



The Gospel of Matthew - Chapter Eighteen

Summary of Chapter Eighteen

The disciples, perhaps feeling elevated by sharing in Jesus' ministry, asked their Lord who would be the greatest in heaven. Jesus responded by saying that it would be the one who showed the innocence and humility of a child.

Jesus then taught of the dire consequences that anyone would face if they were the cause of another person to sin or fall away from the faith. Jesus provided an example of the extreme measures that such a person should consider in order to avoid becoming such a perpetrator, demonstrating just how evil all sin really is.

Jesus also tells a short parable of a lost sheep to show just how important each individual is to God and how much effort should be made to restore that one back into the flock, which is the church of Jesus Christ.

If a person is sinned against by another believer, the aggrieved person should do all they can to be reconciled privately to the other person. If the latter refuses to listen, then the process should be repeated in the presence of two or three reliable and impartial witnesses. If that cannot resolve the issue then the matter should be brought before the church; if even that fails then the perpetrator faces exclusion from the church.

Jesus teaches that forgiveness knows no bounds and that a person should not keep count of the number of times they are required to forgive someone who seeks their pardon.

The chapter concludes with another parable which illustrates just how great the debt is that God has erased from an individual. He then expands on the dire consequences that any person will face if they in turn fail to display the same attitude of grace, love, compassion and mercy towards others who may be indebted to them.

XI. Matthew 18:1-20:34 - The Community of the Messiah Revealed (Fourth Discourse)

This is the fourth of Jesus' five major discourses in Matthew's Gospel. As his earthly ministry drew to a close, Jesus spent considerable time clarifying his identity and mission. He instructed his disciples on the nature of his covenant community, explaining the Kingdom community's characteristics, its implications for the sanctity of marriage, and its intrinsic value.

XI.a Matthew 18:1-35 - Characteristics of life in the Kingdom community

Here, Jesus begins the fourth discourse in Matthew, addressing relationships in the church, the community of the Kingdom. Jesus instructs the disciples about the kind of community life that will characterise their relationships with one another and with the world at large.

XI.a.i Matthew 18:1-5 - True Greatness

The unifying theme in this section is the importance of honouring children, fellow disciples and others who lack worldly status in the Kingdom. The disciples are concerned with an issue naturally prominent in status-conscious Mediterranean antiquity: who will be greatest in the Kingdom. Jesus declares that the Kingdom belongs to children, or at least those with child-like qualities of trust, innocence and dependence.

A key lesson for all disciples today is that life is about serving Christ and one day accepting the rewards, not seeking the rewards through what is done in this life. Those who serve in any capacity in the church should do so with an attitude that matches the privilege of their calling, and not to gratify their own need for status.

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

Matthew 18:1

At that time links this event with their arrival back in Capernaum. A complimentary account makes this explicit: <<*Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest*>> (Mark 9:33-34). However, the focus once again turns to what Jesus taught rather than the things that he did. And his teaching once again focuses on the need for humility.

Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? The disciples misunderstand greatness in terms of human endeavour, accomplishment, and status.

² He 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. ⁴ Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'

Matthew 18:2-4

He called a child. Jesus wanted to make sure his message hit home that he placed a child in front of them so that they could not fail to comprehend the rebuke he was giving them.

Unless you change represents more than a change of attitude or behaviour for the language used is the concept of repentance: <<*You yourselves recently repented and did what was right in my sight by proclaiming liberty to one another, and you made a covenant before me in the house that is called by my name*>> (Jeremiah 34:15).

Whoever becomes humble like this child. The humility of a child consists of childlike trust, vulnerability, and the inability to advance his or her own cause apart from the help, direction, and resources of a parent. Ancient moralists regularly trotted forth models of heroes and statesmen for their students to imitate; Jesus instead points to a child. More so then than today, children were powerless, without status and utterly dependent on adults.

