

LIFEPOINT CHURCH // WORD TO LIFE



MATTHEW 18:7 - 18:35
WEEKS 1-4



Word to Life studies are sermon-aligned study guides, created to help the church dive even deeper into the passages we study together on Sundays.

Each week there will be five studies to help you prepare for the upcoming weekend sermon. This will also be a great discussion tool at your next LifeGroup meeting.

We hope you enjoy and grow deeper in your faith!

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WORD TO LIFE

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Week 1: Matthew 18:7-9

Day 1: A Day to Explore

READ: Matthew 18:7-9

Instructions: Spend time reading Matthew 18:7-9 and complete the activities and questions below.

Activity: While reading, include some observations in the space below.

Questions: Why do you think Jesus uses the term woe? What is your understanding of that word?

Questions: In what sense do you believe Jesus is being hyperbolic in verse 8? How do you think the disciples understood His statements?

Activity: Take a minute to record the temptations that occur because of a fallen world. Lament that they exist and pray that God will help you overcome them.

Question: Of all the things that can cause us to sin, why do you think Jesus focuses on hands, feet, and eyes?

Questions: What do you think the phrase, “hell of fire” means? What are your general thoughts about hell?

Week 1: Matthew 18:7-9

Day 2: Woe to the Tempter

READ: Matthew 18:7-9; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

EXPLORE:

A quick reading of these 3 verses out of context and without carefully examining upon whom Jesus is pronouncing woe could cause a skeptical reader to be dismissive of the passage. Read this in your most cantankerous, grumpy, old man voice: “I know everybody sins and lusts, so how come I’m not surrounded by a bunch of self-mutilated, one-eyed, one-handed Christians?”

First off, who is Jesus denouncing in these verses? Is it sinners? People with evil feet? No. Jesus pronounces woe upon (1) “the world” for providing so many stumbling blocks and (2) the one by whom the temptation comes. This does not diminish committing sin or the role the sinner plays in their own sin, but Jesus is pointing out that it is a far worse offense to be the person leading other believers to sin.

Let’s also jump back a few verses and identify who Jesus is addressing. He is talking directly to His disciples. Up until chapter 18, most of Jesus’s judgments regarding false teaching were directed at the religious leaders, but Jesus is speaking directly to His disciples in this passage. Also note that these same body parts are used in 1 Corinthians by Paul to compare members of the church. Jesus is sending a warning to this group of disciples that will be the founding members of this new body of believers that will be His Church. The first teachers. The first leaders. He wants them to lead all the new believers that will come after His death and resurrection with extreme care. Jesus is not advocating for self-mutilation in this passage. He is using hyperbole to highlight the seriousness of sin and leading others to sin. If one member of the body of Christ is leading other members astray, then that

member needs to be treated like “the world,” set apart, and no longer part of the body.

I also believe Jesus intentionally highlighted sins of the eyes in this passage, addressing the covetous desire for power the disciples displayed in Matthew 18:1. Sin of the eyes represents lust and coveting and is a powerful sin. It distorts reality and destroys relationships, but it lurks in the shadows because the sin secretly occurs entirely in our hearts and minds. Lust isn’t illegal. You get arrested for stealing and murdering, but the police aren’t going to show up at your door for lust after a member of the opposite sex. Even if I actually removed one eye, then I’m pretty sure my other eye would lust as well. If I never address the root cause, my inherent, evil desire to sin, then I dare say, that even without eyes, hands or feet that I would still fall prey to the various temptations of my heart.

BIG IDEA: It is a delicate balance to acknowledge the active role we play in our sin while also being fully aware that we are not the ones receiving the punishment and are powerless on our own to completely avoid sin. Yet, this passage is not a free pass to sin nor an invitation to blame others for our sins but a warning to all believers that leading others to sin requires immediate separation to avoid leading the rest of the body astray.

Apply:

- **Activities:** Pray for conviction for any areas where you are leading members of your family or your church to sin and then repent. Pray especially for the protection to turn your eyes from lustful opportunities and your heart from covetous desires.

Week 1: Matthew 18:7-9

Day 3: The Hell of Fire

READ: Matt 18:7-9; Matt 5:22-30; Ex 19:18; 1 Cor 3:13

EXPLORE:

One of the most difficult parts of biblical interpretation is understanding figurative language. One example of figurative language that Scripture often uses is hyperbole. Hyperbole is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally.” Jesus appears to be using hyperbole all throughout His ministry. However, it can be difficult to determine when Jesus is being hyperbolic and when He is being literal.

In our passage this week, Jesus says to cut off limbs and eyes if they lead to stumbling. By stumbling, Jesus means “fall into sin.” If we take Jesus literally, then all Christians are going to be in rough shape. We’re all going to be limbless and blind. Therefore, most readers of this passage believe Jesus is speaking hyperbolically. And yet, Jesus’ overall point is true if taken literally. It is self-evident that it would be better to be limbless and blind on earth than to be thrown into an eternal fire. Yet still, it does not seem possible that if you cut out an eye on earth that you will only have one in heaven. These complications all factor into an attempt to form a doctrine of hell. What does Jesus mean by hell and why does it matter for us?

Hell is a complex subject and every question about it cannot be addressed in a WTL, but what can be addressed is Jesus’ use of it in Matthew 18. The word that Jesus uses for hell is the word *Gehenna* which was not understood as the place of torment next to a red spiritual being with a pitchfork, but it was a literal place on earth. It was a ravine in the south of Jerusalem that the Jews of that time understood as where God’s final judgment would take place. Jesus uses that ravine as symbolic of the judgment of God

along with the element of fire. In what sense does Jesus mean hell is associated with fire? It could be seen as literal or symbolic. There could be a literal dimension of fire, or fire could broadly represent the wrath and judgment of God. In Scripture, fire had a variety of associations with God. God reigns down fire on Sodom, God comes in the presence of fire on Mount Sinai before the Israelites, and fire is also a tool of God's for the purpose of refining His people. All of these occurrences show that God uses fire to show His power and that He should be feared. Jesus is at minimum stating that hell is a place to show God's power and wrath. Hell is reserved for people who do not take God's power and wrath seriously.

