Matthew 18 revisited

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Few texts were more central to the life and faith of the early Anabaptists than Matthew 18:15-20. Yet, though this biblical text is one of the most frequently alluded to and quoted by our spiritual forebears of the sixteenth century, it is perhaps one of the texts most likely to make twenty-first century Mennonites cringe. Church discipline? Binding and loosing? What can excommunication and the ban possibly have to do with the good news of Jesus?

Then again, consider the standard church discipline exercised by the other church bodies of sixteenth-century Europe: imprisonment, torture, and even capital punishment. By comparison, as they attempted to obey this text the Anabaptists seem humane in merely excommunicating and shunning from fellowship an errant sister or brother.

Still, to our ears, statements such as the following by Menno Simons can sound harsh, even uncaring:

> *Some hold the idea concerning the ban that they want to avoid and shun not the excommunicated themselves but only their false doctrines and offensive lives. They say this and fail to notice how that they are already themselves fallen into false doctrine, for they make null and void the clear ordinance of Christ (Matt. 18:17).*
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> *Shun all heretics (I refer to those who used to be of us) and apostates, according to the Word of the Lord; whether it be father, mother, wife, child, relative, or friend.... Whosoever loves anything more than his God, cannot be the disciple of the Lord.*[1]

We want to ask Menno: How could you expect a wife to refuse even to share her bed with her husband? How could you demand

that a father deny his backsliding son a place at the family table?

In their zeal to obey this text they called "the rule of Christ," some of our Anabaptist forebears seem to have paid insufficient attention to the context of Matthew 18:15-20. The purpose of this article is, first, to consider briefly the place of Matthew 18 within its context in the Gospel as a whole; second, to examine in more detail the context of this rule of Christ (18:15-20) within the entire chapter; and third, to revisit the specific instructions of this text with an eye open to its situation within its given context.

Matthew 18 in the context of Matthew's Gospel

Matthew boldly structures his Gospel as a new Pentateuch, in which he gathers and forms Jesus' sayings about God's new covenant inaugurated in Jesus into five major blocks of teaching. For the first evangelist, Jesus is the new Moses, who—in actions reminiscent of the first Moses on Mount Sinai—ascends a mountain to deliver the first book (5:1), and then again (24:3) for the fifth and final book. Jesus opens his new Torah with the Sermon on the Mount and its new covenant blessings (5:3-12); then he concludes his Pentateuch with the Olivet Discourse (chapters 23–25) and its woes pronounced on those who reject his new covenant (23:13-32). This is how the Torah of the first Moses also concludes: covenant blessings are promised to the obedient, and curses are pronounced on those who rebel against God's covenant.

The new covenant Jesus is inaugurating holds forth a new hierarchy: the least will be the greatest, the humblest the most exalted, the last first. The greatest in the kingdom is small, dependent, vulnerable, and needy.

The story of God's people after they receive the law is a story of rebellion against God's rule and God's covenant. But the prophet Jeremiah looked forward to a new covenant that would reestablish God's rule, a new covenant that would institute a new way of life marked by humility, forgiveness, and reconciliation (Jer. 31:34). Now, in this fourth book of Matthew's new Pentateuch (chapter 18), Jesus sets forth this very way of life promised by Jeremiah as the charter for the reign of God and its new covenant, which God is inaugurating through Jesus. Hence, the importance of chapter 18 to Jesus' kingdom proclamation can hardly be overstated. And how interesting that the Anabaptists so

aptly called this fourth book of Jesus' new Torah "the rule of Christ."[2]

Matthew 18:15-20 in the context of Matthew 18

Like most questions put to Jesus by the disciples in Matthew's Gospel, the one that opens chapter 18 is misguided, even obtuse. Who is the greatest in your kingdom? they ask Jesus. Who gets to be the most powerful and influential of all your bureaucrats? Jesus had confronted his disciples' wrongheaded thinking on this matter repeatedly. The new covenant Jesus is inaugurating redefines power, holds forth a new hierarchy: the least will be the greatest, the humblest the most exalted, the last first.[3] This time Jesus dramatizes his point, calling a little child to himself. The greatest in the kingdom is like this little child: small, dependent, vulnerable, and needy. In God's kingdom, the little ones are the great ones. And the measure of care that we, Jesus' followers, offer these greatest-neediest is the measure of our own standing in the kingdom established by God's new covenant. This is the theme of Matthew 18.[4]

