

## **Matthew 17-20: Creating the Beloved Community**

### Focus on Matthew 18

Two significant events frame the next section of Matthew, the Transfiguration (Matt 17:1–13) and the entry into Jerusalem for the final events of Jesus' public ministry (21:1–11). Within this framework, Jesus teaches in three major blocks. The first block of teaching focuses on his own mission (17:14–20) and its relations with civil authority (17:24–27). The second, central section, delineates what is expected of members of the community of disciples (18:1–35). This chapter forms the fourth large segment of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel, which concludes with the formulaic expression at 19:1 that concludes all the major blocks of teaching. There follows a series of exchanges between Jesus and various interlocutors treating the demands that Jesus makes of his disciples (19:3–20:34). Each of these sections merits attention, but the focal point of this segment of the study will be the discourse on the life of the Church in ch. 18.

#### *Transfiguration and Healing (17:1–23)*

Matthew begins this segment of his gospel with three pericopes derived from Mark 9:1–32. Whether the story of the transfiguration reflects some historical experience or not, its narrative role is clear. At its core the story reports that the disciples had an experience of the divinely ordained character of the person and mission of Jesus, who was on a level with Moses and Elijah (17:3). Yet the disciples did not fully understand that this divine mission had to involve suffering and death (17:22–23). The second part of the story (17:9–13 = Mark 9:9–13) offers a clarification about the relationship of Jesus to the prophet Elijah, whom some contemporaries expected to return before the coming of the Messiah. Jesus now says that Elijah had already

come. Matthew (17:13) makes clear what is simply implied in Mark, that the expected Elijah was in fact John the Baptist. Through this identification followers of Jesus made sense of the relationship between Jesus and John. Although Jesus had been baptized by John (Matt 3:13–17), he was not a disciple of John. Instead John was Jesus’ prophetic forerunner.

The account of the healing of a demon-possessed boy (17:14–20) offers an abbreviated form of the Markan story (Mark 9:14-29), omitting the details of the boy’s illness and the difficulties in healing. The story fits into the current context primarily because it illustrates the lack of robust faith on the part of the disciples (17:20), who could not effect a cure.

#### *The Mission of Jesus and Civil Authority (17:14-27)*

Matthew adds here a story not found elsewhere in the gospels, no doubt reflecting a particular concern of his community. The question is whether the disciples should be paying the “Temple tax” of two drachmas, roughly the equivalent of two days’ wages for an ordinary worker. Although Jews paid taxes to support the Temple while it was standing, the situation envisioned here was what probably was in place after the destruction of the Temple by Roman forces in 70 CE at the climax of the Jewish revolt against the empire. The Matthean community, which attempted to abide by Torah as observed by pious Jews (Matt 5:17–20; 23:3), would probably have been subject to this tax. Gentiles in the community may, however, have objected to paying it. The story offers the action of Jesus as a precedent. Like the children of the ruler (17:25), Jesus’ followers are not liable to the tax, but they will pay it so as not to cause scandal (17:27).

#### *The Discourse on the Church (18:1–35)*

The discourse on life in the Church (the “ecclesia,” or “assembly,” mentioned in 18:17) combines some sayings of Jesus found in Mark (18:1–9 = Mark 9:33–48) about humility and avoiding scandal; a parable found also in Luke (18:10–14 = Luke 15:3–7); sayings about reconciliation and forgiveness (18:15–18), reinforced by a parable about an unforgiving servant (18:21–35). The concerns of the discourse reflect a community of disciples who have tried to live by the teaching and follow the example of Jesus, but have been confronted with the realities of human frailty. The situation of Matthew’s “church” is not that far removed from the many communities of disciples that have followed in its footsteps.

#### *Humble as a Child* (18:1–5)

All the Synoptic gospels have a version of the saying about children (Mark 9:33–37; Luke 9:46–48), though with slightly different nuances. A core element in the tradition is the injunction to “receive a child in the name of Jesus” (Matt 18:5, Mark 9:37; Luke 9:48), an admonition to disciples to care for those who need it most. The saying then acquires an ethical dimension in which disciples are urged to become like children in some way. In Mark the connection between caring for children and being a servant to others (Mark 9:35) is only implicit. Luke makes the connection more explicit by saying the “least” among the disciples is the greatest (Luke 9:48). Matthew makes the most explicit ethical appeal, by saying that disciples need to become childlike (18:3) and interpreting that injunction in terms of humility (18:4).

#### *Avoiding Scandal* (18:6–9)

In Mark the sayings about scandals or “stumbling blocks” (Mark 9:42–48) are separated from the command to receive children (Mark 9:37) by a brief story of a rival who casts out demons in Jesus’ name. Matthew connects the two sayings directly. In Luke the sayings about scandal come in a totally different context (Luke 17:1–4).

This block of sayings in Matthew and Mark has two parts. One is the warning not to cause “little ones” to stumble, with its chilling threat that it would be better to go swimming with a millstone around one’s neck (18:6). The “little ones” here are not confined to the children mentioned in v 5. They are ones “who believe in me,” that is, members of the community of disciples on which the chapter focuses.

The second part focuses on how a believer might cause oneself to stumble (18:8–9). With the hyperbole that was characteristic of his sayings, Jesus admonishes, if it causes offense, cut it off! This set of sayings seems to focus more on individual commitment and the need to take decisive action to keep on the straight and narrow; but in the context of this discourse about life in community, the evangelist may have in mind the need to keep the community itself pure. Other early Christian leaders, such as Paul, similarly recommended that community members who were bad examples be cut off from the fellowship (1 Cor 5:1–13), and the evangelist will soon describe a process for doing the same thing in his community.