In Matthew 18:7-9, Jesus says that body parts can lead to hell. While our body parts are the tools of our body, the organ that leads us is our hearts. Matthew 15:19 states that the heart causes evil thoughts. The heart controls everything that our body does. That's why we are called to love God with our whole hearts. God is love, but He also is a God of justice. He will punish those who do not repent and turn to Him. Hell is the wrath of God that no one will want to face on judgment day no matter what the specifics will look like. Our call is to live for Christ and call others to do the same so that they do not face that wrath. Jesus is the only hope to avoid the wrath because He took God's wrath on the cross and made a way for the whole world to avoid it.

BIG IDEA: The wrath of God is reserved for those who do not believe in it.

APPLY:

- **Question:** What in the world could tempt you away from God?

Week 1: Matthew 18:7-9

Day 4: Overcoming Temptations

READ: 1 Peter 1:6-7; Ephesians 5:16; 1 Corinthians 10:13

EXPLORE:

The greatest basketball player ever is Michael Jordan. Jordan's most famous statistic is that he was 6-0 in the NBA Finals. He never lost, and he was always the guy who received the ball at the end of the game. It was and is a big deal to get to the NBA Finals because each player has to put their bodies through a gruesome 82-game regular season and multiple series during the playoffs against the best teams. Not many players have gotten to the Finals let alone win it, but once a team gets there the pressure is at its peak. The pressure leads most players to crumble but never Michael Jordan. He appeared six times and won six times. There's a famous clip during a Finals game when Jordan is about to take one of the final shots to win the game and his teammate Dennis Rodman who led the league in rebounding is standing behind the three-point line knowing that the shot will certainly go in the basket. It's an amazing clip that shows how much confidence that Jordan's teammates had in him. All their struggles and hard work were not going to go to waste because they knew Jordan was going to come through in the end.

In our passage this week, an intriguing phrase appears, "For it is necessary that temptations come." It's a natural question to ask, why is it necessary for temptations to come? We all know that temptations occur every single day for each of us in different ways but why does that have to be the case? Part of the answer is that we live in a fallen and broken world created by the effects of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the garden. That answers why the world goes through hardships, but why must Christians go through them too? Why must Christians go through even inner turmoil after being saved?

God in His wisdom has decided that the effects of sin on our hearts and minds will not be completely removed until heaven through a process called *glorification*. In this life, we are called to slowly grow in holiness called *sanctification* which can oftentimes be painful. We are declared holy by God when we are given Christ's holiness, but we are not actually made perfectly holy until we receive our resurrected bodies. In the meantime, God wants us to grow in faith. God does not directly say that He brings all of our trials upon us, but He does allow them to happen for a greater unknown purpose. In Peter's first letter he says, "you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Paul says in Ephesians that we should make the best use of the time because the days are evil. There are many temptations that will plague us throughout our lives. Our passage says that it is necessary for temptations to come but other translations simply say it is inevitable that they do. Either way, they are coming, and God will always provide a way for us to resist them. We can be confident that we will eventually overcome all of our temptations, because just like Jordan's teammates, we can be assured that He will come through in the end no matter what.

BIG IDEA: Temptations are coming, but God will save us from them if we turn to Him.

APPLY:

- **Question:** What temptations plague you most days that you can pray against right now?

Week 1: Matthew 18:7-9

Day 5: Eternity is at Stake

READ: Matthew 18:7-9; Colossians 3:1-17

EXPLORE:

The phrase we see in both verses 8 and 9 of this passage, “It is better for you to enter eternal life...” reminds us of the reason why we must take sin seriously and why Jesus calls us to take extreme measures to kill it—not simply to manage or reduce it. Eternity is at stake. We know that as believers we will not be perfect in this life and will continue to struggle with sin until we meet our Savior face-to-face. Yet the sign of true salvation is a life bearing the fruit of repentance (Matt 3:8) and refusing to make a practice of sin (1 John 3:4-10). When we allow habitual sin in our lives and make provision for the flesh (Rom 13:14), we reveal a heart more devoted to sin and self than to God. Thus, the presence of sin in a believer’s life does not mean they are unsaved, but the absence of repentance and determined fleeing from sin is a serious warning sign.

A frightening reality is that we can begin to lose our sense of God’s holiness which results in losing our sense of sin’s sinfulness. When we tolerate our sin and indulge selfish desires, we reveal a lack of fear – both of what sin leads to (death and destruction) and of who God truly is in His holiness. The imagery in this passage may seem intense, but though the references to mutilating the body are metaphors, they are not hyperbolic. God takes sin seriously, and so must we. Because sin separates us from the Father, we must make every effort to put it to death as those who have been made new with Christ. A right view of God – His holiness, purity, and glory – is the starting point. When we see God correctly and understand His salvation rightly, the proper response follows: dying to sin and living to righteousness.

Colossians 3:2-3 says, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” As believers, we are to die to self and center our thoughts, actions, and lives around Christ. Since our old self has died, our new life belongs to Him and is oriented toward the things of God. We are not concerned with status, wealth, beauty, or worldly pursuits. Instead, we are devoted to the gospel and the advancement of God’s kingdom. The selfish, sinful desires of the flesh cannot compare to the joy of serving Christ.

