



Power and Forgiveness in Matthew 18

ELAINE J. RAMSHAW

*Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota*

I. THE PIECEMEAL USE OF MATTHEW 18

THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES, IN THE CHURCH'S USE OF MATTHEW 18, VARIOUS pieces of the chapter have been lifted out of context and applied to the conduct of Christian life. Two prime examples of passages that have frequently been decontextualized in Christian usage are the so-called "church discipline" directive (vv. 15-18) and the "70 x 7" saying on how often one should forgive (vv. 21-22; the NRSV translation has "seventy-seven times").

Verses 15-18 give instructions on what to do if a "brother" sins: go to him directly, bring along witnesses, take it to the church, and if he still doesn't listen, exclude him from the community. These instructions have been incorporated into countless church constitutions and similar legal documents as the procedural guidelines for dealing with misbehaving persons. The very label of "church discipline" for this passage indicates how the legal use of it has skewed our understanding of it. "Discipline" suggests the concern of an organization and its leaders for maintaining order and bringing errant individuals into line. While this concern is not necessarily wholly at odds with the spirit of Matthew's instruction, Matthew's emphasis is clearly on the goal of reconciliation, "gaining your brother." All too often, though, we have looked to Matt 18:15-18 more as a way of getting rid

ELAINE J. RAMSHAW is associate professor of pastoral care.

A piecemeal and acontextual use of the texts on forgiveness and reconciliation in Matthew 18 can lead to the exclusion of some and the abuse of others. The chapter as a whole envisions a better way.

of the sinner than as a way of seeking the lost. We have turned to it when we have already given up on the person in question, as if the process were designed to lead to excommunication rather than full reinstatement in the community. Shouldn't it have given us pause that this instruction for confrontation comes immediately after the parable of the lost sheep?

In a similar fashion, the "70 x 7" passage has been wrenched out of its context in Christian usage. It has been quoted countless times in sermons and pastoral exhortations to urge those who have been injured or offended to forgive, with no mention made of repentance or the offender's accountability to the community—in spite of the fact that this passage comes almost immediately after the instructions about confronting the offender. The offended party is just expected to forgive indefinitely; even to keep track of how many times you've been hurt is wrong-minded. Especially when forgiveness is defined as a willingness to overlook the other's fault and to preserve or reinstate the relationship, this can be very dangerous and oppressive advice. The most egregious (but sadly, far from uncommon) instance of such an approach is when a battered woman is told to "forgive" her husband over and over and over again, to give him another chance, which is to say, to continue the relationship on his terms. It is possible, of course, to apply the "70 x 7" passage out of context without defining forgiveness in this most dangerous way; one could, for example, say that a battered woman need not remain in the marriage, but should cleanse all bitterness from her heart. I would argue, though, that dissociating the ideal of forgiveness from a discussion of how concretely to deal with harm done within the community makes it more likely that forgiveness will come to be defined as "forgive and forget"—in the sense of acting as though the offense had not occurred rather than dealing with its effects on relationships. This dissociation is what is made possible by lifting vv. 21-22 out of context rather than reading them in connection to the directive on confrontation. Interestingly, the only parallel to both these sections is a succinct two-sentence passage, Luke 17:3-4, where one is told to rebuke an offender and to forgive if the offender repents, as many as seven times a day. Why has the Matthean passage on unlimited forgiveness been quoted so much more often than the Lukan text? It may be simply because "70 x 7" is a much catchier and more impressive number than "seven times a day": but it may also in part be due to the fact that Matt 18:21-22, if taken out of context, can make it seem that human forgiveness can and should exist independent of all accountability.

Try a thought experiment: imagine that, throughout the history of the church, every Christian judicatory dealing with a recalcitrant individual member had been guided solely by the "70 x 7" text, while every battered woman had been advised to put vv. 15-18 into practice. How would things have been different? Not perfect, because none of these texts can be followed as literal guidelines in vastly different situations without some catastrophic results. But we might have had fewer individuals labeled as heretics and more abusive men confronted by the community. This thought experiment demonstrates the problem in our use of Matthew 18: not only have we applied sections of it without reference to how they

function in the chapter as a whole, we have also allowed these piecemeal applications to serve the interests of those in power, legitimating the authorities' practice of discipline and letting abusers off the hook. This essay will argue that Matthew 18 intentionally raises the issue of power, precisely in association with the hard questions of how to deal with harm done within community.

