

9 The community of the king (Matthew 17-18)

Now that someone finally has the revelation that Jesus is the anointed ruler who restores his Father's reign to the earth, the Christ can tell us how kingdom life functions. Matthew 17–20 is the practical side of kingdom life.

Like the river in Eden's Garden, kingdom life flows out of the relationship between the king and the kingdom. Our chapters tonight unfold the two sides of that relationship:

- a) Heaven confirms the revelation Peter received, calling us to recognize the Son appointed by heaven, to listen to him (Chapter 17).
- b) The Son explains how relationships work in his kingdom (Chapter 18).

That's how the kingdom of heaven works on earth. Heaven appoints the leader, and earth lives under his leadership.

9.1 Heaven reveals Jesus' authority (Matthew 17)

Dress for the job you want, they say. Jesus didn't. Except for this one time. Far from the cities of power, three trusted friends glimpsed him dressed in regal splendour.

They had just declared him as God's anointed ruler (16:16). He said they'd see him raised up with his Father's glory (16:27-28). For a brief moment they saw it:

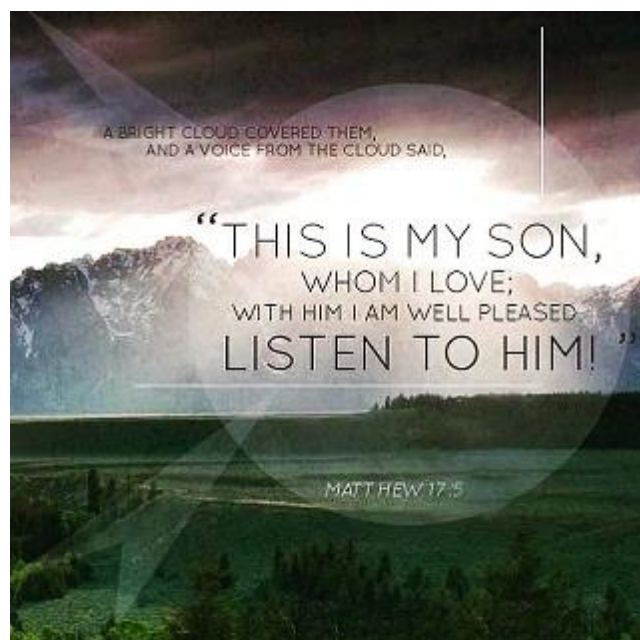
Matthew 17:1-8 (my translation)

¹ Six days later, Jesus takes Peter and James and John his brother. He leads them up a high mountain on their own. ² He was visibly transformed before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothing became as bright as sunlight. ³ And look! They saw Moses and Elijah in dialogue with him.

⁴ Peter responded to Jesus, "Lord, it's so good for us to be here. If you like, I'll set up three shelters here: one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah."

⁵ While he was still speaking, look, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and—take note—a voice spoke from the cloud: "This is my son, the one I love, the one I'm pleased with. Listen to him!"

⁶ Hearing it, his followers fell on their faces, utterly terrified. ⁷ Jesus came over to them, reached out to them, and said, "Stand up! Don't be afraid." ⁸ When they looked up, they saw no one else, just Jesus.



<https://onewalk.com/2021/02/28/this-is-my-beloved-son-listen-to-him-matthew-175/>

Moses and Elijah were the foundational prophets of the Old Testament. **Moses** delivered God's Law (Torah) to Israel. **Elijah** and the prophets called Israel back to the covenant relationship. The disciples see Jesus in dialogue with the Law

and the Prophets. The entire Old Testament narrative is reaching fulfilment in him (Matthew 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40).

But Moses and Elijah's voices aren't what this is about. Peter wants to honour them, but the voice that speaks from the cloud is the one that matters.

Do you recall a "cloud" in the Old Testament? When God delivered Israel from Pharaoh, God was visibly present in a *pillar of cloud and fire* (Exodus 13:21-22; 14:19-20, 16:10). God spoke from the cloud (Exodus 19:9; 24:15-18; 33:9-10; 34:5). And the cloud of his glory filled the house they built for him (Exodus 40:34-38; 1 Kings 8:10-12).

In exile, Ezekiel saw *an immense cloud with flashing lightning, surrounded by brilliant light*. And a voice (Ezekiel 1:4, 25-28).

Some of us wish God was more visible. Why does he hide in a cloud? Why doesn't he speak more often? It's been three years since we heard God's voice. That was the day Jesus was baptized. Do you remember what God said? (Hint: Matthew 3:17).

Compare what God says now (verse 5). God seems to have one message for humanity, calling us to recognize the Son he has appointed:

- ***This is my Son***: The Father affirms Jesus as the Son who restores heaven's reign to the earth (compare Psalm 2; 2 Samuel 7), underscoring the significance of Peter's declaration in 16:16.
- ***whom I love***: The Father's *beloved* is the one he has chosen to rule with his authority. That's how Luke understands the voice from the cloud: *This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him* (Luke 9:35).
- ***with him I am well pleased***: The one the Father delights in is the one to whom he is pleased to give kingship over earth. And in him God's pleasure extends to us (Luke 2:14).