It is certainly true that “It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.”

Therefore, set the eyes of your heart upon the Lord. Do not allow temporary pleasures and fleeting enticements to take the throne of your soul. Either Jesus is your King or something else is—there is no room for two gods. Whatever lengths you must go to in order to reject and kill your sin and keep Christ central, do it. He is worthy of it all, and you have not known true pleasure or true delight until you have loved Christ.

BIG IDEA: We must ruthlessly kill our sin and focus on the things of God because eternity is at stake.

APPLY:

- **Questions:** What habitual sins are in your life that you have been deceived into minimizing, ignoring, or excusing? What practical steps (confession to another believer, asking for accountability, removing access, seeking prayer, etc.) will you take to kill these sins?
- **Questions:** What patterns and rhythms are in your life to continually remind you that Christ is your true delight? What practical steps (worship, prayer, devotionals, Sabbath, etc.) will you take to center your life on Christ?

Week 2: Matthew 18:10-14

Day 1: A Day to Explore

READ: Matthew 18:10-14

Instructions: Spend time reading Matthew 18:10-14 and complete the activities and questions below.

Activity: While reading, include some observations in the space below.

Question: Who do you think Jesus is referring to when He says, “little ones”?

Questions: What do you think Jesus means when He says, “their angels”? In what sense do the little ones have angels?

Question: What does it mean that the angels see the Father’s face in heaven?

Question: Do you believe that verse 12 is implying that God leaves the majority of His people to search after one that goes astray?

Question: What does it mean that the shepherd rejoices more over the one than the ninety-nine?

Questions: Can a little one perish if it is not God's will that it should happen? What does the will of God mean in verse 14?

Activity: Describe the ways that you believe God watches over His Church.

Week 2: Matthew 18:10-14

Day 2: The Role of Angels

READ: Matthew 18:10-14; Psalm 91:11; Hebrews 1:14

EXPLORE:

In the late 90s and early 2000s, there was a popular show called *Touched by an Angel*. In this show one or two angels appear in human form, and they help humans get through their difficulties. It was a show with limited theological insight and did not center on truths of the gospel message, but as far as TV goes, the values promoted were decent. The main role of angels in the show does not have much scriptural support but in our passage this week, the role of angels definitely comes up as a matter of discussion.

Jesus says, in reference to the “little ones” that “their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.” Before addressing what it means for the little ones to have angels, we must establish who little ones are. The disciples were told earlier that the kingdom of heaven was reserved for people who become like children and that whoever is humble like a child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. This means that by “little ones” Jesus could be referring to **children** or those who have **become like children** and have become genuine followers of Christ. The latter is preferred because Jesus speaks of the church right after the parable of the lost sheep. This would mean that all believers in some sense have angels who advocate for them before God. Some commentators believe that this warrants the idea for personal guardian angels and others believe that God uses angels more corporately where they are over a church or nation. Either way it is an extraordinary thought that angels play such a role in the affairs of men and women. How should we respond according to this truth?

The focus first and foremost must always be on God rather than the vessels that God uses to accomplish His purposes. We should

never hyper-focus on angels to the neglect of our worship and reverence toward God. Angels are amazing creatures, but they are that way only because that is how God has created them to be. And how amazing is it that He uses them to take care and watch over us?

God is our Great Shepherd and He is always providing for us in ways that we cannot imagine. He loves His little ones and chooses to have not just Himself but also His angels watch over us and protect us lest we go astray. The purpose of this beautiful parable in Matthew's Gospel is to show the love God has for His children and that He wishes to keep all of them connected to Him where it is safe and the pastures are green.

BIG IDEA: The Good Shepherd cares for His sheep even through the angels.

APPLY:

- **Question:** What do you think the significance is behind God using angels to protect His Church?
- **Apply:** Write down the ways in which God has protected you over the years and then thank Him for His care over your soul.

Week 2: Matthew 18:10-14

Day 3: Mixing the Old and the New

READ: Matthew 18:10-14; Ezekiel 34:1-16; Psalm 119:173-176

EXPLORE:

During college, I (Olivia) studied abroad in Amman, Jordan. For one of our day trips, my cohort and I traveled to the city of Madaba where we listened to lectures and saw Mt. Nebo where Moses lifted the snake on a pole in Numbers 21. While we were waiting for our bus to arrive, I saw a flock of sheep being led by some shepherds as they walked down the mountain. As I watched, one of the sheep got distracted and started wandering away from the rest of the flock. One of the shepherds quickly noticed and ran to retrieve the sheep, reunited it with the other members of the flock, and then they continued on their way. Seeing this not only gave me a picture of what Jesus was teaching in this parable but also showed me what the original audience would have inherently understood when imagery, allusions, and language of sheep and shepherds were used in Scripture.

In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus uses the example of a sheep wandering away from the flock to illustrate His point, but He was also alluding to passages in the Old Testament. Most Christians today are familiar with the parable, but some may not realize these important allusions to Old Testament passages about sheep and shepherds. The first Old Testament passage that Jesus is alluding to is Ezekiel 34:11-16. In these verses, Ezekiel expands on the previous verses where he issued a warning against the shepherds appointed to guard the sheep of Israel. Instead of guarding the sheep, the shepherds fed themselves as their sheep wandered away and were eaten by waiting predators. In verses 11-16, the Lord identifies Himself as the ultimate shepherd, rescuer, and protector of those sheep who wandered away. Jesus draws from this theme of sheep and shepherds in Matthew 18 to

remind the disciples that God the Father will continue to care for, protect, and rescue “the little ones” even if they wander away.

