



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Gospel According to St. Matthew

Chapter 18

Bishop Youssef



Introduction

Chapter Main Points:

- The need for humility, and concern for others in the kingdom
- Dealing with a sinning brother, and the importance of forgiveness



An Overview

- Greatness in the Kingdom defined as humility (verses 1-5)
- Jesus Warns of Offenses (verses 6-9)
- Parable of the Lost Sheep (verses 10-14)
- Dealing with a Sinning Brother (verses 15-20)
- The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (verses 21-35)



An Overview

Please note:

Verses 1-14 has significantly repeated words:

- "child/children" (verses 2, 3, 4 and 5)
- "causes sin" (in verses 6, 7 three times, 8 and 9)
- "little ones" and "heavenly Father;" both occur twice "once at the beginning and again at the end of the passage"

Who Is the Greatest? (18:1-5)



- By the kingdom of heaven they meant the kingdom which they supposed He was about to set up - His kingdom as the Messiah
- They asked the question because they supposed, in accordance with the common expectation of the Jews, that He was about to set up a temporal kingdom of great splendor, and they wished to know who should have the principal offices, and posts of honor and profit

Who Is the Greatest? (18:1-5)



- This was among them a frequent subject of inquiry and controversy
- St. Mark in 9:34 informs us that they had had a dispute on this subject in the way. Jesus inquired of them what they had been disputing about
- St. Luke in 9:47 says that Jesus perceived the thought of their heart an act implying omniscience

Who Is the Greatest? (18:1-5)



- Some have thought that the little child was Ignatius the martyr
- The word "converted" means changed or turned
- The verb means to change or turn from one habit of life or set of opinions to another, James 5:19; Luke 22:32

Who Is the Greatest? (18:1-5)



- Humble, teachable and free from selfish ambition, like little children
- Jesus' teaching is an expansion of His teaching on the conditions of discipleship in 16:24-26 where He said that self-denial was a condition of true discipleship (verse 24)
- Children, when very young, do not desire authority, do not regard outward distinctions, are free from malice, are teachable, and willingly dependent on their parents

Who Is the Greatest? (18:1-5)



- So great is the disparity between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdoms of this world, that there is no way of rising to honors in the former, but by humility of mind, and continual self-abasement
- Greatness in the kingdom is not secured by seeking to be greatest
- In verse 2-4 the child only served as a model to imitate
- In verse 5 the child becomes the center of the action with "one child such as this" referring not to children in general but to those who declare themselves as Jesus' disciples who in humility accept the non-status of a little child and are therefore living in imitation of Jesus

Who Is the Greatest? (18:1-5)



- Those who receive such a Christ-like disciple as an apostle of the Lord receive Christ
- Surely we need to be daily renewed in the spirit of our minds, that we may become simple and humble, as little children, and willing to be the least of all
- Christ spoke many words of his sufferings, but only one of his glory; yet the disciples fasten upon that, and overlooked the others
- Many love to hear and speak of privileges and glory, who are willing to pass by the thoughts of work and trouble

Jesus Warns of Offenses (18:6-9)



- Little ones not only embraces children who have learned to believe in Christ, but all lowly and humble disciples
- Mills, anciently, were either turned by hand or by beasts, chiefly by mules
- These last were of the larger kind, and the original words denote that it was this kind that was intended
- This was one mode of capital punishment practiced by the Greeks, Syrians, Romans, and by some other nations
- Better that a man should lose his life in so terrible a way than to destroy the souls of others

Jesus Warns of Offenses (18:6-9)



- The word “Woe” is used by our Lord to express sympathy and concern; is an expression of grief
- The judgment Jesus pronounces against those who cause His believers to "stumble" into sin or to loose their faith is found also in Mark 9:42 and Luke 17:2
- The judgment imagery of a millstone being thrown into the sea is also found in Revelation 18:21-22
- The sinner being drowned in the sea recalls the fate of the pigs possessed by the demons in 8:32
- Such ultimate destruction is the judgment awaiting all unrepentant sinners who add to human suffering

Jesus Warns of Offenses (18:6-9)



