

Lesson #19- Matthew Chapter 18 Questions for Discussion (With Help for Teachers):

1. Read and discuss the first fourteen verses of this chapter.

Help for Teachers:

This is a difficult passage to understand, and one of the harshest teachings of Jesus. Most expositors make some surface comments to the affect that sin (offences) will predictably occur with regularity as though there were a law that demands it, but even though this true, the offender is still responsible for his or her willful decision, in each case, to violate God's law.

Some argue that what is in view here is the specific offence of enticing others to sin, and yet others point out that we must "part with what we cannot keep without being entangled by it in sin" (cut off your hand or foot or pluck out your eye).

All the above are true observations, but it seems to me that as opposed to being harsh, this is one of the most passionate (and compassionate for His people) teachings of Jesus, when read in the context it is given. This discourse begins with Jesus calling attention to a child, in response to the disciple's worry about who is the greatest in God's economy.

Who is the child? This is critical to identify because the child remains the focus throughout these first fourteen verses. The child is readily identified as His people, the children of the Father, that will be converted (V3), that Jesus has come to save (V11).

They are great in the kingdom of heaven, because they realize their unworthiness and make great the name of their Heavenly Father (V4). They are so precious to the Father, that Jesus, the Only Begotten Son of the Father, says that however someone treats His children is paramount to how they treat Him. In other words, God is just as offended when someone tries to injure one of us, His children, as if they had attacked Him personally. He is just as pleased when someone is kind to one of His children, as if they had been kind to Him personally (V5-6). We understand this; if someone is hurtful or disrespectful to one of our earthly children, they might as well have been that way to us. If they render aid or are in some way kind to one of our earthly children, we take that personally also. Our children are loved as part of us. Moreover, the specific offence in question is an attempt to separate God's children from Him. Have you ever seen footage or read stories of a bear reacting to someone that has come between her and her cubs?

What is the offence? To answer that question, we see that Jesus finalizes His response about greatness in the kingdom of heaven with His famous analogy of a shepherd having a hundred sheep and going on a rescue mission to bring back one that had strayed from the fold. In context, the offense and offender emerge clearly. The offender

is anyone that tries to seduce one of God's children to leave the Father, and that is the offense that brings forth the harshness of God's wrath.

How serious is God about protecting His children from those that would lead them astray? **"But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!"** I don't think any words of explanation would render this any clearer. The only thing I would point out is that the offender in this passage seems not a child of God, but rather of the world, *"woe unto the world because of offences"* and *"woe to that man by whom the offence cometh"*.

How should God's children view falling away, and/ or those that place temptation to pursue something above God in their path? 1 Thes 5:22 tells us to abstain from even the appearance of evil, there are many passages in the epistles warning us to flee from sin. Jesus uses hyperbole to stress how forcefully we should flee from that or those that would separate us from Him. Also using hyperbole to make the point, Paul writes in Colossians 3:5-8, ***"Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience:"*** (mortify means to deaden), or where Jesus said that, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take *up his cross*, and follow me." No one would take it literal that Jesus expects us to physically carry around a wooden cross like He died on. Verse 8-9 of our text says, **"Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire."**

To view these two verses, as some would advocate, as shifting to speaking to those that are of the world and are trying to lead God's children astray, causes a couple of issues. First, ridding oneself of sin makes grace no longer the means of salvation, but at best a mingling of works with grace. Second, the one(s) offended in this teaching is consistently the child (of God).

The point of cutting off hand or foot, or plucking out an eye that offends, is that it is much better to separate from anyone or anything that would separate us (His children) from God, even if it seems painful. Even if we are very attached to it. How much better that we enter everlasting life than to reject the offer of Christ for salvation in favor of following the eye of flesh (1 John 2:16)! Hebrews 11:24-25 says of Moses, *"By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of*

sin for a season;”. Moses, having every imaginable pleasure in the whole land of Egypt at his disposal, in faith that the treasure we have in God was vastly superior to all of it, cut himself off from the things of Egyptian nobility that separated him from the true and living God.

While (my opinion) the primary offender in view is of the world (an apostate unbeliever that is intentionally deceptive), this can and should also be seen as a warning to God’s own children. Utmost care must be taken in the handling and teaching of Scripture (2 Tim 2:15), and by the example we present by the way we live before those developing in the faith. Paul, speaking for the last time in person to the Ephesian elders, gave them these final words, *“And when they were come to him, he said unto them, Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, Serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews: And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, **but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly,** and from house to house, Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more. Wherefore **I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.”***

Our careless handling of these matters can, even if unintentionally, cause brothers and sisters to ere. Remember that Peter’s inconsistent behavior caused some immature Jewish believers, and even the well-grounded and highly respected Barnabas to stumble (Gal 2:11-16). This is the second time Jesus, addressing His own disciples, has used this analogy of cutting off or plucking out some treasured body part that is causing a separation of us from Him, to make us see the vastly greater treasure that is in Him (Matt 5:29-30).

