

Chapter 18

Succession and Administration in the Church (18:1–20:34)

(Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48)

As mentioned, we are in the last 30 days of Jesus life. For this reason, it is important for Jesus to begin to address issues of his **succession** and the **administration** of this band of brothers when he is no longer present to instruct them.

The topics to be addressed are these: who will lead this group (18:1-14)? Following that, what do we do with a member who has fallen in sin and is now recalcitrant (18:15-20)? Somewhat related are those members of the community that are trouble makers and harbor hurt feelings against others in the community, destroying the peace of these followers (18:21-35). Most of these people are married and there will be marriage problems in this group; how shall they be handled (19:1-12)? And what role shall the rich play in this assembly? Surely, they will receive special status and place in the kingdom (19:16-22). And what about us who have giving up our wealth for the kingdom, what will we get out of it (19:23-30)? A reminder on who enters the kingdom (20:1-16). And to show that they well understood all this, the mother of James and John request that her sons receive the preeminence by sitting on the left and right of Jesus in this new kingdom (20:20-28).

All of this represents material that Jesus' disciples will need in order to carry on the mission of expanding the kingdom of God on this earth as it is in heaven. These problems will beset them, these answers will address these issues.

This is a unique segment of material that instructs the Church on how to act in Jesus' absence. It is immediately followed by Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem (21:1-11). At that point, Jesus is in his final week of life; the end is near.

The Disciples' Question about Status (18:1-14)

(Mark 9:33-38; Luke 9:46-48)

Matthew 18:1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who [then] is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

The unit begins with a question by the disciples. The fact that the disciples would ask this questions shows that to a very real degree they are taking him seriously about this kingdom of heaven he has been talking about. "They seem to have become increasingly sure that Jesus was the Messiah, which meant that the messianic kingdom was just around the corner, and that in turn meant for them that **the top places in the kingdom were up for grabs.**"¹

We read earlier that Jesus said that there would be distinctions in the kingdom.

"Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:19, ESV)

¹ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 458). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” (Matthew 11:11, ESV)

Surprisingly this discussion in chapter 18 will not end the controversy and Jesus will speak of it again on three other occasions.

“It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:26–28, ESV)

“The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matthew 23:11–12, ESV)

And even as late as the Lord’s Supper they are still jockeying for positions of greatness in the coming kingdom.

“A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.” (Luke 22:24–27, ESV)

This unrestrained passion for preeminence and power in the disciples is amazing and frightening. It serves as a warning to all the Church. It has haunted and cursed the Church from its early years and now some are even required to kneel before these great ecclesiastical ones and kiss a ring of gold to show their subservience to these religious powers with their unrestrained craving to reign. But these “church leaders” will one day learn that **you must serve in God’s kingdom although you may reign in Satan’s.**

Who is the Greatest? (18:2–5)

At that time Who [then] is the greatest or [So,] who is.... Knowing that there are distinctions in the kingdom, the disciples now address the question of their own elevation. The opening of this verse, “**at that time**” and “**so,**” tightly connects what follows with what came before. “Who then” or “So who” “...perhaps arises out of Peter’s role in the immediately preceding incident. That showed Peter in a prominent position.”² And what came earlier? Peter’s prominence.

Earlier we saw how Peter walked on water (14:22-33). At Caesarea Philippi, Peter gave the confession “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” and was told that the Church would be built upon him (16:13-20). Not long after, Peter, James and John accompany Jesus to the mount and see him transfigured (17:1-8), the others are not invited. Jesus then pays Peter’s temple tax (17:24-27), but not theirs. Clearly, Peter is receiving the preeminence. **If they don’t make their move soon, they may miss out on the top roles available to kingdom founders.**

² Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992).

It's all coming to a head, so, just who is the greatest? Are they to concede that Peter, James and John are the successors of Jesus? Or should they not make a play for the position themselves? So, they make their move.

Entrance into the Kingdom

Matthew 18:2 And calling to him a child, he put him [the child] in the midst of them

child³.... The word “child” is a neuter pronoun. So, it is not certain that the child is in fact a “him.” It could very well be a girl.

“Surrounded by grown men, the child must have looked insignificant, which of course is Jesus’ point.”⁴ “The child is **weak, small, basically helpless, and unimportant** in comparison with grown-ups. It is dependent on others; the younger it is the more dependent. This objective **insignificance** of the child, not any particular characteristic of children, is set forth as **the way in which disciples are to think of themselves**....”⁵

“The child is held up as an ideal, not of innocence, purity, or faith, **but of humility and unconcern for social status**.”⁶

Matthew 18:3 and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Truly, I say to you.... We should not miss the very solemn nature of Jesus’ introduction to their question. What follows is serious.

turn or **you are turned** or **unless you become turned**⁷.... The word **turn** is in the **passive voice** and therefore is **the recipient of the action, not the originator of the action**. The fact that they needed to **turn** suggest that they were heading in the wrong direction with their self-serving questions.

and become like children.... In verse 2, Jesus put a real child in their midst. In verse 3, they are instructed to become **like** children; they are not to become children.

The two thoughts, “turn” and “become like children” make clear that true salvation demands humility.

This is what is to be modeled and admired. “He seems to be referring to the insignificance and unimportance of children as the ancient world saw them.... Adults

³ *child παιδίον* “...a child, normally below the age of puberty—‘child.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁴ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 458). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

⁵ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p.458). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

⁶ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 397). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁷ *turn στρέφω* “To turn, turn about.” Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

like to assert themselves and to rely on their own strength and wisdom. This attitude is impossible for those who wish to enter the kingdom.”⁸

“The instruction to “become like children” is thus not about adopting some supposed *ethical characteristic of children* in general (innocence ... receptiveness, trustfulness or the like) **but about accepting for oneself a position in the social scale which is like that of children, that is as the lowest in the hierarchy of authority and decision-making....**”⁹

you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.... The word never is a translation of two Greek words that each mean “not.” This is a very forceful “never” perhaps spelled NEVER!