Jesus was not calling them to act in childish ways: <<*Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults*>> (1 Corinthians 14:20), nor should they be fickle: <<*We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming*>> (Ephesians 4:14). He is calling for them to a trusting innocence, accepting total reliance on God for all things. Peter would later call on his readership in similar vein: <<*Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation*>> (1 Peter 2:2).

Those who adhere to Jesus' teaching will become the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, whereas those who do not will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven, showing the stark contrast that will be applied at judgement. All or nothing!

⁵ **Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.**

Matthew 18:5

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. Those who follow Jesus are called to be welcoming to everyone, especially to newcomers in the church who are perhaps drawn from lower social backgrounds than themselves. This is not to be done in a condescending way but with genuine acceptance that they are all equal in God's sight. This is something that Paul also commands: <<*Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are*>> (Romans 12:16). David perhaps encapsulates the whole concept of Jesus' teaching here: <<*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 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 for evermore*>> (Psalm 131).

Child here is literally 'little one'. True disciples are little ones who believe in Jesus: <<*and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones*>> New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

Matthew18-3

in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward>> (Matthew 10:42), out to make Christ alone great. In Jesus' day parents loved children, but children held little status in the home until they could earn their keep and they held none at all in society generally. Jesus calls his followers to take notice and welcome everyone, and especially to esteem those without status or social respect.

Although we live in a era of slogans such as 'lifelong learning', and it is true that we should never cease to learn new ideas or acquire new skills, childhood is accepted as the key learning age, for children are so often able to soak up so much, just as a sponge retains water. Jesus commands this of his followers.

XI.a.ii Matthew 18:6-9 - Temptations to Sin

Jesus warns of the consequences that face those who cause any of his believers or an innocent child to fall into sin. Jesus provides extreme metaphors of self mutilation that were intended to shock his listeners into understanding just how serious God views all sin.

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.

Matthew 18:6-9

Put a stumbling-block means to cause someone else to sin and fall away from Christ. Paul relates this to unintentional actions as well, such as where those who felt it right to forego the requirements of the Jewish food laws would flaunt their beliefs in front of those who still maintained adherence to the Jewish heritage for, by giving up what they thought was right, they sinned in the eyes of God: <<***But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed***>> (1 Corinthians 8:9-11). A disciple is called to live a Godly life that supports all others, often deferring to the needs of others rather than to their own requirements or desires.

As with the child in vv.2-5, these little ones who believe in me refers to Christ's disciples: <<'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward'>> (Matthew 10:40-42).

Those whom Jesus calls to himself will belong to him and anything that is done to prevent their allegiance to him or to hinder their service to him in anyway will be dealt with as a personal attack on God himself. This passage does not speak of specific sin but relates to all and any sin that has an impact on others.

It would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck.

The cruellest legal punishment in Jesus' day was crucifixion, but this image of drowning represents a Roman punishment more horrifying to Jewish hearers than crucifixion and one only rarely tolerated among them. Jesus refers here not to the lighter millstone turned by a woman's hand but to the heavier community kind turned by an ass, heavy enough to take one quickly to the bottom of the sea. Jesus says such a punishment would be an act of mercy



A typical millstone pulled by a donkey

compared to what is in store for those who turn little ones from Christ's way - be they arrogant university professors, torturers enforcing Islamic law, i.e. if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away, or gossipers within the church. Drowning in the depths of the sea will only kill the body but hell is everlasting torment and judgement should bring fear to all of mankind: <<***But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!***>> (Luke 12:5). There will be a great chasm in place that prevents any that are in hell to come back to God: <<***Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us***>> (Luke 16:26).

Drowned in the depth of the sea, foot causes you to stumble, cut it off, eye causes you to stumble, tear it out. Because Judaism abhorred self-mutilation, this is an especially stark image of the cost one must be willing to pay to avoid spiritual death. Jesus uses hyperbole, i.e. intentional overstatements, to emphasise the necessity of rigorous self-discipline and radically removing sin from the disciple's life before it leads to judgment; refer to comments made on Matthew 5:29-30.