What motivates the offender to entice God's children to leave the fold? The answer is hatred. Jesus warns in verse 10, "**...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 which is in heaven.**" Because the world hates God (note that even we that are in Christ still have a hateful human "body of this death" that wars against "the law of my mind" as Paul puts it in Romans 7:18-25), they hate His children (John 15:18-20). Also helpful to remember is the OT story of Balaam, who unable to curse the people of God, caused them to go astray by teaching them to go after other gods. See also Jesus' words to the church of Pergamos in Revelation 2:14, "*But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.*"

How do we see God's love, commitment to, and preservation of His children through these teachings of Jesus? Jesus' passion for God's little ones is evident in His stern warning to those that may think to steer them wrong, and thus away from the protection and fellowship of the fold, "Take heed" He says in verse 10. Jesus then adds something that is thrilling about our safety in Christ, God has evidently assigned angels to the task of giving constant, direct report to God concerning His children!

Verses 11-14 read, "**For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost. How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.**"

Jesus refers to Himself by the name "Son of man", reminding us that God Himself has acted with such compassion that He has left the glories of heaven to come into our world as one of us (Matt 1:23). He is on a mission "to save that which was lost". There will be no failure, He is going to accomplish the purpose for which He has come (John 6:37-40). He is going to purchase His people that He has known and are of His fold with His own blood. He is going to bring them out from all the peoples of the earth for His own glory (John 10:14-17, Rev 5:9). Though they may be caused to wander by the deceptions of the enemy, they will in no case be lost. Jesus will go to great lengths (into the mountains) to protect His flock. God's wrath against those that offend His children by causing them to stray is such that it would be better for them if they were thrown into the sea with a great weight chained around their neck; His response will be severe (present text). He will not lose even one that is His (John 18:9). Often referred to as "perseverance of the saints", we can rest secure in knowing that no man can pluck us (His sheep) out of the Father's hand (John 10:29) and there is nothing that can separate us from His love (Rom 8:35-39)!

2. Based on verses 15-17, what are we commanded to do when a fellow brother or sister does wrong to us? Include in your discussion why we often handle offences differently than the way Jesus tells us to in this passage and what are the results.

Help for Teachers:

Jesus is teaching us how we should behave within the family... His family. A trespass is a sin, a violation of God's moral law, in this case against a brother or sister in Christ. The range of offenses is broad, as Jesus commanded in Luke 6:31, "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise."

When an offense occurs, the command of our Lord is that the offended person confront the offending person alone, one on one with no spectators. If this were the normal way that these matters were handled, can you imagine how many churches would not have divided over ridiculous causes, how little entertainment value would be found in gossiping, and how many people's dignity would have been preserved had the offended person shown the grace required to appeal privately to the offender. It is certain that most problems would be arrested, and fellowship restored at this first step, were this the common practice. Often the offender is even unaware that his or her actions have caused hurt, and it is hard to correct a behavior you don't realize is damaging.

Unfortunately, there will be those that, even when privately confronted, will refuse to repent. There will also be times when someone falsely accuses another. For this reason, Jesus outlines a second step which involves trying again, this time with one or two additional believers so that the conversation can be witnessed. If there is no validity to the charge(s), often the "offended" person will not risk the embarrassment of being found to be a false accuser and won't pursue step two. If there is a second step, this time the witness and encouragement of one or two more brothers will hopefully bring the offender to repentance and reconciliation.

Should the offender refuse to hear after the second attempt with one or two more witnesses, Jesus commands a third and final step. From Jesus' instructions, He obviously expects that brothers and sisters will be united in a local church that has Scriptural authority. Having twice attempted to resolve the problem in relative privacy, the issue is now to be brought before the assembled church. If the offender is still unwilling to make it right with his brother that he sinned against after hearing from the church, the church is to disassociate with the offender until such a time as he repents. This is often referred to as "withdrawing fellowship" or "excommunication" (not to be confused with the heretical Roman Catholic notion that certain clergy have authority to damn someone to hell).

I think there are probably two main reasons this isn't practiced often or well in most churches.