With the addition of this phrase, we can see that “turn” means **be converted or saved**. Not only would they not be considered “greatest” in this kingdom, they wouldn’t even enter it! **“Jesus starts by ignoring the question of greatness in the kingdom and addressing the unspoken issue of entrance into the kingdom. You can forget about greatness in it if you aren’t there.”**¹⁰ “They were asking about the All-Star team. Jesus said, “Let’s talk about *making* the team.””¹¹

This follow up phrase makes it again clear that humility is a necessary element in salvation and without it, there is no salvation. The proud do not humble themselves at the cross, as a result, they do not enter the kingdom of heaven. “He does not talk about eminence in the kingdom at all; without genuine humility it is impossible even to get into it, and for humility the question of personal preeminence does not arise.”¹²

But who is Jesus talking to? Are the disciples lost?

The disciple’s questions and Jesus’ answers do not always have a one-to-one correspondence. They have immediate and personal questions. Jesus has in mind a bigger picture and his answers address issues greater than their questions. No, the disciples are not lost.

Greatness in the Kingdom

Matthew 18:4 Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

“Having brought up and taken care of the issue of entrance, Jesus then addresses the disciples’ question of greatness.”¹³

⁸ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 459). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

⁹ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (pp. 676–677). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

¹⁰ Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament: Verse-by-Verse Explanations with a Literal Translation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 78.

¹¹ Daniel M. Doriani, *Matthew & 2* (ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani; vol. 2; Reformed Expository Commentary; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 139.

¹² Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 459). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

¹³ Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament: Verse-by-Verse Explanations with a Literal Translation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 78.

Whoever.... This isn't just for the disciples, "*Whoever* makes the following statement quite general; what Jesus says is of universal relevance."¹⁴ It is for us as well.

humbles¹⁵.... Jesus now clarifies what he means by "become like children." As we suspected, he is talking about **humility**.

himself.... The requirement is for the saint to do this to himself. The responsibility is squarely on the shoulder of the believer to make this happen.

As far as humility is concerned— "The vital difference ... between the child and what Jesus calls for is that for the child this is a natural state, but what the kingdom of God calls for is a **deliberately chosen ('turn and become') stance of humility**. It is a form of self-denial that has its counterpart in the taking up the cross of 16:24. The challenge is to replace the assertion of one's own importance with a **deliberately** chosen posture of subordination."¹⁶

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 14:11, ESV)

Notice the comparison made in Matthew 5 between those who are least in the kingdom of heaven and those who are greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

"Therefore whoever relaxes 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 does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:19, ESV)

Those identified as least in the kingdom of heaven are those who fail to keep God's commandments. The great are those who do so with humility, very unlike the scribes and Pharisees.

So, the kingdom of heaven is characterized by two things: 1) submission to the law of God and 2) humility in relationships with others. "**There entry into the kingdom turned on committing oneself to the whole of the Law; here it turns on adopting childlike humility. Submission to God (his commandments) and submission to one another go together.**"¹⁷

greatest.... "In a world left to its own devices people are continually trying to lord it over one another: the rich over the poor, the intelligent over the simple, adults over children, man over woman...on and on goes the list."¹⁸

¹⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 459.

¹⁵ *humbles* ταπεινώω "...to cause someone to be in a low status—"to make humble, to bring down low."¹⁷ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

¹⁶ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

¹⁷ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

¹⁸ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 209.

“But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.” (Luke 22:26, ESV)

Good Behavior in the Kingdom

Matthew 18:5 “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,

Now that the issues of entrance into the kingdom (18:3) and greatness in the kingdom (18:4) have been addressed, it is now time to address behavior in the kingdom, this addresses the treatment of fellow disciples (18:5).

receives or welcomes.... It is a word suggests a warm welcome.

in my name or upon my name or on the basis of.... “The challenge is to treat the lowly figure of the child with the respect that would come naturally in relating to Jesus himself. In the present context, the key to such a generous reception of the child is clearly disregard for one’s own superior status: having the attitude of one who has opted for humility and turned and become like a child.”¹⁹

“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him....” (Romans 14:1, ESV)

receives me.... Without receiving Jesus, there is no hope in time or eternity.

“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matthew 23:12, ESV)

Evil Behavior by Others (18:6–9)

The story is now taking an unexpected turn beyond the disciples’ question.

Matthew 18:6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Verse 5 addressed “*whoever receives,*” verse 6 addresses “*whoever causes.*” To receive the child is to receive Christ and eternal life. But to cause a child to fall is to receive eternal damnation.

causes ... to sin²⁰ or ***is a stumbling block that leads to sin....*** “Causing one to “stumble” meant causing the person to fall from the way of Christ and be damned....”²¹ This was addressed in the Old Testament as well using a literal illustration:

“You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 19:14, ESV)

¹⁹ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a Commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

²⁰ *causes ... to sin* σκανδαλίζω “...to cause to sin, with the probable implication of providing some special circumstances which contribute to such behavior—‘to cause to sin.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

²¹ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 449.

It was also used figuratively; the idol was a stumbling block which is an illustration on how one can fall because of sin.

“Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces. Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them?” (Ezekiel 14:3, ESV)

“There is a recognition here that people are susceptible in damaging ways to the influence of others.”²² Earlier we read:

“The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 13:41–42, ESV)

There is a special condemnation for those that delight in encouraging others to sin.

“Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.” (Romans 1:32, ESV)

one of these little ones who believe in me. We were introduced to the word *child* in 18:2, 3, 4, and 5. Now in verse six we read of little ones, clearly a successor term with the same meaning found in 18:6, 10 and 14.