The kingdom of heaven, then, is an entity—a place, a people, a society—that welcomes little children (18:2-5) and those like them, offering hospitality to these "little ones" (18:6) who are dependent, in need, and powerless. Unself-conscious, humble hospitality is a defining characteristic of Jesus' kingdom. Moreover, when Jesus' disciples humbly care for any such little one, they are, in fact, caring for Jesus himself (18:5).

Care for these little ones—the great ones in the kingdom—entails not only self-forgetful hospitality toward them, but also sensitivity that avoids offending them or causing them to stumble (18:6-9). The critical importance of this care not to offend is communicated by Jesus' extreme, even ruthless, language for those who run roughshod over these vulnerable ones. Jesus calls his followers to a radical protection of these needy great ones. He requires our passionate commitment to do all in our power both to protect their faith and to remove any obstacle to their belief, even to the point of amputating our hand or foot.[5]

But what if one of these little ones has been looked down on and despised (18:10)? What if this one has been so offended against that he or she wanders away like a lost sheep from the new

covenant community? Contemplate the heavenly Father's response, should this one's guardian angel have to report such an offence (18:11). The parable of the lost sheep is more familiar to us in the Lukan context of the parables of the lost coin and of the lost son (Luke 15). There it is the heavenly Father who passionately pursues the lost one. But in this context (18:12-14), Jesus is calling his disciples to love the wandering little one with the Father's ardent love. With the zeal of the Shepherd we are to pursue the one who has wandered away, the one who is lost, the neediest—greatest—one.

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Notice how this fourth block of Jesus' new Torah is building toward a "crescendo of care."[6] First is a call to welcome the least-greatest (18:2-5). Next comes a stern warning against offending those in the community's care (18:6-9). And now follows a summons to search out and restore the little one who is wandering away from the ninety-nine (18:10-14).

But what if this wandering off involves offence against the community? What if this wandering includes public and serious sin against a fellow disciple? What will covenant-keeping care mean then? With these questions we come to our central text (18:15-20).

A closer look at Matthew 18:15-20

First, however, we consider how the preceding teaching of Jesus may help us. We recall that the person who has sinned against us is, in Jesus' eyes, a little one who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Caring for this person is the same as caring for Jesus himself. We recall that these little ones have guardian angels who represent them to the Father in heaven and watch God's face. How will that face respond, should we choose to despise this person?

When you approach this person to talk about his or her sin, remember that it would be better to have a massive millstone hung around your neck and for you to be dropped in the deep, deep sea, than to cause this little one to stumble. Remember that this person is the one lost sheep the Shepherd pursues passion-

ately. In God's eyes, this person you are being called to approach is the greatest! The crescendo of care evident in Matthew 18:1-14 prepares and equips us to listen and respond with integrity to the next paragraph, the rule of Christ or Torah of Jesus.

The first issue we approach in this paragraph is a textual question. Did Jesus say, "If your brother or sister sins against you" or simply, "If your brother or sister sins"? Is this text about my responsibility toward the person who has sinned *against me*, or more broadly, about my responsibility toward my sister or brother who has sinned *publicly*? Both readings are contested, and no clear scholarly consensus has emerged.

And the debate is not just academic. Will we not be in danger of becoming meddlers if we attempt to get involved every time we suspect that one of our sisters or brothers has trespassed? What would it mean to care for the erring disciple whose sin has no direct effect on my own life? Then again, is Jesus expecting victims who have been sinned against to put themselves into a potentially vulnerable situation by seeking reconciliation with the offender? And to go to that person alone, at that?