A second Old Testament allusion is found in Psalm 119:173-176. While Psalm 23 might seem like an obvious connection between the two passages, Psalm 119 has a stronger allusion in Matthew 18:10-14. The psalmist closes Psalm 119 by asking the LORD to be ready to help him because he has followed His precepts. He describes himself as having “gone away like a lost sheep” and asks the LORD to seek after him. Jesus picks up this theme in Matthew 18:12-13 when He describes how a good shepherd will notice when one of His flock wanders away and will go after it so that it would be joyfully reunited with the rest of the flock.

Both Ezekiel 34:1-16 and Psalm 119:173-176 provide important context for fully grasping the significance of Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:10-14. The allusions to sheep and shepherds throughout the Old Testament allow the reader to see the heart of God for the sheep who wander and stray from the rest of the flock. As Christians, reading and studying the Old Testament is important for seeing how God has been working throughout history because it is ultimately pointing to Christ and the gospel.

BIG IDEA: Jesus is the ultimate shepherd of the sheep who have wandered away from the fold of God at the cost of His own life.

APPLY:

- **Question:** What steps can you take to grow in studying the Old Testament and how will it impact your understanding of the Bible as a whole?
- **Challenge:** Consider how valuable you are that God sent His Son to seek you out, not because you are lovable, but because He loved you from the foundation of the world.

Week 2: Matthew 18:10-14

Day 4: Missing the Point

READ: Matthew 18:10-14; Luke 15

EXPLORE:

There are statements in Scripture that are purposeful overstatements to get us to focus on what God's people and all people can generally neglect. Jesus says that a bad tree does not bear good fruit. The point is not that a bad person can never do anything good whatsoever. It is to make a point about the heart of man. In our passage this week there is a similar reality taking place.

In verse 13 of Matthew chapter 18, Jesus says that God rejoices more over the one He finds that was going astray than the ninety-nine that never went astray. What a statement! From a logical standpoint it would be easy to assume that God would rejoice more over the obedient sheep rather than the sheep that wandered off and only eventually come back. As a parent, I think I would be more upset at the child that disobeys me and runs off than the child that stays by my side. God, though, rejoices more over the one that He finds who wandered than the ninety-nine! What's going on here?

Luke gives this same parable in his Gospel except the context is different. Remember that Jesus had a ministry that lasted probably around three years and during that time it is safe to assume that He delivered the same stories and parables for different audiences at different times. When Luke gives Jesus' account of the parable it is in the context of two other parables that deliver the same core message. The message that Jesus is delivering in Luke is not as much about God's love towards the lost (although that is certainly a part of it) rather it is about the Jews not wanting the Gentiles to have the same status before God. Arguably, the most famous parable that Jesus tells is the one

about the prodigal son. However, the focus of the parable is not on the son who returns but on the son who is angry at the father's response to the son returning. In the context of the Lost Sheep, we see that the focus is not on the heart of those who do not care about the lost but rather it is on those who want God to only focus on the found. Luke wants to focus on the Jewish/Gentile issues, but Matthew wants to focus on the Church/Deserter issues. Next week we'll focus on church discipline and when excommunication is warranted, but the parable of the Lost Sheep in Matthew gives us insight into what our hearts should be in church discipline.

God assumes that we in the church will care about the faithful followers, but He wants to remind us through this parable to care about those who leave and need to be guided back. God's goal is not to play favorites but to get us to see that we want Him to. We all have the temptation to believe that we deserve God's special love, but in reality, we are all saved by grace apart from works. God's heart is for everyone, even those who fall away and He wants us to have that same heart. The point of church discipline is not to shame those who mess up and are stubborn, rather it is to restore them to their Father who loves them.

BIG IDEA: God loves everyone, even those who fall away from the Church. He wants us to go find them and bring them back in the fold.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Who do you know that is falling away from the church or has fallen away from the church that you can reach out to and/or pray for?

Week 2: Matthew 18:10-14

Day 5: The Great Seeker

READ: Matt 18:10-14; Luke 19:10; John 4:23; Ezek 34:16; Is 65:1

EXPLORE:

According to a quick search on the internet there are approximately 767,856 people who are homeless in America. 767,856 who will not have a solid roof over their heads tonight. The homelessness problem in America is complicated. People find themselves in that state for a variety of reasons, but it is tragic nonetheless. Almost all of those on the street have no one looking out for them or coming to get them. They have little to no hope of a rescuer and the chances of their situation improving are low. That is a sad reality, and apart from the grace of God that could have been our situation. Most of us will never be homeless but at one point we were all spiritually homeless.

In our passage for this week, Jesus gives us an amazing truth about God. God searches for the one that goes astray. Since Adam and Eve, we have all gone astray from God. We are born in a sinful world and freely choose to sin. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he states that there are none who seek for God. Therefore all of us need God to seek for us, and what a wonderful reality that He does. He sought for all of mankind in a very distinct way. He sought us through His Son Jesus. And through Jesus, God the Father seeks in a variety of ways. Luke, John, and Matthew all give different ways in which God seeks for men and women.

Luke tells us that Jesus came to this earth to seek and to save the lost. He did not stay in heaven and say come to me, but He came to earth and said, "Follow me." Jesus sought after sinners not just to enter into heaven but to follow Him and come into a loving and committed relationship with Him. In Isaiah, we see God identify the lost as the Gentiles who had no understanding of the one true God. Israel failed to be a light to the nations that brings them to

God, so that's why Jesus had to come. The Lord said in Isaiah, "I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me." Only Jesus could make this mysterious statement an amazing reality.

John tells us that the Father seeks believers who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. So, when the lost are sought after, they are sought after with the intention of them worshiping God correctly. When God brings someone to Himself, He does not allow them to worship apart from spirit and truth. God does not have genuine worshipers that worship Him in falsehood.

