



NEW TESTAMENT

HUMILITY IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH

Wade Miller

There is a continual outcry in our country from various religious leaders against the decline of traditional moral values and the ongoing attacks on the family. The church's protest against various contemporary social morés raises the question of its own identity in the world. Some rightfully ask if the church isn't a little hypocritical in calling for society to change while at the same time indulging in ecclesial ambivalence. Is the church ready to clean its own house before making demands for moral and social renovation of the culture? Ongoing sex scandals and moral laxity within the church; the failure to hold both clergy and laity accountable for their conduct; and the adoption of worship practices that seem to mimic *American Idol* rather than reflecting anything remotely catholic appear to make the church's social outrage a bit disingenuous. As Jesus said, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:1–3).¹

Matthew 18 lifts up several injunctions that the church is to practice. The church should realize her identity by living a life of humility and servanthood. The church is admonished to function as a family: a place of protection, sacrifice, and mutual correction with ongoing forgiveness. In other words, the church is to live out her baptismal identity, putting her faith into action by living the life of humility, epitomized by her Lord.

Act Like Little Children!

In Western Christianity, a common attitude toward children is that they should be seen and not heard. This mentality reduces children to mere spectators in the various activities of the local parish, including the liturgy and especially the eucharist. Confirmation has become the Christian version of the Jewish bar mitzvah, a rite of passage into adulthood. It is interesting, however, that Matthew describes the way in which children are to be examples of genuine faith.

Instead of relegating children to mere spectators, our Lord uses these little ones as prototypes for the church to follow. Matthew tells baptized Christians to begin acting like little children by living a life of humility.

Matthew 18 begins with the disciples' debate about the identity of the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. In response to their arguing, Jesus must have stunned the disciples by calling a child to himself. He then announced, "Whoever *humbles* himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (v. 4). The key that unlocks the door to the kingdom of heaven is humility. Children provide the example of humility in their childlike faith. In other words, the kingdom is not for the self-righteous cynic or the pompous expert in theology; it is for those who humble themselves like small children. This call to act like children is reiterated in Matthew 19:14, where Jesus announces, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

The Protective Parent

Matthew now records the stern warning by the Lord to any who would harm one of his children. Jesus says it would be better for a person to have a giant millstone wrapped around the neck and be thrown into the depth of the sea than to cause one of his children to sin (Matthew 18:6). This language speaks of protection and provision. Using the familiar metaphor of wayward sheep, Matthew depicts the care of the Lord by using the analogy of a shepherd. Although the word *ποιμήν* (shepherd) is not used here to describe the Lord, the story portrays the way in which Jesus seeks those who are lost. The imagery here in chapter 18 is reminiscent of the way in which Matthew earlier described the compassion of Jesus when he wrote, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36).

The parental nature of Matthew's depiction of Jesus speaks of the radical union between shepherd and sheep. The language is not that of a courtroom in which a prosecutor stands over against the defendant; it is one of a

family in which a loving and caring father watches over his child. If one of the sheep goes astray, the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in order to rescue the one that is lost. Whenever the shepherd finds the straying sheep, he rejoices greatly. Jesus said, "So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (Matthew 18:14).

The very fact that people can pray the words, "Our Father, who art in heaven..." demonstrates the fatherly heart of God. The Lord cares for his people in such a way that He longs for their good and desires to bring His wayward sheep home. The wayward sheep describes all humanity, but the protective parent magnifies the great compassion of the Lord. Matthew 18:11 captures the heart of Jesus' care for his sheep with those comforting words, "for the Son of Man came to save the lost."²

The lives of the baptized children of God, who are the sheep in this story, are to recognize the mercy of God and give praise to their shepherd. It is a reminder that it is only out of the sheer mercy and grace of the shepherd that anyone can come into His presence as His children. Psalm 100:3, which is often chanted for the morning office, proclaims, "Know that the LORD, He is God! It is He Who made us, and we are His; we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture."

It Takes a Church...

The imagery of the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine while going out and rescuing the one lost sheep is a wondrous portrait of God's grace. This image should not, however, lead one to conclude that salvation is merely an individual experience. These sections of Matthew 18 demonstrate that salvation has a very strong communal component as well. In other words, the church must combat the American heresy that the rights and privileges of the individual are the chief virtues. A better way to put it: "Those who go to hell do so on their own, while those

who go to heaven cannot but do so in the company of the multitude."³

In a well-known passage, Matthew records Jesus' instructions on handling conflict in the church. If one sins against his brother, then the offended party is to go to that person and state the fault. If the person will not listen, then the one offended is to take one or two people with him. The others are involved so that they might stand as witnesses. If the one accused of the fault refuses to listen, then the matter should be taken to the church. If that individual persists in his unwillingness to listen, then the church is to treat the unrepentant individual as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Matthew now invokes the imagery of the courtroom. The concept of church discipline seems a bit archaic for most Christians. It is often deemed a relic of the church's embarrassing and primitive past. If the church, however, is going to be true to the teachings of her Lord, she must follow His word despite voices to the contrary. The language of two to three witnesses echoes the words of Deuteronomy 19:15. The church is not a brand-new invention; it finds its continuity in the covenantal life of Israel. As the new Israel, the church must now maintain order and protect the greater community from those individuals who cause one of the Lord's children to sin. Dissension and disunity breed chaos and confusion. That is why St. Paul instructs young Timothy with the following exhortation, "Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear" (1 Timothy 5:19). A charge brought against another believer is a serious matter. The church must be scrupulous and wise in the way it handles various disciplinary matters. Church discipline, however, is not merely optional for the church. It is a matter that must be handled within the community of the faithful, not swept under the rug or ignored.

