

**THE COMMUNITY
OF GOD'S 'LITTLE ONES'
WELCOMED AND PARDONED**

Matthew 18:1 - 19:2

Introductory Comment

Matthew's community is suffering persecution from outside. We have already listened to Jesus encouraging his disciples to persevere through such trials (5:11-12; 10:16-22). Some of the suffering is also coming from divisions within the community. In the previous section we saw Jesus gathering this community around him and training them to believe and to understand. Now Matthew focuses on central aspects of discipleship and shows how essential it is to have a proper spirit if we are to retain the unity of the community and resolve the differences that arise within it.

Note the constant mention of the 'Father' (18:10,14,19,35). The church is in a special way God's house. Jesus teaches his disciples how to live as members of God's household (10:25), for the church is a community of Jesus' brothers and sisters (12:50). Everything in Jesus' covenant community is based on the intimacy which God offers Jesus' disciples in their relationship to him, an intimacy shared with Jesus who is 'among them' (18:20).

¹At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'

²He called a child, whom he put among them,³ and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,

⁴Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.⁵ Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

compare Mark 9:33-37;
Luke 9:46-48

Being like a child, humble before God

The question asked by Jesus' disciples takes us to the heart of Jesus' teaching on the essential response we are to make to God's grace. Earlier Jesus had said that whoever does the will of God as expressed in the least of the commandments 'will be called great in the kingdom of heaven' (5:19). He had also said that to be 'least in the kingdom of heaven' was to experience a privilege greater even than that enjoyed by John the Baptist (11:11).

When they ask: 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' Jesus takes a little child as a symbol of the smallest and least significant of human beings, and placing the child 'among them' instructs his disciples that they must change and become like a child if they want to 'enter the kingdom of heaven' (an expression already found in 5:20 and 7:21).

That Jesus himself identifies with the child becomes clear when he goes on to say: 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me', and when he speaks of himself being (like the child) 'among them' (18:20). One thinks of Jesus' prayer in which, as God's beloved Son (3:17; 17:5), he speaks with God with that special intimacy that is associated with the term 'Abba' (dear Father). Disciples are to share this absolute and total trust, for being in the kingdom of heaven means accepting God as a loving Father.

In this passage, Jesus focuses especially on the need to become lowly [Greek *tapeinos*] like a child. The noun used in the New Testament for ‘humility’ [Greek: *tapeinophrosunê*] is not found at all in the Greek Old Testament. The related verb occurs only once. The text is very instructive, and reminds us of the text on which we are commenting:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed [The Greek version translates the problematic Hebrew verb here as ‘think humbly’] and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.

– Psalm 131:1-3

Humility involves the realisation that all we are and have is a gift; that we are dependent upon God for everything; that of ourselves we can do nothing. It includes a response to this awareness that is characterised by joy, because we are confident, like a child, that we are not alone, but are embraced by a God who loves us unconditionally and in whom we can have absolute trust. Jesus, who addressed God as ‘Abba!’, knew the secret of the kingdom of God (see 11:29; 12:18-21). Only when we accept with delight that God delights in us can we begin to understand the gospel which Jesus is preaching and enter into that communion with God which he enjoys.

One of the greatest barriers to grace is self-reliance that blinds us to the presence of God sustaining and guiding us. As adults we have had to learn habits that are, in fact, a barrier to receiving what Jesus is offering. As disciples of Jesus there is much to unlearn, for we cannot earn grace; we cannot make a success of life by our own efforts; we are not meant to achieve by our own effort. Jesus looked to God as a child looks to a parent, with total trust and a simple expectation of receiving love. To be his disciple, we must learn to do the same. If you have tried to do this you will know that it is not at all easy, for it cuts at the very core of our pride. We like to be independent and self-reliant. We see it as being adult. Jesus says we have to change all this and become like a child. For an adult this requires humility: one further aspect of being ‘poor in spirit’(5:3).

We must also welcome each other into the Christian community as we welcome a child, and in doing so know that we are welcoming Jesus himself. Since the gospel is that each and every person is a beloved son or daughter of God, it should come as no surprise that we are meant to treat everyone with the sacred respect and reverence with which they are treated by God.

