

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 63, Chapter 18

We began chapter 18 last week and immediately the topic became humility. It is that humility is to be perhaps the chief virtue for anyone hoping to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Verses 1 - 14 are essentially an examination of Godly qualities that the Lord expects to exist within the body of Believers. Some are expressed positively; some negatively. That is, just as with the Law of Moses, there are some do's and some don'ts. And at first there is explanation with encouragement, but in verse 6 it quickly turns to a warning with a penalty. When we back away and see this from the far view, we can discern that if we adopt the mindset that Yeshua is prescribing, then we will avoid the inner urge to judge others too harshly or too quickly. Thus when we get to verse 10 we learn that ironically one of the most loving and charitable things we, as Believers, can do for the brother or sister that has sinned against us is to confront them with their sin, but also to treat he or she in a way that acknowledges their continuing value to God. And this part of the teaching of Christ prepares us for what comes next starting in verse 15, which is about how we are to deal with a member of our Believing community that has sinned, and failed, and to do so justly, forthrightly, and in the manner God would have us.

Perhaps an at-times overlooked background of Matthew chapter 18 is that it is really about how a community, a congregation, of Jesus followers is to think and to behave. The idea is that no man is an island unto himself. If we, as individuals, trust in Yeshua then we automatically belong to multiple levels of community beginning with our local fellowship and extending to the entire worldwide body of Believers. So never are we to isolate ourselves from the world or from fellowship,

but rather we are to engage both. We are simply not allowed to flee from our relationships, our obligations as members of the Kingdom of Heaven, nor from our sins and transgressions. And all this is to be driven by the quality of sincere humility that makes the good of the many above what is good for us individually.

So to carry out Yeshua's command to love our fellow man as much as we love ourselves (as taken from Leviticus 19:18), then we must humble ourselves as is natural for a little child, but not so much for an adult. What does this look like as it plays out? It looks like Christ's life. We are to be in imitation of this, and knowing what this looks like represents one of the primary reasons for the Father sending Yeshua to us. Talking about emulating the invisible God in Heaven is great in theory; but how does this transpire on a human level among people living on a deeply flawed planet earth? The Law of Moses sets down a few hundred case examples; Yeshua fleshes it out as our model.

Let's re-read a portion of Matthew chapter 18.

RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 18:1 - 14

Yeshua begins a discourse that is in response to a wholly inappropriate question from His disciples. Which of the 12 disciples was the one to speak it, we're not told. But the idea is that this was a broad discussion that had been ongoing for some time (Mark 9 characterizes the discussion as an argument). And the question involved rank and status; that is, which of the 12 disciples was the highest in rank and therefore greatest in status. Although I can't prove it, it seems to follow that this argument was precipitated by Jesus singling Peter out as the Rock out which the assembly of Believers shall be cut.

Thus it was a concern among the disciples about who would be considered the greatest in leadership rank in the Kingdom of Heaven and so Yeshua pointed to some little children nearby as an answer by means of an object lesson. He even embraces one of the children and says that the disciples should become like them in the sense of being humble as opposed to focusing on issues of personal status. I want to emphasize: it is the noticeable humble quality of a child (a small child) that is to be emulated... nothing else. The disciples were not commanded to become naive or childish. Nor were they to discard their adult roles and put little children on the same level of authority. Nor were little children thought to be founts of wisdom or spiritual knowledge.

Thus says Yeshua the greatest in the society of the Kingdom of Heaven will be those who display the greatest amount of humility (as seen in small children). Now it is important especially in the modern Western world to think of the small children in Yeshua's illustration in terms of how they were viewed in the 1st century in Jewish society or all context for understanding our proper response to this instruction is lost. In that era little children were to be seen and not heard. They had very little status even within their own families (and of this they were acutely aware). It is not that they were disposable, or that they weren't loved or cared for or seen as of less worth to God. But... they definitely were seen as having less practical value to the economy of the family. They produced far less work than their older siblings or their parents, and they had no wisdom to offer. Families then were not designed to cater to every need and whim of the small children. Still little children were vulnerable and easily led and so needed protection. Needless to say that is somewhat different than children are viewed in the West today, where children are often see as having equal importance and value as adults. In fact, haven't we all heard the constant refrain in our time that children are so valuable that we must put them above all other concerns and give them the best we have to offer and so in many ways they rule the roost. Whatever they want is to be given to them (at times before they even know they want it) or we may harm their precious little psyches forever. Little children today, therefore, don't necessarily reflect the quality of selfless humility of 1st century Jewish children as Yeshua is using to teach the disciples.