Who are the little ones? It is not always clear if we are talking about biological children or children of God or children who are children of God. However, the phrase **who believe in me** helps us understand that we are not talking about believers, young in faith, age no longer a critical issue.

Clearly *child* in 18:2 referred to a biological child. In verse 3, the story uses “like” children and has taken a step from the natural child to something *like* it—a socially unpretentious and humble person. In verse 4, we again read of “like” a child. In verse 5, we read of “one such child” with “such” meaning “of this sort” not unlike the word “like.” Verse 6 moves to the new phrase “little ones” but even while doing so is still addressing the child. Perhaps a difference here is that these “little ones” are old enough to believe in Jesus. So, here the nature of being “little ones” is not their size but the humility expressed in believing on Jesus, no matter the age. Verses 7-9 expands the subject of causing a *little one* to sin, to the terrible results of doing so. Verse 10-13 picks up the subject again in illustrating the value these *little ones* are to Jesus. Verse 14 concludes with a statement on the will of God toward these *little ones*. There is here a transition from biologically young people to those young in the faith.

“Thus the answer to the question whether the term “little ones” here refers to all Christians or to a special group is: All Matthean Christians are little ones to the degree that they affirm this insignificance and practice it as humility and love.”²³

²² Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

²³ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 434.

“The little ones who believe in me” are disciples who have become lowly like a child and who therefore are so precious in God’s sight that they will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”²⁴

it would be better.... How would this be better? How much worse must the alternative be that this would be better? It would be better if it were a substitute for eternal damnation. Otherwise it would simply put one into eternity faster, thereby confronting one with the eternal consequence of this behavior.

great millstone²⁵.... This is not a hand millstone that a housewife would turn by hand, but one so big, great, that it took a donkey or an ox to turn it.

This is to lead us “to imagine the struggle and agony of the drowning process, with the outcome guaranteed by the attached weight.²⁶ “To be thrown into the depth of the ocean with such a stone around one’s neck is a hyperbolic image for a **gruesome fate from which there is no escape.**”²⁷ And all this is to be viewed as “better” than the option. “Even that kind of horrible fate is better than what awaits a “person of snares” [a person who causes one to sin] in the final judgment.”²⁸



²⁴ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 434.

²⁵ *great millstone* *μύλος ὄνικός* “...a millstone of the kind to which donkeys were fastened, thus a large millstone.” Nolland, John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

²⁶ Nolland, John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

²⁷ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 433.

²⁸ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 433.

the depth²⁹ of the sea.... Far out in the middle of the sea where swimming back to land would be impossible.

Matthew 18:7 “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!”

Woe³⁰.... “It is a strong expression of regret, usually for the punishment that sinners are inevitably drawing down on themselves.”³¹

world³².... “The world here denotes earth’s people, those who sin and those who lead them to sin; unhappiness is inevitable for both. The sinner is in trouble because of the evil he does, **and the person who leads another into sin is in a worse position**, as Jesus is now saying.”³³

Jesus is here taking note of what happens “to the world” not to believers. These are not Christians who are stumbling blocks, but the lost.

for temptations to sin.... More literally, *for stumbling blocks* or *for snares*.

For it is necessary that temptations come.... **The fallen condition of man being what it is, there is a necessity that sin occurs.** However, there is a special woe or distress that must come upon those that tempt, encourage and drag others into sin with them: **but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes.**

Your Own Evil Behavior (18:8–9)

Whereas verses 6-7 above spoke of external stumbling blocks, in verses 8-9 Jesus will speak of internal stumbling blocks.

There are those that put stumbling blocks into the path of believers to encourage sin. But then, there are the passions of our own flesh. These will result in spiritual failure as well. What must we do about this?

Matthew 18:8 And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.

Matthew 18:9 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

Jesus said something like this in the Sermon on the Mount addressing sexual sins.

²⁹ *depth* πέλαγος “A vast expanse of water or the open sea....” Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

³⁰ *Woe* οὐαί “...a state of intense hardship or distress—‘disaster, horror.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

³¹ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

³² *world* κόσμος “...people associated with a world system and estranged from God—‘people of the world.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

³³ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 462). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.”
(Matthew 5:29–30, ESV)

But the principle addresses all sin. The figure of cutting off body parts is a startling hyperbole; **we don't take it seriously because it is not something we would literally do. But it does mean something serious; what?**

cut it off and throw it away. “Any sin to which hand, foot, or eye might lead is pertinent. And since these three represent the three primary ways in which we move out to encounter the world around us, the scope is quite comprehensive.”³⁴

“He makes the supposition that one's *hand* or *foot* leads one into sin. Jesus does not define how this should take place, but leaving it general covers all the ways in which one of these members of the body should occasion evil. If that takes place, he enjoins a drastic remedy: *cut it off and throw it away*. In other words, get rid of the source of the sin.”³⁵

Although at first reading this material seems rather impractical, in fact there is something very practical here for the believer. It has been called radical amputation and that describes what Jesus demands from us. The point is this; sin is so destructive to the soul that, using hyperbole, one must do the most radical things necessary to avoid it. The Christian must apply this to his own life. What is it you must do, no matter how radical, let alone inconvenient, in order to avoid sin? For example:

Would it be “radical” for you to have but one computer password or email address shared with your wife or husband? Probably. But would it “cut off” opportunity to sin if you did so?

Would it be “radical” for you to ride to and from work with someone? Possibly. But would it “cut off” opportunity to sin if you could not go to certain stores or could not spend time with certain people?

Would it be “radical” for you to publicly confess your addiction to alcohol or drugs to your church family? Maybe. But would it help “cut off” the opportunity to sin through the accountability that this would provide?

Just how many spiritual failures would there have been in your life if you had in some such way practiced radical amputation?