Woe to the world because of stumbling-blocks! This statement speaks of the inevitability of the causes of sin that exist in the world. Jesus acknowledges they will always be here but warns against those individuals that are the cause of sin, especially in others. The world is under God's woe. It has become a dark and

dangerous place but one that offers life to those who will follow God's decrees, as King David discovered: <<**Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble**>> (Psalm 119:165).

The main condemnation falls on those who are the cause of sin; but woe to the one by whom the stumbling-block comes! Even these people are fulfilling God's purpose: <<**For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false, so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned**>> (2 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

To enter life was standard shorthand for 'enter the life of the coming age' <<**And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments'**>> (Matthew 19:17). The language of losing limbs was reminiscent of the price martyrs paid for their devotion to God. According to a common Jewish belief, a person with missing members would be resurrected in that form before being restored.

The Greek for hell is *gehenna*, a name derived from the Valley of the Son of Hinnom near Jerusalem: <<**He defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of Ben-hinnom, so that no one would make a son or a daughter pass through fire as an offering to Molech**>> (2 Kings 23:10), <<**And they go on building the high place of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire – which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind**>> (Jeremiah 7:31), and: <<**Thus said the Lord: Go and buy a potter's earthenware jug. Take with you some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests, and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the Potsherd Gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you**>> (Jeremiah 19:1-2). It was the place where rubbish from Jerusalem and the surrounding dwellings was constantly burned so that it came to be seen as a metaphor for the fire of hell: <<**His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire**>> (Matthew 3:12), and: <<**Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire**>> (Revelation 20:14-15).

XI.a.iii Matthew 18:10-14 - The Parable of the Lost Sheep

The overwhelming meaning of this parable is that God loves the sinner, even though he hates their sin and even allowed his Son to die as the only means of atonement for it. Being found is not something the sheep can do for itself; it requires a shepherd or a Saviour.

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.

Matthew 18:10

Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones. By his ingenious arrangement of the material, Matthew demonstrates that overbearing leaders, unwilling to forgive the repentant, fall into the same category as those who caused

the stumbling to begin with. Matthew, or more accurately Jesus, opposes leaders in the religious community who are more concerned with their own reputation and position than with the needs of the people. The same would apply in the church!

The heavenly Father uses angels to care for his childlike disciples: <<***Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?***>> (Hebrews 1:14), but their angels does not imply that each disciple has one assigned guardian angel. However, there are some interpreters who do hold on to the belief that each individual does have a guardian angel, which is in line with ancient Jewish tradition. While others believe this simply refers to the spirits of children.

Continually see the face of my Father. These angels do, however, have continuous and open communication with God in heaven. Again, there are those who hold these to be guardian angels that have a higher status than other angels. Thus they are afforded the privilege of being always in the presence of God. How different it is for those who chose a different master in Satan: <<***And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgement of the great day***>> (Jude 6).

[[Other ancient authorities add verse 11, but it is not included in the NRSVA]]

[[¹¹ For the Son of Man came to save the lost]]

Although not included in the earliest manuscripts, there is nothing theologically wrong with this verse. Indeed, it could be held to be Jesus' mission statement, along with the comments made by Peter to Cornelius and his household: <<***That message spread throughout Judæa, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him***>> (Acts 10:37-38).

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?

Matthew 18:12

A hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray. One hundred sheep was quite a normal size for a typical flock, with larger herds split to allow for ease of grazing and flock management by shepherds. That a shepherd would go off to look for animals that had strayed was accepted practice: <<***Now the donkeys of Kish, Saul's father, had strayed. So Kish said to his son Saul, 'Take one of the boys with you; go and look for the donkeys'***>> (1 Samuel 9:3).

Here the wandering sheep represents a believer who has left the fold, although in a similar parable in Luke 15:3-7 it represents an unbeliever who has never been part of the flock.