At first, Jesus is talking about literal little children. But as He often does, He begins to morph the object of a lesson into something deeper than what is immediately apparent. The Jewish religious leaders especially did so regularly and such a procedure later gained some labels for just how far the object lesson might transform into something deeper or even become mysterious. So the ***P'shat*** level Jesus was speaking (the simplest most literal level of His message) was to say that God loves and values little children both from their physical human aspect and from their spiritual aspect. And whomever would think to harm these innocent little ones from either aspect would be judged for it. But as His discourse continues, the ***Remez*** level of His teaching (the hint of something deeper) emerges. Yeshua says:

^{CJB} **Matthew 18:5** *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me;*

Clearly the identification of the child with Jesus becomes part of the equation as

does the Believing person that welcomes even a small child into the fold. So now we have to be alert that the term "little one" or "little child" takes on a deeper meaning as a person of any age that is new to trust in Christ, as well as at the same time keeping the meaning of literal little children. This concept is very difficult for most Christian Bible commentators (and perhaps most Bible students) to process because they see such matters from an either/or perspective. That is, Yeshua's statement can only mean literal little children or it can only mean all new Believers. But when we put on the mindset of 1st century Jews (this would have been Yeshua's mindset) then such a stark choice disappears. Meanings of profound, even inspired, words can be comfortably taken on multiple levels.

So what this amounts to is that little children that are drawn to Jesus can be seen as His legitimate followers just as much as adults of the age of accountability can. But for new Believers of all ages, just like little children, they have such little knowledge and experience that they can be misled rather easily. Or they can have their hopes and trust dashed either accidentally or on purpose nearly effortlessly. Thus great care must be taken of new Believers (sometimes in Christian-eze called Baby Christians) especially by the leadership. New Believers must... again like small children... be protected but also educated. One of the reasons in the West that it is a legal requirement for all children to go to school is the overriding need for education so that they can mature and operate successfully in a complex society. If they should not be educated (or they are improperly educated) then they will not mature or thrive as they should. It operates exactly the same for a new Believer. A new Believer needs to immediately begin an education program. The most basic trust in Yeshua that may amount to little more than being attracted to Him might be sufficient to get one's toe in the door to the Kingdom of Heaven. But maturation is expected. Or as the author of the Book of Hebrews puts it:

^{CJB} **Hebrews 5:12** *For although by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the very first principles of God's Word all over again! You need milk, not solid food!*

All to say that this is the context for interpreting this passage of Matthew 18. So what comes next is all important. In verse 6 it is not just that new Believers and little children who are drawn to Christ are to be treated humbly and with care, but Yeshua uses very strong language to warn those who would, for whatever their motivation, cause these vulnerable ones to stumble. He then declares "woe" to the one who sets a snare to cause that stumble. To emphasize His point, He

urges that anyone who seems to see these "little ones" (again, literal children or new Believers) as easy prey to lord over in an unhealthy way, take whatever drastic action is needed to avoid it.

Yeshua then turns the tables by saying that those who are thinking to set snares for the "little ones" are actually setting snares for themselves. Thus if what a snare setter sees with his eyes is the impetus for determining to set a snare for the little ones, better to rid oneself of the eye that causes it. The same holds for the foot, because the foot represents no longer just the thought but now the action itself. Let me be clear: this is an expression. By no means is Jesus suggesting that anyone mutilate themselves so that they are not snare setters. It is simply strong language to make His point because the penalty for failing to heed this warning is so severe:

CJB Matthew 18:8 ...*Better that you should be maimed or crippled and obtain eternal life than keep both hands or both feet and be thrown into everlasting fire!*

From the far view, this is about those who would cause scandals to the Believing community, especially if those scandals are taking advantage of people of only small faith, or immature faith, who are naive and unguarded...and of children who are too innocent and helpless to protect themselves.

The punishment for doing something that Christ regards as despicable and as therefore disqualifying one from the Kingdom of Heaven, is for that snare setter to be thrown into Gei-Hinnom. Gei-Hinnom is the Valley of Hinnom in Jerusalem that was used as the city garbage dump. Fires burned there 24 hours a day 7 days a week. Animal carcasses, even body parts of humans, were thrown into it. Everything that nobody wanted anymore wound up in Gei-Hinnom. The fires stunk so bad that sulfur was thrown onto it to try and somewhat mask the wretched odors. So the image is of what Christianity would call Hell. There could be no worse fate than to be thrown into that burning trash heap.