Seeking reconciliation with the offender is especially problematic when the sin was intentional and perhaps even repeated, when it has left us feeling powerless and removed our dignity. So is not Jesus' call to forgive seventy-seven times (18:22) dangerously disempowering for the battered wife, for example? And what shall we say of our tendency to try forgiving and forgetting too easily, offering sentimental toleration for the offence, when what we should be doing is confronting the guilty party? After all, if sin is the destructive force scripture insists it is, then do we not fail in our care for the wandering sister or brother if we merely forgive the sin without looking it straight in the face? So how are we to approach someone who may well choose not to listen, and who may, in fact, inflict fresh pain, perhaps push us even further to the margins? What does care for the wandering sheep, the little one (who may seem more like a big bully), look like then?

This paragraph's broader context (chapter 18) keeps before us the purpose of this brotherly or sisterly confrontation. The paragraph is not about maintaining the purity of the church (despite what far too many Anabaptists have believed, in the sixteenth century and more recently). Nor is this paragraph's concern

conflict resolution, although that may be a welcome by-product. Nor is this paragraph's purpose to make certain that everyone's dignity and rights remain intact. And its purpose is surely not to set forth rules for a proper excommunication. As in all that has preceded this paragraph, the concern here is for the care of the little ones, those who are in need or in trouble. Obedience to the words of Jesus in this text will mean pursuing exclusively the well-being, restoration, and wholeness of the person who has committed the wrong.

A second question emerging from this text concerns the reason for taking along one or two witnesses, should the first meeting fail to result in reconciliation. What exactly is entailed in "every matter" which is to be "established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (18:16 TNIV, quoting Deut. 19:15)? Is the purpose of this second step simply to up the ante, to tighten the screws on the offender?

Perhaps the Anabaptist leader Hans Denck was closer to the reason: "When you hear your brother say something that is strange to you do not immediately argue with him, but listen to see whether he may be right and you can also accept it. If you cannot understand him you must not judge him, and if you think that he may be in error, consider that you may be in greater error."[7] So the purpose for meeting together along with one or two others is to protect the person being approached as much as the one doing the approaching. Hence, of utmost importance is the choice of witnesses whose care and commitment extend to both parties, witnesses who will listen with sympathy in order to sort out what is actually going on.

The broader context of Matthew 18:15-20 keeps before us the purpose of this brotherly or sisterly confrontation: not the purity of the church or conflict resolution but care for the little ones, those in need.

A third difficulty with this text is Jesus' pronouncement of judgment toward recalcitrant offenders: "If they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (18:17). The big problem with this language is that Jesus did not share the extreme dislike that most of his compatriots fostered toward non-Jewish outsiders and those Jewish "traitors" who collaborated with their pagan oppressors for financial gain. What does it mean for Jesus to

lump the unrepentant offender with pagans and tax collectors? Matthew is not afraid to remind us that he had been a tax collector (10:3); perhaps he grins wryly as he records Jesus' command regarding the church's ultimate act toward the impenitent offender. Jesus does not say, "Treat the offender as *your compatriots* would treat pagans and tax collectors," but rather, "as *you* would." Is Jesus calling on his disciples to display the same gracious compassion and care for outsiders that he was so frequently accused of manifesting?

True, Jesus did not affirm the actions of the pagans and the tax collectors. "When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans," he said (6:7). And do not be like the tax collectors who love only those who love them (5:46). But here Jesus is not talking about how tax collectors and pagans act. He is telling us how his own followers should act toward them, and surely we should act toward them as Jesus did (see 9:10-11; 21:31-32). Compassionate welcome and table hospitality will be the obvious signs that we are embracing the unreconciled sister or brother with the same grace that our Lord extended toward these outsiders. Lest we miss the other side of this point, however, we must also acknowledge that the sister or brother is now an outsider. To pretend that reconciliation has happened when it has not would be unhelpful.

This rule of Christ contains one of only two references in all the Gospels to the *ekklēsia* (compare Matt. 16:18). The church together binds and looses with heaven's full authority. No mention is made of an ecclesial hierarchy whereby this authority is channelled. Rather, when the church gathers around the offending little one for the purpose of restoration and reconciliation, even when such care is rejected, and even when the church consists only of those two or three witnesses, there Jesus is present in a special way.