Matthew tells us in the Parable of the Lost Sheep that God seeks those who have fallen away from the Church. He does not shun them and hate them for leaving but wants them back. In Ezekiel, God says, "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick." God does not give up on people but wants all to come to repentance and come back to Him.

These scriptures then tell us that God seeks the lost, the Gentiles, those that worship Him correctly, and those that fall away from Him. Without Christ coming, we all would be homeless without a spiritual home to rest. But thanks be to God who did not want to leave mankind behind but decided to come down and save them.

BIG IDEA: God came down because He seeks to bring all people to Himself.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How can God use you today to seek for those who are lost?

Week 3: Matthew 18:15-20

Day 1: A Day to Explore

READ: Matthew 18:15-20

Instructions: Spend time reading Matthew and complete the activities and questions below.

Activity: While reading, include some observations in the space below.

Question: Do you think verse 15 applies only if someone sins against someone else or could it apply to any sin that someone is committing?

Questions: What do you think constitutes a brother or sister sinning against you? If it is a very small infraction or slight against you is this procedure necessary or should you let it go?

Question: Why do you think that Jesus says that a charge must be established by two or three witnesses?

Question: What do you think Jesus means when He says that if someone refuses to listen that they should be to you like a Gentile or tax collector?

Question: How does this passage inform us on what Jesus means by binding and loosing?

Questions: How do people usually speak about verse 20? What does the context tell you about the meaning of the verse?

Activities: Write down what kind of sins it would be appropriate to bring before the church. Record what issues can arise from bringing a person's sins before the church. Pray that churches would use wisdom and discernment when following these commands of Jesus.

Week 3: Matthew 18:15-20

Day 2: To Matthew 18 or to not Matthew 18

READ: Matthew 18:10-35

EXPLORE:

When I (Brayden) attended a church in the past, there was a phrase thrown around more than any other whenever there was drama taking place. That phrase was Matthew 18. It was used as a verb. If anyone brought an issue up with someone, the first question was, "did you do Matthew 18?" I learned a lot about church governance and politics during that time and how people love to mention Matthew 18 no matter which side of the argument a person was on. There are complications with the passage and ways that it can be used properly and improperly.

It is primarily important to state the objective of Matthew 18. Matthew 18:15-20 is intended to give church leaders the authority to keep the church holy. Whenever a church member is to be excommunicated it should be done slowly in the proper order and with a heart to win back the brother or sister. Matthew 18 can be abused whenever it is done hastily, expeditiously, or with a bad heart toward the unrepentant church member. Here are a few examples of these points.

First, it can be done in haste. The first qualification in verse 15 for Matthew 18 is that a brother or sister must sin against you. But who gets to define what sin is and what it is not? Some have defined sinning against them as not saying the right thing the right way, pointing out a flaw in a person, or someone getting a position over someone. All of these are gray areas where hurt feelings can arise, but Matthew 18 is probably unwarranted. Should reconciliation be involved where one person apologizes for harboring poor feelings? Yes, but taking it before the church is a different issue. So, it being done in haste means being too quick to apply Matthew 18. Second, it can be done expeditiously.

Whenever a church member is not given enough time to consider their actions then the church can throw out a person who might've repented with more time. When you go to someone with an issue and are immediately ready with your other witnesses and the church elders then you are showing a desire to embarrass someone rather than bring them back to good fellowship. Third, it can be done with a bad heart. Right before and after Matthew 18:15-20 are parables showing how our hearts should be in exercising church discipline. The Lost Sheep shows us that God rejoices over those who come back to the fold! If the procedure laid out in Matthew 18 is performed, the initiator must ask themselves if they will rejoice after their brother or sister repents. In the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus demands His followers to forgive an unlimited number of times. If repentance occurs at any point of the Matthew 18 procedure there should be no harboring of ill will towards the person.

Matthew 18:15-20 is a wonderful text preserved for us through the Apostle Matthew, but it should always be administered with discernment. Jesus calls us to be wise as serpents and as innocent as doves, let's pray, we also have the love that He calls us to.

BIG IDEA: Matthew 18 should not be done hastily, expeditiously, or with an unloving heart.

APPLY:

- **Question:** When would be a proper scenario for you to use Matthew 18?
- **Question:** When is it better to forgive someone outright rather than decide that they owe you an apology?

Week 3: Matthew 18:15-20

Day 3: Restoring a Brother through Discipline

READ: Matt 18:15-17; Prov 27:6; Leviticus 19:17-18; Luke 17:3-4

EXPLORE:

This portion of Matthew 18 is surely among the most feared and likely least well-applied texts of Matthew. This passage deals with 'church discipline', a passage that is sometimes abused, either by ignoring it completely or using it as a hammer to take down Christians with whom we may disagree. The first thing we must note is the context in which it occurs, following hard on Matthew 18:12-14, where the idea is one of restoring a lost sheep to the fold. For this is how the Father restores a straying sheep: by using a brother who is watching over another brother's soul and is, in effect, 'shepherding' him in love. Throughout these verses, there are strong notes of compassion and love with a goal of restoration. The entire passage is addressed to a 'you', a 'singular' disciple who is aware of his brother's (or sister's) sin and humbly accepts his (or her) responsibility to do something about it. For what follows, we will use the term 'brother' generically. The factor that must come into focus is that it is the brother's danger, not any effect of his sin on me personally, which is at issue. The aim is 'to win your brother over' – to restore him to God and to restore and heal the relationship that has been ruptured by the sin. All such discipline is to happen with redemptive purposes. Jesus assumes that the individual who personally confronts his brother will do so with true humility. The erring brother must first be approached alone. Whereas it is hard to accept a rebuke, even a private one, it is harder still to carry out one in loving humility. To that end, a minimum of publicity must be used. If the first step does not work, the next step is to humbly approach the brother with two or three mature brothers. Only if that fails is the matter referred to the 'church', the local assembly of believers. If the brother fails to repent of his sin, then he should be treated as a non-believer (Gentile and tax collector),