II. AN OVERVIEW OF MATTHEW 18

Before we address the question of how the various parts of Matthew 18 relate to each other and to the whole, it might be helpful to outline the chapter briefly.

verses 1-5 Who is the greatest in the kingdom? Whoever becomes humble like a child. The specification of the quality of humility as the key element of childlikeness is unique to Matthew. Verse 3, "unless you change and become like a child..." was apparently lifted by Matthew from the story of Jesus welcoming the children (Matthew doesn't include it in that story) and modified for inclusion here.

verses 6-7 Anyone who puts a stumbling block before one of these little ones would be better off drowned.

verses 8-9 If your hand/foot/eye causes you to stumble, get rid of it; it's better to enter life maimed than not at all.

verse 10 Don't despise one of these little ones; their angels continually see the face of God.

verse 11 This verse is relegated to a footnote in the NRSV.

verses 12-14 The parable of the lost sheep. In Luke 15, this parable is Jesus' response to the Pharisees' complaint that he welcomes sinners and eats with them; the lost sheep seems to stand for the lost sinner who is outside the community until found. Matthew's context and his wording for this parable make it apply rather to members of the community who have "gone astray"—the Greek word here is one used elsewhere for moral straying. The parable is a charge to seek the one who has gone astray. Note that in Luke the shepherd seeks the lost sheep "until" he finds it, while in Matthew it says that "if" he finds it, he rejoices. Could this fit with Matthew's realistic view that even the best efforts to bring an erring member back to the fold may meet with failure?

verses 15-17 Instructions for what to do if a "brother" sins (the phrase "against you" is missing in some ancient manuscripts; thus it's possible that it could be someone other than the victim who confronts the offender). The NRSV, looking for a gender-inclusive term to translate the Greek generic-male sibling, settled on "another member of the church," since it is agreed that the use of "church" in verse 17 makes it clear that Matthew assumes these are instructions for the post-resurrection Christian community. The closest parallel to this is Luke 17:3: "If another disciple [your brother] sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive." A number of commentators assume that Matt 18:15-17 is Matthew's own expansion on this saying, or a guideline used in a community he knew, which he incorporated into the discourse.

verses 18-20 "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven" is paralleled closely only elsewhere in Matthew (16:19, the keys of the kingdom), and

loosely in John 20:23. Following this come the assurances that if two believers agree on anything, it will be done for them by the Father, and that where two or three are gathered, Jesus is there among them.

verses 21-22 Peter asks if he should forgive a brother as many as seven times, and Jesus says not seven, but seventy-seven times. The parallel is Luke 17:4: "And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive." It's arguable whether "seven times a day" or "seventy-seven times" is a more impressive formula, but it is generally agreed that the point in either case is to suggest that forgiveness should have no upper limit. If both of these texts are based on a common original saying, then either Luke added the mention of repentance (also present in verse 3, the closest parallel to Matt 18:15-17) or Matthew left it out. Hagner says that though Matthew doesn't mention repentance here, he probably assumes it.¹ This needn't mean that the sinner is repentant without being rebuked, as Meier seems to argue, a position Davies and Allison dispute.² The question is whether Matthew thought the offender's repentance necessary for forgiveness to occur, which seems to be the case in vv. 15-17. I would agree with Hagner that Matthew probably did; this can only be construed as placing a "condition" on forgiveness if forgiveness is defined as the offended's stance toward the offender rather than as reconciliation, an inherently two-sided process (though one in which the offended can take the first step, defined in vv. 15-17 as confrontation aimed at reconciliation).

verses 23-35 The parable of the unforgiving servant (no parallel). Matthew has probably changed this parable to make it more allegorical, with the lord standing for God and the unforgiving servant standing for the reader, who has been forgiven an astronomical debt by God and therefore should forgive as she or he has been forgiven. There are two possible indications of this editing: the use of the term "king" in the introductory line, when the body of the parable refers to a "lord" ("king" for Matthew is more direct God-language), and the change Matthew is thought by some to have made in the amount of the first servant's debt. The amount of 10,000 talents is incredibly huge; according to Josephus, 600 talents in taxes were collected from all of Judea, Idumea, and Samaria in 4 B.C. DeBoer argues that Matthew probably inflated an originally more reasonable number (he suggests 10,000 denarii), as it is generally agreed that he inflated pounds into talents in the parable of the talents; the amount of 10,000 talents fits better into Matthew's allegorical purpose than it does into the sense of the story.³ Matthew makes

¹Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary 33b (Dallas: Word, 1995) 536.

²W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991) 792. They quote Meier as saying that in v. 21 "the focus shifts to the brother who is not recalcitrant," the recalcitrant brother being the focus of vv. 15-20. Davies and Allison don't want these two passages separated from each other so neatly. I'll return below to the way they draw the elements of the chapter together.