“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” (Romans 13:14, ESV)

³⁴ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

³⁵ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 463). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

enter life “He is speaking about the life that really matters, the life of the world to come....”³⁶

crippled or lame “...he specifies being *crippled or maimed*. There is not a great deal of difference in the meanings of the two words; both point to a grievous handicap. But better that than having the normal equipment of two good hands and two good feet to be lost eternally.”³⁷

Sin is so horrible and its consequence so momentous that all steps must be taken to amputate the elements in life that allow for it. Your life may be so disrupted by these steps that you feel crippled or lame as you try to get on with your daily live. So be it.

thrown into the eternal fire “...*thrown* ... speaks of vigorous action. *Eternal fire* is, of course, used ... in an expression that brings out the painfulness of the lost in their eternal lostness. Jesus leaves his hearers in no doubt as to the seriousness of the eternal state of sinners.”³⁸

“Matthew uses πῦρ [fire] 12 times, which is more than in any other New Testament book apart from Revelation (26 times). Mostly he employs it to bring out the thought of the eternal destiny of the wicked. Thus here it is *eternal fire*.”³⁹ The addition of eternal to fire teaches the utter helplessness of those who experience damnation. Being eternal, there is no hope of ever experiencing relief, a teaching found also in:

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’” (Matthew 25:41, ESV)

Since “we sacrifice even the most valuable of our limbs, in order to avoid the death of the body by incurable disease. We ought to be ready to sacrifice things of still greater value, in order to avoid the death of the soul in ‘the eternal fire.’”⁴⁰

“Jesus’ parenthetical warning in 18:8–9 is simply a part of what it means for his disciples to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow him (16:24).”⁴¹

“Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’” (Matthew 16:24, ESV)

It is now perfectly clear; heaven and hell hang in the balance. There are no limits as to what one must do to avoid hell.

The Value of the Little Ones (18:10–14) (Luke 15:3-7)

³⁶ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 463). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

³⁷ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 463). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

³⁸ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 463). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

³⁹ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

⁴⁰ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Matthew* (New York; London: Charles Scribner’s Sons; Elliot Stock, 1910), 250.

⁴¹ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 910.

In verses 5-9 we read about those that were tempted and fell into sin. Here we read about how much the shepherd loves these fallen ones and the extremes he will go to in pursuing them with his love. **They serve as instructions to the under shepherds of the sheep as to what they should do in similar circumstances.**

Matthew 18:10 *“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.*

See that you do not... On the one hand the disciples are to be like children, on the other hand they are to make sure that they do not despise those that are children. It is not hard to walk over humble people.

despise⁴².... “Literally, “think down on,” with the assumption of superiority.”⁴³ “...to despise the little ones here is to treat as of no real significance the loss to the Christian community of one of them who has been led astray.”⁴⁴ It “can also have the nuances of “to disregard” or “not to be concerned with.””⁴⁵ Don’t do it!

little ones.... Who are the little ones? Probably, the common people that heard Jesus gladly some of which were actual children.

angels.... “... the interests of these little ones is fully and without interruption represented in the near presence of God.”⁴⁶

It is from this verse that the teaching of guarding angels has its greatest support. Based on verse 14, these are elect children. We read something like this in the Book of Hebrews. Speaking of angels, it says:

“Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?” (Hebrews 1:14, ESV)

This passage speaks of “*those who are to inherit salvation*” making the case that these angels are sent as protectors of the elect. It does not mention the age of the ones that they protect. It appears it would cover both “**little ones**” and adults.

“The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried,” (Luke 16:22, ESV)

This verse does not tell us about guardian angels but about the angels that carry us to heaven when we die. They could be our guardian angel or other angels God send to us at that moment. Both ideas are comforting. **I want to see the angels.**

⁴² *despise* καταφρονέω “...to feel contempt for someone or something because it is thought to be bad or without value—to despise, to scorn, to look down on.” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁴³ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Mt 18:10.

⁴⁴ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁴⁵ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 440.

⁴⁶ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

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

lost.... Those that not lost, see no need of being found.

This thought is found in many places in the New Testament. See Matthew 9:13; Luke 9:56. Luke 19: 10; John 3: 17; John 12: 47; 1 John 4:14.

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matthew 9:13, ESV)

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” (Luke 19:10, ESV)

He did not come seeking the good and the found, he came seeking the bad and the lost.

Matthew 18:12 What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?

What do you think? If a man has.... This statement serves more as a means to further engage his disciples than it does to elicit information from them. “The formulation “if a man has” ... with the following rhetorical question invites the readers to become involved in the story by asking themselves where and for whom they are called to act in the same way that this “certain man” acts on behalf of the sheep.”⁴⁷

one of them.... This would correspond to the child or little ones earlier in the section.

has gone astray or is led astray⁴⁸.... An option to “has gone astray” is to “be led astray” and that may be closer to the idea here. “It is best here, however, to give a full passive force (‘be led astray’) and link with the motif of causes of stumbling of vv. 6–7, 8–10.”⁴⁹ **The broader context of this passage suggests “led astray.” Matthew 18:6 speaks of those that lease one of these little ones into sin. Matthew 18:12-14 speaks of the responsibility of the under shepherds to seek these fallen ones.**

leave the ninety-nine on the mountains.... At first reading it appears that he may leave the ninety-nine unattended but that is not likely. “...we may imagine the sheep being left in the temporary care of another shepherd who must divide his attention. In any case, the normal level of care is temporarily withdrawn in order to deal with the needs of the moment.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 443.