There are two kinds of lost sheep for which God looks. First of all, there is the doctrine of election and effectual calling that comes into play. This means that

if a person belongs to God because he has predestined them to belong to him, even though they may not have been converted yet, it is as if they are one of God's sheep already. There are those out in the world of whom God says, 'They are mine, and I will call them in due time'. God goes after those lost sheep as if no one else existed, until he finds them and gathers them in.

The second type of lost sheep is the Christian who has fallen into sin, wandered from the fold and then is later brought home. It shows God's tenderness towards the backslider.

Jesus draws upon the OT images of God's people as both secure sheep and straying sheep, such as: *<<I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek out your servant, for I do not forget your commandments>> (Psalm 119:176), <<All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all>> (Isaiah 53:6), <<But if you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock has been taken captive>> (Jeremiah 13:17), <<Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord>> (Jeremiah 23:1-4), and: <<My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray, turning them away on the mountains; from mountain to hill they have gone, they have forgotten their fold>> (Jeremiah 50:6), <<My anger is hot against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders; for the Lord of hosts cares for his flock, the house of Judah, and will make them like his proud warhorse>> (Zechariah 10:3), <<'Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is my associate,' says the Lord of hosts. Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones>> (Zechariah 13:7).*

The prophet uses it extensively in Ezekiel Chapter 34, especially those found wanting in their task: *<<Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them – to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?>> (Ezekiel 34:2); countered by the theme of good shepherding appearing in the NT: <<So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them>> (John 10:7-8), <<Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant>> (Hebrews 13:20), <<Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be*

examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away>> (1 Peter 5:1-4), and: <<They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes>> (Revelation 7:17).

Ultimately, it is God who is the shepherd of his people: <<The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want>> (Psalm 23:1), <<Then he led out his people like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock>> (Psalm 78:52), <<He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep>> (Isaiah 40:11), and: <<For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out>> (Ezekiel 34:11).

¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.

Matthew 18:13

He rejoices over it. Whether the reader applies this parable to the person not yet converted or to the converted person who is brought back, a celebration is called for. When the newly converted are brought to repentance, all heaven rejoices, and when a backslider returns, again, all heaven rejoices: <<*Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance*>> (Luke 15:7).

The phrase more than over the ninety-nine indicates that God still rejoices over those that do remain faithful to their calling.

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

Matthew 18:14

It is not the will of your Father. Nowhere does the bible teach universalism, i.e. that everyone will be saved even though God would wish it to be so: <<*This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*>> (1 Timothy 2:3-4). However, it is clear that those who do not have eternal life are in that position because of the personal choices they made to follow others or, most often, their own will. The bible teaches that there is always an opportunity for all to come to saving faith before final judgement: <<*Some of the wise shall fall, so that they may be refined, purified, and cleansed, until the time of the end, for there is still an interval until the time appointed*>> (Daniel 11:35).

Jesus confirms that what he says is witnessed by the highest authority in heaven: <<*Even now, in fact, my witness is in heaven, and he that vouches for me is on high*>> (Job 16:19).

Little ones should be lost. A dangerous yet real possibility is that apparent followers of Jesus may not be true disciples at all but only professing believers, as was the classic case of Judas Iscariot.

It is too often the case where someone who has been attending a church regularly suddenly stops going and no one from the fellowship even bothers to go to see them to find out why. Although people should not be pressured to come back into fellowship, nor should they be forced to reveal why they have left, they should at least know that those in the fellowship care enough about them to make the enquiry, showing they are genuinely missed and would be welcomed back at any time.

XI.a.iv Matthew 18:15-20 - Reproving Another Who Sins

Having just given instructions that disciples should not cause offence, Jesus now provides guidance as to how disciples should privately reconcile themselves to others who have harmed them in some way. If the person does not respond to the personal approach then two or three reliable witnesses should be taken along. If this fails then the matter should be brought to the church, via its leadership. If all else fails, then leaders are to expel such a person from the fellowship.