³Martinus De Boer, "Ten Thousand Talents? Matthew's Interpretation and Redaction of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988) 227-29. Davies and Allison are convinced by his arguments (*Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 795-96); Hagner is not (*Matthew 14-28*, 538).

the allegorical moral clear in verse 35: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

III. THE COMMENTATORS PUT IT ALL (WELL, MOST OF IT) TOGETHER

It is possible to argue, as Hickling does, that Matthew collects material without giving it a unifying interpretation and that Matthew 18 is simply a collection of passages connected to one another by theme or just a key word (such as "stumble"). Hickling thinks that vv. 15-20 and vv. 21-35 just flat out contradict each other. "The obligations of love are met by going on indefinitely forgiving one's enemy; they are not met by being content to see him excommunicated after the failure of a somewhat summary process in rudimentary ecclesiastical courts to bring him to his senses."⁴ Hickling sees this contradiction as evidence that Matthew does not edit his material so as to support one coherent position.

Most commentators, however, while recognizing the tensions in the chapter, try to relate the various parts of the discourse to each other so as to make sense of the whole. One way of dealing with some of the tensions is to say that the directions for how to deal with the offender (vv. 15-20) are framed by parables and other material that emphasize mercy, forgiveness, the imperative to seek the lost, and the Christian's need for the brother/sister. Donahue, for instance, states that the parable of the lost sheep, "immediately preceding what seems to be a rather harsh and juridical approach to failure within the community, shows that order within the community is to be measured against the claims of the weaker members for special care."⁵ P. Mathew argues that the placement of vv. 15-18 between the parable of the lost sheep and the assurance of God's granting the prayer of two who are in agreement makes it clear that every effort must be made to bring the erring brother to reconciliation.⁶ Patte points out that the motivation for confronting the offender is stated in v. 15b to be that of "gaining a brother" (somewhat obscured in the NRSV translation), and that the importance of having or regaining a brother/sister is underlined by vv. 18-20, which state that two in agreement will have their prayer granted and two or three gathered are assured of Jesus' presence among them.⁷ Davies and Allison see vv. 1-14 as setting the stage for the reconciliation discussion by laying out virtues important for life in Christian community: "humility (cf. vv. 3-4), special kindness toward children (v. 5), refraining from offending others, especially the weak or marginal (vv. 6-7), serious self-control (vv. 8-9), and heart-felt, loving concern for all fellow believers, including 'these little ones' (vv. 10-14)." These qualities and actions, they say, "will check the

⁴C. J. A. Hickling, "Conflicting Motives in the Redaction of Matthew: Some Considerations on the Sermon on the Mount and Matthew 18:15-20," *Studia Evangelica* 7 (1982) 259.

⁵John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 73.

⁶Parackel Mathew, "Authority and Discipline: Matt. 16.17-19 and 18.15-18 and the Exercise of Authority and Discipline in the Matthean Community," *Communio Viatorum* 28 (1985) 123-24.

⁷Daniel Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 253-255. Patte also argues that the "two in agreement" condition in v. 19 applies also to the promise about binding and loosing in v. 18, so that one needs the brother/sister also to receive the authority of Jesus.

impulse to judge others and...will make brotherly correction, necessary as it will be (18.15-20), a true act of charity (cf. vv. 21ff.), so that there is a hedge around 18.15-20, a buffer of grace, which reflects deep pastoral concern."⁸ Similarly, they suggest that the "70 x 7" passage is placed right after vv. 15-20 "to inculcate an attitude of forgiveness in the midst of the necessary but unpleasant proceedings just described."⁹ All of these are arguments that vv. 15-18 should be understood in relation to what precedes and follows them, a frame that lends grace to the procedure for how to deal with the offending brother/sister, such that confrontation is motivated by the strong desire for reconciliation, restrained by the warning against being a stumbling block, leavened by humility.

All of these arguments go a long way towards addressing the first of the two dangerously context-free applications we discussed at the beginning of this essay. They place what has unfortunately been called the "church discipline" pericope in a context which should govern its application according to principles of humility, grace, care for the weak, and deep mutual need. If we heeded these arguments, we might not be willing to enshrine the procedure of vv. 15-17 in a legal document shorn of its surrounding material. We certainly would be wary of turning to it as a means of getting rid of a troublemaker.

It is interesting that, while many commentators seem aware of the danger of taking vv. 15-18 out of context as a legitimation for "church discipline," there is much less awareness of the danger of taking vv. 21-22 out of context as a call for unlimited and unconditional forgiveness. Some of them do see the danger of the call to forgive being heard as law rather than gospel, in the Lutheran sense; this comes up in relation to the parable of the unforgiving servant, whose Matthean moral unquestionably sounds like law of the nastiest sort (you'd better forgive, or God will hand you over to the torturers). Yet the commentators tend to assume that unlimited forgiveness is the ideal of love and don't see the danger of dissociating that ideal from the concrete realities of dealing with harm done within community.