The final piece of context for this rule of Christ or Torah of Jesus seems especially concerned to prevent abuse of the rule in the hands of the disciplinarians.[8] So the final word is forgiveness. It is introduced again by one of those misguided questions from a disciple: How often should I forgive? How long do we continue to pursue this little one (who is still, from the perspective of the kingdom of God, the greatest)? Jesus' hyperbolic insistence on

unlimited and boundless forgiveness is probably an allusion to the contrasting arrogant claim of Cain's descendant Lamech to his rights of unlimited vengeance (Gen. 4:24). The way of Jesus is a polar opposite of the way of Lamech. And so, in this final section of chapter 18, the crescendo of care reaches a resounding climax. The profligacy of divine forgiveness demands our unqualified forgiveness offered to one another as the ultimate act of care for the little-great ones in God's kingdom.

Pastoral thoughts on translating theory into practice

When asked to take another look at Matthew 18, my instinctive response was, "Oh no, any text but *that* one." I have had too many experiences, personally and pastorally, in which an attempt to obey these words of Jesus has ended badly. The theory is good, but the practice of this text is so often unsatisfactory.

The foundational event and symbol of our faith, the cross of Christ, should emancipate us from any notion that reconciliation is an easy exercise.

The foundational event and symbol of our faith, the cross of Christ, should emancipate us from any notion that reconciliation is an easy exercise. The incalculable cost to God of reconciliation—the volitional and vulnerable laying bare of the divine heart to pain and grief as the path toward accomplishing our forgiveness and the restoration of shalom—should lead us to give up our illusions about finding quick fixes. In N. T. Wright's words, the way to reconciliation announced here by Jesus is "severely practical as well as ruthlessly idealistic: not a bad combination."[9] Or in John Howard Yoder's trenchant summation: This text "gives more authority to the church than does Rome, trusts more to the Holy Spirit than does Pentecostalism, has more respect for the individual than humanism, makes moral standards more binding than puritanism, is more open to the given situation than the 'new morality.'"[10] And—we might add—it reflects more commitment to the formation of reconciled and reconciling Christian community as a sign of God's kingdom than Anabaptism has shown.

Though they didn't put it exactly in these terms, surely our Anabaptist forebears were correct in insisting that this rule of Christ is a fundamental tenet in the manifesto of God's approach-

ing kingdom. It is a central pillar in the charter of the new covenant, Jesus' new Torah, established in this new Moses. I have attempted to demonstrate that this rule's context reveals the nature of the power and authority that embody God's reign. At the heart of its power is the force of humble forgiveness. At the centre of its authority is sacrificial, self-forgetful care for the least of these. May we too commit ourselves unswervingly to this rule of Christ by our care of the little ones who are greatest in the kingdom.

Notes

[1] "A Clear Account of Excommunication, 1550," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1496–1561* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956, 1984), 457, 472.
[2] Note that the semantic range employed here for *rule* encompasses both "command" and "sovereignty."
[3] Matt. 20:20-28; Mark 9:33-37; 10:35-45; Luke 9:46-48; 22:24-27.
[4] For more in-depth development of this theme, see Jeffrey A. Gibbs and Jeffrey Kloha, "'Following' Matthew 18: Interpreting Matthew 18:15-20 in Its Context," *Concordia Journal* 29 (January 2003): 6–25.
[5] Here Jesus once again employs stock Semitic exaggeration to make his point forcefully. See also verse 6. For a few other examples of Jesus' frequent use of hyperbole, see Matt. 5:29-30; 7:3-5; 8:20.
[6] This evocative phrase is taken from Gibbs and Kloha, "'Following' Matthew 18," 7.
[7] Hans Denck, "Concerning the Love of God," 1526, in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Resources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Kitchener, ON, and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 216.
[8] W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr. consider verses 15-20 to be the central paragraph of chapter 18, with the paragraphs preceding and following it a buffer of sorts, to prevent misunderstanding and misapplication of this text. See *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2 (New York: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 751.
[9] N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part Two: Chapters 16–18*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 2004), 34.
[10] John Howard Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

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