First, unbelief. We often fear that confrontation will make the hurt worse, or that the outcome will be unfavorable. Instead, we convince ourselves it is best to just suffer the wrong than to risk additional conflict (it really is better to suffer wrong than to take your case before unbelievers to the harm of the name of Jesus, "I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?" 1 Cor 6:5-7). The reality though is that the unresolved offense drives a wedge that damages our fellowship with one another and hence or witness to the world for Christ ("By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." John 13:35). Is it not also unloving to harbor resentment against a brother or sister and not try to help them with a sin that is possibly doing them and others great harm? So, how does this translate as unbelief? Because we don't believe that obedience to Jesus' way of resolving trespasses will yield the best results.

Second, we get perverted enjoyment out of juicy squabbling and wallowing around in self-pity. We don't want to resolve the problem ("From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not." James 4:1-2). It would be good to read the remainder of chapter 4.

3. In verses 18-20 Jesus gives what we commonly refer to as the law of binding and loosing. How do you understand this teaching?

Help for Teachers:

We have somewhat looked at this in Mathew 16:19, where Jesus makes a similar statement, "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Comments on this from Chapter 16 were: *The binding and loosing has nothing to do with forgiving of sins, as some teach. Only God can forgive sins. The church and elders of the church have the responsibility to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15). As stewards of the kingdom, we are to interpret and teach the truths of Scripture. When Peter refused to allow the efforts of the legalists to "put a yoke upon the neck of the*

disciples” in Acts 15:10, he “loosed” (freed) what was already loosed in heaven. When Peter writes in his epistles, commands concerning how we are to live in a holy manner as obedient children, he “binds” on the hearts of Christians what is bound in heaven.

In this case, “Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” follows on the heels of the church’s responsibility and authority to correctly resolve issues of trespasses between brethren. So, looking at all the components Jesus brings together in verses 18-20 we have, 1- things that are bound and loosed are backed by heavenly authority, 2- brothers unified and seeking heavenly guidance in prayer will get an answer from the Father, and 3- this unification must have its basis in the glorification of Jesus Christ.

It seems best understood that Jesus is offering encouragement (such judgement is stressful and can carry grave consequences) that when the above ingredients are brought together, God will give enlightenment to arrive at a proper decision that is honoring to God and best for all His “little ones” involved.

It seems unlikely and not in keeping with Scripture to interpret this, as some have attempted, to mean that church decisions or ecclesiastical decisions are at all binding on heaven. The reality is always quite the opposite. Man conforms to the will of God, never the reverse. Many translations are similar to the CSB, which reads “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will *have been* bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will *have been* loosed in heaven.” This more modern sentence structure makes it plain that we are reacting to what has already been determined by heaven, not the opposite.

Some of the old (1700’s and 1800’s) commentators say that in chapter 16 Peter was given binding and loosing power such that decisions he made were honored by heaven (almost like setting precedent is how I understood it), and that this power was extended to the remaining eleven apostles in chapter 18, and that no one outside the apostles remains empowered in this fashion. It is true that the apostles were uniquely empowered to speak, and often write, with divine authority that is granted to no one else, upon the completion of the New Testament. But they never dictated to God how heaven was to behave or set heavenly policy (“Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being his counsellor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understanding?” Isa. 40:13-14). They merely spoke/ wrote under inspiration of the Holy Spirit with divine authority (as they were led and empowered) and in such cases to defy or disobey the apostles was to defy or disobey God in heaven. Beyond reiterating what God revealed to them, they had no authority.

4. Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive his brother and seems to think seven times is pretty liberal. Jesus has a completely different command than what Peter expected. What did Jesus say and what is the basis of His answer?

Help for Teachers:

Peter thinks that forgiving a brother that offends him seven times is pretty liberal, but Jesus shocks him by announcing that the heavenly rule is that you must forgive your brother four hundred and ninety times.

Jesus reminds Peter (and us) through a parable that God has forgiven all His children of great debt... many and horrible sins. Far in excess of seven. Jesus makes it clear that our refusal to forgive is greatly offensive to the King that has forgiven us of so much. It shows much ingratitude when we are merciless.

It seems this ending parable is a vivid reminder of the depth of love and compassion that God has for His "little ones". That it is better for someone to drown in the sea with a great stone about his neck than to offend one of them. That His "little ones" are so valuable to Him that He won't suffer the loss of even one of us, but will pursue us into the wilderness and rescue us. That when we get out of sorts and offend one another, even the chastisement of heaven is intended to restore. And how dare we forget what mercy our King has extended to us, as we consider how we will behave toward our offenders.