

Matthew 18 The Community of the King: Humility and Forgiveness July 5, 2015 (Peter)
Jeremiah 23
Psalm 100

Jesus will speak of how a shepherd will leave the 99 and go in search of the one straying sheep.

Jesus is reflecting on what Jeremiah had said.

The shepherds of Israel have scattered the flock and driven them away.

So often that has been true of shepherds in our own day.

Pastors who are abusive – sexually or verbally.

Shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep.

God says through Jeremiah that *only God* is a shepherd that will never fail.

Only God can gather the remnant: “I will bring them back.”

And that is what God has done in Jesus Christ.

“I will raise up for David a righteous Branch,
and he shall reign as king and deal wisely...

and this is the name by which he will be called:

‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”

Jesus is the LORD our righteousness –

the good shepherd who seeks that which was lost.

And for that we give thanks in Psalm 100

Sing Psalm 100

Read Matthew 18

I want you to think about the big picture of chapter 18.

Jesus assumes that there will be conflict in the church.

He assumes that your brother will sin against you.

He assumes that some people will do things that cause others to stumble and fall away.

He assumes that there will be straying sheep –

and that some people won't want to forgive others.

So Jesus teaches us how to be such a church.

Last time we looked at chapter 17

and the importance of the death and resurrection of the Beloved Son.

And I pointed out last time that if the Beloved Son must die and be raised again,

then we should not be surprised when we discover that death is the only way *for us*
to attain glory.

If anyone would come after me,

Jesus said,

let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”

The problem is that the disciples do not yet understand what Jesus means.

1. The Call to Humility (v1-14)

a. You Need to Humble Yourself (v1-4)

*At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"
2 And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them 3 and said, "Truly, I say to you,
unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever
humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

The disciples are asking "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

Jesus has been talking about his coming death,
so perhaps they are asking "who will lead when you are gone?"
Certainly that is the way that Jesus answers the question.

Jesus' answer presumes that he will not be physically present to lead.

"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

What does it mean to "become like children"?

We can be thankful that Jesus does not leave us to guess!
"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus had called a child to come.
And the child came.

The child did what Jesus said.
The humility of obedience is at the heart of what Jesus is saying.
When Jesus told the child to come, the child obeyed.

When I was in seminary, I befriended an older Nigerian student.
He said that in Nigeria, in the villages, when an older person told a child what to do,
the child was expected to obey immediately.
But as modern society invaded the cities, the children were becoming more rebellious.

It is ironic – and deeply tragic –
that modern society is trying so hard to destroy this aspect of childhood!

A father recently told me that in his home the children were in charge.
Whatever they wanted is what he would do.
He seemed both proud – and frustrated – at the result.

Humility – obedience – is the bedrock upon which *love* is built.

The humility of obedience is necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven.
Who is the greatest?
The one who masters the humility of obedience.

Think of Philippians 2 –

“have this mind among yourselves, which is your in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant,
being born in the likeness of men.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.” (Phil 2:5-8)

The one who masters the humility of obedience will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven.
And he calls *you* to have the same mind – the same way of thinking.

The child does not necessarily understand *why* he must do what he is told.
But he must do it nonetheless.
Very often this is the way that we *learn* “why.”
By doing what Jesus tells us.

Often you just need to do it in order to understand why.
And sometimes you need to *keep* doing it to understand why!

The humility of obedience is essential for all of us.
Without humility, you cannot love.
If you are proud – if you are “full of yourself” –
then you may “love” the way your wife “makes you feel” –
but you will not *love her*.
If *your happiness* and *your priorities* are what matter to you,
then you can stomp on someone else – but you cannot love them.

And *that* is where Jesus turns next in verses 5-6,
where Jesus himself gives an example of the humility of obedience:

b. Otherwise You Will Cause These Little Ones to Stumble (v5-6)

⁵ “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, ^[a] 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.

Remember – the question is “who is the greatest?”
Jesus says to adults – to his disciples –
that “whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.”