When Moses approached the burning bush, he was overwhelmed by the sacred Presence he encountered there. He removed his sandals, because he was on holy ground (Exodus 3:5). As Jesus’ disciples we know that every encounter with another person is an encounter with God. To treat others with the sacred reverence that is their due is only possible when the love we have for them is the love of God that filled the heart of Jesus. Only then will the words we speak and the actions we do be convincing witnesses of the gospel.

6 'If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were *drowned* in the depth of the sea.

7 *Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!*

8 'If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the *eternal* fire.

9 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.

compare Mark 9:42-47
Luke 17:1-2

verses 8-9 compare
Matthew 5:29-30

Warning against causing scandal

Likening a humble disciple to a child, Jesus has just said: 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me' (18:5). Along the same lines he speaks here of 'these little ones who believe in me' (compare 10:42). Being a disciple of Jesus, opening one's heart in love to all, makes one vulnerable to rejection, to abuse of trust and so to hurt.

Jesus focuses first on those who would abuse the trust of his disciples by taking advantage of them for their own ends (18:6-7). This can happen in many ways. We can distort the gospel in our preaching, engaging people's longing for God and pointing them in the wrong direction. We can, wittingly or unwittingly, use spiritual power to attract others to ourselves, instead of encouraging them to be united to God. We can present God as vengeful, angry, distant, controlling. By our sinful behaviour we can cause others to doubt God's love or to lose faith in the Christian community.

To hurt another in this way is to hurt oneself. Matthew repeats here words found already in the Sermon on the Mount (5:29-30). He adds only that the fire of Gehenna (see commentary on 5:22) is 'eternal'. We are inclined to think of 'eternal' as a temporal concept, signifying a time that never ends. In fact, it refers to a reality that is outside the realm of space and time as we know it. It refers to the sphere of the divine, which we can enter in faith here, and which we enter fully when we pass beyond the horizon of death. This depends on how we have chosen to live here.

Putting obstacles in the way of those who place their trust in Jesus, and who thereby accept to be vulnerable with him, is destructive behaviour, with results such as those which came upon the sinful inhabitants of Jerusalem, whose corpses were burned in the valley of Gehenna.. In the Old Testament the lame and the blind were excluded from the temple (2Samuel 5:8; Leviticus 21:18). This makes Jesus' remarks all the more striking. It is better to be lame or blind than to cause scandal to one of God's little ones. It is being obstinate and unrepentant in placing obstacles in the way of the poor and humble that excludes one from God's kingdom.

God's love for the lost

For the second time Jesus speaks of 'one of these little ones' (see 18:6). He is stressing the unique value of each disciple in the eyes of God. God's providential care, expressed here in terms of a 'guardian angel', is personal and intimate.

Jesus has already warned the disciples against scandal, that is, against being the cause of one of his disciples losing faith in him and so in God's love. Now he warns against 'despising' or looking down upon any of them. God has a special place in his heart for each one (see 10:29-31), for we each have a 'life hidden with Christ in God' (Colossians 3:3).

The importance of each person to God is highlighted in the parable of the sheep that strays (compare Ezekiel 34:11-16). There is no limit to what God will do to bring back the stray to the fold. This includes, of course, the one who strays by causing scandal as well as the one who strays by being scandalised, for, as Jesus says in what must surely be one of the most consoling statements of the gospel: 'It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost'.

We have here another indication of the compassion of Jesus, God's shepherd Messiah (see 9:36; 15:2; 26:31). His heart goes out to all. The following statements from the New Testament also speak of the universal scope of God's saving action:

God our Saviour desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

– 1 Timothy 2:4

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.

– Titus 2:11

I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

– John 12:32

¹⁰ *'Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.'*

(Some manuscripts add ¹¹For the Son of Man came to save the lost.)

¹² *What do you think? If a shepherd 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 tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.*

¹⁴ *So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.*

verses 12-13 compare Luke 15:3-7

15 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.

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

Correction within the community and communal prayer

Correcting others is necessarily a delicate task. Matthew has prepared us for this in the preceding passages which remind us of the need for humility, of the importance of not scandalising or despising others, and of God's love for those who have gone astray. It is of interest that Matthew does not mention any specific community leaders in this passage. Perhaps the Antioch church had not yet developed a set pattern of organisational leadership. The problem is to be taken to the community, called the 'church' here for the second time by Matthew (see 16:18). It is a community of Jesus' disciples, and therefore of his 'brothers and sisters' (12:50). We are to be brothers and sisters to each other.