⁴⁸ *has gone astray* πλανᾶω “① to cause to go astray from a specific way, act. ② to proceed without a sense of proper direction, go astray, be misled, wander about aimlessly....” Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁴⁹ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁵⁰ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

“...‘it was not the high value of the animal that caused the shepherd to set out on his search, but simply the fact that it belonged to him, and without his help it could not find its way back to the flock’”⁵¹

go in search of the one that went astray or was led astray.... “The point of the parable is the disproportionate investment of effort and concern directed towards the one sheep: ... the one is *temporarily* of more importance than the ninety-nine’. With the seeking of the one that has been led astray we get to the heart of the parable.”⁵²

Sometimes families and churches find it necessary to direct their time and money to the ones who have gone astray and thereby temporarily neglect the ninety-nine. And on occasion, the ninety-nine are displeased by that. Yet the heart of the shepherd, pastor or parent, drives them, sometimes frantically, to find the one lost sheep. For the believer, it is the natural order of things; it is built into the heart of man. The ninety-nine must remember this.

Matthew 18:13 And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.

The story is to remind us of the love of God for the lost of the house of Israel.

“I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.” (Ezekiel 34:16, ESV)

“In this way, the heavenly Father’s will always is that every needy and powerless disciple not be despised or ignored, but rather be sought after and saved from falling into unbelief and so perishing.”⁵³ Church and family that “act as the parable challenges to act are modelling themselves on the priorities that God himself has.”⁵⁴

Matthew 18:14 So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matthew 9:36, ESV)

will⁵⁵.... “The will of God concerning the little ones, that they should not perish, becomes an imperative for the believer. The disciple must be like God (cf. 5:48), that is,

⁵¹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 2; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 776.

⁵² Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁵³ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 912.

⁵⁴ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁵⁵ *will* *θέλημα* “...that which is desired or wished for—‘wish, desire.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

must act as God, the good shepherd (Ps 23, etc.), acts and so share in his activity of saving the lost.”⁵⁶

“At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.” (Matthew 11:25–26, ESV)

The *little children* in this verse appears to address those with a childlike faith. The *child* and *little ones* of chapter 18 ultimately seem to be the same. So, it is the will of the Father to pursue and save the elect that none should perish.

perish.... Sin results in the lost person perishing.

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose [perish] one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose [perish] one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.” (Matthew 5:29–30, ESV)

“Since it is not the will of the heavenly father that one of these little ones should perish ... in the final judgment, the members of the church are called to love, forgiveness, and to receiving the lost back into the community.”⁵⁷

10a one of these little ones
10b my Father who is in heaven
12b has gone astray
12c the ninety-nine
12c **the one that went astray**
13b the ninety-nine
13b went astray
14 my Father who is in heaven
14 one of these little ones⁵⁸

The question is: “Is this coincidence or the result of Matthew’s studied effort?”⁵⁹

These are critical instructions on how Jesus wants his disciples to lead and to care for his sheep. Soon the great shepherd of the sheep will be gone and they will need to remember this material in order to administer the Church.

“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep

⁵⁶ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 2; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 776.

⁵⁷ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 444.

⁵⁸ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 2; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 768.

⁵⁹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 2; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 768.

that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.” (Ezekiel 34:11–16, ESV)

Challenging Sin with a Concern for Restoration (18:15–20)

Matthew 18:15 *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.*

brother sins.... Let’s identify the setting: “A brother or sister who sins is equivalent to a ‘little one’ who has been caused to stumble (v. 6), or a ‘little one’ is likened to a sheep that has been led astray (vv. 10–14).”⁶⁰ Matthew’s topic is the sin of one of these little ones and what now must be done to help.

Paul likewise recognizes the responsibility of the Church to confront errant brothers.

*“For what have I to do with judging outsiders? **Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?**” (1 Corinthians 5:12, ESV)*

against you.... There is a question if this “against you” refers to sinning personally against another believer or sinning against the community of faith. But is the result any different? It does not appear to address public sins which are known by all and therefore cannot be kept secret. And it is not directed to the “world” but the Church as Paul said in the last verse: *“For what have I to do with judging outsiders?”* (1 Corinthians 5:12, ESV)

go⁶¹.... The word here implies going quietly or privately. *““Go” means taking the initiative; the person in the clear is not to wait for the sinner to come to him.”*⁶²

*“What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and **go** in search of the one that went astray?”* (Matthew 18:12, ESV)

“In other words, the offended brother is to imitate the shepherd of vv. 10–14 and go after the one stray sheep....”⁶³ As the good shepherd goes in search of the sheep that

⁶⁰ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁶¹ *go* ὑπάγω “...to go away, particularly under cover, out of sight, with stealth.” Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

⁶² Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 467). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

⁶³ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 2; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 782.

have gone astray, so his church must do the same thing. A failure to go suggest a greater concern for the under shepherd, or the members of the Church, than for the sheep. **Of course, there is danger for both shepherd and church member in the wilderness. There are wolves, bears and lions in the wilderness. The safe path would be to stay with the ninety-nine.** So, it is when brothers sin; there is danger in the pursuit; it is safer to stay close to those who are not so troublesome.

tell him.... “Jesus does *not* tell us to **talk to others** when a brother or sister sins; he or she deserves a prior conversation. Thus gossip, too, is limited by Jesus’ command. (“The offender should be spoken **with**, not **about**...”).”⁶⁴

his fault⁶⁵.... “The verb *elenchō* [fault] probably suggests “convict” the brother, not by passing judgment, but by convicting him of his sin.”⁶⁶ “...*shew* is better than *tell*, which implies merely *naming* the fault; whereas the injunction is, go and *prove* to him how he has erred.”⁶⁷ **This implies more than hurt feelings, it suggest that you have Scriptural reasons for your concern and these you must share with him.** So, these is a certain theological maturity, an understanding of the Bible, that is required of the person who would go.