Everything the Father says points us to his Son. Everything the Spirit says points us to the Son (John 16:14-15; 1 Corinthians 12:3). Everything Scripture says points us to the Son. God's message is this (Matthew 12:18 quoting Isaiah 42:1):

"Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations."

"Listen to him!" God says. To restore heaven's reign, earth must respond to heaven's anointed. Divine rule is restored as nations recognize his authority and learn to obey the Commander-In-Chief, present among us (Matthew 28:18-20).

When God spoke from the cloud at Mount Sinai, the people *trembled with fear ... and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die"* (Exodus 20:18-19). From that moment, God spoke to them through Moses and the prophets.

When God spoke on the mount of transfiguration, the disciples *fell facedown to the ground, terrified*. "Listen to the Son who pleases me," God said. The heavenly sovereign has *spoken to us by his Son whom he appointed heir of all things ... the Son who is the radiance of God's glory* (Hebrews 1:2-3).

The LORD reigns, robed in majesty (Psalm 93:1). And for just a moment they saw who he was, robed in majesty, heaven's decree as enfleshed reality on earth, living among us with all the grace and truth of his Father's glory (John 1:14).

Facedown on the mountainside, they heard Jesus' voice. He raised them up. He drained their fears (17:7). Looking up, all they could see was Jesus. The vision faded, but they could never unsee who he was.

It's not flesh and blood but heaven's decree that reveals Jesus as the anointed Son, heir of our reigning heavenly sovereign (as in 16:16-17).

The Moses and Elijah connection (17:9-13)

Moses was the prophet who laid the foundation for God's reign over Israel through the Sinai covenant. Moses spoke of *a prophet like me* whom the LORD would raise up (Deuteronomy 18:17-18).

Elijah was the prophet who called Israel back to covenant relationship with the LORD (1 Kings 17–21). Elijah had not completed this task when he was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1, 11). At the end of the Old Testament (Malachi 4:5-6), they still needed an "Elijah" to restore the covenant relationships.

Although the Torah describes Moses' death (Deuteronomy 34:5), another Jewish book (*The Assumption of Moses*) imagined Moses being taken up to heaven. If Moses and Elijah were both taken to heaven, perhaps they could come back and finish their work. But that's not what Jesus expected:

Matthew 17:9-13

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one what you saw until the son of man is raised from the dead."

¹⁰ His followers asked, "Then why do the Bible scholars say that Elijah must come first?"

¹¹ He replied, "Elijah does come and will restore everything. ¹² But I'm telling you that Elijah already came, and instead of recognizing him, they did whatever they wanted to him—the same as the son of man is about to suffer from them." ¹³ Then his followers realized he was referring to John the Baptizer.

For Jesus, **John the Baptist was the "Elijah"** promised by Malachi (4:5). John's prophetic calling was to turn the hearts of the people towards each other in preparation for the restoration of the kingdom (God's reign). Tragically, the new "Elijah" had been put to death before the hearts of the people had been turned towards God's Messiah, leaving *the son of man* vulnerable to the beasts in power (26:2, 24, 45, 64-66).

If John was the new "Elijah," **Jesus was the new "Moses"** of Deuteronomy 18:18. He was the founder of the new covenant relationship between heaven and earth. But how will heaven's reign be restored when people won't submit to God's authority? If the rebels killed the new "Elijah," what will they do to the new "Moses"?

Jesus expected it. The new *covenant* would be established *in his blood* (Matthew 26:28). Divine authority would be restored to the human (the son of man) when heaven raised him up with all authority over the earth (verse 9).

I hope that's not too densely packed. That is the story Matthew is setting up.

Trusting his leadership (17:14-23)

Peter, James and John saw Jesus' regal authority in his transfiguration. The others were tending the needs of the crowds, but they'd run into trouble:

Matthew 17:14-20

¹⁴ As they re-joined the crowd, a man came up and fell to his knees before him ¹⁵ saying, "Lord, please help my son. He has fits and suffers injury, as he often falls into the fire and often into the water. ¹⁶ I brought him to your followers, but they couldn't heal him."

¹⁷ Jesus replied, "O, faithless and misguided generation! How long will I be with you? How long can I put up with you? Bring him here to me."

¹⁸ Jesus rebuked it, the demon left him, and the child was healed from that moment.

¹⁹ Jesus' disciples approached him privately and asked, "How come we couldn't cast it out?"

²⁰ He says to them, "Because of your small-scale faith. I tell you the truth, if you [plural] were to have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will tell this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

Can you relate to these apostles? Sometimes God heals when we pray. Other times he doesn't. Is it just that our faith isn't good enough?

Mountains are a metaphor for the immovable. In the centuries before Christ, kingdom after kingdom had invaded and imposed their stamp on the landscape, but the mountains remained. Human authority could not move them, just as human authority was unable to remove the reign of those empires. That would take an act of God.