once again leaving open the door for restoration. Notice that there is no permission whatsoever given to shunning or any such behavior. The source of Jesus' teaching here is almost certainly Leviticus 19:17-18 where Moses writes: "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him... , but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD." All of this is anchored on the person, work, and character of Yahweh! While it is hard to pin down the extent and nature of the 'sin against you', it is clearly a serious sin that, if not repented, warrants excommunication from the local church. In the New Testament as a whole, there are three categories of sin that rise to this level of seriousness: major doctrinal error (I Tim 1:20), major moral failure (I Cor 5) and persistent and schismatic divisiveness (Titus 3:10). These three constitute the negative flipside of the three positive tests of I John: the truth test, the obedience test, and the love test. All of this is centered on Jesus' protection of the peace and the purity of His bride. The following verses along with Luke 17:3 also convey this reading, with the added command to forgive your brother when he repeatedly sins 'against you' and repents 'you must forgive him'. Taken together, Matthew 18:15-22 and Luke 17:3-4, paint a glorious picture of forgiveness accompanied by restoration, all of it framed by the forgiveness that each of us has experienced at the throne of God, by means of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

BIG IDEA: Church discipline, if practiced with humility and kindness with a goal of restoration is a beautiful sight to behold.

APPLY:

- **Challenge:** The Christian who feels called of God to use Matthew 18:15-17 should carefully examine their motives, and do so with humility, praying earnestly for their brother's soul.

Week 3: Matthew 18:17

Day 4: Like a Tax Collector

READ: Matt 18:15-20; Matt 5:44-46; Luke 5:27-32; Luke 19:9-14

EXPLORE:

As we continue to study this passage about church discipline, let's break down Jesus' instructions to us, step by step:

If your brother sins against you...

1. Go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.
 - a. If he listens, you have gained your brother!
 - b. If he does not listen...
2. Take one or two others along with you as witnesses.
 - a. If he listens, you have gained your brother!
 - b. If he refuses to listen to them...
3. Tell it to the church.
 - a. If he listens, you have gained your brother!
 - b. If he refuses to listen even to the church...
4. Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Like a tax collector...so, what did Jesus mean by that? Of all the professions; of all the jobs; why does He mention "tax collector"? Doesn't everybody love the Tax Man?! In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...for if you love (only) those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the *tax collectors* do the same?" As we know from Luke's Gospel, Matthew was a tax collector. So, as the appointed scribe for *this* Gospel, the irony would certainly not have been lost on Matthew. Tax collectors were detested by Jews and Gentiles. It was not uncommon for tax collectors to be harsh, greedy, and deceptive. Until Jesus rescued him, Matthew was among those detested tax collectors; so, was he eager to understand what Jesus meant by that too? Actually, Matthew had already learned why Jesus used that metaphor. When Matthew first came to follow Christ, he hosted a great feast

in his home. Luke tells us that there was a large company of tax collectors reclining at the table with them. So, Step 4 of church discipline is “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em?” Of course not! As you can imagine, the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled about Jesus eating and drinking with “tax collectors and sinners.” Why would you do this? Always the perfect teacher, Jesus explained to them, “Those who are well have no need for a doctor. But those who are sick...those are the ones that need healing.” He went on to say, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” In Luke 18, Jesus tells a parable about two men: one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee ‘proudly’ thanked God that he wasn’t like other people—swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or tax collectors. He boasted about his tithing and fasting, and what an amazing rule-follower he was. Meanwhile, the tax collector beat his own chest crying out for mercy to God for being a sinner. So, back to our original passage. When Jesus tells us to treat that wayward brother like a tax collector, conventional wisdom says that we should shun them, ignore them, maybe even excommunicate them. Could it be, though, that our Savior wants us to pray for them, love them, witness to them all the more. After all, that’s what He did. As He said, those that need healing are the ones that need a healer.

BIG IDEA: The point of church discipline is restoration, not punishment.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Do you think it could be difficult to follow Scripture when it comes to church disciplines? Why or why not?
- **Challenge:** Recall a time where God showed you grace and mercy, when you probably should have been treated like tax collector. Thank Him for His unending love.

Week 3: Matthew 18:15-20

Day 5: Straight Outta Context

READ TOGETHER: Matthew 18:15-20

EXPLORE TOGETHER:

It will be helpful to keep your Bible open to Matthew 18:15-20 so you can refer to it during today's devotional.

Our passage this week contains some of the most misunderstood and misused verses in the New Testament. When verses are ripped from the context in which they are found, it is possible to read a meaning into them that neither the human author nor the Holy Spirit ever intended. One way for us to guard ourselves from making this mistake is to follow the advice of Greg Koukl – “Never read a Bible verse. Always read a paragraph.”

Verse 19 is used by word-of-faith and some charismatic leaders to teach that God is obligated to answer any prayer offered in agreement with other believers. If we consider this verse devoid of any context, we can see it is understandable how they arrive at this doctrine. The error is compounded by the fact that they almost always start quoting the verse after the first comma, omitting the first 5 words of the sentence. The truncated verse becomes “if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.” As R.C. Sproul said, “If you want weird theology, all you need is half a verse.”

The missing 5 words – “Again I say to you” – are important. They tell us this verse is part of a thought, not a single idea. It is part of a larger teaching and refers to something Jesus said earlier. The phrase “two or three” in verse 19 is the clue we need to discover what Jesus is speaking about. It points us back to the believer who was sinned against and the witnesses of verse 16.