The warning of the most gruesome punishment imaginable is followed up with:

CJB Matthew 18:10 ¹⁰ *See that you never despise one of these little ones, for I tell you that their angels in heaven are continually seeing the face of my Father in heaven.*

This is a really intriguing statement. Yeshua seems to be saying that these "little ones" have Guardian Angels in Heaven. And in fact the majority of Christianity has taken it to mean just that and made it part of Church doctrine concerning angels. I find that hard to argue against. Further, some ancient Jewish sources indicate more or less the same belief about angels that goes so far as to say that each person gets a personal angel. Psalm 91 says:

CJB Psalm 91:10-11 ¹⁰ *No disaster will happen to you, no calamity will come near your tent;* ¹¹ *for he will order his angels to care for you and guard you wherever you go.*

The Targum of Jacob 2:5 says: "I am the angel who has been walking with you and guarding you from your infancy". Philo comments as much. The Book of Jubilees 35:17, the Targum of Job 43:10 and a number of other extra-biblical Jewish works confirm the Jewish belief that either there are many Guardian Angels that help people as needed, or that each person is assigned their own individual angel (I'll let you be the judge about just how to take the meaning). However unless what Yeshua uttered about little ones and their angels is merely an allegorical expression (unlikely) then God on earth confirms that as Believers we indeed have angels watching over us because that's the full time job of this particular group of angels! But even more they are allowed to be in God's very presence (when a Jew speaks of the face of God or the face of a person it means God's or that person's presence). I want to repeat: as Believers we have angels watching over us. Yeshua's words seem to be saying that EVEN the little ones (children and new Believers) are no exception and they, too, have been given Guardian Angels. So it's not like at some point, after a time, a Believer finally earns a Guardian angel. A Believer at any point in our walk with Jesus is assigned an angel, so no one should have any pride about having an angel look out for them; we all do. Yet is Jesus saying that God worshipping Jews who do NOT trust in Christ do NOT have a guardian angel? In full disclosure in absolute certainty I can tell you... I don't know.

After this statement some ancient Greek manuscripts add a verse 11, while others don't. Verse 11 (when included) says:

KJV Matthew 18:11 *For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost.*

We find that same sentence, word for word, in all Greek manuscripts of Luke 19:10. So it is pretty clear that some later Christian editor thought that adding it to

Matthew 18 brought some needed point of clarification or maybe a more smooth segue from verse 10 to verse 12. It certainly doesn't change the meaning of the passage in any way.

Christ's question to open verse 12..."What do you think"... is used to get His disciples to pause and reflect. He asks a question that on the surface is simply rhetorical; that is, He expects full agreement with His premise. He must have determined that by now, because of all that the disciples have been taught by Him, and watched Him in action, that it was time for them to begin to use that reservoir of knowledge and experience to draw some conclusions on their own. It's a question from Yeshua that most folks who have been Believers for any length of time have heard and it is that if a person owned 100 sheep and one wandered away and got lost, would you leave the other 99 and go to find it? A modern person in the risk averse West of the 21st century might say (if they were honest): goodness NO! Why would I put 99 sheep at risk for the sake of one who certainly didn't wander away by accident; it meant to. What we have to do is to keep in sight the core of the matter: it is still all about the "little ones". So we have to keep as our context that the issue is what happens to a little one...a child or a new Believer... who strays. Thus the stray sheep is a metaphor for a little one. This also means that we have to read this statement as inferring that the 99 sheep were mature enough and sufficiently wise NOT to stray and so it enables the Shepherd that watches over them to leave them for a short time, and to go off and find that one immature and unwise sheep. So even though often this story is thought to include the element of risking the well being of the other 99 to go rescue the 1, we soon find out that this is not the point at all (nor is risk to the 99 even contemplated).

Verse 13 says:

^{CJB} Matthew 18:13 *And if he happens to find it? Yes! I tell you he is happier over it than over the ninety-nine that never strayed!*

The point is the joy over the one that was recovered, and not about risk for the 99 who were stable. Think of it this way: you and your wife and perhaps another adult couple bring your 5 year old nephew to Disney World. As you are walking and talking and taking in the sights, you suddenly realize that the child is missing. What would you do? You'd leave the adults who were mature and wise enough to care for themselves and go to find that child. After searching for nearly an hour, you finally find him afraid and crying, but safe and sound. Your relief and

joy is overwhelming, and there was no thought of risk to the 3 you left behind as you searched to find the 1.