The paragraph on discipline fits closely with the preceding paragraph on seeking the straying sheep and the paragraph before that warning against causing little ones to stumble. It also fits with the following story about unconditional forgiveness. By holding discipline and grace in their proper tension, with a greater but not imbalanced emphasis on grace, Matthew summons the church to practice tough love.

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.**

Matthew 18:15

Go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If a matter can be settled without getting others involved, that will keep rumours and misunderstandings from multiplying, and will keep the conflict from spreading: <<*Argue your case with your neighbour directly, and do not disclose another's secret*>> (Proverbs 25:9). The reasoning behind this approach was embedded in the law: <<*You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself*>> (Leviticus 19:17). The Greek used is *elenxon auton*, which requires reasoned argument of the case and is not intended as an opportunity to avenge any wrongdoing. Christian reproof is an ordinance of Christ for the bringing of sinners to repentance, and must be managed as such.

Although Jewish teachers preferred that the offender seek forgiveness first, Jewish law also emphasised proper giving and receiving of reproof, which continued until the offender repented or decisively repulsed the person who was reproofing. This approach is in keeping with Jesus' teaching that a doctor comes to his patients or the shepherd goes after the lost sheep. Rabbis emphasised that reproof was to be private whenever possible. The Dead Sea

Scrolls also emphasise this sequence: private reproof, then before witnesses, and finally before the gathered assembly. Public admonition was reserved for the severest of circumstances, something Paul thought was necessary in his reproof of Peter in Antioch: <<*But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'*>> (Galatians 2:14).

Regained that one. The ultimate objective is restoration of the offending brother or sister to the path of discipleship. It is not about settling a personal dispute as that should always be of secondary importance. This is similar in analogy to be willing to go out and recover the lost sheep. The Lord's brother writes in similar vein: <<*My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins*>> (James 5:19-20).

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.

Matthew 18:16

The evidence of two or three witnesses follows the guidelines in: <<*A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offence that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained*>> (Deuteronomy 19:15), and refers to witnesses of the subsequent confrontation described in this verse, not necessarily eyewitnesses to the original offence alluded to in v.15. This practice of having independent witnesses was carried forward into the early church: <<*This is the third time I am coming to you. 'Any charge must be sustained by the evidence of two or three witnesses.'* I warned those who sinned previously and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again, I will not be lenient>> (2 Corinthians 13:1-2), and: <<*Never accept any accusation against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest also may stand in fear*>> (1 Timothy 5:19-20).

Disputes should never be allowed to arise nor upheld purely on hearsay or church gossip. Evidence should be gathered in an appropriate manner. It is also important that witnesses should have no vested interest in the outcome other than that which is right based on Scriptural interpretation. Care also should be taken not to simply dismiss accusations where evidence is uncorroborated or circumstantial. All accusations should be dealt with in line with church policies and adjudged fairly, guided by prayer.

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.

Matthew 18:17

If the member refuses to listen to them. Such an attitude towards the body of believers could only come from someone who was not truly saved and therefore the leadership would have little option but to separate them from a position that could harm other believers. Paul held a similar opinion: <<*After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions, since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned*>> (Titus 3:10-11).

Professing Christians, who were never repudiated by the church, have perpetrated many evils throughout history, bringing shame to the body of Christ. The church therefore, and not just its leaders, has a duty to God to make a stand in such cases.

If the offending party of vv.15-16 will not repent after the matter has been brought before the entire church, then he or she is to be excluded from the fellowship and thought of as an unbeliever: <<*Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous*>> (Psalm 1:5). However, Jesus will always continue to seek out the repentant sinner in order to have them reconciled back to God: <<*They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out. Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?'*>> (John 9:34-35). Ultimately, the church should be looking to reconcile those that have transgressed: <<*But if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but to some extent – not to exaggerate it – to all of you. This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person; so now instead you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. I wrote for this reason: to test you and to know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ. And we do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs*>> (2 Corinthians 2:5-11).