The promise of verse 19 is given in the context of believers confronting, correcting, disciplining, and restoring others in the

church. It's not an encouragement to join with another believer to ask for anything you want. It's not sanctioning covetousness. It's an encouragement to ask for wisdom when making difficult decisions about discipling a believer who is in unacknowledged, unrepentant sin.

Church discipline can be among the most difficult experiences a believer faces. Jesus knows we might be tempted to shy away from it, and he promises that the Father will support us through the process. In verse 20, Jesus also assures us that He will be present with those doing the tough work of loving confrontation. We want to see sinful believers restored — Jesus wants it infinitely more.

We should resist the temptation to use the Bible as a grab-bag of promises we rummage through to find promises and to form doctrines. A verse is part of a paragraph, a chapter, and a book, and we must consider this context when seeking to understand a verse.

BIG IDEA: The Bible is not a collection of promises and inspirational verses. It is a grand, unified narrative about God and His redemptive work.

APPLY TOGETHER:

- **Question:** Do you interpret the meanings of verses 18 and 20 any differently from how you have heard them taught when you consider Jesus said them in the context of church discipline?

Week 4: Matthew 18:21-35

Day 1: A Day to Explore

READ: Matthew 18:21-35

Instructions: Spend time reading Matthew and complete the activities and questions below.

Activity: While reading, include some observations in the space below.

Questions: What do you think sparked Peter's question about forgiveness? What do you think Peter thought of Jesus' reply?

Questions: Do you believe there is any significance behind Peter offering the number seven and Jesus responding with seventy-seven times?

Question: Why do you think that Jesus uses a parable with a king and his servants specifically?

Question: Why do you think the master chose to forgive the debt entirely rather than have the man slowly pay back the debt?

Questions: Why do you think the servant was so harsh with the man that owed him money? How does this relate to how human beings can be towards one another despite what God has blessed them with?

Questions: Do you think there is a direct comparison between paying off a debt in prison in relation to how humanity is with God? Is it possible that hell is eternal because the debt to be satisfied cannot be paid?

Activities: Write out a modern version of Jesus' parable. Spend some time thinking through Jesus' message and how it could resonate with people in our culture who do not know Christ. Try and remember it so that one day you can use it to explain God's forgiveness and the forgiveness that He requires us to have as His followers.

Week 4: Matthew 18:21-35

Day 2: Revenge vs. Forgiveness

READ: Matthew 18:21-35; Genesis 4

EXPLORE:

Matthew 18:21-22 reads, “Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.’”

Today we will discuss how Peter arrived at the idea of seven times for forgiveness and the significance of seventy-seven fold forgiveness with which Jesus replies. We will use Genesis 4, as it is the only other time in the Bible that the number “seventy-seven” appears (or “seventy times seven”, the translation is ambiguous, but the Greek text is the same in the Septuagint and Matthew’s Gospel).

It is believed that the mainline Jewish thought on forgiveness at the time was that the obligation was to forgive 3 times building off the text of Amos with 3 transgressions the cup of iniquity was full and with the fourth transgression, it overflowed into vengeance against Israel’s enemies. So likely in choosing the number seven Peter was attempting to be magnanimous. The number seven has important significance in Judaism and Christianity as it reflects God’s creation. When you read Scripture, you will often come upon the number seven. Many times, the number seven can symbolize the ideas of completion, divine order, and spiritual wholeness. Perhaps this is what Peter is attempting to evoke, however with Jesus’ reply to the text, what seems to be in mind is Genesis 4.

In Genesis 4, God puts a mark on Cain and promises seven-fold vengeance on anyone who kills Cain. Later in Genesis 4, Lamech a descendant of Cain states to his wives, “If Cain’s revenge is

sevenfold, Lamech's revenge is seventy-sevenfold." This is the only other time in the Bible the number seventy-seven is mentioned, and interestingly appears also beside the number 7, and on the topic of revenge which is the antithesis of forgiveness. The story of Cain and Abel is the first murder described in the Bible, and soon after the idea of revenge is deeply inset in the sinful descendants of Cain. Promising revenge to levels greater than those promised by God. By evoking this number Jesus turns this idea on its head. Showing Peter that far from counting transgressions until you can cut a brother off, the proper attitude of the Christian is radical forgiveness. The parable that follows this passage in Matthew 18 illustrates to us that we should show thanks to God for the radical forgiveness that he shows us, by using his example in our own lives. The proper response to being forgiven is to show forgiveness to others. This is the essence of loving others well, because if we don't forgive others they will be at a distance, and we will be unable to be an example to them or share the gospel with them.

BIG IDEA:

APPLY:

- **Questions:** What are some examples in your life where you have been called to exercise forgiveness several times? Did you do a good job of living Jesus' teaching?
- **Question:** When you are working on forgiving someone, do you think of God's mercy and the forgiveness that has been showed to you? If you do, how does this help you in practicing forgiveness? If you don't, how might it help you in the future?

Week 4: Matthew 18:21-35

Day 3: Who Sits on the Throne in your Heart?

READ: Ps 47:7, 99:1; Isa 9:6-7, 33:22; Jer 10:7; Dan 7:13-14; Mt 28:18; Jn 18:36; Eph 1:20-21; 1 Tim 6:15; Rev 19:16

EXPLORE:

This week, we have been reading a parable about the kingdom of heaven and a king who wishes to settle his accounts with his servants. Speaking of kings, did you hear the one about the king who opened a music school? He taught people how to *properly compose themselves before the crown*. Ba da bum. All joking aside, there is a way that we are to compose ourselves as we live under the authority and rulership of Jesus Christ. You see, He is not just our redeemer and friend, but our Lord and our God.