But Heaven's reign changes everything, even the mountains. Wild spaces and deserts are no longer considered of little value. When God reigns, the poor are raised up and given the kingdom. The high places are brought low. Terraforming the earth is the glory of heaven's reign:

Isaiah 40:4-5 (NIV)

⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.



Mount Hermon (Wikipedia)

What counts is not the size of our faith but the declaration of our God. Natural thinking asks whether our faith is up to the task, but Jesus says we don't need a mountain-sized faith to move a mountain.

It's just as well! If this conversation took place near Caesarea Philippi (16:13), Jesus may have been pointing to Mount Hermon as *this mountain*. If you needed a faith equal to the task, the weight of a 9000-foot mountain would crush and bury you and your scales before you could put your little herb seed of faith on the other side.

But faith is not working up enough confidence to smash a mountain. It's pure reliance on what God decrees, on what the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

So, what has God decreed? He has decreed the end of the reign of evil. The demonic oppression of the child cannot remain in the presence of the Son who restores heaven's authority to earth. All they needed was to *listen to him* (17:5).

We do not have power to do whatever we want. We have power to do whatever he wants. Jesus had authority to remove every mountain, every obstacle to heaven's authority on earth. But observe how he used his authority.

Jesus did not use that authority to remove the human rulers who opposed his authority. He did not treat Herod as a mountain to be cast into the sea. He did not cast down the temple authorities in Jerusalem to avoid the pain of the cross. Nothing was impossible, but that's not how heaven uses its authority.

Note carefully what Jesus says immediately after *Nothing will be impossible for you*:

Matthew 17:22-23

²² Travelling back to Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The son of man is about to be handed over to the hands of men. ²³ They'll kill him, and on the third day he will be raised up." They were deeply grieved.

His pain is the preceding context (16:21 and 17:9). His frustration is the *generation* that *mistrusts* his leadership and ends up *misguided*. That's the irony of his painful question, *How long will I be with you? How long can I put up with you?* (17:17)

Jesus' authority does move mountains. In the end, *every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low* under God's reign.

But he's not a bulldozer forcing the earth under his feet. He's not blasting haughty mountains with explosives or expletives. He's establishing heaven's authority on earth by giving his life. It's the only possible way to represent his Father's authority (26:42).

Heaven's authority does not force people against their will. You cannot use your faith to demand that God make your spouse return after a separation, or your business partner return the money they stole. God's authority calls us to suffer in the face of evil, just like our Lord. The prosperity teachers lost the context of the cross.

There is so much suffering in God's world. War in many places. Diseases take children before their life unfolds. The rich and powerful gorge themselves while others starve. Crime and injustice seem like insurmountable mountains. What is our faith in the face of all these?

In the face of the injustice of those who refuse to submit to heaven's authority, the Lamb is leading the world back under heaven's reign. We join our faith with his mother's even before she gave birth, declaring, *He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.* (Luke 1:52).

Nothing can stand against the authority of his name. Satan has already been dethroned (John 12:31; 16:11). Nothing is impossible for heaven's authority.

But we exercise his authority with sacrificial love, just like the king we represent. In the context of his reign, nothing is impossible for us. Together.

The king who pays tax (17:24-27)

If death and taxes are the only certainties, you don't want to offend those who charge taxes. Taxation was not part of the created order. In the beginning, God only gave humans authority over the other creatures, not each other (Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8).

There's something seriously wrong when representatives from the temple expect tribute from the king:

Matthew 17:24-25a

²² Travelling back to Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The son of man is about to be handed over to the hands of men. ²³ They'll kill him, and on the third day he will be raised up." They were deeply grieved.

²⁴ When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax approached Peter: "Your teacher pays the temple tax, doesn't he?"

²⁵ "Yes," Peter said.

Peter hadn't even paused to think. He'd seen Jesus pay the temple tax each year.

This year was different. Peter had just declared Jesus to be God's anointed king (Christ), the Son appointed to rule the earth by his Father in heaven (16:16). And Jesus had explained that the temple leaders in Jerusalem would kill him (16:21; 17:23).

Jesus wants Peter to ask, "Why should God's anointed king pay tribute to the rebels?"

Matthew 17:25b-26

When Peter went inside, Jesus raised the topic. "What do you think, Simon? From whom do earthly kings receive their taxes or contributions? From their own sons? Or from others?"

²⁶ "From others," Peter said.

"Right," Jesus said. "So, their sons are free."

Verse 25 is exciting. It's the closest we've seen to Jesus calling himself a king. In all his teaching on God's kingship (the kingdom of God) Jesus never claimed to be king, since kingship must come from God. Now, in private, with someone who has received the revelation of his kingship, Jesus feels free to discuss his regal authority.

Peter no longer knows the answer to the question.

It's weird to pay the tax, making him subservient to the temple authorities. It's dangerous not to pay the tax, an offence against the temple authorities who will be seeking grounds to execute him. What should he do?

