

Living in the Shade of the Cross:  
Sin, Repentance, Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Matthew's Christian Community.

by Richard Jizba

✿ Introduction ✿

What can we say for certain about the fourth of the five great discourses in the Gospel According to Matthew? We know where it comes to an end, because all the discourses end with the essentially the same phrase<sup>1</sup>:

*"When Jesus finished these words ..."*<sup>2</sup>

While the end of the discourse is obvious, its beginning is not. Does it begin with the first verse of chapter eighteen with the disciples' question about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Could it begin even earlier with material at the end of chapter seventeen? Many commentaries treat chapter eighteen as a unit, beginning with the first verse and continuing to the end with the concluding verse that begins chapter nineteen. Yet most do so without any great justification, and one suspects that beginning with verse one is a matter of convenience.

If scholars are uncertain about the beginning, is it clear what this discourse about? It has been called "*The Great Community Discourse*"<sup>3</sup> and "*Matthew's Advice to a Divided Community*"<sup>4</sup> – which suggest very different perspectives about the nature of the community: can it be both great and divided? "Great and unified" or "struggling and divided" would seem to

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew uses this wording to mark the end of each of the discourses:

- Sermon on the Mount: 7:28a "When Jesus finished these words... "
- Mission discourse: 11:1a "When Jesus finished giving these commands ..."
- Sermon in parables: 13:53a "When Jesus finished these parables..."
- Eschatological discourse: 26:1a "When Jesus finished all these words..."

<sup>2</sup> Matt 19:1. Unless otherwise noted, all passages used in the paper are from *The New American Bible : translated from the original languages with critical use of all the ancient sources : including the revised New Testament and the revised Psalms*, (New York: Catholic Book Pub. Co, 1992), 436.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2002), 329.

<sup>4</sup> William G. Thompson, *Matthew's advice to a divided community*, (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970), 297.

express more of consensus. Other titles take a less committed stance calling it “*The Church Order Discourse*”<sup>5</sup>, or just simply the “*The Sermon on the Church*”<sup>6</sup>. It is interesting to note that when scholars write about the issue of forgiveness in the Gospels most of them will include some part of this discourse. Indeed, the word for ‘church’ is mentioned once in this text, while at least half of it is devoted to a question about forgiveness. Why then, is this called “*A Sermon on the Church*” and not “*A Sermon on Forgiveness?*”

Some of the material in this discourse is also found in Mark and in Luke<sup>7</sup>, and some of it is even repeated from Matthew’s own writing. Whatever the source, the ‘borrowed’ passages are always found in different settings or contexts, implying that Matthew assembled these teachings, dialogs, and parables into a literary unit, and that he did so with a purpose. But the theme or the development of his thought may not be so easily discerned. Some topics<sup>8</sup> stand out, but how do each of the units relate to one another and to a common theme? On these points, there is no common consensus.

There seems to a tendency to treat each unit separately. One scholar will focus on the disciples’ question about greatness, another on the parable of the lost sheep and yet another on the saying about the inevitability of sin. With this piecemeal approach it is easy to ignore the

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<sup>5</sup> *The New American Bible : translated from the original languages with critical use of all the ancient sources : including the revised New Testament and the revised Psalms*, 436.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Edward Brown, *An introduction to the New Testament*, 1sted. (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 878.

<sup>7</sup> The corresponding passages are:

- The second passion prediction: Matthew 17:22-23m Mark 9:30-32, Luke 9:43-45.
- True greatness in the kingdom of heaven: Matthew 18:1-4, Mark 9:33-37, Luke 9:46-48.
- Temptations to sin: Matthew 18:5-9, Mark 9:42, Luke 17:1-2.
- Parable of the lost sheep: Matthew 18:10-14, Luke 15:3-7.
- A brother who sins: Matthew 18:15-20, Luke 17:3-4.

For a careful comparison of these passages from Mark and Luke with Matthew 17:22-18:35, see Thompson, *Matthew's advice to a divided community*, 297. What is obvious from the comparison is the extent to which Matthew has reworked this material. These passages in Mark and Luke are not particularly helpful in determining Matthew’s train of thought. In this instance it is the vertical analysis within Matthew that is most helpful.

<sup>8</sup> Not everyone agrees that there is a unifying theme. See the discussion in E. J. Ramshaw, "Power and Forgiveness in Matthew 18," *Word & World* 18, no. 4 (1998): 397-404.

question of Matthew's editorial purpose and to interpret the text out of context. Ramshaw,<sup>9</sup> for example has argued that the use of the material on forgiveness has been misapplied in pastoral practice to situations of domestic abuse, *because* it has been used out of context.

Given these questions, how should one read and understand this discourse? Since it uses the word church (*ekklēsia*) and concern for 'brothers' it obviously has something to do with Matthew's community. It is equally obvious that it is also a discourse about forgiveness, or to be precise about the tension between sin, excommunication, reconciliation, and forgiveness. These are not new themes, but few commentators seem to study them in the context of the entire discourse. Part of the problem is that they make pick one of the themes and skip the passages which do not appear to manifest it. The result is that they miss the interplay of the thematic ideas Matthew is developing. Jeffrey Gibbs and Jeffrey Kloha, for example, have written a paper about studying Matthew 18:15-20 in its context<sup>10</sup>. They identify 18:1-4 as the interpretive key to the entire chapter, yet they completely skip any discussion of 18:8-9. Yet as we will see, 18:8-9 and 18:15-20 certainly do share a common theme. The aim of this review is to identify and follow the themes throughout the discourse, examining each passage in context in order to see how Matthew may have weaved these themes together to develop a coherent message for his church.