This illustration and comparison of sheep to God's people, and of shepherds to the leadership of the people, which Christ used wasn't invented by Him from thin air. In fact Yeshua must have had Ezekiel in mind especially because Ezekiel was one of the Prophets that spoke extensively about the Latter Days and the End Times. And Yeshua was quite self-aware of who He was and that His advent signaled the time of the first of two Latter Days. I want to pause here for just a moment to remind us all that Jesus was a human being and His mind operated like a human being... the perfect, ideal human being. Therefore He regularly spoke using well-worn Jewish cultural expressions, He employed the literary norms for His day such as Parables, He used illustrations of daily life and their familiar surroundings to help explain spiritual matters (and especially what the Kingdom of Heaven is like). He had unparalleled knowledge of the Holy Scriptures (what Christianity calls the Old Testament). He used all these things in His earthly ministry, so it should come as no surprise that He would mimic the words that His Father gave to His Prophet Ezekiel. Words that many, if not most, Jews had heard at one time in their lives. So let's take a few minutes to hear Ezekiel to help put Yeshua's words into an even greater context.

READ EZEKIEL CHAPTER 34 all

Hopefully you can see now where Christ is coming from in this matter of going after the 1 while leaving the more responsible 99. It is fascinating to me that the final words of Ezekiel chapter 34 are:

^{CJB} **Ezekiel 34:31** ***'You, my sheep, the sheep in my pasture, are human beings; and I am your God,' says Adonai ELOHIM.***

Did you catch it? The sheep and shepherd illustrations throughout these inspiring words are plainly said to be "human beings"; so there is no doubt as to the meaning. But also notice in Ezekiel that God is disgusted with the shepherds (the leadership) for NOT going after those who strayed and wandered from the flock. This doesn't necessarily mean that the strays are those who have renounced God. Rather it more means those who are immature, unwise (even foolish) and wandered away without realizing the negative impact and the dangerous consequences of their actions. At the same time, God says He lays the earthly responsibility on the leadership to try to rescue those who strayed. But

should the leadership fail, God still doesn't abandon the wandering sheep. Thus back in Matthew 18 verse 14 we read:

^{CJB} **Matthew 18:14** *Thus your Father in heaven does not want even one of these little ones to be lost.*

Folks, between Ezekiel and Yeshua we have been given a manual for how the Believing community is to handle the matter of those members who have sinned and fallen away. But the manual continues in verse 15.

Ben Witherington III astutely characterizes verses 15 -20 as a trouble-shooting handbook for recovering a fellow Believer or for disciplining a follower of Christ. So let's read this short section.

RE-READ MATTHEW 18:15 - 20

None of the other Gospel accounts contains this narrative; only Matthew. No doubt this is because of its uniquely Jewish cultural worldview. It is important that we set the context for what this passage is and is **not** talking about. This is NOT talking about criminal activity. The offenses are not only between humans, mostly they fall into the category of shaming someone or violating the unwritten Jewish etiquette or fairness code of the day. It is quite difficult for modern Westerners to wrap our minds around the matter of shame and honor. We have only in recent times gained a rather horrifying glimpse into a societal structure of shame and honor as the rise of extremist Islam has taken the cover off of the most negative consequences of such a system that is the norm for the Middle East, as we hear of honor killings, blood libels, beheadings, and so on. I don't have time to go into the several aspects of such a societal system but you can go the TorahClass.com lesson 19 of 1Kings for an overview of it and of the other 2 basic societal structures that exist.

In the West we operate in a system of guilt and innocence that necessarily revolves around a stable system of legislated and written rights and wrongs and what happens when someone is found guilty of committing a wrong. We call this codified system of rights and wrongs "laws". So when someone steals another's car, or commits a battery, lies in court, or murders we don't think in terms of someone committing a trespass against us, or offending us, or sinning against us. Rather they have broken the law and in such a system there is a perpetrator and a victim. But the shame and honor system operates differently. In that

system there is an unwritten, but thoroughly understood, system of behaviors and etiquette that rides in parallel with that system's criminal law code. That is, the offense has nothing to do with right and wrong but rather one person doing something to another that brings shame upon that other. A person who has been shamed will do nearly anything to recover his honor because shame and honor represent a fundamental social status.