What is not being said here is that we should do such a confrontation based on a **rumor**. The word here suggests that there is **personal knowledge** available to the person doing the rebuke. But even here it is often advisable to demonstrate humility (18:4) and **ask** for an explanation of the questioned behavior before you **tell** his his fault. Sometimes there are elements to the story that you are simply unaware of. In other words, we think we know what happened but it turns out that there is more to the story than we were aware of. This process can be painful for all, but remember:

“Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.”
(Proverbs 27:6, ESV)

You can tell if the person is a friend by the **attitude** he brings to the meeting.

Compare Matthew 18 with Matthew 5:21-26 where “... *your brother has something against you...*” and our current passage where “*If your brother sins against you...*” In these two passages, the whole range of offenses are addressed by Christ with practical solutions provided.

alone⁶⁸.... “We are to work for the restoration of the sinner as **unobtrusively** as possible.”⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 224.

⁶⁵ *tell him his fault* ἐλέγχω “...to state that someone has done wrong, with the implication that there is adequate proof of such wrongdoing—‘to rebuke, to reproach...’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁶⁶ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 402). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁶⁷ Marvin Richardson Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (vol. 1; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 104.

⁶⁸ *alone* μόνος “...the only entity in a class—‘only one, alone.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁶⁹ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

“The privacy of the initial contact allows the sin to be dealt with without any need for wider awareness or for public shaming. Insofar as this is possible, the privacy of the initiative protects the dignity of the person, even at the point of serious sin. **The matter is to be dealt with at the lowest possible effective level and the circle of knowledge restricted as much as possible.**”⁷⁰

And note the attitude of the heart while doing this rebuke.

*“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, **but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.**”* (Leviticus 19:17–18, ESV)

“Correction of evildoers is demanded in the OT lest hatred develop (Lv. 19:17). For the Rabbis rebuke is an integral part of brotherly love. Both to deliver and to receive it is a duty on the one side and a high moral achievement on the other.”⁷¹

Paul says the same thing:

“Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.” (2 Thessalonians 3:15, ESV)

As can be seen from Leviticus 19:18, the driving force in the confrontation is one’s love for the offending member.

“It is not Christian to let a member of our congregation run rampant over other people or moral norms. ... And when a Christian brother or sister lives outrageously, it is the Christian’s *duty* to confront that person—since Christ’s reputation, the church’s integrity, the community’s well-being, and the person’s salvation are all at stake.”⁷²

By example, God sends Nathan to do just this:

*“Nathan said to David, **“You are the man!** Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel....”*” (2 Samuel 12:7, ESV)

But, how do we explain Paul’s very public behavior if this is all to be kept quiet?

*“But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, **“If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”**”* (Galatians 2:14, ESV)

Peter’s sin was not a private one but a public one. It was a public sin requiring a public rebuke. In fact, Paul is in full harmony with these teachings saying:

⁷⁰ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁷¹ Friedrich Büchsel, “Ἐλέγχω, Ἐλεγξις, Ἐλεγχος, Ἐλεγμός,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 474.

⁷² Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 222–223.

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” (Galatians 6:1, ESV)

listens to you.... “The verb has nearly the connotation of ‘obey’. ‘He heeds’ would be a good translation....”⁷³

gained⁷⁴.... “Matthew is probably thinking primarily of the restoration of the sinner to the people of God or to the church.”⁷⁵

“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” (James 5:19–20, ESV)

“Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him,” (Luke 17:3, ESV)

But, at this point you may remember Jesus’ statement about judging and wonder how this passage in Matthew 18 fits with Jesus’ comments in the Sermon on the Mount.

“Judge not, that you be not judged.” (Matthew 7:1, ESV)

As a result, you may think 18:15-17 is out of sync with this passage in 7:1. This conclusion is a common error for those that fail to read Matthew 7:2-5 for there you read how one is to equip himself to judge brothers (7:3). And it is not all judging that’s forbidden, just judging by hypocrites (7:5).

Now, notice the greater context of our Matthew 18 material; it begins with a major qualification for leadership in the Church. And what is that? Humility (18:1-6) as well as a willingness to seriously deal with one’s own temptations (18:7-9). With these qualification in place, one can pursue lost sheep (18:10-14) and rebuke sinning brothers (18:15-20)—but not before. *“...then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”* (Matthew 7:5, ESV)

“Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right [righteous] judgment.” (John 7:24, ESV)

All judging is not forbidden, but judging unrighteously is always forbidden.

But what about the parable of the weeds and tares in Matthew 13:24-30? There we are told:

⁷³ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 2; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 783.

⁷⁴ *gained* κερδαίνω “...to gain by means of one’s activity or investment—to earn, to gain, to make a profit.” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁷⁵ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 452.

“He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, “Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.” ’ ”
(Matthew 13:28–30, ESV)

Here we are told not to address the tares but leave them alone till the last day of judgment.

The difference between Matthew 18 and Matthew 13 is found in the ability of the Church to know who are or are not believers. The wheat and tares are so similar that it is nearly impossible to determine this. However, the individual that stands out by his unchristian behavior is now identifiable as one that is possibly not of the sheep, but apparently of the goats. It is based on the public and outrageous behavior of these individuals that action can be taken. But to administer an inquisition among all indiscriminately is prohibited. To be proactive is forbidden, to be reactive is required.

Also, “the Parable of the Weeds forbids any *violent* removal of enemies or unreal Christians. It is not clear that it would forbid the orderly confrontation and, if necessary, the disciplining, perhaps even the excommunicating of open sinners who bear the Christian name. Moreover, Matt 13 is concerned with a group’s evil, Matt 18 with an individual’s. The church is to be tolerant (Matt 13) but not indifferent (Matt 18), patient but not passive, believing in the Last Judgment but making preliminary judgments where gross sin and public scandal require. The church must walk carefully between the prohibition of chapter 13 and the command of chapter 18, erring by developing neither a mentality of crusades nor a mentality of indifference.”⁷⁶

Matthew 18:16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

if he does not listen⁷⁷.... “But this technique is not infallible. There is the possibility that the offender will not alter his ways.”⁷⁸

one or two others.... This is where we in the Church often to go astray. If the person will not listen to us, we then tend to resent them—maybe all our life, but do nothing else to address it. Here, we become a part of the problem for now we are also sinning—against them for not giving them another chance to address this sin thereby sinning against God by not obeying his word in this matter.

