

## Remarks on Matthew 18

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In chapter 16 we had two subjects connected with the revelation of the Lord's Person to Simon Peter — one of them entirely new, or for the first time divulged; the other the familiar subject of the kingdom of heaven. We shall find in the chapter before us that these two topics are again brought together, but of course not confounded or identified. We are called to see the kingdom and the Church in their practical bearing. We heard already that the Lord was to build the Church upon the rock of the confession of His Person — "Upon this rock I will build My church." Afterwards, He promised to give the keys of the kingdom of heaven to Peter. Now we find — and I think connected with our Lord's showing the practical principle which actuated Himself with the consciousness of glory, and of the absolute command of all that He had made (for He was the Lord of heaven and earth, if He paid the tribute of the temple) — it was not a question of rights. Had it been a mere matter of right, the children were free: He was the Lord of the temple, so that there was no claim possible on that ground. But "lest we should offend them," etc.

Grace, you see, gives up its rights; at least, it does not seek to claim and exercise them for the present. And in the very consciousness of the possession of all glory, it can bend in this evil world. But, then, carefully observe that what it leads the soul that understands it to, is never to yield God's rights, but our own. We must be as unbending as a flint wherever God is in question. Grace never surrenders the true holiness, the claim or will of God; in fact, it is the only thing that, as far as man is concerned, strengthens any soul to value them, or assert them, or walk in them: and grace does this. It is God's own way from the gospel upwards. "What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh." The practical lesson follows: "that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." That which the law claimed, but never produced, is accomplished by the power of grace acting upon the heart of man. Christ does not so much demand as give the power. It is all of His goodness.

And grace consists not merely in forgiving sins, but in giving power to be and to do that which is entirely contrary to nature and above it. The law never even sought this. The law addressed itself to man as he was — supposed him to be a sinner, to have evil lusts and passions, and forbade them; but what more could it do? It claimed the heart of man, the very last thing he would or could give. He might give his body to be burned, and all his goods to feed the poor, but never his heart to love God. I am speaking now of man as man. When you speak of a Christian, what makes him a Christian? Not the law, which never made a Christian since the world began, nor ever was intended so to do. It condemns a man because he is a sinner, and does not like to obey God: but it does not even hold out what a Christian ought to be. It never proclaims that a man should forego his rights, and be willing to suffer: a Christian is one who does this, being called to go far beyond what the law asked; and if he does not, he is not walking as a Christian. So that, in both ways, looking at the law whether as dealing with an ungodly man, it cannot save him; and in dealing with a godly man it never puts before him the full character of the holiness Christ enjoins. What, then, is it that God has given the Christian? If he is not under the law, under what is he? He is under Christ, under grace; under Christ as the very fulness of grace and truth.

This is what comes out here. And it is a very beautiful feature of the chapter which we are about to look at just now. We find that the grace of the gospel is the pattern of the spirit that is to actuate the

Church and its members in everything that merely concerns ourselves. There is often a great practical difficulty that people do not understand. While you are called upon to walk in nothing but grace, as to your own relations with God, it is a misuse of grace to suppose it to be an allowance of evil or indifference. Grace, on the contrary, while it meets a man in his ruin and forgives him, spite of his sins, imparts a power that he had not before, because it reveals Christ, strengthens the soul, gives a new life and acts upon that life so as to carry him forward in the obedience as well as in the enjoyment of Christ. Our Lord shows that this ought to govern everything. But, first, we have the spirit that befits us: "At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" This furnishes opportunity for our Lord to indicate the spirit that becomes the kingdom of heaven. "Jesus called a little child unto Him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." Now this is what is wrought in a soul when it is converted: there is a new life given, even Christ. Hence there is much more than entire change. That would be very far short of the truth as to a Christian. Of course the Christian is a changed man, but then the change is because of something still deeper. A Christian is a man born again, possessing a life now that he possessed not before. I do not mean merely that he lives after a new sort, but that he has a new life given him, that he had not as a man. It is in this way that he becomes a little child. Then this new life has to be cultivated and strengthened. Our natural life as men grows up, or it may be checked and hindered by various circumstances. So it is with the spiritual life, though it be external.