This is related to the fact that the commentators generally see the offender as much more imperiled, much more in need of protection, than the offended party. They worry about the misuse of hierarchical power, the power of leaders or the community as a whole acting oppressively. They see the concern for the little ones to be directed primarily or solely towards the offender, the one who has strayed. It seems to me that they imagine the "brother who sins against you" to be someone in the community of less power or equal power; they are not thinking about what it is like to live in community with someone who intimidates you. It follows that they tend not to see the procedure in vv. 15-17 as protective of the injured; instead, they often see it as harsh toward the offender, an ecclesial "three strikes and you're out" law.

⁸Davies and Allison, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 777.

⁹*Ibid.*, 792.

IV. A PROPOSAL REGARDING THE ISSUE OF POWER IN MATTHEW 18

From verse 12 on, it's fairly easy to see that the discussion is focused on a few linked, common themes: forgiveness, reconciliation (including what to do when reconciliation fails), the joy of finding the lost, the need of the Christian for community, the grace of God which will turn to rage if we do not show mercy in our turn. How do the first ten verses fit with the rest of the discourse? Most of this material (all but vv. 8-9) is concerned with children or with "these little ones." How does this relate to the material on forgiveness and reconciliation?

I have already observed that one connection people make is to see concern for the "little ones" as one of the arguments for a merciful approach to the "identified sinner." Indeed, Matthew makes this connection explicit in v. 14, when he adds to the parable of the lost sheep, "So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost." Yet one cannot say that the "little ones" are the "sinners" of the community throughout the chapter; they may be all disciples, or weak or marginalized members of the community. While the passages about "these little ones" may in part be urging a special care for anyone who has gone astray, that is probably not the only message they carry.

As I noted above, Davies and Allison see the first 14 verses of the chapter as laying out the dispositions crucial for life in Christian community: humility, kindness toward children, a care not to offend, self-control, a loving concern for the strays. These attitudes and behaviors are especially important when the community has to correct one of its members; hence, these verses are part of the "buffer of grace" around the instructions for dealing with a member who sins.

Both of these ways of connecting the first ten verses to the rest of the chapter seem to me to be legitimate, but not the whole story. I am struck by the fact that the discourse on forgiveness and reconciliation (or exclusion) begins with the question, "Who is the greatest?" This pericope is not just about cultivating an attitude of humility; it raises in a very direct fashion the question of power in the Christian community. Who's on top? Who ranks the highest? Jesus responds to this question by showing the disciples a particular child, someone who has little or no power, and telling them they must become like children, be humble like this child, welcome such children—which is equivalent to welcoming Jesus himself.

Perhaps Matthew begins the discourse on forgiveness and reconciliation with this pericope that answers the question "Who is the greatest?" because he is aware that we can't deal adequately with the nitty-gritty issues of sin and reconciliation in community without first concretely addressing the nature of power and relative ranking in the community. Nothing raises questions of the meaning of power more acutely than having to come to terms with harm done within a relationship, within the community.

The issues of power that are raised are complex and hard to untangle. When someone hurts another, she is using some power she has over him. She may continue to exercise control over her victim, or she may be "one-down" now in their relationship, with the victim having the power of injured innocence, the power of

one to whom something is owed (cf. the parable of the unforgiving servant). If she is identified by the community as a wrongdoer, she may be abused by the community or by its leaders. Alternatively (or even simultaneously!), she may have great power to disrupt the community. The one she hurt may be abused by the community because of the stigma of victimhood, or he may find sympathy and support. He may be abused by being told that if he doesn't forgive her unilaterally and immediately, God will hand him over to the torturers! And on top of all this, there's the further confusion that many situations of interpersonal harm are not neatly divided into victim and victimizer; often a relationship has gone bad and there is a shared responsibility for the harm done. So who are the "little ones" here?

The only thing that is clear in all this is that we have to keep the question of the nature of power front and center when we deal with these matters. And indeed, that is what Matthew 18 does, by beginning the discussion of intracommunal sin and reconciliation with the question, "Who is the greatest?" No question has more relevance to the process of pursuing reconciliation, at every step of the way. If we try to practice mercy while obscuring the realities of power, we are liable to perpetuate all sorts of abuses. The only hope is that we will keep our eyes on that little kid. Not just try to be childlike in some spiritualized sense, but attend to the literal child whom Jesus has moved from the periphery to the center of our attention. Then we will not forget that there are concrete differences in power in this world, that there are vulnerable ones who need protection, and that Jesus will view our communal life through the eyes of a child. ⊕