The king's answer is as hilarious as it is creative. Demonstrating the authority God gave humans over the creatures, Jesus sends Peter to collect the tax money from a fish. He can then pass it on to those who make demands, so they have no grounds for accusing him of an offence:

Matthew 17:27

²⁷ “But we don't want to offend them, so head down to the lake and throw in a line. Open the mouth of the first fish you catch, and you'll find a coin—enough to pay my tax and yours.”

Laughing all the way to the lake, Peter knew creation's true king came not to be served, but to serve.

9.2 The community of the Christ (Matthew 18)

Who is the most significant person in the kingdom? Can we agree on who it is?

Okay, so who's next? Should Peter be regarded as the “Prime” Minister of Jesus' government? Or do you think James or John have that honour? They want to know:

Matthew 18:1

That's when Jesus' followers came and asked,
“So, who is the greater in the heaven's kingdom?”

Everyone's eyes are on Jesus. He has the authority to determine their significance.

Jesus looks around. He sees children playing. He calls one over. We're not told her gender, but I'm going with a girl since girls had a lower social status in their culture.

This little girl is now the centre of everyone's attention, because the king made it so. “The most vulnerable person is the most important for you,” the king tells his servants:

Matthew 18:2-5

² Jesus called a child over and raised her up among them. ³ He said, “I'm telling you the truth, unless you turn back and become like children, there's no way into heaven's kingdom. ⁴ The one who will take a lowly position—like this child—this is the greater person in heaven's kingdom.

⁵ Anyone who, as my representative, receives one such child is receiving me.”

Let's clarify verse 3. Jesus did not say I can't go to heaven unless I'm as naïve or innocent as a child. He said there's no way we (the *you* is plural) as a society can experience heaven's reign while we're dominating each other.

Who was the most powerful person in the town square? It might have been the Roman soldier with the sword he was given to enforce Roman justice. Rulers of this world bear arms to enforce justice (Romans 13:4). They're authorized to kill killers to limit violence (Genesis 9:6). Is that what Jesus wants in his kingdom?

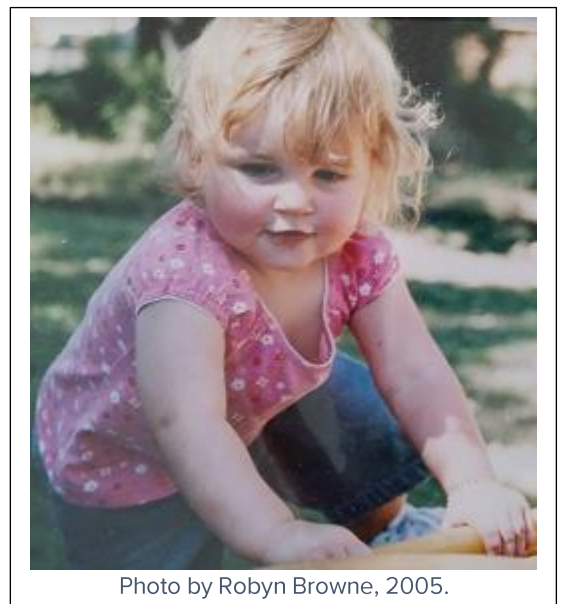


Photo by Robyn Browne, 2005.

"No," says Jesus. "I'm not calling you to throw your weight around like adults who think they must fight to make things better. Turn the other way. Become as vulnerable as children. If you're strong enough, absorb the hurt like children who can't fight back. That would be greatness in my kingdom."

Rather than fighting back, the strong are the human shields for the vulnerable. That makes the vulnerable the highest priority in Jesus' community.

The child in that courtyard felt vulnerable. Every eye was on her now. But in that moment, she was greater than any of them. The king had lifted her up.

"This is what I want you to do," our leader said. "Look for the vulnerable. Prioritize them as the greatest. As you do, you'll find me there."

Predator warning (18:6-10)

Jesus wasn't encouraging naivety. There are always predators trying to take advantage of naïve people, trying to trap them to their own advantage. The first hunter to earn that reputation was the warrior who started war for political ends. He founded the kingdoms that ultimately led to Israel's fall (Genesis 10:8-12).

So how do we protect vulnerable people from those who would hunt them and bring them down? Listen carefully:

Matthew 18:6-10

⁶ "But anyone who trips up one of these little ones—those who place their trust in me—would be better off with a donkey's millstone around their neck, drowned at the bottom of the sea.

⁷ "Woe to the world of such entrapments! The traps are inevitable, but woe to the person who sets the traps!

⁸ "If your own hand or your foot trips you up, chop it off and throw it from you. It's better for you to enter into life with a disability or limp than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into the fire forever.

⁹ "If your eye trips you up, pull it out and throw it from you. It's better for you to enter into life one-eyed than to have two eyes and be thrown into Gehenna's fire.

¹⁰ See that no one disrespects one of these little ones. For I tell you that through it all, their angels in heaven see the face of my Father who is in heaven."

The keyword (in verses 6, 8, and 9) is *trip up*, often translated *cause to stumble*. Sticking your leg out to trip someone up is a nasty schoolboy trick. Israel actually had a law against placing a stumbling block in a blind person's path (Leviticus 19:14).