Given the issues noted so far, it should be no surprise to find that scholars often disagree on how to divide up the text. Following in large part the work of Thompson<sup>11</sup> the material here will be divided into seven sections:

1. 17:22-23 The gathering and in Galilee and the second passion prediction.
2. 17:24-28 The question of the Temple Tax
3. 18:1-4 Who is the greatest?
4. 18:5-9 Sin and exclusion in the community

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> J. A. Gibbs and J. J. Kloha, "'Following' Matthew 18: Interpreting Matthew 18:15-20 in Its Context," *Concordia Journal* 29, no. 1 (2003): 6-25.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson, *Matthew's advice to a divided community*, 297. Thompson

5. 18:10-14 The parable of the lost sheep
6. 18:15-20 The brother who sins: embracing the repentant
7. 18:21-35 The parable of the unforgiving servant.

Within each section I will explore how Mathew develops the sub-themes of sin, excommunication, reconciliation, and forgiveness under the main theme of life within the Christian community and show how such a reading provides unity and coherence to the entire discourse.

### ☞ Where to begin? ☞

William Thompson has argued that the fourth discourse encompasses 17:22-18:35, rather than the more traditional identification of 18:1-35. His argument is based on several factors. First is the geographical reference in 17:22, which Thompson sees as the concluding episode of the Galilean ministry. Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, withdrawing to Capernaum from Nazareth after John was arrested (4:12). After all the significant events of the Galilean ministry which moved Jesus and his disciples throughout Galilee, Matthew says one final time that they were gathering in Galilee (17:22) and that they came to Capernaum (17:24). This somewhat abrupt geographical reference could be interpreted as ending the Galilean ministry where it began: in Capernaum in Galilee. At the end of the discourse he leaves Galilee for Judea and Jerusalem (19:1).

While Matthew is generally following Mark at this point, Thompson also sees Matthew making important editorial moves to structure his material. He notes that there are four narrative phrases involving time or sequence conjunctions which link 17:22-28 with 18:1:

- 17:22a As they were gathering in Galilee
  - 17:24a When they came to Capernaum
    - 17:25b When he came into the house
      - 18:1a At that time

which is a very similar narrative pattern to the material immediately after the Sermon on the Mount and may indicate a deliberate narrative pattern:

- 8: 1a When Jesus came down from the mountain
  - 8:5a When he entered Capernaum
    - 8:14a Jesus entered the house
      - 8:16a When it was evening

After the Sermon on the Mount these four verses introduce three miracle healings followed by a reference to the healing activity in the Servant Song of Isaiah<sup>12</sup>. The text from Isaiah effectively joins these separate and somewhat unrelated healing stories together. Is Matthew attempting the same narrative process here? Should we read back from 18:1 to understand 17:22-28?

Finally, Thompson also notes that each passion prediction and its following verses fit the same initial pattern: passion prediction, a dialogue, and sayings to the disciples.<sup>13</sup> Taken together, Thompson's arguments demonstrate that it is quite plausible that Matthew intended 17:22-18:35 to form a coherent literary unit. But without strongly identifying a theme or purpose that provides unity between 17:22-28 and 18:1-35, the case flounders.

❧ The gathering in Galilee and the second passion prediction. ❧

For Matthew's audience<sup>14</sup> the passion and resurrection of Jesus is a powerful image. Without elaboration it none-the-less brings to mind many fundamental truths of the faith: that the triumph of Jesus' resurrection was preceded by his humiliation, degradation and crucifixion; that he died for our sins so that we could be reconciled with God; that our sins are forgiven and we live now in hope and in the dawn of the kingdom of heaven; that we should not yield to hatred even in the face of injustice. With so few words, so many ideas are raised. Which ones will be developed?

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<sup>12</sup> Matt 8:17b "He took away our infirmities and bore out diseases."

<sup>13</sup> 16:21-28, 17:22-18:20, 20:17-28.

<sup>14</sup> Hopefully for all Christians!

Although Matthew follows (Mark 9:31) in using a simplified version of the passion prediction, is interesting that there is no mention of the chief priests or the scribes in this version. Were they left out because they weren't relevant to a discussion about relationships within Matthew's community? When using material from Mark, Matthew is a meticulous editor. He tends to edit out extraneous details, but will also change the text to suit his setting and style. He obviously changed the reaction of the disciples. No longer do the disciples fail to understand what Jesus is saying and fear to question him as they did in Mark. They have learned from Jesus' rebuke of Peter after the first passion prediction. Now they accept the teaching and are simply and reasonably sad. If Matthew used Mark's simple version of the prediction, then we may assume he kept it unchanged because it suited the theme he was developing.

So what message is Matthew communicating? Perhaps, already knowing something about chapter eighteen, we can note these particular aspects: Jesus did not grasp at power; he accepted humiliation. Jesus did give in to anger; he said his blood would be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins. By prodding his readers to consider the passion and resurrection Matthew sets the tone for the discussion of humility, sin, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the Christian community. It is a teaching for the community and not a time to discuss outsiders, even priests and elders.

#### ☞ 17:24-28, The question about the temple tax ☞

The temple tax episode is unique to Matthew. It contains a typical Matthean trait of highlighting Peter's roles as a leader or spokesman within the disciples: The collectors of the temple tax see Peter in just this role. They accept that he can speak for Jesus. But this is an aside in the narrative. The episode also raises an interesting historical note because the Gospel was written after the destruction of the Temple. Did the episode originate from the time of Jesus'

ministry or was it created later by Matthew to address an important issue for his community? If it was Matthew's creation, why was it important? Although these are interesting historical questions, they may be secondary to the main point of the episode and to its function in developing the theme of the discourse.