- There will continue to be temptations and causes of stumbling in the world which will lead thousands astray and cause much sorrow
- We must not suppose for a moment that Christ subjects human actions to the control of rigid fatality
- It is not the foreknowledge or prediction of Christ, which causes these evils to take place; they do not happen, because Christ foretold them; but, Christ foretold them, because they would infallibly happen
- Considering the cunning and malice of Satan, and the weakness and depravity of men's hearts, it is not possible but that there should be offences

Jesus Warns of Offenses (18:6-9)



- God permits them for wise and holy ends, that those who are sincere, and those who are not, may be made known
- The Almighty permits malice, because the good are benefited by them, making them more diligent and more watchful: witness the great virtue of Job, of Joseph, and many others perfected in temptation
- If the less virtuous receive any harm from evil, they owe it to their own laziness

Jesus Warns of Offenses (18:6-9)



- The same words are repeated here on occasion of offences, as are spoken by Christ, Matthew 5:29 on account of unchaste looks, desires and lusts: giving offence to Christ's disciples, or endeavoring, by any means whatever, to cause them to stumble and fall, is equally satisfying the flesh, and no more to be indulged, than the other, on pain of eternal punishment
- If an object dear as the right eye, and useful as the right hand, lead you into sin, that object however dear, we must quit it and renounce it sooner than remain in the occasions of offending God

Jesus Warns of Offenses (18:6-9)



- Jesus sums up His comments on sin by saying that sin not only causes others to stumble into sin and brings suffering to the world but one must avoid sin at all costs because sin can ultimately lead to eternal death in hell

The Parable of the Lost Sheep (18:10-14)



- The words "little ones" and "little child/children" are also used for believers in the Gospels of Mark and Luke (Mk 9:42; 10:14,15; Lk 17:2; 18:16,17)
- "Little children" is the term that St. John uses for believers spoken by Jesus in his Gospel and is a favorite term St. John uses for believers in his first letter to the Church (Jn 13:33; 1 Jn 2:1,12,13,18,28; 3:7,18; 4:4; 5:21)
- Not merely one of the children, but those saints whom the world regards as insignificant and unimportant

The Parable of the Lost Sheep (18:10-14)



- To despise is, literally, to look down upon, and hence, to neglect
- The doctrine of angels is definitely taught in the Scriptures; Tobit 5:4-8; 12:12-15; Job 33:23-24; Ps 34:7-8; 91:10-13; Dan 8:15-17; 9:20-23; 10:4-14, 20-21; 12:1; Zech 1:7-11; Lk 16:22; Acts 12:15
- Observe the dignity of the humble and little, whom the world despises
- They have angels constantly pleading their cause in the divine presence

The Parable of the Lost Sheep (18:10-14)



- They have their advocates in heaven, accusing those who offer them any injury or harm
- A second reason why we should not despise the lowly is that the Son of man came to seek and save them
- He came in search of them when lost; He found them; He redeemed them
- "Since the whole object and errand of the Son of man into the world is to save the lost, take heed lest, by causing offenses, ye lose the saved."

The Parable of the Lost Sheep (18:10-14)



- By the *one sheep*, some understand all mankind, and by the ninety-nine, the angels in heaven
- He has come down upon earth to save by His death what was lost
- “What do you think? This illustration of the anxiety of the shepherd for lost sheep is used to show the deep interest that God feels in any one of the straying little ones
- This same parable is related in Luke 15:3, and it being there more largely expressed
- A shepherd rejoices over the recovery of one of his flock that had wandered more than over all that remained; so God rejoices that man is restored: so He seeks His salvation, and wills that not one thus found should perish

The Parable of the Lost Sheep (18:10-14)



- If God thus loves and preserves the redeemed, then surely man should not despise them
- It is interesting to note that verse 13 suggests the lost are not always returned to the flock when Jesus says *And if he finds it*
- Verse 14 is similar to St. Peter's encouraging statement concerning the delay in Jesus' return in 2 Peter 3:9
- If any soul be finally lost, it is not because God's will or counsel was against its salvation, or that a proper provision had not been made for it; but that, though light came into the world, it preferred darkness to light, because of its attachment to its evil deeds

The Parable of the Lost Sheep (18:10-14)