Children are less aware of the traps people set to harm them. So what do we do about the people who want to ensnare vulnerable people for their own benefit?

This might be the most shocking expression to ever come from Jesus' mind. He says those who plot to take advantage of others like that would be better off dead—drowned at the bottom of the sea, with a donkey's millstone around their neck.

Most households had a millstone for grinding seeds to make flour. Wealthy households had a larger millstone that needed a donkey to turn it. Although English translations usually miss this detail, that's what Jesus said: *a donkey millstone*! If someone throws you into the sea with a donkey millstone around your neck, you're not going to survive.

This is the stuff of horror stories, mafia legends. Is this what our king wants us to do?

No, he did not tell us to do this. He said this is what it would be like for the people who set the traps to trip people up. There's another hand behind the scenes that people forget about when they're setting traps. We're living in God's reign (God's kingdom, not Nimrod's). Those who plot evil to bring others down are destroying themselves. They won't survive. They don't have a place under God's reign.

The king did not call us to kill the killers. The force of his "**Woe**" in verse 7 is the prophetic announcement that God will bring down those who trap others.

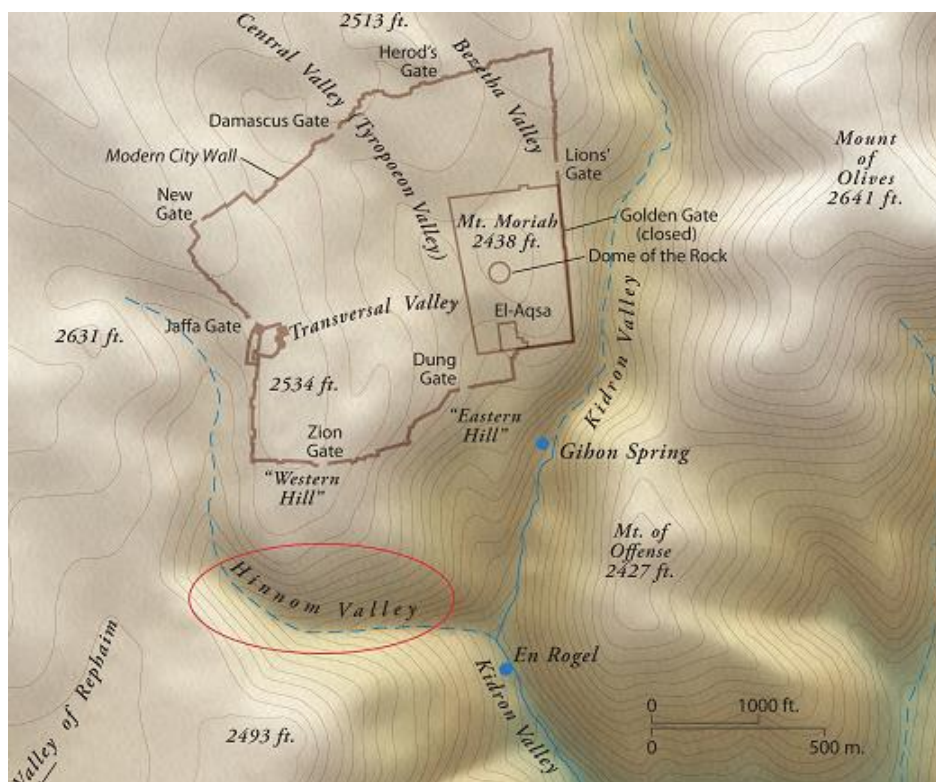
We don't have authority to bring others down, but we do have responsibility for our own choices. The "*you*" in verses 8 and 9 is singular: I'd be better off without the money I gain from trying to take someone down. I'd be better off without the social recognition I gain by climbing over others and pushing them down. If that's part of who I am, I'd be better off without that part of me—like amputating a gangrenous limb so it doesn't rot my whole being.

Amputated limbs are burnt. You can live without a limb. But you don't want your whole being rotting until it kills you, your whole body is burnt as garbage.

Bodies in hell (18:9-14)

In verse 9, Jesus speaks of having your body burnt in *Gehenna*. It's usually translated Hell, but Gehenna was a real place just south of Jerusalem. The Hebrew name was *Ge Hinnom* (Valley of Hinnom). Hinnom was the original owner, so the valley was also known as *Ge Ben Hinnom* (valley of the sons of Hinnom).

Gehenna had a terrible history. People burnt children there as sacrifices to get the gods on side. Even kings of Judah had done this to keep their power: Ahaz (2 Chronicles 28:3), and Manasseh (2 Chronicles



Topography of Jerusalem, *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible* (Zondervan, 2010), 242.

33:6). The last good king tried to stamp out the practice (2 Kings 23:10).

God viewed what they did in Gehenna as unimaginable evil, declaring an end to Jerusalem and the kingdom rather than let this child abuse continue:

Jeremiah 7:31-32

³¹ They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind. ³² So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room.

Jeremiah was describing the Babylonian invasion. So many of Jerusalem's defenders were slaughtered that the cemetery could not hold them. Their bodies were burnt in Gehenna, a prophetic reminder of the city's violence against her own children.