It is Jesus' question to Peter: "From whom do the kings of the earth<sup>15</sup> take tolls or census tax? From their sons or from others?"<sup>16</sup> and the exchange that follows which develops the theme. Simply put, the question is '*who are we, what is our relationship our king, the Father in heaven?*' The answer is that Jesus and the disciples are "sons", children of the Father. The remainder of the episode is good narrative, but the question and answer are the key.

☞ 18:1-4, Who is the greatest? ☞

Having established that the disciples are children of the 'King', Matthew modifies the corresponding passage from Mark to explore what this means for the disciples -- and by extension for his community. What Mark narrates as a private discussion among the disciples about who among them was the greatest in (9:34), is turned by Matthew into a much broader question posed directly to Jesus: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" As noted above, Matthew seems to have used four narrative introductions to tie this material together (17:22a, 24a, 25b, and 18:1a). It was argued that the fourth line in the pattern should illuminate the reading of the earlier passages. It does seem as though the question "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" requires us to know about the the status of the disciples. Why ask who is the greatest if it's not relevant to anyone in the narrative? One can't help but admire Matthew's skill in working with, and transforming the material he received from Mark.

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<sup>15</sup> Harrington notes that 'kings of the earth' alludes to Ps 2:2 and contrasts with 'king of the universe.' Daniel J. Harrington, *The gospel of Matthew*, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 429.

<sup>16</sup> The New American Bible uses "subjects" rather than sons, but in the footnotes mentions that the translation "sons" is also possible.

Matthew often cites passages from Isaiah to show how the prophecies have been fulfilled in Jesus. Recall that in the *Suffering Servant* passage from Isaiah, God says that because of his servant's quiet suffering for the justification of many, he will receive his portion among the *great* (Is 53:12). The disciples question thus reflects directly upon that lesson of the passion: humility, patience and forgiveness even in times of great suffering and trial.

Much has been written about Jesus' example of the child (*paidion*) to demonstrate greatness. There is a long tradition equating the child with innocence and purity<sup>17</sup> (Salvesen 2006, 307-326). But that metaphor is probably not the intention here. Children were probably thought to exemplify those who lacked power and influence rather than those who were innocent and pure.<sup>18</sup> In that time and culture, children were totally dependent on the care of their parents and families. So Jesus' answer that "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" is not a call to innocence, but to have the attitude of a child and to be dependent upon the Father in heaven. It is a cautionary statement for those who will have to exercise leadership in the community. Perhaps in reflecting on this they will reflect on the leadership of Jesus. He willingly died an unjust death to make them children of God.

Thompson argues that this passage consists only of verses 18:1-4 because it begins with the disciples' question in verse one and ends with Jesus answer in verse four. Many commentators include 18:5 with this passage, while others read it as a transitional saying that moves the developing thought into the next passage. Indeed, the reason many commentators want to keep 18:5 with 18:1-4 is because it also includes the word *paidion* (child), noting that in 18:6 Matthew switches to from 'child' to 'little ones' (*mikroi*). Yet this approach seems to rely

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<sup>17</sup> A. Salvesen, "Without Shame or Desire : The Pronouncements of Jesus on Children and the Kingdom, and Early Syriac Attitudes to Childhood," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 59, no. 3 (2006): 307-326.

<sup>18</sup> For a good discussion of the meaning of the child in this passage see Gibbs and Kloha, *'Following' Matthew 18: Interpreting Matthew 18:15-20 in Its Context*, 6-25.

exclusively on the vocabulary issues while ignoring how Matthew develops the theme. In 18:5 there is a transition away from the child as an example for greatness to ‘one such child’ as someone to be received in Jesus’ name. Most translations begin 18:6 with the conjunction ‘but whoever’ which Thompson notes forms a typical contrast or opposition construction elsewhere in Matthew.<sup>19</sup>

The decision about how to handle 18:5 is subtle, but not trivial. If Matthew is developing a theme it is important to follow his argument carefully and not to chop up the text into disparate sayings. Is this simply a nice saying about openness toward children, or is it a metaphorical reference to receiving ‘little ones?’

#### ☞ 18:5-9, Sin and exclusion in the community ☞

This passage, more than any other, is a stumbling block<sup>20</sup> for commentators. If they lose the theme at any point in this discourse, it will happen here. Having established that humility rather than pursuit of power and influence are the mark of greatness in the community, Matthew acknowledges that Christians will not simply fail to live humbly, but may do just the opposite and cause scandal and lead others astray. When this happens, he says, the community must act.

Commentators agree that ‘*little ones*’ in this context refers to disciples, at least in a generic sense. Matthew makes that metaphor explicit in 10:42: “*And whoever gives only a cup of*

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<sup>19</sup> Examples from *Holy Bible : New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 2001), 726.

- 18:5-6, And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. **But if anyone** causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin ... (NIV)
- 5:19, Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, **but whoever** practices and teaches these commands
- 12:32, Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, **but anyone** who speaks against the Holy Spirit ...
- 16:25, For whoever wants to save his life[a] will lose it, **but whoever** loses his life for me will find it.

<sup>20</sup> Harrington, *The gospel of Matthew*, 264. notes that the term *skandalon* occurs in some form six times in this passage. A *skandalon* (scandal) is a stumbling block and when it is used in a religious context refers to something that results in sin or a loss of faith. Much has been written about this word and it’s role as a keyword that provides thematic unity. Since this discourse seems illustrate the development of an idea, there is real danger in trying too hard to associate the theme with words rather than the larger context. It is more useful, I think, to understand the words in the context of the theme rather than vice versa.

*cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple--amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward.*" In the context of 18:6 however, it may be a more limited reference to the newly baptized or those Christians who come from the margins of society, catechumens, or at least those who are not leaders or influential members of the community.<sup>21 22</sup>

The focus of the passage is not on "the little ones", but on the one who leads others astray or tempts them to sin: "whoever causes...", "...better for him...", "...woe to the one...". Then suddenly in 18:8 Matthew reuses with modifications a passage from the Sermon on the Mount<sup>23</sup> and the references are now in the second person rather than the third: "*if your hand or foot ... if your eye ...*". In the Sermon on the Mount, this saying is in the context of Jesus' teaching on lust and adultery. In that context it can be read as personal admonition in the form of hyperbole. However, reading it as a strictly personal admonition in the context of 18:5-9 is problematic. If Matthew is building an argument about life in the community, why would he make such an aside at this point? Reflecting on this issue, Addley identifies four approaches to interpreting 18:8-9<sup>24</sup>:

1. A literal and individualistic interpretation in which a part of a man's body tempts him to sin and therefore should be cut off.
2. A literal and relational interpretation in which a part of a man's body tempts a fellow to sin and therefore should be cut off.
3. A metaphorical interpretation with a focus on individual action in which the body parts are metaphors for someone in the community who leads someone astray. The one who is so tempted should disassociate himself from that person.

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<sup>21</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 762.

<sup>22</sup> Thompson, *Matthew's advice to a divided community*, 107-109.

<sup>23</sup> In the Sermon on the Mount, the eye is listed first and the foot is not mentioned: <sup>27</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'<sup>28</sup>But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup>If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna. <sup>30</sup>And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body go into Gehenna. (Matt 5:27-30)

<sup>24</sup> W. P. Addley, "Matthew 18 and the Church as the Body of Christ," *Biblical Theology* 26 (1976): 12-18.

4. A metaphorical and corporate interpretation in which the body parts are metaphors for someone in the community who leads others astray and so community should expel and exclude that person.

Since the subject in the first part of of this passage (18:6-8) is about a sinful and corrupting member of the community, Addley's fourth interpretation seems to be the most appropriate. One problem however is that Matthew does not use the "body of Christ" image which we associate with Paul.<sup>25</sup> Hultgren briefly reviews the use of word 'body' to refer to communities of various sizes in Greek and Roman literature from New Testament times, but notes that this does not mean that Paul borrowed the term<sup>26</sup>. He may have used it because of its Eucharistic context. If it appears that the word 'body' as a metaphor for community was in common use at the time that Matthew wrote, there is no reason to say he would not use the idea, even if he did not explicitly use the phrase. Indeed, it appears he used this idea once (18:8-9) and perhaps even twice (5:27-30). In all likelihood, however, Matthew did what all good writers and homilists do: he employed a useful saying in two different contexts.

Addley's fourth interpretation is not new. It is exactly the interpretation given to this passage by Chromatius of Aquileia, a fourth century bishop:

"This sentence of the Lord can faithfully be understood about any one of us. Yet in cutting off a hand or foot or in plucking out an eye, it is clear that family relations or unbelieving ministers and leaders of the church are signified.

And so by 'hand' we understand that priests are signified; like a hand their work in every area is necessary to the body of the church ... By 'foot' we recognize that deacons are signified. In busying themselves with the sacred mysteries of the church they serve the body like feet ... And so, if hands or feet of this sort, that is, any priest or deacon, either through heretical faith or through depraved living, has become a stumbling block to the church, the Lord orders that such a man be plucked from the body of the church and thrown out."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> 1 Cor 10:17, 12:12-26, Col 1:18, Eph 4:4,12 etc.

<sup>26</sup> A. J. Hultgren, "The Church as the Body of Christ : Engaging an Image in the New Testament," *Word & World* 22(2, 2002)124-132 (2002)

<sup>27</sup> Chromatius, Tractate on Matthew 56:2-4. English translation from Manlio Simonetti and Thomas C. Oden eds., *Matthew 14-28*, Anonymous (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 344. p. 72)

It should be noted that Thompson, whose work on this discourse has been so important, mentioned option four as a possibility yet seems to have more seriously considered option two,<sup>28</sup> for which Addley takes him to task.<sup>29</sup> Why he wonders, after pronouncing a “woe” on the offender in 18:7 would Jesus then relent and suggest that such a man correct his own fault and presumably remain part of the community? Unfortunately there doesn’t seem to have ever been a common interpretation of this passage: John Chrysostom, who was contemporary with Chromatius, used the third interpretation<sup>30</sup>. Twentieth century scholars Davies and Allison also object to the fourth interpretation because Matthew never explicitly connects the body of Christ to the church as Paul does.<sup>31</sup> Again, one might simply comment that Matthew did not use it anywhere else. He seems, based on the context, to have used it here in 18:8-9.

If interpretation four is correct and exclusion from the community (excommunication) is what was intended, what supporting evidence can we find for this practice? There is a passage in the *Qumran Community Rule* (aka *Manual of Discipline*) which “refers to stumbling blocks and to being cut off from the membership of the community:

Cursed in the idols of his heart be he who comes to enter into this covenant but sets before his face his iniquitous stumbling-block to draw back by means of it, and when he hears the words of this covenant blesses himself in his own heart with the words ‘It will be well with me even though I go in the stubbornness of my heart’! (1 QS 2. 11b-14)

Let him be cut off from among the sons of light in his drawing back from God through his idols! And let his iniquitous stumbling-block apportion his lot among those accursed for ever!” (1 QS 16b-17)”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Thompson, *Matthew's advice to a divided community*, 117,144.