But it is still a “...matter is to be kept as quiet as possible.”⁷⁹ Only one or two others are made aware of the problem. Again, this follows Old Testament precedent.

⁷⁶ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 226.

⁷⁷ *refuses to listen παρακούω* “...to refuse to listen to and hence to disobey—‘to refuse to listen, to refuse to obey, disobedience.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁷⁸ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 467). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

⁷⁹ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 467). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

*“A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. **Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.**”*
(Deuteronomy 19:15, ESV)

“The presence of the supporting parties ensures that the initiative is not a confused one, based on a misunderstanding, **but is also concerned to enhance in the eyes of the one being approached the seriousness of what is at stake.**”⁸⁰

every charge [word] may be established [may stand]⁸¹.... These “one or two others” are witnesses to the words spoken by both parties.

by the evidence [mouth] of two witnesses⁸².... The Greek word here translated **evidence** actually means **mouth** and implies that the “one or two others” may be required to give verbal testimony to others based on how the confrontation developed.

Matthew 18:17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

church⁸³.... This word is made up of two Greek words, *ek* [ἐκ] meaning “out” and *kaléō* [καλέω] meaning “to call.” So, the basic meaning is to “call out.” It was used to reference the actions of the town crier in Greek cities. When there was to be a public meeting of qualified citizens, the town crier walked through the town and “called out” the citizens of the city. At this point, the citizens gathered at the forum to hear what their political leaders had to say or debate before them. Those that were thus called out became an “assembly,” or “called out ones.” It is in this sense, as an assembly of called out ones who are God’s people, that the word is commonly understood in this New Testament period.

The word church is an old English word chosen by scholars many years ago to translate the Greek word *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία). The history of this English word takes us back through the middle ages to another Greek word. That word is *κυριακός* meaning “pertaining to the Lord—‘belonging to the Lord, Lord’s.’”⁸⁴ That word is used twice in the New Testament.

“When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat.” (1 Corinthians 11:20, ESV)

“I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet” (Revelation 1:10, ESV)

⁸⁰ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁸¹ *may be established [may stand] ἵστημι* “...to establish as validated and in force—‘to establish, to authorize, to put into force.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁸² *evidence*.... *στόμα* “Mouth, opening, edge.” Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

⁸³ *church ἐκκλησία* “...a congregation of Christians, implying interacting membership—‘congregation, church.’” Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 125.

⁸⁴ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

In one verse, it means the Lord's supper, in the other it means the Lord's day. Its use in the middle ages was to reference the Lord's people. It would appear that this old English word does capture the meaning of *ekklēsia* [ἐκκλησία] well.

So, what are we to make of this *ekklēsia* [ἐκκλησία], these called out ones. How is this term used here?

“The problem here is whether Jesus has in mind an actual body of believers already in existence or is speaking prophetically of the local churches that would be organized later....”⁸⁵ At the moment Jesus was speaking, there was no formal Church but instead an informal church, a group of disciples numbering over 500 (I Corinthians 15:5) and led by twelve. It is to this immediate group that Jesus is here speaking. Yet this passage certainly has implication to a larger audience once the Church is formally created.

So, it could be prophetic. Jesus is looking to a period beyond the present day to some period after Pentecost to an age in which “the Church” is now fully come. He is addressing how to deal with problems in this coming era.

Or it could be current, aimed at the Twelve and the others in Palestine that were also followers of Jesus, maybe five hundred to a thousand from one end of Palestine to the other.

When you view this passage in the context of chapter 18, we see bickering disciples jockeying for leadership position in the kingdom (18:1). We see children or other believers being sinned against (18:5-9). We see sheep that have wandered from the fold with the need to restore them to the community of faith (18:10-14). And we see a brother sinning against “you” with a need to address this problem (18:15-20).

With this immediate context in mind, it is not hard to believe that Jesus is dealing with current issues in need of a problem-solving method to bring solution. However, we would not want to deny a prophetic view of the needs of the coming “Church” either. Ultimately in fact, that may have been his long-term intent.

if he refuses to listen even to the church.... A question has always been whether this means all the members of the church in open session or the elders of the church in closed session? Those espousing Congregational polity (government) insist it is in open session of all the congregation. Paul's instructions appear to support this.

“When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 5:4–5, ESV)

This is a popular view by those that question the continuity of the Old and New Testament. But those that stress the continuity of the two testaments, those espousing Presbyterian polity, they insist it refers to the leaders of the church in closed session. The Old Testament model of the elders of Israel administering the “Church” called Israel favors the Presbyterian approach.

Exodus 3:16

⁸⁵ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Mt 18:17.

Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt,

Exodus 4:29

Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the people of Israel.

Exodus 19:7

So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him.

Exodus 24:1

Then he said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar.

Numbers 11:16

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you.

Numbers 11:24

So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent.

Numbers 11:25

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.

Deuteronomy 5:23

And as soon as you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes, and your elders.

Deuteronomy 31:28

Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers, that I may speak these words in their ears and call heaven and earth to witness against them.

The historic administration of the nation of Israel was by elders. That office continued into the New Testament. Indeed, it is the only universal office found in most religions around the world from ancient times till today.

1 Timothy 4:14

Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.