Jeremiah repeats this tragic warning (32:35-39), but this time with the promise that God would bring his people back from exile. Of course, those whose bodies were burnt in Gehenna did not see the kingdom restored. Gehenna became a symbol of those who perished. Other Jewish writings used this symbolism too (e.g. Isaiah 30:33).

In the New Testament, Jesus is the only person who uses the Gehenna imagery, with one exception (his brother in James 3:6). Jesus had quite a bit to say about the coming invasion when Rome would overrun Jerusalem and destroy the temple, just as Babylon had done in Jeremiah's time. That would account for why some thought Jesus sounded like Jeremiah (Matthew 16:14).

In the Middle Ages, Gehenna morphed into the image of hell preached by Catholicism and depicted in Dante's *Inferno*. The idea was that, although our bodies pass away, our spirits live forever. So, for the spirits that did not deserve heaven, God would torture them unceasingly, with no way out. (Well, actually there might be if your relatives paid the church to pray for them to be released from Purgatory.)

But that whole approach doesn't fit with what Jesus said. He didn't say humans were eternal spirits that have to live somewhere (heaven or hell) after their bodies rot away. He said eternal life was a gift, the alternative to perishing (John 3:16). Jesus never spoke of spirits in hell; he spoke of *bodies* in Gehenna (Matthew 5:29, 30; 10:28; 18:9).

So, whatever you think Jesus meant by speaking of bodies being burnt in Gehenna, we clearly need to rethink the view of hell we've inherited from Catholicism.

Any interpretation that presents God as someone who calls us to forgive our enemies while he tortures his enemies forever is suspect. And when that interpretation arose so church leaders could condemn people, the foundation for that doctrine is dubious.

Jesus' picture of God is as a shepherd who goes out of his way to gather his sheep and reestablish his leadership of his flock, even the ones who have been led astray by the hunters and trappers who seek their own power:

Matthew 18:12-14

¹² "What do you think? Say someone had a hundred sheep, and one was misled from the others. Wouldn't he leave the ninety-nine on the hills,

head off, and search for the misled one? ¹³ And if it can be found, I tell you truly that his joy over this one is greater than over the ninety-nine that were not misled. ¹⁴ None of those who gather around your Father in the heavens want any of these little ones to come to ruin.”

Resolving injustice (18:15-17)

So if we aren't tying millstones around the trappers' necks, how do we deal with unjust treatment in the kingdom of God?

That's a real problem. When God released Israel from Pharaoh's oppression, Moses' life was consumed with sorting out the disputes over how God's people were treating each other (Exodus 18).

For some things, we can go to Bunnings, buy some timber, build a bridge, and “get over it.” Love covers a multitude of failures. But we also need a process for escalating the issues we can't just get over:

Matthew 18:15-17

¹⁵ “If one of the family wrongs you, go and confront them, just the two of you on your own. If they hear you, you've gained your family member.

¹⁶ “If they do not hear you, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘any statement can be established by the voice of two or three witnesses’ [Deuteronomy 19:15].

¹⁷ “If the person disregards them, speak to the assembly. If they disregard the assembly, let them be a gentile or tax collector for you personally.”

First, we try to sort it out between ourselves. If that doesn't work, we involve one or two siblings from Father's family who can help us to see beyond our own perspective. If that still doesn't work, the king invites us to bring the matter to the *ekklēsia*. That word is usually translated as *church*, but we've seen how the essence is *the assembly that gathers around the king*. (See on Matthew 16:18, page 106.)

Do you remember how justice worked in the days of the kingdom? People brought matters of justice before the king. Solomon was the paradigm of wisdom in resolving his people's disputes (e.g. 1 Kings 3:16-28; 10:3-9).

Now, *something greater than Solomon is here* (Matthew 12:42). King Jesus is present in the assembly that gathers around his kingship. When we can't resolve disputes on our own, he invites us to bring the matter before his throne, in the assembly that gathers around his kingship.

And if that still doesn't sort it out? Jesus says if someone disregards the assembly under his kingship, we're to treat them as someone outside the Abrahamic family, someone aligned with another power like the tax collectors who served Rome.

Some churches and cults have taken verse 17 to mean, “Excommunicate them! Kick them out of church. Have nothing to do with them.” But that is not how Jesus treated gentiles and tax collectors. If Matthew wrote these words, he was living testimony of how Jesus treated tax collectors.

The point is not to ostracise these people. The point is to treat them as someone who is not following our King.

And this is not a ruling for the whole church. The final *you* in verse 17 is singular: it's how you personally cope. It's not a command for everyone to treat them that way.

The point is that if someone does not recognize our King, we've reached the end of the road as far as reconciliation is concerned. They're like a foreigner operating by a different set of rules. Just as you cannot go to Indonesia and expect them to live by Australian laws, you're out of options when someone doesn't follow King Jesus.

Binding and releasing each other (18:18-22)

Matthew 18:18 talks about *binding* and *loosing* (also in 16:19). Is this spiritual warfare? What are we binding and loosing? The devil? Or angels (if they've been bound)?