Our Lord shows here what is the characteristic moral feature that suits the kingdom of heaven; and this in opposition to Jewish thoughts of greatness. They were still thinking of the kingdom of heaven, according to Old Testament delineations of it. When David came to the kingdom, his followers that had been faithful before, were exalted according to their previous worth. You have the three great chiefs, and then thirty other warriors, and so on; all of them having their place determined by the way in which they had carried themselves in the day of trial. The disciples came with similar thoughts to our Lord, full of what they had done and suffered. Peter gets rebuked for that very thing afterwards. The same spirit broke out on many occasions, even at the last supper. Our Lord here uses it for showing that the spirit He loves in His disciples is to be nothing — to be without a thought of self, in a spirit of lowliness, dependence and trust — that does not think about itself. This is the natural feeling of a little one. It may be spoilt; but naturally it looks up to its parents, and thinks there is nobody like them; and as long as the child is unsophisticated, so it goes on. In the spiritual child that self-forgetfulness is exactly the right feeling.

The little child is the standing witness of true greatness in the kingdom of heaven. In our Lord Himself this was shown fully. The wonder was that He who knew everything, who had all power and might, could take the place of a little child; and yet He did. And indeed you may be sure that the lowliness of a child is in no wise incompatible with a person being deeply taught in the things of God. It is not a lowliness that shows itself in phrases or forms, but the reality of meekness that confides not in itself but in the living God: and that has the respect which God Himself loves that there should be towards those around it. Perfect humility was just as much a feature of our Lord Jesus as was the consciousness of His glory. The two things may well go together: and you cannot have becoming Christian humility, unless there be the consciousness of glory. To behave ourselves lowly, as children of God, is the beautiful thing the Lord is here putting before us. "Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

It is not merely the becoming like little children, as begotten of God, and brought into the family, but there is here the practical work of humbling ourselves. But then comes another thing: not only the

humbling ourselves, but how we feel towards others. "Whosoever shall receive one such little child in My name, receiveth Me." Whatever may be the lowliness of the Christian, he should be viewed with all the glory of Christ, which is meant by receiving him in the name of Christ. It is a person that does not defend his rights, nor assert his glory in any way, but is willing to bend and make way for any one; and yet conscious of the glory that rests upon him. There may be the very opposite of this — "Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in Me." What is meant by this? Anything calculated to shake their confidence in Christ, to put a stumbling-block in their way. It does not mean anything said in faithful love to their soul.

People may take offence at this: but that is not what is spoken of here. It is what shakes the confidence of the little one in God Himself. "Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in Me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea." These things are constantly occurring in the world. Therefore, says the Lord, "Woe unto the world because of offences; for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh." What is to be done? The Lord shows in two forms the way to guard against these stumbling-blocks. The first is this — I must begin with myself. That is the most important means of not stumbling another. "Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off and cast them from thee." It may be in one's service, or in one's walk; but if hand or foot become the occasion of stumbling (something in which the enemy takes advantage against God), deal resolutely and at once with the evil thing. "It is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than, having two hands or two feet, to be cast into everlasting fire." The Lord always puts the full result of evil before the soul. In speaking of the kingdom of heaven He takes into account that there may be persons in it false as well as true. He therefore speaks generally. He does not pronounce upon them, and say, "If you really belong to the kingdom you have nothing to fear." But He looks at the kingdom of heaven; and there are persons who apparently enter that kingdom, some of whom may be truly born of God, others not.

The Lord solemnly puts before them, that such as are indifferent about sin are not born of God at all. It is impossible for a soul to be regenerate, and habitually careless about that which grieves the Holy Ghost. Therefore He puts before them the possibility of such being cast into everlasting fire. Of no one who was born of God could this be said. But as there may be in the kingdom of heaven a false profession as well as a true, so a grave thing for the believer to look well to is, that he do not allow sin in any of his members. "And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire." It may cost ever so much, but God is not a hard Master: none is so tender and loving. And yet it is God giving us His full mind by the Lord Jesus, Who shows us that this is the only way of dealing with that which may become an occasion of sin (cf. Eph. 5: 5, 6).