- Jesus is using a metaphor common to the Old Testament prophets in the symbolic imagery of domesticated animals
- The most common of such metaphors was a shepherd and his sheep (for some Old Testament passages depicting God as the shepherd and Israel as the flock of His sheep see Ps 23; 95:7; Jer 23:1-4; and especially Ezek 34)
- Jesus will use this same imagery in His discourse on the Last Judgment (Mt 25:32-33); in warning the Apostles of their crisis when He is arrested (Mt 26:31); and in His Good Shepherd discourse (Jn 10:1-18)

Dealing with a Sinning Brother (18:15-20)



We are to follow four steps when a someone sins against us:

- Go to the brother or sister who is in error or who has wronged you and privately tell him his fault; this was required under the law, Leviticus 19:17
- If he listens be reconciled with him, but if he does not listen take others along and speak to him a second time so that you have witnesses to the discussion; it is based on Deuteronomy 19:15
- If he refuses to listen or mend his ways take the problem to the Church
- If he refuses to listen even to the Church, then the person is to be considered outside the fellowship

Dealing with a Sinning Brother (18:15-20)



- He speaks of an ecclesiastical assembly, for he speaks afterward of the power of loosing and binding, which belonged to the Church
- If someone sins against another, he ought not to complain of it to others, as is often done merely upon report, but to go to the offender privately, state the matter kindly, and show him his conduct
- This would generally have all the desired effect with a true Christian, and the parties would be reconciled
- If that person deny the fact, excuse it, defend it, or at least is stubborn and adamant, shows no signs of repentance, but is angry, gives hard words, and ill language

Dealing with a Sinning Brother (18:15-20)



- Then take with you one or two more; members of the church, and perhaps of weight, reputation, and character, who may know some thing of the matter, and so can confirm, by their testimony, what has been alleged, in order to bring the person to conviction and acknowledgment
- It is done to gain the brother not for revenge
- This is the second instance in the New Testament use of the word church. The first is in Matthew 16:18
- The church has power to admonish and to exclude
- Have no religious fellowship with him, more than you would have with a heathen, or a publican

Dealing with a Sinning Brother (18:15-20)



- To separate a believer from the Sacraments is a last measure to attempt to bring that person back into communion with God and fellowship with his brothers and sisters
- In 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, St. Paul makes a similar demand for excommunication of an unrepentant member of the faith community in the hopes that exclusion will be a liberating remedy that will bring about repentance
- In his letter to the Church in Rome and in his letter to the Church in Thessalonica he warns the faithful concerning members of the community who have gone astray into false teaching or immoral behavior; Romans 16:17-18, 2 Thessalonians 3:6,13-16

Dealing with a Sinning Brother (18:15-20)



- “Who, for instance, was wiser than David? Yet for all that, when he had sinned he perceived it not, his lust keeping in subjection all his reasoning powers, and like some smoke filling his soul. Therefore he stood in need of a lantern from the prophet, and of words calling to his mind what he had done. Wherefore here also He brings these to him that hath sinned, to reason with him about the things he had done.” (St. John Chrysostom)

Dealing with a Sinning Brother (18:15-20)



- The power of *binding* and *loosing* is promised to the apostles and their successors, bishops and priests
- It is spoken to all a second time (Jn 20:23)
- All had the keys as well as St. Peter
- The apostles were, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, to establish the rules of the church discipline, as well as to announce the conditions of salvation by the gospel
- These rules and conditions, found in Acts and the Epistles, bind and loose men
- *That if two of you*, From these words, we learn how imperative is the public to prayer

Dealing with a Sinning Brother (18:15-20)



- The united prayers of this fellowship for any legitimate object shall be heard
- The assurance of this is found in the fact that Christ will be present wherever two or three are gathered in His name
- Their united prayers will ascend, made mighty by the intercession of the Son of God
- By His presence it becomes His prayer
- His promise in 18:20 recalls the title Emmanuel (meaning "God with us") given in Isaiah 7:14 and repeated in Matthew 1:23 as well as Jesus promise after His resurrection when He told the disciples *And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age*

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:21-35)