The disciples are thinking about doing great things – doing big things.
Jesus says – “You want to do something great? Receive one such child in my name.”

This is the irony.
The way that you teach children the humility of obedience,

is *not* by demanding their obedience!
The way that you teach the humility of obedience
is by demonstrating that same humility of obedience to Jesus!

Jesus sets up verses 5-6 with polar opposites:

If you receive a child in Jesus' name, then you receive Jesus.
But if you cause of one these little ones to stumble,
it would be better for you to go for a swim while wearing cement shoes.

When he says “whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin” –
the word translated “sin” is actually the word “to stumble”

(also used in verses 8-9).

It is a word that Matthew has used fairly often.

In Matthew 13, Jesus used it of the one who hears the word but “falls away” –
and a couple of times it has been used of those who were “offended” by Jesus.

Jesus has caused the Pharisees to stumble! (15:12)

So I don't like the translation “cause to *sin*.”

The point is *not* that you would be better off dead
if you do something that results in a child sinning.

The point is that you would be better off dead
if you do something that causes a child to stumble –
to fall away from following Jesus.

Sin is bad – but sin happens – and sin gets forgiven – and we move on.

But when a person stumble and falls,
that's a different matter.

And that's why Jesus goes on to say in verses 7-9:

c. And It Would Be Better for You to “Cut It Off” (v7-9)

⁷ “Woe to the world for temptations to sin!^[b] For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! ⁸ And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell^[c] of fire.

Jesus has already said this in the Sermon on the Mount (5:29-30).

He now repeats the same thing here.

But here he introduces it in a new setting.

“Woe to the world for temptations to stumble.

For it is necessary that temptations come,
but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!”

In the Sermon on the Mount, the admonition to cut out your eye or cut off your right hand came in the context of the warning against lust.

Here the new setting gives the saying a very different focus.

In Matthew 5, the focus was entirely on the individual.

Do not lust after – do not covet a woman.

But here, Jesus is making a broader statement.

There are going to be temptations to stumble –
temptations to fall away from Jesus.

And woe to the world for those temptations!

And *woe to the one by whom the temptation comes.*

While there is still an individual application of this –

namely, that you would rather be a one-eyed cripple

than cause one of these little ones to stumble and fall away from Jesus! –

there is also a corporate component beginning to emerge.

After all, within a few verses, Jesus is going to talk about church discipline.

Jesus concludes his point about the “little ones” –

and the importance of the humility of obedience – in verses 10-14.

d. After All, Look at Jesus (v10-14)

¹⁰ *“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.”^[d]*

Verse 10 has sometimes been taken to refer to the idea that each person has a “guardian angel” – but the bible never says that.

Jesus does not say that each person has a guardian angel.

Rather, Jesus says that the reason why you should not despise “these little ones” is because their angels are in the presence of God.

In other words, Jesus’ point is more general:

if you mess with “these little ones,”

you are dealing with powers you don’t understand.

“Woe to the world for temptations to stumble!”

You may think that you can get away with it because you don’t see anyone around.

But “their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.”

If you despise these little ones, you won’t get away with it!

After all,

¹² *What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of my^[e] Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.*

Jesus is the good shepherd.

And as Jesus exemplifies the humility of obedience in his death on the cross –
so also he shows us what the humility of obedience looks like
in going in search of the *one* straying sheep,
rather than staying with the 99 who did not stray.

This is one of the most challenging texts for a pastor –
especially a pastor with approximately 100 sheep under his care!
If *only* there were 99 who never strayed – and only *one* straying sheep to go after!

But Jesus says that it is not the will of his heavenly Father
that one of these little ones should perish.

So I have my marching orders.

Jesus tells me – as he tells each elder – that our task is to go after straying sheep.
Yes, it's much easier to hang out in the sheepfold with the 99 –
but I try to remember every week to spend some time searching for strays.

Of course, what do you do when a stray sheep refuses to return?