#### *The Lost Sheep* (18:10–14)

Matthew relates a parable of a shepherd who goes in search of one lost sheep, which also appears in Luke (15:3–7). The contrast between the two passages illustrates how parables of Jesus could take on different meanings in different contexts. Luke’s is an illustration of compassionate forgiveness, as indicated by the punch line (Luke 15:7) comparing the joy of

finding the sheep to the joy in heaven over the repentance of a single sinner. For Matthew, the story illustrates God's desire not to lose one of the "little ones" in his ecclesial flock (18:14). That reference to little ones picks up the theme of vv 5 and 6. The saying thus balances the implied threat of the saying on cutting off the scandalizing member (18:8–9). The goal is not to lose anyone!

#### *Dealing with Sin (18:15-20)*

The concern to preserve community continues with some practical advice about dealing with a "brother who sins" (18:15). One must first try direct conversation (18:15), then intervention with other members of the community (18:16), and only then is the matter to be brought to the whole assembly, which may take the radical step of expulsion, labeling the offender as a "gentile and tax-collector" (18:17).

A series of sayings reinforces the community's authority to take such drastic action; the decisions of the community on earth are binding in heaven (18:18). The verse focuses more on the community's authority than on that of a singular leader, as at 16:13–20. Much of the history of the Christian church, especially since the Reformation, has revolved around the tension between the principles of governance articulated in these two texts.

Grounding the saying about communal authority, Jesus affirms the importance of community solidarity. When two disciples agree on something, they will be heard in heaven (18:19) and where two or three are gathered in his name, he is with them (18:20).

#### *A Parable (18:21-35)*

The previous parts of the chapter dealt in various ways with the difficulties of life in a religious community, balancing the ideals of humility and forgiveness with the need for some disciplinary mechanisms. The parable of the lost sheep in the center of the chapter put the emphasis on the need for forgiveness. The concluding section, consisting of a command to forgive “seventy times seven” (18:22) and a parable, makes the same point.

The parable works through an antithetical image of one who does not show compassion. Some details of the story may sound fantastic to modern ears, including a “servant” who had a debt of 10,000 talents, an enormous sum of money (= 60,000,000 drachmae). While there is no doubt some exaggeration, people in the status of “slaves” in antiquity were often given significant managerial responsibilities and could in fact become very wealthy. In this parable, a servant with such a level of debt was himself the recipient of his master’s leniency when he could not pay it, but he failed to show compassion to his fellow servants, who owed him a piddling amount. At the end he receives his just desserts as the master subjects him to torture till he pays his debts. The application to the way in which divine judgment works is direct and clear (18:35).

#### *A Series of Disputes (19:3–20:34)*

After the discourse on the Church, Matthew returns to his Markan source and portrays Jesus engaged in controversies. The Pharisees first challenge him about his teaching on marriage (19:3–9, cf. Mark 10:2–12). Jesus responds with his prohibition of divorce, echoing Matt 5:31–32, with the Matthean exception clause. The saying on divorce leads to his proclamation of a radical call to devotion and sexual restraint (19:10–12), invoking the image of the voluntary eunuch, one who gives up sex and family life for the sake of the kingdom of God.

The image of children, prominent in ch. 18, surfaces again as Jesus calls his disciples to childlike simplicity (19:13–15, cf. Mark 10:13–16). A rich young man asks what he must do to have eternal life, to which Jesus responds with a challenge to radical poverty (19:16–22, cf. Mark 10:17–31), which leads to further reflection (19:24–26), including the famous saying that it is easier for a camel to go through the “eye of a needle” (a gate in the walls of Jerusalem) than for a rich man to enter the kingdom (19:24). Jesus assures Peter and his other disciples that they will receive a reward for their sacrifice (19:27–30).

Jesus goes on to tell a parable that makes the simple assurance of heavenly reward more complicated. The story, unique to Matthew, describes the varied recompense received by laborers in the vineyard hired at different times of day (20:1–16). The parable, which may simply reflect economic reality -- scarce labor is more expensive -- makes the point that rewards are ultimately in God’s hands.

After Jesus reminds his disciples once again that he must suffer and die (20:17–19, cf. Mark 10:32–34), the subsequent narrative illustration introduces a dramatic example of the ways in which disciples might miss the point of Jesus’ promises, as the mother of the sons of Zebedee tries to assure her sons’ future status (20:20–28, cf. Mark 10:35–45). The section ends with Jesus curing two blind beggars (20:29–34, cf. Mark 10:46–52).

*Questions for reflection:*

1. Matthew’s treatment of life in the “Church” balances advice and guidelines for discipline. How does the discourse of ch. 18 relate to the life of Christian community as you have experienced it?

2. Several parables appear at key points in this part of the gospel. How do they compare with the parables that appear elsewhere in Matthew? What do you make of the differences between Matthew's version of the parable of the Lost Sheep (18:10–14) and the Lukan version of the story?
3. The teaching about divorce and sexual restraint (Matt 19:1–12) is striking, and in some ways distinctive within the gospels. What value does it have for today?

*Suggested Reading:*

Bridget Illian, "Church Discipline and Forgiveness in Matthew 18:15-35," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37 (2010): 444-450.

Armand Puig i Tàrrach, "The Glory on the Mountain: The Episode of the Transfiguration of Jesus," *New Testament Studies* 58 (2012): 151 – 172.

F. Scott Spencer, "Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Matthew's Jesus," *Interpretation* 64 (2010): 368-378.