

Introduction: As we return to Matthew's Gospel, let us confess how much we need the Lord to expose our sinfulness – both as a *corrective* for our hardness of heart and as a means of *restoration* when we have gone astray. This is, in fact, what Jesus does in Matthew 18. His disciples are about to wander once again into the fantasy world of who is the greatest among them. But Jesus patiently brings them back to reality by speaking about the *offensiveness of the sin of self-exaltation*. “Oh, Lord, make us see the offensiveness of our own sins of pride instead of being so easily offended at the sins others commit towards us”. Amen.

Monday: read Matthew 18:1-5. The Apostles' *offensive pride* comes to expression as they compete for the highest place. How obnoxious such jockeying for position must be to Jesus, who “humbled Himself by taking the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:7)! And make no mistake – Jesus is very concerned as to where the Twelves' pride will lead them if left unchecked. This is why He repeatedly warns them about “giving offense” in our chapter. Consider how “giving offense” forms the theme of Matthew 18:6-9 (KJV Version):

But 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.

⁷ Woe unto the world because of offenses! for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!

⁸ Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire.

⁹ 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.

Meditate and Pray: “Lord, make us more and more sensitive to the terrible sin of giving offense to those “little ones who believe in you”. Give us a regard for the weakest, and most vulnerable among us. May we be known as a church that binds up the wounds of those who have been made to stumble by others' sins. Amen.”

Tues/Weds: read Matthew 18:1-5. What then does Jesus do to counteract this ego competition among His disciples? He enfolds a child in His arms in Matthew 18:3, and reminds His disciples of the necessity for them to humble themselves like children under the mighty hand of God. The language is significant in the use of a certain verb (stre'-fo) in Matthew 18:3:

“Unless you are **converted** and become as little children, you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven”. (KJV)

“Unless you **change** and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (NIV)

“Unless you **repent** and become like little children, you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” (1599 Geneva Bible footnote)

Let's think about both what this word means and does not mean. First, for the Twelve as believers and followers of Jesus, it does *not* mean that they could lose their salvation and have to

repent in order to be reconverted again and again. But what it *does* mean is that Christian living is characterized by changes of direction, fresh deaths-to-self and re-consecration to God's ways.

For example, a "turning back" to the Lord is promised Peter after his three-fold denial, when the Lord Jesus says to the Apostle: "When you have **turned back**", (there's our root verb), "strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:32).

Meditate and Pray: Let us thank God that there are definite times when He checks us, bringing us to a halt in our sin with this warning: "Unless you repent and change your attitude in this matter, you cannot continue to call yourself a subject of my Kingdom!" That is the challenge of Matthew 18:3. But, oh, let us thank the Lord Jesus even more *it is the prayers of our Savior which explain why we do turn back to Him!* It was because Jesus prayed for Peter's restoration that He could predict that this wayward disciple would indeed turn back after his sin in Luke 22:32!

Sing about Christ's effective intercession in hymn # 305 by Charles Wesley:

*Arise, my soul, arise; shake off thy guilty fears;
The bleeding sacrifice in my behalf appears:
Before the throne my surety stands,
Before the throne my surety stands,
My name is written on His hands.*

*He ever lives above, for me to intercede;
His all redeeming love, His precious blood, to plead:
His blood atoned for every race,
His blood atoned for every race,
And sprinkles now the throne of grace.*

*Five bleeding wounds He bears; received on Calvary;
They pour effectual prayers; they strongly plead for me:
"Forgive him, O forgive," they cry,
"Forgive him, O forgive," they cry,
"Nor let that ransomed sinner die!"*

*The Father hears Him pray, His dear anointed One;
He cannot turn away, the presence of His Son;
His Spirit answers to the blood,
His Spirit answers to the blood,
And tells me I am born of God.*

Thursday: read Matthew 18:1-5 and Psalm 119:5. We continue with Jesus' bracing warning against giving offense through pride. To counter such pride, we must continually live a life of repentance, each day submitting to our Lord's re-directing hands, which change our priorities, challenge our misplaced loyalties and continually test us in order to forge a relationship with us. This is the challenge of Matthew 18:3 – a challenge found in other key Scriptures as well. For example, consider the Psalmist in Psalm 119:5 and how he longs for a closer walk with the Lord:

“Oh that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees...” He means literally, *“Oh, that I were more fixed and purposefully focused on obedience to your Word”*.

In other words, the Psalmist feels his failure when it comes to God’s perfect standard of obedience. He knows that “God’s precepts are to be fully obeyed” in Psalm 119:4, and grieves over his failure to do so in verse 5: *“Oh that my ways were steadfast”*.

Meditate and Pray: It is this kind of humility which Jesus aims to produce in the Twelve, in contrast to the pride which prompted them in so many ways to not only exalt themselves, but to despise the weak (Matthew 18:10)! Oh, Lord, make us sensitive to how our sins affect others!

Fri/Sat/Sun: read Matthew 18:6-10 and John 21:15-17. How wonderful that Jesus is able to take His general warnings against giving offense in Matthew 18:6-10 and apply them personally and pastorally to us when we are guilty of *giving offense*. For example, consider Peter, whose three-fold denial caused the rest of the Apostles to panic and to abandon Jesus themselves – just as Peter did! His betrayal of Jesus was a massive stumbling block placed in the path of the other disciples. No wonder that Jesus in John 21 must probe Peter’s betrayal, with the three-fold question, “Simon... do you love me?” Here is what we wrote about Peter’s offense and how Jesus dealt with it back in notes on John 21 from 2009:

Jesus knows that Peter will never be ready to care for His Church until pride and self-reliance are crushed out of him. Jesus proceeds with this crushing beginning in John 21:15. By not addressing him as ‘Peter’ and instead three times using his given name, ‘Simon son of John,’ our Lord deeply humbles the Apostle, as if to say to him (quoting Richard Trench in ‘Miracles of Our Lord’):

“Where is that name Peter, which I gave you (Matt. 16:18)? Where is the Rock, and the rock-like strength, which, when most needed, I looked for in vain (Matt. 26:69-75)? Not therefore by that strong name, ‘Peter,’ can I address you now, but as flesh and blood, and the child of man; for all that once was higher in you has disappeared.”

Meditate and Pray: Thank Jesus for the penetrating sharpness of His words to us in our failures. Just as Peter’s empty boast that he would stand with Christ when all others fell away (Matt. 26:33) had to be exposed as empty pride in the natural man (‘Simon’), so Jesus knows how to painfully drive us to rely not on human pride or plans, but on His Grace and Help alone:

“He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Let us then use the following hymn about wandering, asking God that, in all our interactions with others, as well as fellowship as a church family, He might quickly reclaim us from wandering, so that we do not cause others to stumble. These words are from Philip Doddridge, and are found in the original Blue Trinity hymnal, # 498:

*O God of Bethel, by whose hand
Thy people still are fed,
Who through this weary pilgrimage
Hast all our fathers led.*

*Our vows, our pray'rs, we now present
Before thy Throne of grace;
God of our fathers, be the God
Of their succeeding race.*

*Through each perplexing path of life
Our wand'ring footsteps guide;
Give us each day our daily bread,
And raiment fit provide.*

*O spread thy cov'ring wings around
Till all our wand'rings cease
And at our Father's loved abode
Our souls arrive in peace.*

*Such blessings from thy gracious hand
Our humble pray'rs implore;
And thou shalt be our chosen God,
And portion evermore.*