Do you just keep going after the stray?

Jesus says “No” –

if the brother refuses to repent, there is a humble way to deal with that as well:

2. What Is the Humble Way to Correct the Faults of Others? (v15-20)

a. The Three Step Process (v15-17)

Matthew 18:15-17 provides a simple three step process for correcting the faults of others:

¹⁵ *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.*

Notice that here the word for *sin* is the regular word for *sin*.

This is not just that your brother “offended” you –
but that he sinned against you – he has broken God’s law.

There are a couple of distinctions here that are important:

First, this is the process for *private* sins.

When Peter sins publicly in Antioch, Paul rebukes him publicly (Gal 2:11)

Jesus’ point is that your brother has sinned against *you*.

Sometimes it can be useful to go privately in the case of a public sin,
but the language used here assumes that the sin was private.

Second, it is important to add that the language of “alone”
does not mean that you must put yourself in harm’s way!

If you are concerned that a person will react violently,
you can always have your “you and him alone” conversation
in a public place (like a restaurant).

But the first step is to go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.

By the way, notice that this is not *optional*.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault.

If you do not go, then you are disobeying Jesus!

Jesus has come to establish the sort of community where sin may not flourish.

You may not ignore sin!

The humility of obedience *demand*s that you go to your brother and show him his fault.

Too often we assume that church discipline is something the elders do.

Jesus says that every disciple is responsible to do his part.

If you are not showing your brother his fault, then you are proud and stubborn –

you are refusing to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus!

Steps one and two of church discipline happen *before the elders are aware of anything!*

Now, I realize that you don't want to be petty.

Good.

Don't be petty!

You cannot say "I was offended."

You have to say, "You sinned against God and me."

If it wasn't a sin – then don't worry about it!

If it was a sin – then go to your brother!

Your goal is not to humiliate him, but to persuade him that he has sinned.

If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

¹⁶ *But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.*

Step two then increases the pressure.

When Jesus says that you are to take one or two others along with you,

Jesus is not saying that these people had to have witnessed the sin.

Sometimes you are the only person who witnessed it.

The reason why you take one or two others

is so that they can witness the charge.

If the person refuses to admit that it happened,

then you don't have the evidence of two or three witnesses.

But if he admits that it happened – but he refuses to repent –

then you have two or three witnesses to the charge!

There was a time in college when a professor mistreated me in front of the whole class.

Since it was public, I didn't bother trying to go to him privately.

Rather, I went straight to step two.

I didn't take fellow students with me.

Instead I took a professor from the same department.

These professors were best friends.

Why I did I take his best friend with me?

Because I wanted him to repent.
I knew that if I took anyone else, he would be defensive.
It was a painful meeting.
I felt like the two of them were ganging up on me!
But at the end of the meeting, the professor looked at me and said,
 “No one has ever followed Matthew 18 with me before.”
 (And trust me, he had sinned against *a lot of students* before!)
 “If I have offended you, I’m sorry.”

Now, that’s a lousy apology – and it isn’t even *repentance!*
But afterwards, talking with his friend,
 I learned that this professor had never said “I’m sorry” to anyone.

If you want to bring someone to repentance,
 you need to approach them with humility!

Of course,

¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

The third step is to tell it to the church.

Jesus does not specify a particular procedure for how the church is to hear the charges.
All throughout the Old Testament there were elders who would judge cases –
 and in the book of Acts and the epistles there are similar references to elders –
 so it is safe to say that Jesus assumes that there will be elders
 who will hear the case and pass judgment.

But the language of “tell it to the church” also makes it clear that if a person is found guilty
 then the sin needs to be announced to the church,
 and the church needs to exclude that person from the Assembly.
(Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.)

In verse 15, Jesus had identified this person as “your brother.”
 But now, “your brother” must be treated like a Gentile or a tax collector.

Some people have been confused by Jesus’ reference to “Gentile and tax collector.”