A Gentile and a tax collector is used to describe those who are deliberately rebellious against God, or think nothing of earning a living dishonestly. The inference here is that such people should be expelled from the church. Just as a disciple has a responsibility to restore the lost sheep, there is a responsibility on leadership to drive out the wolves: <<*By rejecting conscience, certain persons have suffered shipwreck in the faith; among them are Hymenæus and Alexander, whom I have turned over to Satan, so that they may learn not to blaspheme*>> (1 Timothy 1:19b-20).

The greatest sin of this context is being a continuing stumbling block to others, which must include unwillingness to accept them back, a sin that results in damnation. The principle would apply to many kinds of sin, but in this context such a sin, whether committed by those expelled or by those expelling others, is most probably an unrepented and continuing sin against the community or its members.

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.

Matthew 18:18

Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Peter's foundational authority (Matthew 16:19) is extended to the entire community of disciples, giving them the authority to declare the terms under which God forgives or refuses to forgive the sin of wayward disciples. Bind and loose refer to the judicial authority of gathered Christians to decide cases on the basis of God's law. Refer further to comments made on Matthew 16:19.

God authorises the Christian judicial assembly that follows these procedures to act on the authority of heaven. The unrepentant person has already left God's way and cannot be restored without repentance. The verb tenses allow, although do not demand, the meaning that the context suggests - the earthly action follows the heavenly decree. By removing an unrepentant sinner from the Christian community, believers merely ratify the heavenly court's decree, they are removing branches already dead on the vine: <<*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit*>> (John 15:1-2).

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.'

Matthew 18:19-20

If two of you agree. Just as two or three are called as witnesses, Jesus also requires a similar group to pray into such situations as these so that those guilty of sin will come to repentance and therefore be restored: <<*If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one – to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that*>> (1 John 5:16). Jewish excommunication even in its long-term form was normally reversible if repentance took place.

I am there among them. Jesus affirms that he will be divinely present among his disciples as they seek unity in rendering decisions, which is rightly understood also as an affirmation of omnipresence and therefore of deity. An ancient Jewish saying promised God's presence for even two or three gathered to study his law. Here Jesus himself fills the role of the *Shechinah*, God's presence, in the traditional Jewish saying. Jewish teachers often called God 'the Place', that is, 'the Omnipresent One'; Jesus is: <<*God with us*>> (Matthew 1:23b).

XI.a.v Matthew 18:21-22 - Forgiveness

Jesus shows that there should be no limits to the amount of forgiveness that a disciple should show to others, since God forgives them all their sins.

Judaism also stressed forgiveness, although some teachers saw the need to limit forgiveness to three instances of premeditated sin, pointing out that repentance was otherwise not genuine. But Jesus here reverses the principle of vengeance, demanding unlimited forgiveness toward the truly repentant, showing grace reigns.

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.’

Matthew 18:21-22

How often should I forgive? Within Judaism, three times was sufficient to show a forgiving spirit, based on: <<*God indeed does all these things, twice, three times, with mortals, to bring back their souls from the Pit, so that they may see the light of life*>> (Job 33:29-30), <<*Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have threshed Gilead with threshing-sledges of iron*>> (Amos 1:3), and: <<*Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals*>> (Amos 2:6), thus Peter’s seven times allowed him to believe he had shown generosity. But true disciples of Jesus are to forgive without keeping count, i.e. seventy-seven times. This may echo and reverse Lamech’s boast of vengeance: <<*If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold*>> (Genesis 4:24). God alone, as the only one who can judge, will keep count of offences: <<*Is not this laid up in store with me, sealed up in my treasuries?*>> (Deuteronomy 32:34).