If a member of the Christian community goes astray, it is an act of mercy to attempt correction, but the correction will be graced and not destructive only to the extent that the virtues stressed in the previous passages are present. In the passage which comes after the present one Matthew will reinforce this message by speaking about forgiveness. The way in which Matthew has surrounded this passage is proof of his pastoral concern and wisdom. As regards Jewish practice, we have the following:

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

– Leviticus 19:17-18

Normal Jewish legal procedure required the evidence of two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15). Gentiles and tax collectors were not members of the Jewish synagogue. Therefore, the synagogue officials could exercise no jurisdiction in their regard. So when Matthew has Jesus speak of treating an unrepentant member 'as a Gentile and a tax collector', he is effectively telling the members of the community that their obligation ceases and that they must leave the unrepentant to God.

Hopefully, the good shepherd (18:12-13) will find other ways to bring the unrepentant sinner back. Matthew may also have in mind an official declaration that the sinner has broken communion with the church: a declaration of excommunication that must always be in view of repentance and of welcoming the repentant sinner back (see 2Thessalonians 3:15; Titus 1:13 and 2Corinthians 2:5-11).

Addressing himself to the community of his disciples, Jesus repeats what he has already said to Peter: ‘whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven’(see 16:19). In this context, it refers to the power to pronounce whether or not things have been set right.

Jesus has already said that ‘the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’(9:6), and he has already told his disciples to pray to God their Father: ‘Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors’(6:12). He has said, too: ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy’(5:7). When the church prays for God’s forgiveness of a sinner ‘it will be done for you by my Father in heaven’(18:19).

The key to this is the presence of Jesus among his disciples. The psalmist tells us that ‘the Lord is in his holy temple’(Psalm 11:4). Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon (died 135AD) says: ‘When two are seated and discuss the Torah, the Shekinah resides among them’(The Sentences of the Fathers, III,3). Similarly, Jesus says: ‘Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’. One recalls the child whom Jesus placed ‘among them’(18:2). Gathered around Jesus, his disciples experience the glory of Jesus’ humble prayer, and, in the words of Paul:

All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

– 2Corinthians 3:18

21 Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?'

22 Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

23 For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him;

25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe."

verse 22 compare Luke 17:3-4

Forgiveness

Peter is obviously learning from Jesus. He presumes that he must forgive in a full and complete way ('seven times'). Reversing the awful cry of the braggart Lamech which took revenge to its ultimate limits (Genesis 4:24), Jesus multiplies Peter's seven by seventy (or adds seventy: the Greek is capable of both meanings).

We are to put no limits on our readiness to forgive. The goal of forgiveness is reconciliation. No one can bring this about on his own as both parties to the hurt have to be willing to be reconciled. But even when another is unwilling to forgive or to be forgiven and shies away from reconciliation for whatever reason, we are asked by Jesus to be ready to forgive and to be open to reconciliation. Any barriers that are there should not come from us.

The debt of ten thousand talents owed by the first slave is astronomical, when we consider that the whole of the annual tax for the districts of Galilee and Peraea was two hundred talents (see Josephus Antiquities 17.9.4). However, we must not let this huge sum distract us from the fact that the debt of one hundred denarii owed by the second slave was not inconsiderable. It was the equivalent of one hundred day's wages. Who of us would not be upset if payment of such a debt were delayed? It is only when we recognise that the first slave had just been let off ten thousand talents, the equivalent of one hundred and sixty thousand years' wages, that the point of the parable is thrust home to us.

However big another's debt to us may be, it is minuscule in comparison with the unpayable debt which God in his compassion has cancelled in our regard.

The master was moved with compassion for his slave, as Jesus was moved with compassion for the hungry crowd (15:32). We should treat each other with the same mercy with which God treats us.

The fellow slaves are rightly 'distressed' (compare 17:23; 26:22) by the refusal of the slave to forgive. More significantly, such refusal to forgive, such hardness of heart, means that God's willingness to forgive is frustrated and the enormous debt of the slave remains. Only a heart that is open to forgive can experience forgiveness (compare 6:14-15; 7:1-2; 16:27).

²⁹ 'Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you."'

³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?"'

³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Conclusion

This summary passage acts as a transition from the fourth major discourse of the gospel to the following narrative section. Once again Matthew's focus is on Jesus the healer.

¹ When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. ² Large crowds followed him, and he cured them there.

19:1-2, compare Mark 10:1