After all, Matthew was a tax collector –
 and Jesus came to break down the wall between Jew and Gentile!
But the phrase, “Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector,”
 would have meant something to Jesus’ hearers.

Gentiles and tax collectors were *outsiders*.
 And not just “outsiders” in some vague, general sense.
 They are dangerous and potentially hostile outsiders.
They are *not* brothers.
 They are not part of the community of Jesus’ disciples.

If a person insists on living in rebellion against Jesus –
if they will not repent of their sin –
then they must be removed from their status as “brother,”
and be treated as a potentially hostile outsider.

Why does Jesus say this?

Because they person who persistently refuses to repent of their sins
is living in a manner that is hostile to the gospel of Jesus.
If they prefer to continue in their sin rather than follow Jesus,
then they have no place in Jesus’ community.

And *they need to know* that they are not living like a follower of Jesus.
If you say that you are a disciple of Jesus,
then you need to live like a disciple of Jesus!

Church discipline has fallen on hard times these days.
After all, if you don’t like what your church does,
you can just go to the church around the corner!

But Jesus says that this process has *his authority*:

b. The Authority of This Process (v18-20)

¹⁸ *Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed^{l1} in heaven.* ¹⁹ *Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.* ²⁰ *For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”*

In chapter 16, Jesus had given the keys of the kingdom to *Peter*.

As we saw then, Peter is the one who opened the doors of the kingdom
to the Jews (at Pentecost in Acts 2)
to the Samaritans (in Acts 8)
and to the Gentiles (in Acts 10).

The kingdom is now open to people from every tribe and language.

But the power of binding and loosing is still being exercised.

And Jesus says that if two of his disciples agree about anything on earth
“it will be done for them by my Father in heaven” –
and particularly this is with respect to binding and loosing.

When a person refuses to listen to the church of Jesus Christ
and Christ’s duly ordained representatives
declare that a person is cut off from the church,
that person is cut off from the church:
“whatever you bind on earth *shall be bound* in heaven.”

The church does not send “suggestions” to God:

“Oh Jesus, we suggest that you cut this person off...”

No, whatever is bound on earth shall be bound in heaven.

Jesus is saying that *his authority* is being exercised.

Jesus is *not* saying that the church will always get it right.

And if the church gets it wrong,

then the church becomes guilty of causing one of these little ones to stumble.

But that is why wrong verdicts need to be overturned.

I once knew a man who had been excommunicated for something he didn't do!

He came to a session I served on, and requested us to investigate.

We investigated and discovered that he was innocent.

We tried to communicate with the church that had excommunicated him,
but they wouldn't listen,

and so we lifted the sentence of excommunication.

He had been “bound” by the church's sentence.

So we “loosed” him from his bonds.

Yes, the church has the authority of Jesus Christ to bind and to loose.

And Jesus promises to be *with* his church in their exercise of this authority:

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

You often hear this applied to *worship* –

but Jesus says this in the context of church discipline.

Jesus promises to be with his church in the act of discipline.

But sometimes the church refuses to listen to Jesus.

Sometimes the church gets it wrong.

(All you have to do is read the first three chapters of the book of Revelation
to see that the NT *knows* that this will happen sometimes!)

But Jesus is still King and head of the church.

He will deal with shepherds that harm his flock.

But our discussion of the humility of obedience is not complete

unless we move from repentance to forgiveness.

3. The Necessity of Forgiving One Another (v21-35)

a. How Often? If You Are Still Counting, You've Missed the Point (v21-22)

²¹ *Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”*

Peter understands that repentance and forgiveness are at the heart of what it means
to follow Jesus.

Jesus has just told him that if his brother sins,

he should go and confront his brother.
So Peter wants to know – how often should I do this?

²² *Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.*
Some translations will say “seventy-seven times.”
Though, quite frankly, whether it is 77 times or 490 times,
if you are still counting, then you’ve missed the point!

The humility of obedience is *difficult* when it comes to confronting sin.
The humility of obedience is nearly *impossible* when it comes to forgiving sin.