1 Timothy 5:17

Let the elders who rule [administer] well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

Titus 1:5

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—

James 5:14

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

The argument of the continuity of history which is what the disciples already knew and experienced would be the basis of the argument that it is the elders of the church who are to administer the church, which includes these issues of Church discipline—just as the elders administered Church discipline in the Old Testament. So, with this view of the topic, **1 Corinthians 5:4–5 would be the assembly at which the elders announced their decision on the matter to the congregation**, not the original meeting to determine what action should be taken.

a Gentile and a tax collector.... “Both these expressions stand for people outside the people of God, people who have sinned and not repented, and that is the position of the sinning brother.”⁸⁶ The purpose of putting the person out of the church was that **“Neither outsiders nor the sinner should continue under the delusion that this person is truly a follower of Jesus.”**⁸⁷

“Clearly the offender is no longer to be considered a brother or sister.”⁸⁸ “The argument and the NT parallels (Rom 16:17; 2 Thess 3:14) show that Jesus has excommunication in mind.”⁸⁹ If he was actually a believer but remained unrepentant then Paul’s comments here would apply.

“you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 5:5, ESV)

“The person is to be related to now as an outsider, but not as one who must permanently remain outside. The spirit to be adopted will be like that involved in the love of enemies, discussed in 5:43–48....”⁹⁰

Matthew 18:18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

We recently read this in Matthew 16 as well.

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16:19, ESV)

⁸⁶ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 469). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

⁸⁷ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 454.

⁸⁸ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁸⁹ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 403). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁹⁰ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” (John 20:23, ESV)

Is this power available to any beyond the Apostles? That is a very important question.

shall be bound in heaven ... shall be loosed in heaven. The binding and the loosing refer to the official decision of the church. The leaders of the church can bind the errant sinner with the requirement to repent or leave the church or they can loose him from the charge. ““Binding” and “loosing” refer to the judicial authority of gathered Christians to decide cases on the basis of God’s law.”⁹¹

loose.... “In the context of the attempt to bring back an erring brother or sister, the specific point will be that the church is able to confirm the standard of behavior to which the erring one is being called to conform once more. The movement from individual reproof to the involvement of others and finally of the whole church ensures that severing a person from the fellowship of the church, where this needs to happen, is finally based on the most assured understanding of what God requires and therefore what God will give his backing to. The one whom the church declares to be out of step with God is indeed out of step with God!”⁹²

But when does this take place? There is a very unusual grammatical construction here, a future passive perfect, reading “*shall have been bound*” and “*shall have been loosed.*” This means “that their earthly action followed the heavenly action.”⁹³ God acts, man reacts. It can never be the opposite, man acts, God reacts. God is the prime mover, not man.

“Jesus is not giving the church the right to make decisions that will then become binding on God. Such a thought is alien from anything in his teaching. He is saying that as the church is responsive to the guidance of God it will come to the decisions that have already been made in heaven.”⁹⁴

Through the sovereignty of God, the decision of the church to bind or loose has in fact already been made by God in eternity past. Jesus is saying they he will be with them to make the decision that has already been made in eternity.

Matthew 18:19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

Again I say to you.... Verse 19 is fleshing out verse 18 and should be read together in that light. Verse 19 is reinforcing the judicial conclusions of verse 18.

⁹¹ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 455.

⁹² Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁹³ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 454.

⁹⁴ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 469). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

agree....⁹⁵ The Greek is made up of two words *hear* and *with*. The pronunciation in Greek sounds like or English word *symphony*. This gives some idea how strong the agreement must be.

So, who is agreeing and what are they agreeing about?

“The two who agree are the offender and the one against whom the offense has been committed. They come to agreement on earth about any judicial matter they have been pursuing: the verb *aiteisthai* [ask] can refer to “pursuing a claim,” as well as asking in prayer.... The promise, then, is that if two individuals in the church come to agreement concerning any claim they are pursuing (presumably on the basis of the church’s judgment, v. 18), “it will be allowed, ratified (literally it shall succeed, come off) on the part of my heavenly Father.”⁹⁶

Another unlikely option would be a guarantee of God in providing anything they ask for in prayer. Certainly, Jesus and his disciples agreed on earth that he should not go to the cross, but he went to the cross. So, this is not a cart blanch get anything you want prayer.

about anything (about any matter whatever).... The words **about anything** or **any matter** in this phrase “should here be rendered “about any judicial matter....”⁹⁷ Verse 18:16 used the phrase “every charge” or “every word.” The two are comparable. The **anything** or the **any matter** are about the discipline of the offending brother, not about prayer in general. So, verse 18:19 is still dealing with the discipline issues of verse 18:16.

“When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?” (1 Corinthians 6:1, ESV)

“For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter.” (2 Corinthians 7:11, ESV)

“that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.” (1 Thessalonians 4:6, ESV)

agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them.... What they are asking for here is not a new car but wisdom on what to do with the sinning brother.

Matthew 18:20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

two or three.... So here, “the “two or three” [judges] reflect known Jewish legal practice. Each of the disputing parties would nominate his own “judge,” a layman

⁹⁵ *agree συμφωνέω* “To be in unison, accord, to speak together with another, thus to agree, concur.” Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

⁹⁶ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, pp. 403–404). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁹⁷ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 403). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

known to be impartial; and these two would try to settle the problem. If this effort failed, they would approach a third, unconnected with the disputants, who worked with the others either along the lines of arbitration or adjudication. The parallel is very neat and nicely accounts for Jesus' "two or three."⁹⁸

These two or three are referring to the one or two (others) of 18:16 and 18:19. When they gather to address the fallen brother, God is in their midst in making a legal decision. "...in this context it again refers mainly to the decision of a church regarding a discipline situation."⁹⁹ Therefore, "These two verses should not in this setting be taken as a promise regarding any prayer on which two or three believers agree...."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 404). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁹⁹ Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* (vol. 1; Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 688.

¹⁰⁰ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; vol. 8; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 8403.