<sup>29</sup> Addley, *Matthew 18 and the Church as the Body of Christ*, 12-18.

<sup>30</sup> “He is not saying this about human limbs. Far from it. This is said about friends, about relatives, whom we regard in the rank of necessary limbs. Jesus also said this earlier, and now he says it again. For nothing is so harmful as bad company. ... So he orders us with great emphasis to cut off those who are harmful to us ...” Chrysostom, *Gospel of Matthew*, Homily 59.4 (Translated in Thomas C. Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, p. 71)

<sup>31</sup> Davies and Allison, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 765.

<sup>32</sup> Addley, *Matthew 18 and the Church as the Body of Christ*, 17.

And in the New Testament Paul reprimands the community in Corinth for failing to excommunicate a man guilty of immorality:

<sup>1</sup>It is widely reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of a kind not found even among pagans--a man living with his father's wife. <sup>2</sup>And you are inflated with pride. Should you not rather have been sorrowful? The one who did this deed should be expelled from your midst. (1 Cor 5)

Although the man has committed a very serious sin, the sin per se is not what has upset Paul. He is upset that the community failed to take seriously, and respond to, a corrupting influence in their church.



Moving through the passages so far, it appears that Matthew has developed his thought as follows:

1. The disciples (or members of the church) are children of the Father because of the atoning sacrifice of Christ in the passion.
2. As the Father's children they are part of the kingdom of heaven.
3. To be great in the kingdom of heaven, one has to be dependent on God.
  - a. One should not seek independent power, status, or influence.
4. Misuse of power, especially when it leads others away from God is a great evil.
  - a. The powerful tortured and killed Jesus in his passion.
5. Those who misuse their power, status, or influence should be excluded from the community.

At this point the discourse has reached a climax, but the tone is harsh: excommunication has been put forth as an appropriate response in the defense of the community against members who would destroy it or harm some of its members. Does this mean that the disciples or members of Matthew's church should emulate Qumran community and invoke harsh curses on the offender? How does this fit with Jesus teaching about anger in 5:21-22, let alone the kind of discipleship described by the entire Sermon on the Mount? This very issue was addressed long

ago by Theodore of Heraclea<sup>33</sup>, in his commentary on our next passage:

“But see, he says, that you do not at all despise those forced out of the church for wickedness. He does not want them to be cast out with any hatred or curse. But he spares those who are guilty of some damage or disorder and often hardened by their own depravity. It is as if it were possible to see even these change again for the better.”<sup>34</sup>

The second part of the discourse takes up this issue. It is a commentary and perhaps even corrective on the necessity of acting when sin inevitably threatens the community. Communities are made up of individuals and Christian communities, at their best, are exemplified by their concern for each individual member regardless of their worldly status or importance. Thus when one member harms another it is a serious matter, especially when the harm affects the other’s relationship to God. But the sinner is also of concern to the community. For the sinner is also, as a baptized member of the community, a child of God. Therefore the community experiences tension. They must protect the faith of one member against the sin of another, yet they must be concerned about the sinner and work for his repentance and reconciliation.

In the remainder of the the discourse Matthew uses Jesus’ teachings and parables to explain to his community the motivation that should inform why they discipline sinful members. He will show them how to live as an imperfect community who none-the-less takes to heart Jesus’ teachings about anger, retaliation, and love of both neighbors and enemies.

☞ 18:10-14, The parable of the lost sheep ☞

This parable also occurs in Luke 15:1-7, but in a different context: after the Pharisees and Scribes have complained because Jesus eats with sinners. There are other differences as well which Thompson<sup>35</sup> summarizes nicely. It is interesting to note that Matthew’s version holds open the possibility that the shepherd will not always be successful in finding the sheep that has

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<sup>33</sup> late third or early fourth century.

<sup>34</sup> Theodore of Heraclea, Fragment 105. English translation from Simonetti and Oden, *Matthew 14-28*, 73.

<sup>35</sup> Thompson, *Matthew's advice to a divided community*, 174.

strayed: “*And if he finds it, amen, I say to you, he rejoices... .*” Obviously Matthew realizes that some members of the community will be leave and never return, which fits the context in which he is using this parable.

The first verse, 18:10, begins with a strong admonition: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones.” And the last verse, 18:14, ends with an equally strong warning: “...*it is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost.*” Which has considerable implications for a community which prays “*Our Father in heaven ... your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*” (6:10).

Matthew’s reference to the ‘little ones’ is vague once more. It refers to the disciples, but to which ones: those who are led astray, the one who was expelled, or any disciples in general. Certainly the one who is expelled may be despised. Whoever it is, the note about “their angels” indicates that they have a special relationship with the Father.

In the context of the theme as it is set forth here, this parable reinforces the interpretation noted above by Theodore of Heraclea: “He does not want them to be cast out with any hatred or curse,” which assumes that the little ones are those cast out<sup>36</sup>. If it is a bridge between a passage on excommunication and a passage on a brother who sins, then it is a powerful reflection on the will of God as reflected in the atonement and carried out through the passion of Jesus – which set the tone for the entire discourse (17:22).

#### ✿ 18:15-20, The brother who sins: embracing the repentant ✿

The first verse of this unit includes a phrase that Harrington notes is absent from many important manuscripts and may have been an addition of a scribe to harmonize 18:15 and

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<sup>36</sup> It can also be understood as an admonition against indifference when a unimportant member of the community begins to drift away, which picks up some of the sub-themes: all of the disciples or members of the church are children of God (17:26b) and the implied warning against feelings of superiority that flow from the instruction to be humble (18:4). As noted in an earlier footnote, this is the approach of Gibbs and Kloha, who relegate 18:8-9 to the status of an aside. Gibbs and Kloha, *Following' Matthew 18: Interpreting Matthew 18:15-20 in Its Context*, 6-25.

