



Session 5: Matthew 18

for the week of October 31st

The Community of the King: Our Life Together

The gospel of Matthew is structured around five major teaching blocks of Jesus.¹ In chapter 18 we come to the fourth of these teaching blocks. When writing his gospel, Matthew was surely concerned with applying the teachings of Jesus to the newly forming church community. We see especially helpful insights for the church community in chapter 18 in navigating the tensions of following Jesus together. Two particular traits of life together in this new community are emphasized in this chapter: humility and forgiveness.

Jesus does not emphasize these traits in his teaching merely for the sake of people getting along in the new community. Rather, this new community takes on this particular shape of humility and graciousness because it reflects a new reality that has been broken into the world because of God's redemptive work in Christ. We live in humility, aim for restoration, and value even the "little ones" in the Christian community because our Father in heaven desires that none should perish (18:10-14). We forgive those who have trespassed against us because our Father in heaven has forgiven us (5:12, 18:23-35). So, unlike other societies and organizations in the world that operate in self-interest and obsess with social status, the new community of King Jesus seeks to display the grace of God we have experienced by treating one another with selflessness and pursuing reconciliation. In this the gospel of Jesus is proclaimed in word *and* deed within and through the church community.

The pursuit of this new reality is made possible by the grace of God in Christ and the empowering work of the Spirit. It's important to note Jesus' words in 18:3: "...unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." The word for "turn" here means to be turned around and experience an inward change. There is a call in these words to repentance and receiving the new way of thinking and living that Jesus offers. Richard France writes:

"Over against all conventional ideas of status and importance Jesus offered the model of the little child. The point was not any supposedly childish qualities of innocence or unselfishness but the status of the child at the bottom of the pecking order, subject to grown-up authority, dependent and powerless. To accept this lowest rank (humble himself) is to be great, and to treat the least prominent as the most important is to echo the attitude of Jesus. Such an attitude is not natural; it involves a radical *change*."²

Similar words of Jesus are recorded in John's gospel: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."³

Entrance in the kingdom and participation in the new *ekklesia* ("assembly") that Jesus is building requires an inner transformation. It requires seeing and receiving Jesus for who he is, admitting our own powerlessness and need for grace, and embracing the way of Jesus as he meets us with his own example of gentleness and self-sacrifice. This seeing and receiving (faith) then results in a transformation in how we see the world and the sort of pursuits with which we busy ourselves in this world.

¹ The phrase "when Jesus had finished these sayings" or a variation on that phrase signals the close of each of these teaching blocks.

² Richard T. France, "Matthew," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 927-928.

³ 3:3.

As such, the beauty and otherworldly nature of this new community of the King is not found in our striving to be nice people but in our experience of the graciousness of God in Christ at work in transforming and shaping our lives. Our life together in humility and graciousness begins with and is sustained by our dependence on God's grace and the faithfulness of God's promises to us in Christ.

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Discussion⁴

- 1) How does Jesus subtle reference to the disciples as "sons" of the King change how those with faith in Christ and belonging to God's kingdom are meant to think of themselves? How does this thinking prepare the way for the discussion to come in chapter 18?
- 2) Given what took place in the preceding chapter, why would the disciples have asked this question about greatness in kingdom of heaven (18:1)? What do the other gospel writers suggest about the motivation for their question (see Mark 9:33-34 and Luke 9:46)?
- 3) In Matthew 18:2–4 Jesus begins instructing his disciples about the culture of their new community by redefining greatness as humility. What does this passage teach us about humility? How does this contrast with the way that the world views greatness?
- 4) Since Matthew 18:3 states that disciples must be humble like children, it is likely that the “little ones” mentioned in Matthew 18:5–6 (and perhaps also Matt. 18:10–14) are all true disciples (see also Matt. 10:40–42). According to these verses, how does Jesus want his people to treat every other believer?
- 5) Matthew 18:7–9 tells us what to do about our own sins, and Matthew 18:15–22 tells us what to do about the sins that other professing Christians commit against us. For each situation, identify (1) what we are commanded to do, and (2) the goal in addressing sin. In what sense are these loving commands and goals?
- 6) What is the main point of the story in Matthew 18:23–35? How is a bitter and unforgiving disposition wholly inconsistent with how God treats us through the cross?
- 7) What are some practical ways that we can pursue humility and forgiveness in our relationships with other believers?

Prayer

Spend some time in prayer together, praying for each other's needs and that the Spirit will grant us a deeper understanding of the goodness and authority of Christ and empower us for living as representative of his kingdom in this world.

⁴ Some questions adapted from *Knowing the Bible: Matthew* by Drew Hunter.