The first great source of offence to others, which must be first removed, is that which is a stumbling-block to our own souls. We must begin with self-judgment. But there is also the despising the little ones that belong to God. "Take heed," therefore, our Lord says, "that ye despise not one of these little ones: for I say unto you, that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father which is in heaven. For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost." A beautiful word; specially as here it is evidently so broadly stated by our Lord, as to take in a real literal little child as well as the little ones that believe in Him. I believe that this chapter was meant to give encouragement touching little ones. The plea on which our Lord goes, is not that they were innocent, which is the way in which they are so often spoken of among men; but that the Son of man came to save that which was lost. It supposes the taint of sin, but that the Son of man came to meet it; so that we are entitled to have confidence in the Lord, not merely for our own souls, but for the little ones too.

But our Lord goes further. "How think ye? If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? and if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, He rejoiceth more of that sheep than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish." No doubt we can embrace all those that are saved on the same principle, and St. Luke does so in another chapter. The Gospel of Luke shows us (chap. 15) this very parable applied to any sinner. But here the Lord is taking it up in connection with the foregoing, namely, the right feelings for one who belongs to the kingdom of heaven. Starting from a little child, whom He sets in the midst, He carries the thought of the little one all through this part of His discourse. And now He closes with the proof in His own mission, of the interest which the Father takes in these little ones.

But more than this. He now applies it to our practical conduct. Supposing your brother does you wrong, something that may be very hard to bear, perhaps; an evil word, or an unkind action done against you — something that you feel deeply as a real personal trespass against you; the man has done it deliberately, and of course it is a great sin. Nobody knows it but himself and you. What are you to do? At once this great principle is applied. When you were ruined and far from God, what met your case? Did God wait till you put away your sin? It never would have been done at all. God sent His own Son to seek you, to save you. "The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost." That is the principle for you to act upon. It is not merely that this is the way in which God acted. You belong to God: you are a child of God. Your brother has wronged you; go you to him and seek to set him right. It is the activity of love, which the Lord Jesus now presses upon His disciples. They are to seek the deliverance, in the power of divine love, of those who have wandered from God. It is not the flesh feeling its wrong, and resenting what has been done against itself. The law would enable even a Jew to judge this.

But now it is grace, and grace does not shroud itself up in its own dignity, and wait till the offender has come and humbled himself and owned the wrong. The law executes punishment upon the guilty. If I have to do with the law at all, I am a lost man. But now another has come in — not the law, but the Son of man, the Saviour of the lost. Nor is this all. I want you, He says, to be walking after the same principle — to be vessels of the same love. As you have received your life from me, so I want your walk to be characterized by grace, going out after that which has sinned against God — grace to seek the man that has gone astray. This is a great difficulty, unless the soul is fresh in the love of God, and enjoying what God is for him. How does God feel about the child that has done wrong? It is the loving desire to have him right. When the child is near enough to know the Father's heart, he goes out to do the Father's will. It may have been a wrong done against him, but he does not think about that. It is his brother who has slipped into evil, and he sorrows over him. It is a real desire of heart to have the person righted who had gone astray; and this, too, not in order to vindicate self, but that his soul may be restored to the Lord. "If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone."

He could not bear that another should know it. It is not here the case of a sin known to a great many, but some personal trespass only known to you two. Go, then, to him and tell him his fault between you and him alone. A thing, no doubt, very contrary to the flesh, which would ever demand that the offender should first come and humble himself, or that would act on the worldly ground of not troubling itself about the man, but let him go from bad to worse. Love seeks the good, even of the one who has done ever so wrong. "If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." Love is bent upon gaining the brother. It is always so to him that understands and feels with Christ. It is not the offender,

but *thy brother* that is the thought before the heart. "Thou hast gained *thy brother*." "But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." Is it possible for him to resist one or two who come to him, witnesses of the love of Christ? He has refused Christ pleading by one, can he refuse Christ now that he pleads by more? He is sought again. Will he refuse? It may be, alas! that he will. "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church." The Church means the assembly of God in the place to which the man belonged. "If he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

It does not mean what people call "a" church now; there is no such thing in the word of God. Scripture never knows anything but God's Church; *the Churches* Scripture recognizes were simply His assembly in each city or analogous place. And therefore all the terms of men that have been brought in through departure from His thoughts, are entirely unknown in Scripture. "A church," separate from others and independent, has no warrant except in the will of man. Every Christian person is bound, not only to have done with these names, but with the thing itself, because God is looking for reality, and we are bound to act upon the truth of God. His will is that we should not belong to a church of the world or to a voluntary association of our own. Nothing is more simple than for a Christian to act as a Christian. It is only pleasing the flesh whenever we depart out of the path of God. It is evident that this passage contemplates a known assembly to which these persons belonged. It was the Church — the only assembly which we are called upon to acknowledge.