As many as seven times? The number seven indicates perfection or completion in Jewish thinking. Peter may also have had the advice of King Solomon on his mind: <<*Do not lie in wait like an outlaw against the home of the righteous; do no violence to the place where the righteous live; for though they fall seven times, they will rise again; but the wicked are overthrown by calamity*>> (Proverbs 24:15-16).

XI.a.vi Matthew 18:23-35 - The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

This is an account where a man is forgiven a huge debt that he could never repay. Yet he then goes and treats someone who owes him a far smaller sum of money quite appallingly, showing no grace or compassion for his debtor.

Jesus teaches that, since God forgives people their greatest sins, those perpetrated against God, then that person should be prepared also to forgive any transgression that is made against him. Those who fail to heed this teaching will face eternal damnation.

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

Matthew 18:23

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to. Jesus used many analogies to describe the Kingdom to his hearers. Refer especially to the Kingdom parables in Matthew Chapter 13.

Compared to a king. Jesus portrays the magnitude of God's grace in terms that would have stretched his hearers' imagination: everyone owes God more than they could ever repay. Galilæans were quite aware of some features of royal courts outside Palestine, and Jesus presents such a setting to emphasise the severity of the punishment. Later Jewish parables frequently include a king as a symbol for God's majesty.

Settle accounts with his slaves. Slaves can also refer to servants and bond servants, who frequently carried out business on their owner or employer's behalf. This is portrayed in the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30. However, the amount of money involved in v.24 makes this unlikely and is commented on there.

The tribute of Judæa, Samaria and Idumæa came to six hundred talents (Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 17.320). This fact starkly reveals the hyperbolic character of the illustration: the poor man owes the king more money than existed in circulation in the region at the time! By using this illustration that the king is God the Father, it demonstrates just how great the unpaid debt of sin is and just how magnanimous is the gracious gift of salvation to the debtor.

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

Matthew 18:24

Ten thousand talents. In OT times, one talent was a unit of weight equalling about 75 pounds or 34kg. In NT times, it was a unit of monetary reckoning, although not an actual coin, valued at about 6,000 drachmas, the equivalent of about 20 years' wages for a labourer, since a labourer earned usually just one denarius for each day worked: <<*After agreeing with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard*>> (Matthew 20:2 ESV).

In approximate modern equivalents, if a labourer would earn at least £6.31 per hour as a minimum wage, at 37 hours per week he would earn £12,140 per annum, and a talent would equal £242,800. Hence, ten thousand talents would represent an incalculable debt in today's terms, almost £2.5 billion, something only wealthy governments or a few super rich individuals could pay.

Servants could also be tax farmers working for the king; in earlier days some Gentile tax farmers would bid on collecting taxes for the king and could generally turn a profit, provided everyone paid their taxes. If not, they would be indebted for the shortfall that was owed. Business documents from Jesus' day sometimes depict peasants with such overwhelming tax indebtedness that they fled their own land.

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.

Matthew 18:25

Sold, together with his wife and children. This was a practice common in the ancient world: <<When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt. If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone. But if the slave declares, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out a free person', then his master shall bring him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life>> (Exodus 21:2-6), <<If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you for six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free. And when you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing-floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today. But if he says to you, 'I will not go out from you', because he loves you and your household, since he is well off with you, then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his earlobe into the door, and he shall be your slave for ever. You shall do the same with regard to your female slave. Do not consider it a hardship when you send them out from you free persons, because for six years they have given you services worth the wages of hired labourers; and the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do>> (Deuteronomy 15:12-18), <<Now the wife of a member of the company of prophets cried to Elisha, 'Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared the Lord, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves'>> (2 Kings 4:1), <<And there were those who said, 'We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others.' I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, 'You are all taking interest from your own people.' And I called a great assembly to deal with them, and said to them, 'As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!' They were silent, and could not find a word to say>> (Nehemiah 5:4-8). It was often as punishment for those whose debts could not possibly be repaid. Since the sale of these slaves would not even make a dent in the debt owed, but more importantly because of his compassion, the king cancelled the entire debt, lifting their burden of indebtedness and giving them a new chance of life.

