

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

“Matthew 18” you will hear some people reference as if it’s as well known as John 3:16. It’s not, but then again, although most people probably know what John 3:16 says, they also probably misunderstand it.

When people say “Matthew 18,” most often they’re referring to the process that Jesus gives to His church to reconcile sinners one to another and, if necessary, to the church.

In some ways, we like that passage. We like the 10 easy steps to being a better parent; the 5 steps to better health; the 6 steps to financial security, and so forth. Here Jesus gives us the three steps to churchly peace, hopefully, but often not. I’ve seen this process used with an air of Christian superiority, a haughty ego built up by confronting another’s sin. I’ve seen it used as a bureaucratic cudgel to try to stop people from confronting sin and false teaching. I’ve seen it used as a guilt-inducing shield to keep from having to repent of error.

Yes, along with using Matthew 18, they’ll say, “Take the log out of your own eye” (Matt. 7:5), “judge not” (Matt. 7:1), and “you think you’re so righteous, you Pharisee” (Luke 18:9ff). And these come right from Scripture.

But these seem to me to miss the point completely. To be sure, the state and its ministers have the sword to wield, but in the church it’s a misuse to weaponize Jesus’ words. And it’s especially the first misuse that I want to consider today, for it’s not for the sake of power, it’s not with an air of superiority, but of humility that one takes up Jesus’ instructions on reconciliation.

Indeed, it is hard to miss the context of this three-step process. The chapter begins with the disciples’ astounding question, “*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*” Did they think it was one of them?

What a surprise they must have felt when Jesus called to Himself a child. A child! A παιδίον! A small child. Jesus later numbers this child among the μικρῶν, the little ones.

So, what’s so great about a little child? After all, they can’t take care of themselves. You’ve got to feed them, clothe them, wash them, and watch over them. In today’s world, you’ve got to help them with their homework. You’ve got to taxi them all over the place! What a pain! Moreover, they can be frustrating, asking that incessant question: “Why? Why? Why?” How many parents have lost patience at that question: “Because I said so!”

Moreover, they’re not “*greatest in the kingdom of heaven*” because they’re so innocent. They’re selfish, self-centered, and can be just plain cruel. “Why did you taunt that child? Why did you take that from that child? Why did you hit that child? Why did you throw rocks at that child?” “I don’t know,” the diminutive

culprit replies with his head hanging down. “Say ‘you’re sorry.’” “I’m sorry.” How many times have you heard such a scenario play out?

So, what is Jesus teaching us when He says to His disciples, “*unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven?*” The answer is in that little word “*turn,*” to “change inwardly.” It’s not the usual word for “*repent,*” but that’s what the word means in this context. The answer is in how Jesus concludes, “*Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*”

Now, this humility is not a natural humility according to the flesh, but a humility that comes from the status of being a child: of being dependent on someone for virtually everything, trusting another to take care of you, to watch over you, to teach you to walk in the right way. It’s not “*humble yourself like this child has already done,*” but “*become like a child with respect to God,*” being born again of water and the Spirit. Become like a child, denying yourself and following Jesus in all humility—in repentance and in all dependence, trusting in Him with all your heart. And we are reminded that Jesus shows mercy to such as these, to those who fear Him; He exalts the lowly; He fills the hungry.

Living the Christian life is not about superiority; it’s about humility and lowliness and helplessness in the face of sin. And so it’s about repentance. And, to be sure, Jesus expresses it with a bit of metaphor and exaggeration. Nevertheless, Jesus instructs us that our sin, including the sins we commit that cause others to sin, is worthy of condemnation: being drowned by hanging a mill stone around the neck, cutting off limbs and plucking out eyes.

But instead of drowning us in the punishment we deserve, He drowns the Old Adam in us in contrition and repentance with a grace we do not deserve. He makes us, natural born enemies, His children as we are born again in the waters of Holy Baptism. In this way, we become the “*little ones*” before God who believe in Him. We are the wandering sheep, plucked from danger by the shepherd who goes forth to search him out and bring him back into the fold. We are the sinner who repents, a cause for joy in heaven.

For Jesus reminds us, the Father does not will that “*one of these little ones should perish.*” Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord God has told us, “*I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live*” (Eze. 33:11). And St. Paul reminds us, “*God our Savior, ... desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Tim. 2:3-4).

It’s with this in mind, then, that Jesus goes on to give us His formula for reconciliation and peace among fellow Christians. It’s not for the benefit of the Christian who thinks himself superior, but for the sake of the brother. It’s to gain a wandering sheep who is lost. God said, through the prophet, that He desired that

the sinner should “*turn from his way and live.*” Jesus’ instruction says it this way: “*If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.*”

Jesus Himself showed us this way. In humility did the Son come down from the Father’s side not for Himself, but to seek and to save that which was lost. Into the wilderness of sinful men, did the Father send His own Son as both the sheep bearing our iniquities, led to the slaughter, and as the shepherd who would save His people and bless the Lord’s heritage, leading His flock, gathering His lambs into His arms, and carrying them in His bosom. And as He departed, He gave to His church the message to preach: repentance and the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Jesus (Luke 24:47) that the sheep may continue to hear the shepherd’s voice, that He may gather up to Himself all whom the Father has given Him, that none of these should perish (John 10:27-29). So also we have been exhorted to exhibit the same attitude as Jesus in humility (Phil. 2:5) and gentleness (Gal. 6:2) as we speak God’s word of warning. “*Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another*” (1 Pet. 5:5), exhorts St. Peter. “*Turn and become like [little] children ...*” (Matt. 18:3), says Jesus.

God grant us this mind among ourselves. And God grant us patience with one another, even as “*The Lord ... is patient toward [us].*” He does not wish “*that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance*” (2 Pet. 3:9). Likewise, grant that we also may “*walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love*” (Eph. 4:1-2). God grant that we “*who are spiritual*” may “*restore [erring brothers] in a spirit of gentleness. ... [bearing] one another’s burdens, and so [fulfilling] the law of Christ*” (Gal. 6:1-2). God grant it for the sake of Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.