- The Lord had just spoken of the duty of seeking reconciliation with those who trespassed against us (Mt 18:15-17), and there seems to have been some doubt in the mind of St. Peter how far this principle should be carried
- The number is not to be taken literally; it has a symbolic value
- The Greek number can be read either seven times ten plus seven times = 77 times or of seven times ten times seven = 490 times
- In both cases seven is the number of perfection, fulfillment and completion
- He does not mean to say that this number must be the bounds of our forgiving; we must forgive to the end, and never take revenge, however often our brother offend against us

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:21-35)



- To recommend this great virtue more forcibly, He subjoins the parable of the king taking his accounts: and, from the great severity there exercised, He implies how rigid will the heavenly Father be to those who forgive not their enemies
- The king is the Lord, the servants those who profess to serve him as King; the kingdom is His church on earth
- The talent was a weight, not a coin, and its value would depend on the purity of the precious metal used in the coinage
- If the Greek silver talent is meant, the ten thousand talents would amount to about \$7,500,000
- What is meant is that the sum was beyond human ability to pay

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:21-35)



- The servant who was deeply in debt to the Master is every Christian who comes to God in repentance asking for His mercy and forgiveness
- He represents the sinner, who has no way to settle the debt of his sins, Luke 7:42
- It was common for persons to be sold for debt
- In many nations the wife and children were involved in the unfortunate fate of the debtor
- This is the wages of sin, to be sold as a slave
- *I will pay you all*, This promise was one that could not possibly be fulfilled
- The master had pity on him, he saw his distressed condition
- He pitied his family and forgave him the whole debt

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:21-35)



- His own exhibition of brutality was immediately after the great mercy he had received
- What follows shows that he had only been frightened, not changed and repentant
- The whole debt would therefore be from sixteen to eighteen dollars
- Its smallness compared with his debt to his lord is intended to show that our neighbors' sins against us are insignificant when contrasted with ours towards God
- He had been treated with such mercy, had no mercy
- It will be noticed that this unfortunate debtor makes exactly the same appeal as his exacting creditor had made to his lord

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:21-35)



- Jesus here clearly conveys the intolerable injustice and offensiveness which even the servants saw in this act on the part of one so recently laid under the heaviest obligation to their common master
- We may make light of wronging our neighbor, for that is also a sin against God
- The sin of which the servant was guilty and charged is that having received mercy he remained unmerciful still
- He never could pay, he was condemned to eternal imprisonment

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:21-35)



- If we are hard and unforgiving to our fellow-men, we can never expect our heavenly Father to overlook our own sins
- It is a vital doctrine that we, by our own mind towards others, determine what shall be the mind of God towards us
- *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy* (Mt 5:7)
- *With the measure you use, it will be measured back to you,* Matthew 7:2
- *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us* (Mt 6:12)

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:21-35)



- *Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap, (Gal 6:7)*
- The goodness and tolerance of God towards us is the pattern we should follow in our dealings with others
- Our sins are great and God freely forgives them
- The offences committed against us by our brethren are comparatively small; we should therefore most freely forgive them
- If we do not, God will be justly angry with us, and punish us
- Forgiveness, not merely in words, but really and truly to feel and act toward him as if he had not offended us



Conclusion

- Who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?
- Why does Jesus use a little child to illustrate His teaching point?
- What parable illustrates the Father's concern for the lost?
- What four steps are we to follow when a "brother" or "sister" has sinned against us?
- Who asks Jesus how many times do we have to forgive someone?
- What increases the likelihood that God will answer prayer?



Conclusion

- What authority from heaven does the hierarchy of the Church exercise then and now?
- What grave warning is in the parable of the unforgiving servant?
- What should be your efforts in solving interpersonal problems?
- Why is forgiveness so important to the Christian community?
- What are the consequences of failing to forgive our brothers or sisters? Why?



Conclusion

- How do you handle disagreements or wrongs done to you by others, especially by family? What pattern do you follow? How close to the model presented in this chapter is your method of handling problems?
- What are the limits of your own willingness to forgive others?
- Do you forgive readily, do you wait for the offenders to ask for forgiveness, or do you look on forgiving others as a sign of weakness? What should the limit of your willingness be?
- If a church today excommunicate a member does that mean that that person is excommunicated in heaven?