

Teachings of Jesus

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Jesus' Teaching in the Gospel of Matthew (Part VIII)

18:1-6, Who is the Greatest?

Who then is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?: One wonders if the disciples ask this question thinking that Jesus might have already chosen one of *them* as greatest, or that He could be prompted to decide among them. After all, He had already chosen them to be His closest companions, right?

We know from Luke 22:46 and other places that they sometimes argued among themselves about this.

Jesus called a little child to Him: Jesus might have answered the question, "who is the greatest?" directly by pointing *to Himself*. Instead, He drew their attention to *His nature* by having them consider a child as an example.

Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven: Why would Jesus pick a child as an example? Was there a special, super-perfect kid in the crowd that particular day? Hardly! Children of particularly low status. They were subject to the authority of elders, not taken seriously except as a responsibility to be cared for, schooled, and looked after, and not as anyone to be looked up to. Jesus points His disciples away from self-importance and toward complete humility to be "the greatest" in the kingdom.

D. A. Carson in the New Bible Commentary puts it this way:

"The child is held up as an ideal, not of innocence, purity, or faith, but of humility and unconcern for social status."

Jesus knew that we must be "turned" or converted to be like little children. It isn't in our nature to take the low place and to humble ourselves.

Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven: "Humbles himself" here does not refer to arbitrary asceticism or any sort of false modesty, but a realization and wholehearted acceptance of

the inferior position we are in with regard to our personal merit and righteousness. We are humbled in our utter reliance on Jesus to be our righteousness. Just as a child is utterly reliant on his or her parents for life, so are we utterly dependent on the grace of God expressed in the mission and sacrifice of His Son.

Whoever receives one child in My name receives Me: This is the essence of Christian service. The nature of Jesus is like one of these little children, therefor how we treat those who are humble like children shows what we think of His nature.

It is easy to ignore, disregard, or even despise those in humble circumstances. They are sometimes labeled “losers”; the kind who will never make it in our competitive, aggressive, look-out-for-number-one world. The truth is, when we disregard or despise humble *people*, we disregard or despise the very ones Jesus esteems and elevates.

Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.: Jesus takes it seriously when one of His little ones is led into sin. Of course “little ones” here does not only mean children, but those who humble themselves as children in faith.

It is a wicked thing to commit a sin. But leading the faithful astray is leading one of Jesus’ “little ones” into sin, and is worse. This is why leaders and teachers are held to higher standards and incur extra measures of accountability for their teaching and preaching.

A millstone, and anyone attached to it, was sure to sink and never come up again. And, this was a big millstone. Carson again: *“Most millstones were hand tools for domestic use...here it is the heavy stone pulled around by a donkey.”*

18:7-9, Temptation to Sin

Woe to the one by whom the temptation comes: We live in a fallen world, and it is inevitable that sin, hurt, offenses, and temptation will come. Yet the person who brings the temptation has no excuse. This is a Sermon on the Mount-style teaching. Jesus is reminding His disciples – and us! – a warning that we should always be on the lookout that we should never be the cause

of offense, hurt, or temptation to others, but also that we can let go of the anger and the bitterness *for what people have done against us*. God promises to deal with those by whom the offense or temptation comes, He promises to defend and protect His own.

If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you.... If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you: There are significant problems in taking these words as literal instructions instead of conveying an attitude of the heart.

The problem is not even the obvious physical harm that one might bring upon themselves, but more so in the problem that *bodily mutilation does not go far enough* in controlling sin. We need to be transformed from the inside out!

If I cut off my right hand, I can still sin with my left! If my left eye is gouged out, my right eye can still sin! And if all such body parts are gone, I can *still* sin in my heart and mind.

God calls us to a far more radical transformation than any sort of bodily mutilation can address. He calls us to faith in His Son. And that *takes* a miracle!

18:10-14, The Parable of the Lost Sheep

Their angels: This is sometimes taken as a reference to “guardian angels.” We certainly do have angels watching over us and ministering to us (Hebrews 1:14), but there is no need to limit it to only one specific “guardian angel.”

Does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying?: This story demonstrates the value God places on us as individuals.

This parable is similar to the parable of the Lost Sheep recorded in Luke 15:3-7. Here, Jesus emphasizes the love and care we should have for all the “little ones” God has put in our lives.

18:15-20, Christian Conflict Resolution

Go and tell him his fault between you and him alone: When we are offended by a Christian brother or sister, it is essential that we go to the offending person first – not griping and gossiping to others, especially under the guise

of “sharing a prayer request in Christian love” or “seeking counsel”. Instead, speak to the party directly.

This is not a command to go confront your brothers and sisters with every sin they have ever committed against you. The Bible is clear; we should bear with one another and be longsuffering towards each other. Yet clearly, there are some things that we cannot suffer long with and must address more directly. That’s what Jesus is addressing here.

Jesus essentially gives us two options: go to him/her directly and deal with it; or you can drop the matter under Christian patience and bearing with one another. All the other options – holding a grudge, bitterness, retaliation, gossiping to others about the problem – are destructive, and bad for ALL parties concerned, and the church!

Charles Spurgeon”

“We must not let trespass rankle in our bosom, by maintaining a sullen silence, nor may we go and publish the matter abroad. We must seek out the offender, and tell him his fault as if he were not aware of it; as perhaps he may not be.”