18:21.<sup>37</sup> Apparently the recognition of this phrase as an addition has come rather recently. There is a long tradition of including it and very few recent English Bible translations omit it. The verse reads:

- If your brother sins, reprove him ...  
or
- If your brother sins *against you*, reprove him ...?

The logic of the discourse as it has been set forth here, would indicate that the phrase “against you” seems out of place. If the meaning of 18:8-9 is that the community, faced with a member who is leading others astray, may have to expel that person, then reproving such a sinner when a problem first occurs would seem to be everyone’s responsibility. How can you care for the little ones if you only worry about sins committed against you personally? As Harrington notes, the nature of the sin is unspecified, but most likely had implications for the entire community since the next steps in the process of dealing with a sinner specify that it should not remain a private exchange but that two or three others may be consulted and then, if necessary, the ‘church’ should become involved.<sup>38</sup> For a good review of argument for and against the originality of “against you” see the appendix at the end of paper by Gibbs and Kloha<sup>39</sup>. They think the evidence so far slightly favors its inclusion, but note that making a decision one way or other is still very challenging.

In 18:15-17 Matthew outlines a process for working with a sinful brother, which in this context is most likely a member of the community. Although the three steps are unique to Matthew, they may draw individually on existing practices. P.K. Mathew<sup>40</sup> notes that the first step has a direct parallel in Luke 17:3 and is also similar to Paul’s instruction in Gal 6:1. The

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<sup>37</sup> Harrington, *The gospel of Matthew*, 268.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, 268.

<sup>39</sup> Gibbs and Kloha, *'Following' Matthew 18: Interpreting Matthew 18:15-20 in Its Context*, 20-25.

<sup>40</sup> P. K. Mathew, "Authority and Discipline : Matt. 16.17-19 and 18.15-18 and the Exercise of Authority and Discipline in the Matthean Community," *Communio Viatorum* 28, no. 3 (1985): 119-125.

second step, “take one or two others along with you”, is probably derived from Deut 19:15b “a judicial fact shall be established only on the testimony of two or three witnesses” which is also used by Paul in 2 Cor 13:1 and 1 Tim 5:19. The third step parallels the instruction of Paul in 1 Cor 5:4-5 and perhaps 1 Tim 5:20.

Since the instruction in Deuteronomy requires two or three witness and Jesus’ instructions in 18:16 requires only taking along one or two others to confront the sinner, it seems likely that the person who is bringing the others along will be acting as a witness. One might assume that he is therefore a witness to a sin against a third party and not necessarily the one against whom the sin was committed.

The purpose of this three step process outlined in 18:15-17 has as its goal the repentance of the errant brother and his restoration and reconciliation to the community. The goal is never to “convict’ the sinner or even to establish the ‘rights’ of the brother against whom the sin occurred.”<sup>41</sup> But if the brother rejects attempts at reconciliation and remains unrepentant, he can not remain part of the community. But he may not be forced to accept correction. He is allowed his free will: “if he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a gentile or a tax collector.”

The injunction to treat the unrepentant sinner as you would a gentile or a tax collector is somewhat ironic. Generally the Jews avoided Gentiles and they certainly shunned tax collectors<sup>42</sup>, yet almost everyone knows that Jesus had contact and interaction with both groups and that he had followers from both groups. Since Gentiles and tax collectors could join the Christian community, it would seem that the community ought to be open to the return of a shunned member if he eventually listened and repented

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<sup>41</sup> Gibbs and Kloha, *'Following' Matthew 18: Interpreting Matthew 18:15-20 in Its Context*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> J. M. Ford, "Reconciliation and forgiveness in Luke's Gospel," in *Political issues in Luke-Acts* Anonymous (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 80-98.

In 18:19 Matthew reuses the phrase he used in 16:19:

Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven;  
and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

He reuses it exactly except that here it is prefaced with the solemn declaration: “Amen, I say to you,” and the verbs in the Greek, indicate a plural you<sup>43</sup>. There are two primary issues that scholars discuss with respect to this verse: ‘what is it that the church may bind and loose, and how does this authority correspond to the authority given to Peter in 16:19.

The notes on verse 16:19 in the New American Bible state that “there are many instances in rabbinic literature of the binding-loosing imagery. Of the several meanings given there to the metaphor, two are of special importance here: the giving of authoritative teaching, and the lifting or imposing of the ban of excommunication.” Hiers tries to make a strong case that binding and loosing are commonly associated in the New Testament and in the intertestamental literature with exorcisms and other issues related to Satan or demons<sup>44</sup>. Although he provides examples of this, he does admit that ascribing this meaning to either 16:19 or 18:18 is problematic because of the context. Unintentionally perhaps, he demonstrates the importance of maintaining the context.

In 16:19 Jesus gives Peter the ‘keys to the kingdom of heaven’ as well as the authority to bind and loose. The context for Jesus’ declaration was Peter’s insight about who Jesus was. This lends support to the NAB note that teaching authority is part of what Jesus bestowed on Peter. In the context of 18:18 there is no hint that teaching authority might be included. Indeed, in the context binding and loosing needs to be understood as the power to excommunicate and perhaps the power to more generally discipline members and forgive sins. Notice that at each step in the process, if the sinner acknowledges his sin and repents, he may remain in the community. It is

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<sup>43</sup> From the footnote in the New American Bible.

