20. And we will genuinely forgive those who do sin and repent as many times as necessary, 18:21 through 35. If we have these values of humility, patience, and brotherly love, these will strengthen our community's relationships, and they will enable it to withstand the rigors that are ahead in Jerusalem and beyond.

So, the model Jesus inculcates for his disciples at this strategic point in the narrative, as he approaches the trials that await him in Jerusalem, is appropriate for us to keep

in mind as we await the trials that are before us in this world. We have to be strong together because what we get from the outside can be extremely difficult to bear. Well, when we look ahead from Matthew 18, as we come to Matthew chapter 19 verse 1, the journey to Jerusalem does indeed begin.

Jesus has prepared his disciples for it by stressing these kingdom values. He will continue to model such values as he has inculcated here in chapter 18 in such passages as chapter 19, verse 14. Sad to say, the disciples will continue to struggle with the worldly notion of greatness.

Chapter 20 verse 20 makes that clear and the pericope there. So the choice is clearly put before us in this passage. That is, we see ourselves as followers of Jesus who want to model our lives after his own values.

For us to think about the persecution and afflictions which come upon us from the outside, we must have proper relationships with our fellow believers inside the Christian community.