

Session 13

Jesus teaches about Community Living: Mt 18

Context

In the immediately preceding chapters, Mt 14-17, we saw how opposition to Jesus grows as the end of the Gospel is in sight and the shadow of the cross begins to loom. The present focus, Mt 18, looks at the inner life of the Gospel audience—their relationship to one another, how to deal with difficulties and tensions.

Teaching of Video Session 13

As a result of this video, we see how:

- Matthew's Jesus addresses issues of scandal and status-seeking that seem to plague the Gospel household;
- Some Jesus followers exclude others identified as the "little ones" and "children";
- Jesus invites all the self-scrutiny;
- Matthew articulates the practice (perhaps operating in Mt's own day) of how to respond to the one who "sins" against community members.
- Jesus teaches about unlimited forgiveness

Mt 18: Jesus' Advice to a Divided Household

Mt 18 is divided into two thematic sections, linked but with different emphases:

- Part I 18.1-14 is concerned with the "Little Ones"
- Part II 18.15-35 concerns the approach that the Gospel household takes with the 'brother or sister' who sins

Part I—18.1-14: The “Little Ones”

In Matthew’s day, the “child” (Gk. Παιδίον) was a social and political ‘nobody’ (not gender specific) under the age of 12.

- The child and the associate virtue of humility become the essential quality of reception of God’s reign:

“Truly [Amen I say to you] I tell you, unless you change (στρέφω = ‘turn’) and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever becomes humble (ταπεινός = Mt) like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (18.3-5)

- Caring for the Gospel household’s “little ones” –who remain unspecified—is central. Dire consequences await those who do not look after the “little ones”.
- Their care is reflected in God’s care of them and summarised in the parable of the lost sheep (18.10-14).

Harrington notes,

‘...the disciples’ question about greatness in God’s Kingdom fits into first-century Judaism. Jesus’ response about becoming like a “child” challenges cultural assumptions about social status. The child is not so much a symbol of sinlessness or dependence here but rather an example of a social “nobody”. The child had no status and no social importance. Jesus challenges his followers not to think in terms of social hierarchies. The “humility” that he recommends involves putting aside such considerations and being willing to become a social “nobody”....’

Gospel of Matthew, 266.

Part II—Mt 18.15-35: The Household Member Who Sins

Key points to note in Part II include:

- v15: The ‘sin’ enacted by a Jesus member is directed to the household or specific members : ‘Sins against you (sing.)’.
- A three-step process (practice of the Mt household; perhaps Essence/Qumran influence?) is advised:
 - 1. Point at the issue privately
 - 2. Take ‘two or three’ others as ‘witness’

- 3. v17 “... If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church (*ekklesia*); 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.”
- Mt’s Jesus’ attitude to ‘Gentile’ and ‘tax-collectors’ was inclusive. Is this also the attitude to the one who remains recalcitrant?
- Purpose of the process was intended to restore the sinner to the *ekklesia*.
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- Noteworthy in verse 18-20 is the role of the household and the presence of Jesus within it (‘two or three’)
- 18.21-35: The parable of unlimited forgiveness should typify Gospel members’ conduct to the one who sins.



Children playing with nuts. Marble panel from a sarcophagus, Roman artwork, 3rd century CE. From Vigna Emendola on the Via Appia.

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Summary

We note in Mt 18:

- The chapter is shaped by the present experience within the Matthew’s Gospel audience and the memory of Jesus.
- Dealing with the “sinner” begins as a personal one-on-one encounter, but then moves on to engage the whole “ekklesia” (assembly). This appears to be the practice within Matthew’s ‘household’.
- Forgiveness is central to the ongoing life of the faith community.
- Tensions and difficulties were present in Matthew’s day. It was not a “golden era” when all seemed perfect. Followers of Jesus, members of Matthew’s household, were flawed and imperfect.

- The “little ones” needed protection. These were not only children, but anyone who experienced social or religious ostracizing.

For Reflection

- What happens in your experience when difficulties and tensions arise within your faith community? How are they dealt with?
- What can we learn from this chapter of Matthew for today’s Church?



Funerary stele for the freedman Marcus Asellius Clemens,
his wife, and their freedman

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