The assembly, then, are told of the guilty person's fault. The thing has been solemnly investigated and pressed home; and the Church now pronounces upon it. The Church warns and entreats this man, but he refuses to hear; and the consequence is — "Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." A most solemn thing! A man who is called a brother in the verse before, is like an heathen man and a publican now. We are not to suppose that the man was a drunkard or a thief; but what he has shown is a hardness of self-will and a spirit of self-justification. It might have arisen out of small circumstances; but this unbending pride about himself and his own fault is that on which God may pronounce him to be regarded as an heathen man and a publican; that is, that you no more acknowledge him in his impenitent state as a Christian. And yet it may spring mainly from the spirit of justifying ourselves when we are wrong. In the case of drunkenness, or anything of that kind, there would be no necessity for adopting any such mode of dealing with it. If there were not the least question on the mind of any one as to the sin, the duty of the Church is clear: the person is put away. He might not have been seen by a number of persons: there is no absolute need for that. Nor would there be reason in such a case for going one at a time, and then one or two more. This is only where it is unknown to any one but the individual against whom the trespass has been done. But the Lord shows here how, out of a little spark, a great fire may be kindled. The end of this personal trespass might be that the Church are convinced that the man displays not a trace of Christian life about him. "Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven." It is not a mere question of agreement. What gives the validity is that it is done in the name of the Lord (see 1 Cor. 5: 4). "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth, as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." Whether for discipline, or for making requests of God, the Lord lays down this great principle, that where two or three are gathered together in His name, He is in the midst of them. Nothing could be more sweet and encouraging. And I am persuaded that the Lord had in view the present ruin of the Church when there might be ever so few gathered aright.

No company of saints is thus gathered unless it assemble in obedience to the word of God and nothing else — founded and carried out according to the will of the Lord Jesus Christ. Any sect may contain good people, and have good preaching; but these things do not make it to be the Church. Unless it be upon the foundations of the word of God, subject to the Lord by the energy of the Holy Ghost, it is not such. But a person may ask, "Do you mean to say that you are upon that ground?" I can only say that we are taking an immense deal of trouble for a delusion if we are not. We are very foolish in acting as we do, unless we are sure that it is according to the mind of God. I have no more doubt how Christians ought to meet together for worship or for mutual edification, and that we are doing so, than I have about any other directions in the word of God. Not being restrained by rules, there is nothing for it but the word of God; and there is the most entire liberty to carry out that word. But while I speak thus confidently, I feel, on the other hand, that we need to take a very low place. Where members of Christ's body are scattered here and there, humiliation alone becomes us, and this not because of others' ways, but our own. For what have we been to Christ and the Church? It would be very wrong to call ourselves the Church; but if we were only two or three meeting in the name of Christ, we should have the same sanction and blessing as if we had the twelve apostles with us. If through unbelief and weakness the Church at large were broken up and scattered, and if, in the midst of all that confusion, there were only two or three who had faith to act upon the Lord's will, for them the word would still be true, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." The whole thing is wound up with this grand truth. It is the presence of Christ that gives sanction to their acts. If the Church has fallen into ruin, the business of those who feel this, is to depart from evil; to cease to do evil, learn to do well. We always come to first principles when things get astray. This is the obligation of a Christian man. He is never to go on doing what he knows is wrong. Where a man makes up his mind to do even a little wrong, he is an Antinomian. If people think they may sin in the worship of God, they deceive themselves. "God is not mocked."