<sup>44</sup> R. H. Hiers, "'Binding' and 'Loosing' : The Matthean Authorizations," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 2 (1985): 233-250.

only at the last step where the church may take definitive action, which is excommunication. The procedure is very consistent with the parable of the straying sheep. The aim is to bring the wayward brother back into the community, although he may refuse to be found. Then the church must give up the search and declare him lost.

As already noted, binding and loosing in this context is often taken to include the forgiveness of sins. However, this passage does not seem to be as strong and as explicit a source for such authority as John 20:23. Yet forgiving a sinner is also part of the context, especially in the next unit<sup>45</sup>. Reconciliation, which is the central theme in this passage, requires action by both parties: the offender must repent and the one offended must forgive. If such forgiveness is granted in the presence of Christ (18:20) and is bound also in heaven, it is certainly authoritative and irrevocable.

#### ☞ 18:21-35, The parable of the unforgiving servant ☞

Peter begins this unit with a question about how often he must forgive a brother who sins against him. The numbers seven and seventy-seven are probably allusions to Genesis 4:24, “If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold.”, although the Greek for seventy-seven is ambiguous and may also be translated as seven times seventy<sup>46</sup>. In either case, the point is that one should be generous and always willing to forgive.

It is not clear, however, if forgiveness should be tied to repentance. Neither Jesus nor Peter mentions it, but in the context of 18:15-20, it would seem to be implied. Hylen, noting that the context of chapter 18 and that both verses 18:15 and 18:21 concern ‘a brother who sins’, wonders why it isn’t simply assumed by that it is the three step process that should be repeated as

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<sup>45</sup> And of course, the the phrase “*whatever you bind...*” may demonstrate that either Jesus or Matthew had considered the needs of future generations of New Testament scholars!

<sup>46</sup> Most commentaries make note of the issue. Thompson, *Matthew's advice to a divided community*, 297. cites E.J. Goodspeed, *Problems of New Testament Translation*, Chicago 1945, pp. 29-31 for a full discussion.

many as seventy-seven times<sup>47</sup>. The parallel passage Luke 17:3-4<sup>48</sup> is clear that repentance must be present as a condition of forgiveness. If both Luke and Matthew are drawing on Q, perhaps Matthew is just elaborating on the relationship between repentance (“*if he listens*”) and forgiveness. As Ramshaw notes the concern of the discourse is reconciliation — bringing back the lost sheep / gaining a brother gone astray — thus forgiveness is not so much conditional on repentance, rather reconciliation demands the practice of both repentance and forgiveness.<sup>49</sup>

The parable itself is familiar and not difficult to understand<sup>50</sup>. Who hasn't heard in a homily or learned from a commentary that the amount of the debt which the king forgave the unmerciful servant was an astronomically large sum (ten thousand talents) which the servant could never repay, or that the amount the fellow-servant owed (a hundred denarii) was quite manageable and could have been easily repaid? And who doesn't understand the lesson? But in the context of the fourth discourse, there are some interesting things to note which make this parable an even richer text for reflection.

Before going on, it is worth noting that the fourth discourse begins after the passion prediction with the issue of the temple tax. In that passage Jesus asks Peter a question and Peter gives an answer. Now in this final passage the order is reversed: Peter asks the question and we conclude with Jesus' answer and a final reflection on unacceptable attitudes and behaviors in the Kingdom of Heaven. The mirroring of the actors seems to be a deliberate narrative move.

At the beginning of the discourse Matthew began with Jesus' teaching that greatness in

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<sup>47</sup> S. E. Hylén, "Forgiveness and Life in Community," *Interpretation* 54, no. 2 (2000): 146-157.

<sup>48</sup> Luke 17:3-4 <sup>3</sup>Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. <sup>4</sup>And if he wrongs you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times saying, 'I am sorry,' you should forgive him."

<sup>49</sup> Ramshaw, *Power and Forgiveness in Matthew 18*, 397-404.

<sup>50</sup> For a somewhat contrary view see Bernard Brandon Scott, "The king's accounting : Matthew 18:23-34," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 3 (1985): 429-442.. He argues for the profound discomfort which the ending ought to pose for the thoughtful reader: God's mercy can be revoked, his forgiveness may be conditional. Scott's reading is thought provoking, but I think he too suffers from reading the parable without keeping in mind the full context of the discourse.

the kingdom of heaven did not come from power, but humility (18:1-4) and, by extension, powerlessness. Yet the unmerciful servant has power over his fellow servant because of debt he owes. Possessing this power the unmerciful servant abuses it, completely ignoring the full import of God's generous mercy. Indeed the harsh punishment of excommunication for an unrepentant sinner who leads others astray (18:8-9) is now coupled with the equally harsh punishment of the one who is unforgiving when confronted with sorrow and repentance. Both behaviors are unacceptable in the community of believers, that is, the church.

But Matthew seems to have wrapped this parable about forgiveness with an allegory. Framed by the opening verse in 18:23,

*“That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants,”*

and 18:35, the final line of the discourse,

*“So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart,”*

he reminds his listeners of who they are (children in the kingdom) and that an attitude of reconciliation rather than judgment should characterize the children of God. In this final narrative, Matthew may have set a trap to startle his community and drive home the message.

