

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

By the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, Founder of Crossways International
(Sola Publishing, Edited Version © 2023 H. Wendt)



Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Matthew 18:1-20

Year A - Proper 18, Text: Matthew 18:1-20
Year A - Proper 18, Text: Matthew 18:15-20

This passage is part of Jesus' fourth discourse in Matthew's Gospel, a discourse that focuses on humility and forgiveness. When pondering the message of this pericope, it is important to give thought also to the message of the following passages:

- Luke 17:3
- 1 Corinthians 6:1–6
- Galatians 6:1
- James 5:19–20
- Leviticus 19:17

These verses show us that sin and transgression is still a reality for believers in this world. How we respond to sin in others is often the most clear indication of our own moral character.

Verses 18:1-4: Here Jesus uses the trusting faith of a child to point to what God's goal for our lives, and to define what true greatness really is, in contrast with what the world thinks it is.

Verses 18:5-6: The image of the innocent faith of a child prompts a warning about those who would destroy it. We are our brothers' keepers, especially as this relates to children, all of whom are in our care.

Verses 18:7-9: The previous verses are expanded on, as Jesus teaches about temptations to sin. The graphic hyperbole in these verses is meant to demonstrate the seriousness with which God treats sin.

Verses 18:10-14: Reflecting back on the child in verses 5-6, we are warned that God is ever aware of how we treat those in our care. Note: the phrase "their angels" is a reference to God's messengers (*angelos*) bearing witness to our bad behavior. It does not establish the existence of individual "guardian angels" as some have suggested.

The parable of the Lost Sheep not only shows God's concern for those lost in sin, it shows us how we are to deal with one who has strayed from Jesus' community, preparing for what will follow in the next verses.

Verses 18:15–20: Jesus focuses on how his followers are to deal with one who sins yet remains within the community. The procedure is to be as follows:

- First, there is to be a private one-on-one correction (v. 15). This is the step that is most often skipped.
- If this fails, there is to be further correction before two or three witnesses (v. 16).
- If this makes no impact, the matter is to be brought before the assembled community. If the sinner refuses to respond positively to the correction of the community, he is to be expelled (v. 17), treated as though he is a Gentile or a tax collector. The community's judgment will be ratified in Heaven, i.e. by God (v. 18).

[The three-step process outlined above corresponds in some measure (although not completely) to that practiced by the Essenes within the Qumran community.]

The section ends with a saying about how God responds positively to prayer, even to prayers offered by a very small number. After all, Jesus is always in the midst of any gathering, no matter how small. Note that in the four Gospels, the term "church" is used only in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17. In the latter verse, the reference is to the local congregation, not to the church-at-large.

As observant Jews avoided the company of Gentiles and tax collectors, so must a congregation of Christian disciples separate themselves from any arrogantly sinful members who refuse to repent when convicted of their sin by the whole church. Such persons are to be set outside the fellowship of the community.

The harsh language denigrating "Gentiles" and "tax collectors" probably reflects a stage of the Matthean church when it was composed of mainly Jewish Christians. That time had long since passed, but the principle of exclusion for such a sinner remained. Note also Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 5:1–13.

The New Testament writings speak of the church as a community of caring, sharing, servant people whose goal in the midst of sin and transgression is to point others to Jesus as forgiving Savior and Servant Lord. We are to treat others as we ourselves would want to be treated and show others the Jesus we want people to know, believe in, and follow.