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.

Matthew 18:26-27

Forgave him the debt. The forgiveness of such a massive debt, equivalent to £2.5 billion, is a dramatic illustration of:

1. The massive debt that people owe because of their sins to the holy, righteous God.
2. Their complete inability ever to repay such a debt: <<*For the wages of sin is death*>> (Romans 6:23a).
3. God’s great mercy and patience (v.26 and v.29), in withholding his immediate righteous judgment that all people deserve for their sins.
4. God’s gracious provision of Christ’s death and resurrection to pay the debt for sins and to break the power of sin: <<*but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*>> (Romans 6:23b).

The two central points of the parable are:

1. That the gift of salvation is immeasurably great: <<*how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him*>> (Hebrews 2:3).
2. That unless a person is comparably merciful to others:
 - a. God’s mercy has not had a saving effect upon him (vv.32-33).
 - b. He will be liable to pay the consequences himself (vv.34-35).

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.” 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 should 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.

Matthew 18:28-32

A hundred denarii. This was still a large amount, equivalent to about 20 weeks pay for a labour, or about £4,700 in today’s terms, but compared to the debt that the wicked servant himself owed (£2.5 billion), it was a relatively small amount.

You wicked slave! The servant’s unwillingness to forgive even this amount, even though he had been forgiven his own insurmountable debt, revealed the servant’s

true wicked character (v.32), and that he had not in fact been transformed by the forgiveness that his master had extended to him.

They went and reported to their lord. This is a reference to the role of the church, his fellow slaves, in dealing with such a person. It follows on to the teaching of exclusion from the church for the truly unrepentant.

I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me refers to a repentant sinner receiving the free grace and mercy of a compassionate God that should have led him to have a change of heart to reflect the same nature on the one who owed him a debt.

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

Matthew 18:33

Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave. God expects those who have received forgiveness from him to demonstrate the same compassion and love to others that they themselves have received. If they do not show mercy then God will rightfully withdraw his grace from them: <<*Again I saw all the oppressions that are practised under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed – with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power – with no one to comfort them*>> (Ecclesiastes 4:1).

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

Matthew 18:34

In anger alludes to the righteous wrath of God which will still fall upon those who are unrepentant and come before him in final judgement.

Handed him over to be tortured is a metaphorical allusion to eternal punishment that the wicked servant justly deserves: <<*while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*>> (Matthew 8:12), and: <<*He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*>> (Matthew 24:51).

Until he should pay his entire debt. Since the man refused to show compassion after being forgiven himself, even putting his fellow servant in prison (v.30), where he would have no opportunity to earn any money to repay the debt, he demonstrated that he did not deserve the grace he had been shown over his own much larger debt. Thus he deserved the eternal punishment that was announced as his due reward.

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.'

Matthew 18:35

If you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart. A transformed heart must result in a changed life that offers the same mercy and forgiveness as has been received from God: <<*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins*>> (Isaiah 40:2). Someone who does not grant forgiveness to others shows that his own heart has not experienced God's forgiveness.

Throughout Scripture, the heart refers to the centre of one's being, including one's reason, emotions, and will. True disciples who have been transformed by grace will be forgiving. However, there will always be some who continue: <<*Conceiving lying words and uttering them from the heart*>> (Isaiah 59:13d).

To forgive does not necessarily mean to forget what damage has been done but it does mean that a person will not hold it against the one being forgiven, nor will they refer back to it again in the future in anger or to make the other person feel bad about what they had done. Forgiveness means genuinely wishing the other person well, asking for God's blessing on their life, and moving on in one's own.

So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you. No one has the right to expect grace and mercy from God, for he bestows it freely according to his will. Those who choose not to show love for neighbour, who withhold grace and mercy from others, forfeit any hope of receiving mercy from God: <<*For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement*>> (James 2:13).