Ever since Mt. Sinai, God has been moving Israel away from a shame and honor system and into a guilt and innocence societal system. The Law of Moses is that God-given code of right and wrong, and just as importantly it specifies what is to be done to the person that is found guilty of committing the wrong. And the heart of that determination is what is known in the West as Lex Talionis: proportional justice. Therefore a person found guilty of stealing can't have his hand cut off or lose his life as a punishment. But a person who takes a life can, proportionally, lose theirs. And much in between. Yet in the 1st century, Jews still had remnants of shame and honor embedded not in their laws but in their culture. And most of the cultures that surrounded them were either shame and honor systems or, like the Jews, it had some elements of shame and honor in them.

So what we find in this passage is shame and honor terms being used, and the offenses spoken of between people are generally shame and honor-like (although not exclusively); it's a kind of mix. More specifically, this passage deals with things that the community of Believers ought not do to one another or to a display a wrong behavior that is not criminally illegal per se, but ought not be done anyway because they violate The Father's holiness code as well as bringing shame on a brother. Thus it's not that what is being prescribed by Christ is necessarily meant to bypass the criminal justice system of the Jews (or of the Romans for that matter), but rather these are the types of offenses that God finds wrong or inappropriate and so need to be handled within the community of Christ-worshippers. Thus because these offenses rise to a level of not achieving spiritual ideals, then they involve discipline that can rise to being banned from membership in the group, or being removed from a leadership position (but not necessarily from the community), or even (in a shame and honor manner) being shunned because they refuse to confess and to conform.

So with that understanding, look at verse 15. It begins: "Moreover if your brother commits a sin against you..." Instead of using the word sin as is done in the CJB, other Bible versions might use the term trespass or offense. Again, we must think of this as the breaking of community rules, which are to be based on God's

holiness code (as found in the Law of Moses), but not as acts of criminality. At the same time we must not take the cases that are used as examples as hypothetical matters. These things must have been quite real and were happening, and so were causing Yeshua concern. So the trouble-shooting handbook Jesus speaks to His disciples sets down a system for dealing with these offenses, and it begins by quietly, privately, confronting the offending party. It really is a one-on-one situation in hopes that it can be dealt with without causing humiliation or shame but also remedying the matter.

This necessarily means that the offender either doesn't realize what he or she has done, or they feel justified in their action, or have yet to confess it and repent. So both parties sit down and talk about it, and the offended party explains why he believes he has been offended. At least so far in this passage the matter seems to be something that happened between 2 individuals as opposed to a member of the Believing community who displayed a wrong attitude or behavior but didn't necessarily harm a particular person or bring shame to them. The hope of this private confrontation is stated in the final words of verse 15: "If he listens to you, you have won your brother back". That's the hope of this protocol of trying to recover a brother. The goal is reconciliation and not discipline or punishment.

We must not try to remove this narrative from the context of the sheep and the shepherds, or from the "little ones". They are organically connected. So, the brother who feels offended is to deal with this matter privately in imitation of the shepherd and is to find and recover the offender... the sheep (the little one) that has wandered away. Hopefully no further action is needed. Let me add that depending on one's personality and temperament, this is not a terribly hard thing for the offended to do... or it seems impossibly hard. There are those of us who can confront rather easily, and others that would rather chew their own arm off than confront another person over an unpleasant matter. The challenge is that there really is no room given within the Believing community for anyone of any temperament to avoid such a private confrontation. I think part of the reason for this disregard of personality traits is that the person who won't confront doesn't just move on as it seems from the outside they have. Rather they tend to harbor a building resentment that no one else may know about it. This resentment can suddenly explode and lead to that person becoming an offender, him or her self, as he can no longer contain it. So it is always best to handle matters of personal offense immediately and forthrightly.

Verse 16 now goes to step 2. If step 1 (a private confrontation) doesn't work, then

the offended is to take 1 or 2 other brothers with him and (still in private) attempt to get the offending brother to confess his offense. In other words, gentle persuasion has failed and now the matter becomes more public. This system of dealing with personal offenses is, again, not something exclusive that Christ is bringing to the table. In the Talmud, Yoma 45c, we find these words:

"Samuel said: Whoever sins against his brother, he must say to him, I have sinned against you. If he hears, it is well; if not, let him bring others, and let him appease him before them".

So Judaism has always seemed to contain this fundamental system of handling offenses between people that revolves around private confrontation in hopes of reconciliation, but then steps it up to bringing some witnesses to bolster the case against the offender in hopes he will finally give in and confess.

We'll stop here for today and continue next time with unpacking this very important passage that still has such pertinence among the body of Believers even in the 21st century.