If the church is going to be the presence of Christ in the world, then she must act accordingly. Those who demonstrate a spirit of arrogance and pride by not submitting to the authority of the church fail to live the life to which they were called by virtue of their baptism. Unrepentant people forfeit the grace of God by sacrificing humility for their own agendas or comfort.

That could very well be the reason why Matthew includes the language of surgical amputation in this section of his Gospel. In Matthew 18:7-9, Jesus sounds like an ancient prophet of Israel, pronouncing a series of woes. He says that if one's hand or foot leads to sin, then the believer should cut it off. If one's eyesight leads to sin, then the person must tear out the eye and throw it away. In other words, although these examples speak to what individuals should do with persistent sin in their lives, the call for radical amputation or enucleation speaks to the community of faith as well. Treating one like a Gentile and a tax collector means cutting off those who live in perpetual disobedience to Christ. A casual reading of the Pentateuch clearly portrays what happened to those who disobeyed the word of the Lord. The words "cut off" are repeated throughout the Old Testament. To be cut off meant that one had become a stranger to God and His people through one's own disobedience. Paul picks up on this language as he warns Christians living in Rome, who had been grafted into Christ by baptism, with the following instruction, "Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in His kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off" (Romans 11:22).

The language of radical surgery might seem exaggerated if not read in context. It is important to remember that what the Lord calls the church to do extends to each individual member as well. Paul captures this idea in his first letter to the Corinthians. He

uses the metaphor of the body and explains how each individual part depends on the others. Paul concludes with these words, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Corinthians 12:26–27). This communal nature of the church requires accountability on the part of each individual member. The goal is for true unity in the church as her members live a life of continual submission and humility to one another and to the church’s Lord.

Brotherly Love in the Father’s House

It is true that this concept of accountability and church discipline can easily breed a spirit of legalism. The Puritans of colonial New England and many contemporary Christian fundamentalists provide a constant reminder that the church can become quite harsh in the name of purity and holiness. So how does the church function as a family without acquiring a spirit of self-righteousness?

The final section of Matthew 18 provides invaluable insight into this question. In Matthew 18:21, Peter asks Jesus how many times one should forgive a brother. Should it be seven times? Jesus responds that it should be seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22). In other words, forgiveness is the ongoing life of the Christian. Forgiveness involves humbling oneself by not harboring bitterness and anger. Following Peter’s question about forgiveness, Jesus tells a story about an unmerciful servant to illustrate his reply to Peter.

David Scaer’s book on Matthew is very helpful in clarifying this parable.⁴ Scaer observes that the servant in this story owed his master the equivalent of around one billion dollars in today’s money. The desperate man pleaded for mercy. Amazingly, the master forgave the servant’s entire debt. When this same servant, however, approached a fellow servant who owed him somewhere between ten and fifteen thousand dollars, the one who had been

forgiven a debt he could never repay reacted vengefully toward his fellow servant. Despite receiving such mercy, this unforgiving man now placed his fellow servant in prison until the debt could be paid. When the forgiving master heard what had happened, he became angry and sent this harsh and unforgiving man to prison as well. Jesus concludes this parable with the following words, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matthew 18:35).

The point that Jesus makes is that forgiveness is to be the ongoing life, not only of the individual Christian, but of the whole church. The church is like the man who owed a debt that could never be repaid. The master forgave the debt purely out of mercy for his servant. The servant who had received such a wonderful gift then turned around and would not forgive the one who owed him money. If members of the church fail to forgive one another, then they too will forfeit grace and not be forgiven. Church discipline and excommunication are steps that must be taken with great care and humility, but the goal is always restoration. Paul reminds the church of this point as he writes to the church in Galatia, “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. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:1–2).

Any parent knows this lesson all too well. Scolding and disciplining a child is a difficult responsibility, but the goal is not merely correction; it is restoring a relationship that is rooted in forgiveness. Humbling oneself is not a pleasant experience. Being humbled by someone else is even more difficult to accept. But the goal always is restoration in perfect unity and love.

The words that the church prays each week, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” constitute the ongoing life of the church rooted in forgiveness. Mean-

while, the words that are said each week by the pastor presiding over the eucharist, “Drink of it, all of you; this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for the forgiveness of sins,” is a participation of the church in that forgiveness purchased by way of the savior’s blood. The church is called to recognize her forgiveness in Christ while humbly extending that same mercy and grace to others.

Before the church attempts to reform society, she must reform herself. Matthew calls the church to exemplify the humility of her savior. Members of Christ’s church must recognize and embrace their helpless state like little children, recalling and living out their baptismal grace. The greatest remedy for hypocrisy is remembering that all like sheep have gone astray, but through the unmerited mercy of the shepherd, forgiveness is granted and fellowship with our heavenly Father is restored. Members of the church as family must serve one another in humility, always thinking of the community of faith rather than the self. This recognition means submitting to the authority of the church and taking heed to her loving correction. The result is a family in which brotherly love reigns and forgiveness never ceases. As the world observes that the household of faith is rooted in genuine humility and love, then it will be ready to hear what she has to say. *LF*

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Notes

1. All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version.
2. Although many manuscripts do not contain Matthew 18:11, these words of Jesus fit within the scope of this pericope. Cf. Luke 19:10.
3. W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *International Critical Commentary: Matthew 8–18* (New York: T&T Clark International), 11:777.
4. David P. Scaer, *Discourses in Matthew* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004), 339–40.