There is one other thing that I must close with. Peter says to our Lord, "How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times?" We had the case of how we were to act in the case of a personal trespass. But Peter raises another question. Supposing my brother sins against me over and over, how often am I to forgive him? The answer is, "I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven." In the kingdom of heaven — not under the law, but under the rule of Christ — forgiveness is unlimited. How wonderful! To think that holiness, the deeper holiness that Christianity reveals, is at the same time that which feels with the deepest possible love, and which goes out with it to others. So we find here. "I say not unto thee, Until seven times," which was Peter's idea of the largest grace, "but, Until seventy times seven." Our Lord insists that there really was no end to forgiveness. It is always to be flowing out. But remember this: it is a sin *against you*: it is a person that does wrong to you. We are not to forgive a wrong done to the Lord, till the Lord has forgiven it; and the Lord only forgives upon confession of sin. I am now speaking, not of the grace that meets a man in his unconverted state, the case here is that of a brother. When a man is converted, he has to confess his sins day by day. It shows a wretched state of soul if a person breaks down in his daily path without confession to God. But what we learn here is, that if it is some sin done against you personally, and it is a question how often you are to forgive, the answer is, "Till seventy times seven." God will never be outdone in His perfect love: but even a man upon earth is called to forgive after this wonderful and divine pattern.

"Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king which would take account of his servants." Then we have two servants brought before us. The king forgives one of them who had been very guilty (who owed him ten thousand talents; practically, a debt which could never be paid by a servant). The king forgives him. The servant goes out from the presence of the king after the debt was

remitted, and he meets a fellow-servant who owes him a hundred pence — a small sum indeed in comparison with that which had just been forgiven to himself. Yet he seizes his fellow-servant by the throat, saying, "Pay me that thou owest." But the king hears of it through the sorrow of the fellow-servants, and summons the guilty man before him. What is taught by this? It is a comparison of the kingdom of heaven; and these comparisons refer to a state of things established here below by God's will. While we may take the principle to ourselves, much more is taught than this. Taken in the large way, the servant that owes the ten thousand talents represents the Jew who was peculiarly favoured of God, and yet had contracted the enormous debt that he never could pay. When the Jews had completed this debt by the death of the Messiah, a message of forgiveness was sent them: — "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." The Holy Ghost presses on them a message of repentance. They had only to do so, and their sins would be blotted out. God would send the Messiah again, and bring in the times of refreshing. The Holy Ghost answered the prayer of our Lord upon the cross, and Peter was entitled to tell them that they were forgiven. "I wot, brethren," he says to them, "that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers"; even as the Lord had said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That does not mean a personal forgiveness, but a national one, which required their faith and repentance.

Thus the servant had heard the sound of forgiveness to himself, but he had no understanding of it. He goes out, and casts a fellow-servant into prison for what was comparatively a very small debt. This is the way in which the Jew acted towards the Gentiles. After rejecting the message of mercy for themselves, the Jews followed the apostle Paul wherever he went, in order to stir up hatred against him. When the apostle told them that he was sent to the Gentiles, the word was, "Away with such a fellow from the earth." That answers to the catching of the fellow-servant by the throat.

It was the hatred of the Jew toward the Gentile. And thus all the debt that God had forgiven them became fastened upon them. The lord says to the servant, "O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt because thou desiredst me; shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow-servant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him." You may apply this to an individual who has heard the gospel, and who does not act according to it. The principle of it is true now of any mere professor of the gospel in these days, who acts like a worldly man. But taking it on the broader historical scale, you must bring in the dealings of God with the Jews and the Gentiles. The Gentile had, no doubt, treated the Jew badly; but what was all his debt compared with that which God had forgiven the Jew? The Jew therefore is cast into prison; and he will not leave it until he has paid all that was due. The day is coming when the Lord will say that Jerusalem has received of His hand double for all her sins. Jehovah in His grace will count that Jerusalem has suffered too much. He will apply to them the blood of Christ which can cleanse out the ten thousand talents and more; but the unbelieving generation of Israel are cast into prison, and will never come out; the remnant will, by the grace of God; and the Lord will make of the remnant a strong nation.

Meanwhile, for us the great principle of forgiveness is most blessed, and a thing that we have need to remember. We have specially to remind our souls in the case of anything that is against ourselves. May we at once look stedfastly at what our God and Father has done for us. If we can, in the presence of such grace, be hard for some trifling thing done against ourselves, let us bethink ourselves how the Lord judges here. Sometimes a soul goes on well for a time. But if there is not life from God, a slight circumstance happens, which brings out a man's true state, and then you have such a turning back from Christ, as proves that there is nothing of grace in the man's soul. For where there is life, the warning of God is heeded.

May the Lord grant that His words may not be in vain for us, that we may seek to remember the exceeding grace that has abounded towards our souls, and what God looks for from us.

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