If he hears you, you have gained your brother: You have “gained him” in two ways. First, the problem has been cleared up. Perhaps you realized that he was right in some ways and he realized you were right in some ways, but the problem is resolved. Second, you have gained him because you have not wronged your brother by going to others with gossip and half the side of a dispute.

Notice, Jesus did not say that your brother must *agree* with you or immediately repent before you. At first, it is enough if he hears you.

If he will not hear, take with you one or two more....: The circle of people added to the situation should only widen if the offending party refuses to listen. Then, if a stubborn, unrepentant, or hostile attitude persists, they are to be refused fellowship (“let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”).

There’s no mention here of church leaders or polity, or the specifics of how “church discipline” is to be performed, should the situation require it. In all conflict resolution activities, the goal must be reconciliation; restoration of relationship is to be prized over proving one or the other party right.

Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven: If this process is done humbly and according to the Word, this is binding in the eyes of God, even if the unrepentant ones just go to another church. And sometimes, that may indeed be the best solution for the individuals involved, or for the congregation.

If two of you agree on earth: There is real power in agreement in prayer and in the presence of Jesus, even in conflict resolution. This is exactly what the unrepentant ones miss out on!

The word for “agree” here (συμφωνέω, “symphonEH-o”) is literally “to symphonize.” Jesus wants us to complement each other like a great orchestra!

Adam Clarke:

“It is a metaphor taken from a number of musical instruments set to the same key, and playing the same tune: here, it means a perfect agreement of the hearts, desires, wishes, and voices, of two or more persons praying to God.”

It will be done for them by My Father in heaven: There is some mystery to this, as there often is when God uses small numbers of believers to accomplish might deeds. Here it’s just two, and yet when those two are in agreement in accordance with God’s will, it’s a done deal? Because they agreed? Or is their agreement simply a mark of God’s impression on the hearts of His believers? Hmmm?

Where two or three are gathered: Jesus here indicates that meetings of His little ones – indeed, meetings full of power and authority connected to heaven – do not need to be large gatherings. They can be of two or three of His followers at a time. Jesus is no slave to attendance numbers!

Spurgeon:

“Two or three are mentioned, not to encourage absence, but to cheer the faithful few who do not forget the assembling of themselves together, as the manner of some is.”

18:21-35, The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Up to seven times? Peter, in light of what Jesus had just said about agreement and unity, might have hoped to sound very loving by suggesting forgiving a repentant brother up to seven times when three times was the accepted limit taught by many Jewish rabbis of his time.

Up to seventy times seven: Well, nuts! Jesus' answer here unexpectedly, effectively says we are to forgive the repentant an *unlimited* number of times, not 490 (or 77)¹. The Old Testament allusion here is to Genesis 4:24.

Who wanted to settle accounts with his servants: The king in this parable expected his servants to be both faithful and honorable in the way they conducted his business. So one day he examined their books to settle accounts with them.

Who owed him ten thousand talents: Commentators list the modern value of 10,000 talents as anywhere between \$12 million and \$1 billion. The point being, it was an unpayable debt.

Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all: This promise made no sense. He spoke as if all he needed were patience; that if he were given enough time he could actually pay this massive debt. The disciples listening to Jesus would think this was pretty humorous.

The master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt: The master showed mercy prompted by compassion, forgiving a debt that obviously could never be repaid, despite any promises the servant made.

¹ The numeric ambiguity (77 vs. 70 x 7) comes from a difference between the Hebrew Old Testament and the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew. Jesus is teaching to forgive by reversing the statement of Lamech in Genesis 4:24: "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold." (NASB)

The NASB follows the Hebrew which has שִׁבְעִים וְשִׁבְעָה (shib'iyim wshib'ah), which means "seventy-seven." The Septuagint has ἑβδομηκοντάκις, (hebdomekontakis), which means "seventy times seven."

If Jesus quoted the Septuagint, then He said "seventy times seven." If He quoted the Hebrew, then He said "seventy seven (times)." A case could be made for either as both the Hebrew Scriptures and Greek translations of the same were in use in the time!

A more important question than "which did He quote?" is "what is He teaching by it?" And in this case, whether He quoted the Hebrew or Greek, **the teaching is the same!**

One of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii: The servant who had just been forgiven an unpayable debt went out and found one who owed him some money (roughly 100 day's wages). Upon meeting him, he immediately assaulted him and demanded payment.

Have patience with me, and I will pay you all: The man who owed the smaller debt used the exact same plea and promise that brought mercy to the man who had the greater debt. But it gained nothing, and the *forgiven* servant put the man into a debtor's prison.

You wicked servant...delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him: It was plainly, flatly wrong for a man who has been forgiven so much to then be so unforgiving. He then gave the first servant what he deserved – justice instead of mercy.

So My heavenly Father also will do to you: The principle is clear. God has forgiven such a great debt, that any debt owed to us is insignificant in comparison.

No one can possibly offend me to the extent that my sins have offended God. This principle must be applied in the little things done to us, but also to the great things done unto us.

It is also important to understand that a distinction can and should be made between forgiveness and reconciliation. True reconciliation of relationship can only happen when both parties are agreeable to it, and this may require repentance on one or both of the parties in the conflict. *Yet forgiveness can be one-sided.*

To forgive is not to excuse the offense or sin; rather it is to unburden oneself, leaving judgement and vengeance to God.

Forgiveness does not necessarily shield someone from the civil or practical consequences of their sin.

This parable was given to make us **more** forgiving, not less forgiving. No one could reasonably read this parable and think that Jesus was trying to restrict the forgiveness of His disciples.