If the entire discourse has as its focus the behavior and attitudes that should characterize the church community, then we have to be careful not to pass by the community as a character in the parable. In 18:31 the other servants saw what had happened between the unmerciful servant and the one who owed him a debt. They were deeply disturbed and went directly to their master, the king, to ‘tell on’ the bad servant. As Hylan<sup>51</sup> has noted, they did not follow the three-step process given in 18:15-17. Was their interest in crude justice, rather than mercy and

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<sup>51</sup> Hylan, *Forgiveness and Life in Community*, 154. -- reflecting on Scott, *The king's accounting : Matthew 18:23-34*, 429-442.

reconciliation? Did anyone go first and talk his brother-servant in private about his lack of forgiveness? Were they worried about his redemption? Maybe there is more to Jesus' final words than we commonly think: "So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart." The 'you' in Greek is plural<sup>52</sup>. Are his words a warning to the community not skip the process and the hard work of reconciliation? Hylan says that "the beauty of the parable seems to be its power to assert that forgiveness can be conditional, while at the same time compelling the reader to forgive. This, in view of the rest of the chapter, seems to be the effect Matthew intended."<sup>53</sup>



Moving through the passages from 17:22 through 18:9, we mapped out a possible plan in Matthew's thought:

1. The disciples (or members of the church) are children of the Father because of the atoning sacrifice of Christ in the passion. (17:22-23)
2. As the Father's children they are part of the kingdom of heaven. (17:24-28)
3. To be great in the kingdom of heaven, one has to be dependent on God. (18:1-4)
  - a. One should not seek independent power, status, or influence.
4. Misuse of power or influence, especially when it leads others away from God is a great evil. (18:5-7)
  - a. The powerful tortured and killed Jesus in his passion.
5. Those who misuse their power, status, or influence should be excluded from the community. (18:8-9)

Continuing on:

6. It is God's will however, that no one be lost if possible. (18:10-14)
  - a. Those who go astray should be diligently sought out and reconciled.
7. There is a process for reconciliation (18:15-20)
  - a. When one becomes aware that one member has sinned against another, one must act, but act appropriately by first reproofing the sinner in private.
  - b. Reconciliation involves both repentance and forgiveness

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<sup>52</sup> Thompson, *Matthew's advice to a divided community*, 222.

<sup>53</sup> Hylan, *Forgiveness and Life in Community*, 154.

- c. Repentance can not be forced and when completely rejected requires exclusion from the community.
- 8. Forgiveness must be unlimited. (18:21-22)
- 9. The sorrowful and repentant must always be forgiven. (18:23-35)
  - a. Do not let indignation over an injustice lead you astray as well.
  - b. Failure to forgive is as intolerable as remaining unrepentant.

Perhaps there should be a tenth item: the passion of Christ. It began our discourse and it has shaded our view along the way — for in his act of atonement Jesus demonstrated both intolerance for sin, which separates us from God, and forgiveness, which completes the reconciliation. Sadly, with his arms flung wide on the cross, Jesus’ reconciling embrace of humanity was still rejected by many.<sup>54</sup>

#### ✿ Conclusion ✿

How can one read this discourse as an integrated and coherent text without realizing the tension it contains. We must act deliberately and resolutely when sin threatens members of our community, even if it means expelling someone from the Church. The sinner must repent. Jesus did not set aside the law and the prophets. Love of neighbor, not the desire for power, status, or control should be our guide. Those who pursue worldly greatness and fail to keep the second greatest commandment exclude themselves from the community. On the other hand, we must always be willing to forgive. In pursuing justice, our goal must be the good of our neighbor: his reconciliation and return to the kingdom of heaven. Anger, revenge, jealousy should not guide our pursuit of justice.

Unfortunately we often fail to keep the tension and instead use the passages piecemeal and out of context. Elaine Ramshaw finds the misuse of 18:15-18 and 18:21-22 to be particularly troubling. Imagine, she writes, how the world might be different for so many people if no

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<sup>54</sup> Miroslav Volf uses this image to illustrate that Jesus’ was always willing to forgive, but that embrace is not forced upon anyone and can be rejected. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and embrace : a theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 336.

battered wife had ever been told “to forgive her husband over and over and over again, to give him another chance, which is to say, to continue the relationship on his terms” because of the misapplication of the command to forgive seventy-seven times. And imagine if no heretic had been handled simply on the basis of the authority to excommunicate given in 18:15-18 but on the passage about the lost sheep or the unmerciful servant<sup>55</sup>.

Miroslav Volf in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, explores the kind of tension which Matthew identifies in the fourth discourse. Ironically, Volf only cites material from the fourth discourse once, and then just the single verse 18:21. As one who writes so passionately about forgiveness, it is not surprising that he doesn’t engage the discourse fully, yet he says something that is worth pondering now that we have come to the end of the discourse:

We seriously misconstrue forgiveness, however, if we understand it as acting ‘as if the sin were not there’. . . . To treat sin as if it were not there, when in fact it is there, amounts to living as if the world were redeemed when in fact it is not. The claim to redemption has degenerated into empty ideology, and a dangerous one at that.

In taking upon himself the sin of the world, God told the truth about the deceitful world and enthroned justice in an unjust world.<sup>56</sup>

Amen, says Matthew: when sin invades our communities we must address it with resolve but also with justice and the willingness to give the reconciling embrace of Jesus on the cross.

Although we do not really know any facts about the life of Matthew, we do know that he was a brilliant writer and editor. His careful and skillful application of the teachings and stories of Jesus to the needs of his community is truly amazing. And the pearl of great price that we find in this text, turns out to be neither a “Great Community Discourse” nor “Advice to a Divided Community”, but a thoughtful teaching on the relationship between exclusion and embrace in Christian reconciliation.

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<sup>55</sup> Ramshaw, *Power and Forgiveness in Matthew 18*, 397-404.

<sup>56</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and embrace : a theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*, 294.

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