The verb to **bind** (*deō*) simply means to **tie up**. Harvesters tie up sheaves (12:30). Farmers tie up animals (21:2). Herod tied up John the Baptist (14:3). The temple leaders tied up Jesus to hand him over to Pilate (27:2). In Jesus' stories, a king ties up a rebel (22:13), or a strong person is tied up to raid their house (12:29). That last one is sometimes used in favour of spiritual warfare, but we never hear Jesus vocally tying up the devil in Galilee. We see him releasing people whom the devil had tied up.

The verb to **loose** (*luō*) simply means to **untie**. The tied up donkey was untied (21:2). The grave clothes were untied from Lazarus (John 11:44). Moses was told to untie his sandals (Acts 7:33). John was unfit to untie Jesus' sandals (Acts 13:25). The unmarried are not tied to anyone (1 Corinthians 7:27). In John's vision, God untied Satan for a moment (Revelation 20:3, 7), but that is not something we do.

So, what did Jesus think we would be imprisoning or releasing?

Matthew 18:18

"I tell you truly, whatever you confine on earth will have been confined in heaven, and whatever you set free on earth will have been set free in heaven."

The immediate context was about disputes between members of God's family (verses 15-17). The following story explains our need to forgive rather than holding each other in prison (verses 21-35). In this context, what we're binding or loosing is: **each other**.

I keep you tied up when I *bind* you to an obligation you have not fulfilled.
I *loose* you when I release you from your obligation.

Jesus is not saying that our obligations don't matter. He provides a dispute resolution process because they matter. But if the process does not bring a satisfactory resolution, what then? Then I'm faced with a choice: to keep you bound, or to release you.

My relationship with you depends on that choice. But the implications extend far beyond the two of us. When we keep each other imprisoned to our failures, we're tying up heaven's plans to release the earth. What we have not resolved on earth is still viewed as an unresolved matter in the heavenly realm.

When we hold each other enslaved, heaven responds, "Ah, there's one we don't have sorted out yet." When we release each other, heaven responds, "Brilliant! Another one sorted." What we do with each other here on earth in response to Jesus' leadership of God's family is what has been achieved so far in Heaven.

Jesus has come to set his people free, so it's really important that we don't keep each other bound.

Consider what happened when Jesus was facing the greatest injustice of all time: his crucifixion. He prayed, "Father, forgive them." So even in the face of the most aggravated assault of Heaven's anointed, our royal representative changed the status of the relationship between heaven and earth. We sing his praises because what he did on earth was considered done in heaven.

But it won't happen in human experience unless we release each other, in the same way our king released us (verses 23-35). *In agreement* is the opposite of *in dispute*:

Matthew 18:19-22

¹⁹ "Again, truly I tell you, that if two of you are of one mind on earth about any matter they might raise, it will be granted to them by my Father in the heavens. ²⁰ For where two or three have been brought together under my authority, I am among them."

²¹ Peter stepped up and said to him, "Lord, how often should my brother or sister wrong me and I forgive them? As many as seven times?"

²² Jesus replies, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

God is seen in people. We image God. We do violence to that image when we harm each other. The Abraham project was launched so the world could see God in them. To see the Christ is to see the Father. And now, when two or three disputing humans are brought together in the Christ, the world sees the authority heaven has given him, the power of his name to save and reconcile, the living reality of his life in us.

Peter understood what a huge expectation Jesus was placing on us. "How many times do you expect me to forgive a sibling before I can receive what's right for me?" was Peter's question. "Do you really expect me to keep releasing the one who hurts me seven times?"

"No, seven times won't do it," Jesus agreed. "It will need to be seventy-seven times!" Maybe Jesus was alluding to the first revenge statement in the Bible: *If Cain is avenged seven times then Lamech seventy-seven times* (Genesis 4:24). If that's what people expect in revenge, we'll need to forgive like that to release them.

Forgiving bankrupt people (18:23-35)

We naturally want justice for the wrongs done against us. But earth cannot be restored as a kingdom of heaven while we place those demands on each other:

Matthew 18:23-35

²³ "So, the kingdom of heaven is like a human king who wanted to settle accounts with those who served him. ²⁴ As he began the process, they

brought him someone who owed a hundred million dollars.²⁵ Since he had no way to repay, his lord ordered he be sold up—along with his wife and children and everything he had—as repayment.²⁶ The servant fell to his knees in homage, saying, 'Be patient with me, and I will repay it all to you.'²⁷ Feeling love for this servant, the lord set him free and released him from his financial obligation.

²⁸ "But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him ten thousand dollars. Seizing him, he choked him, saying, 'Repay everything you owe!'

²⁹ "The fellow servant fell to his knees begging, 'Be patient with me and I will repay you.'³⁰ But the servant didn't want to. He went and threw his fellow servant into prison until he could repay the debt.³¹ When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were extremely agitated and went and explained the details of what happened to their lord.