No matter how often your brother sins against you,
you must forgive him *every time!*

In Luke 17:3-4, Jesus says it this way,
“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him,
and if he sins against you seven times in the day,
and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”
So whether it is seven times in a single day –
or 490 times overall –
if your brother sins, you must forgive him.

Our brothers and sisters in Charleston, South Carolina, have done a remarkable thing
in offering forgiveness to the man who shot and killed their family and church members.
But they understood what Jesus requires:
they forgave him – but they also called him to repentance,
because he can only benefit from their forgiveness if he repents!

There are two parts to forgiveness:
1) the disposition on your part – are you in a forgiving spirit towards this person?
2) the transaction between you – does he receive the forgiveness?

Some people think that forgiveness is only a transaction –
in which case you cannot forgive until the other person repents!

But that would be a horrible situation to be in!
When you forgive someone, you are letting go of the right to hold that against them.
If you owe me \$100, and I forgive your debt,
then I am no longer expecting repayment from you.
In the same way, if you have sinned against me, and I forgive you,
then I am no longer holding your sin against you.

If I cannot forgive until you repent,
then I am trapped by your sin!

This is why the disposition of forgiveness is properly called forgiveness.

I have forgiven you!

I am free of the hatred and bitterness that could have been there.

But because you have not repented, you have no benefit from my forgiveness.

And Jesus concludes with a story that illustrates his point:

b. How Much? As Much as God Has Forgiven You (v23-35)

²³ “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.^[g] ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.^[h] ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant^[i] fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

A servant owes his master 10 thousand talents.

Just to give you some sense of proportion here,

when Rome conquered Carthage,

Carthage paid 200 talents a year to Rome for 50 years.

So this servant owes his master the equivalent

of the tribute Carthage had to pay Rome over 50 years!

In other words, this debt is ridiculous, absurd, and unimaginable.

A servant with a \$6 billion debt is unthinkable!

But this is Jesus’ point.

We are like that servant with the unimaginable debt.

We deserve to be sold into slavery.

But God has had mercy on us.

And God has forgiven our debts.

But Jesus has taught us to pray,

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

But too often that is *not* the way we treat our debtors.

Too often we hold their sins against them.

²⁸ *But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii,^[i] and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.*

If we calculate the second servant’s debt the same way,

this would be around \$12,000 –

not a minor loan, by any stretch –

but nowhere near \$6 billion!

If God has forgiven you your \$6 billion debt,

then how dare you refuse to forgive your neighbor’s \$12,000 debt?

³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers,^[k] until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Now, at this point, all of you should be very nervous!

After all, in verse 27 it says that the king *forgave him the debt* of \$6 billion.

But now in verse 34, the king changes his mind!

Does this mean that God might forgive you *temporarily* – and then bring it back again later?!

That *is* what Jesus says.

After all, Jesus is talking to his disciples.

He is not just talking to "the elect" – or to "true believers."

To put a name to it, he is talking to Judas Iscariot as well as to Simon Peter.

It's appropriate that we are coming to a baptism today.

Because what does baptism signify and seal?

Baptism signifies and seals the *forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit*.

It doesn't matter how old you are when you are baptized.

Let's take Simon Magus, from Acts 8.

Simon Magus was baptized.

Peter said on the day of Pentecost:

"repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Simon Magus was baptized.

At least to all outward appearances,

he received the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We are told in Acts 8 that the Samaritans spoke in tongues –

so it would appear that Simon Magus spoke in tongues as well!

But then Simon Magus apostatizes – he falls away – and refuses to repent.

(We know from other sources that he started a heretical sect)

When you are baptized God promises you the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Just like the king here "forgave him the debt."

But with the forgiveness of sins comes a requirement:

you must also forgive others.

If you do not forgive others,

then you demonstrate that you have missed the point entirely.

“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you,
if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Use PHSS 151 “Father, We Thank You” in place of “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”