³² "Then the lord summoned him and said, 'You evil worker! I released you from all that debt because you asked me.'³³ Didn't you have an obligation to show mercy to your fellow servant, in the same way I had mercy on you?'³⁴ Infuriated, his lord handed him over to the torturers until he should repay everything he owed.

³⁵ "And that's how my heavenly Father will treat you [plural], unless you each release your brother or sister from your hearts."

The story is about bankruptcy. In the ancient world, an insolvent debtor was sold up and indentured to pay the debt by working as a slave. This was normal life in the Roman Empire and other kingdoms before them, including Israel.

The debt is outrageous: 10,000 talents was the largest amount imaginable, more than a common labourer could earn in 1000 lifetimes.¹⁵ His children and their children will always be slaves.

But the *human king* in Jesus' story is unlike any king in history. He has a radical value system. He preferred to wear the loss himself rather than see one of his families sold into slavery. His affection for his people (verse 27) outweighs how he feels about losing any amount, no matter how astronomical.

What do you think of this king? Is he wise? Would his generosity catch on and transform his kingdom into the most loving place on earth? Could it be the end of slavery? Maybe even the end of war if people stopped fighting each other for possessions? Could his approach transform the world into a different kind of economic state than earth has ever known?

Or do you think his kindness would cause scoundrels to be more abusive than they already are? Would people see an opportunity to borrow money with no intention of paying it back, racking up whatever debts they could get away with? Is forgiveness a good idea? Or is it better to make people pay for their mistakes?

¹⁵ Jeannine K. Brown, *Matthew*, Two Horizons NT Commentary (Eerdmans, 2018), 173–174

That is Jesus' question. And Jesus sees the problem. The forgiven debtor proves to be a scoundrel who doesn't care like his king. The king "unforgives" his debt. Can you even do that?

It's really clear now what Jesus means by *forgiveness*. To forgive is to release a person from their obligation. Whether it's a social obligation (a hurt) or a financial obligation (a debt), to forgive is to set the person free so they no longer owe you anything. The ruler set *him free and released him from his obligation* (verse 27).

The opposite of forgiving is requiring repayment, demanding the person meet their obligation. That's why Jesus uses the verb *repay* seven times in the story (verses 25 [twice], 26, 28, 29, 30, 34).

The point of the king's generosity was to establish a kingdom where his people were not enslaved. That doesn't work if his servants keep enslaving each other. The evil servant is white-anting his long-term vision for his kingdom, harming his people with values he does not share, values smuggled in from the kingdoms of the world. He must nip it in the bud so it doesn't destroy the kingdom.

Possession may be nine-tenths of the law in the kingdoms of the world, but in this kingdom caring for people is ten-tenths of the justice system. Like a parent intervening so the children don't harm each other, the king intervenes to prevent his servants seizing and choking each other over debts.

The king values the kingdom. The people are the kingdom. The people must value each other as the king values them. That means forgiving each other—setting each other free instead of holding each other enslaved to obligations, just as the king has done for them. Not forgiving is too expensive.

9.3 Conclusion

Heaven has decreed it: the Son has heaven's authority on earth (Matthew 17).

Then in Chapter 18, our king describes how relationships work in his kingdom.

He calls us to:

- Prioritize the vulnerable.
- Watch out for predators and trappers, trusting heaven to deal with them.
- Resolve our disputes before his throne.
- Release each, regardless of the debt, because that's what he does for us.

Are we willing to live as our king expects?

For more detail on Matthew 17–18, see:

Mat 17:1-8	See a glorious king? (Matthew 17:1-8)
Mat 17:2-8	The Moses connection (Matthew 17:2-8)
Mat 17:2-13	The Elijah connection (Matthew 17:2-13)
Mat 17:5	The gospel of God (Matthew 17:5)

Mat 17:14-21	Mountains and mustard seeds (Matthew 17:14-21)
Mat 17:22-27	Jesus did refer to himself as a king (Matthew 17:22-27)
Mat 17:26-27	Should Christians pay tax?
Mat 18	Kingdom justice: how it comes (Matthew 18)
Mat 18:1-5	How to receive Christ (Matthew 18:1-5)
Mat 18:6	Don't fall for repaying evil with evil (Matthew 18:6)
Mat 18:7-10	Are we worse off if we live unselfishly? (Matthew 18:7-10)
Mat 18:9	What does the Bible say about hell?
Mat 18:12-14	The shepherd's heart (Matthew 18:12-14)
Mat 18:15-17	How far do you push for reconciliation? (Matthew 18:15-17)
Mat 18:18-20	The king is in community (Matthew 18:18-20)
Mat 18:21-22	How far does forgiveness go? (Matthew 18:21-22)
Mat 18:23-35	The rich texture of atonement (Matthew 18:23–35)
Mat 18:23-35	When forgiveness outweighs repayment (Matthew 18:21–35)
Mat 18:23-35	Forgiveness: reciprocated or rescinded (Matthew 18:23-35)
Mat 18:34-35	And if I don't forgive? (Matthew 18:35)

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In preparation for next week, read Matthew 19–20.