Kingdom of heaven, Kingdom of God, Christ is King, King of kings are all phrases overused and under contemplated. The vast majority of us grew up in a democracy which makes the notion of a monarchy, or more accurately a theocracy, a distant and foreign concept. Kings (in theory) have absolute power and are supposed to set the social order, create and uphold laws, and administer justice. They are military leaders, establish the economics of the land, and act as the moral progenitor of the people.

The Gospel accounts tell of the life of Jesus in the context of a king taking back His land. Jesus is our true king. The story of Jesus is not a goal to get to heaven, but to bring heaven down to earth preparing for the new heavens and new earth. Salvation isn't just about individual rescue *from* the world but about rescuing the world itself so that God's people can be part of God's new creation. What started in Genesis, with God ruling and leading His people in love, continued to weave its way through the entire Bible. He tabernacled with His people to be their King, dwelt in the temple to be their King, incarnated as Jesus to be their king, sent His Spirit to live inside them to be their king, and will one day

fulfill this inaugurated kingdom when He returns again, enthroned on the new earth as their king. The story of God is the story of kingship. He has always been the king.

Throughout history and the Scriptures, a recurring theme has been a clash of kingdoms. Biblical people of old waited a long time for deliverance from the clutches and bondage of various empires ranging from Pharaoh to Caesar, but Jesus made it clear that His kingdom was of a different kind. He was not there to topple the Roman Empire, but to transform the human heart.

You see, the New Testament writers were setting forth an eschatology that had been inaugurated, but not fully consummated. They presented the idea that a new creation has begun (internally and externally), and Jesus is ruling over that new creation and making it happen through His Church. The four Gospels leave us with the primary application of the cross not in abstract preaching about 'how to have your sins forgiven' or 'how to go to heaven' but in an agenda in which the forgiven people are put to work, addressing the evils of the world in light of Jesus' victory. God's kingdom is here and now, and Christians should be working to sustain it. One day every knee will bow and tongue will confess that Jesus is king. Meanwhile, let's show them what His kingdom will look like.

BIG IDEA: God is King — you are not.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Are you letting Jesus make your military decisions? Economic decisions? Social decisions? Moral decisions?
- **Activity:** Practice the presence of God today by actively sitting Him on the throne of your life and see how that changes the things you do.

Week 4: Matthew 18:21-35

Day 4: God's Standard vs Our Standard

READ: Matthew 18:21-35; Leviticus 19:2

EXPLORE:

You have got to love Peter. Everyone's favorite disciple really. The one who is always the quickest to speak and put himself out there. In our passage for the week, Peter asks a seemingly good question. A question I think a solid person with strong morals would ask. A person who is willing to not hold a grudge and let some wrongdoing done to them go but believes that there has to be a limit somewhere. Peter just wants to know what the limit is for Pete's sake! What is the limit on my mercy and forgiveness? Wouldn't you want to know? How many times do I need to forgive someone who wrongs me? Where exactly is the limit? Jesus is never interested in limits. He's never interested in giving His followers a way out of loving God and loving their neighbors. He does not give His followers an out when they don't feel like doing the righteous thing. Instead, He always shows the heart of God and how it is separate from the heart of man.

There's always been an infinite gap between God and man. God is eternal, man is finite. God is perfect, man is flawed. God can create from nothing; man can only create with already existing matter. His ways are not our ways, and our ways are not His ways. Maybe God can forgive sins done against Him from as far the east is from the west, but how can we possibly do that?

I (Brayden) was watching a conversation between an Atheist and a Christian over the concept of morality the other day and the atheist made a very salient point that I was not expecting. In comparing the moralities of the worldviews, the atheist suggested that those who do not believe in God are far more moral because when they do the right thing it is of no benefit to them. If a Christian does the right thing, it could always be interpreted as

doing something to please God or get something from Him. If a Christian avoids the wrong thing, it could be seen as just trying to avoid the consequences that God would give them. But if an atheist, let's say, sees someone drop their wallet when no one is looking and gives it back to them they do it without factoring in God's punishment or reward. They do it because they purely see it as the right thing to do. It's a fair point with one major issue.

Nothing actually stops an atheist from doing whatever they want or changing their morality at any time. Christians are held to a standard that does not move. We are held to God's morality. We cannot live up to God's holy character, but we are called to try. Leviticus commands us to be holy because God is holy (Leviticus 19:2). Part of seeking to live a holy life is forgiving others, especially when they do not deserve it. God shows us what our hearts should be, and we are called to submit to that standard. No matter how many times we fall short and are selfish, the standard remains the same. We don't get to shift our morality whenever we don't feel like doing the right thing. We forgive because we have been forgiven. We love because He first loved us.

BIG IDEA: Strive for the Lord's Unchanging Standard

APPLY:

- **Questions:** Which part of God's character do you believe is the most difficult to copy? How can you grow in that character trait?

Week 4: Matthew 18:21-35

Day 5: Forgive From the Heart

**READ TOGETHER: Matt 18:21-35; Mark 6:34; Mark 11:15-17;
Luke 22:28-30; Eph 4:31**

EXPLORE TOGETHER:

One of the marks of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual maturity is the ability to recognize when you do not know the answer to a difficult question. A mature person is able to place themselves in the realm of uncertainty and hear different perspectives before coming to their own conclusions. This WTL will focus on Matthew 18:35 and what it means to forgive someone “from your heart.”

What do you think it means to forgive someone from your heart? Spend some time pondering this question and asking others how they would respond to this question...

Forgiveness could be considered the most difficult part of being a Christian. Maybe you have never had someone do something extremely egregious to you, but others certainly have. One of the most famous stories of forgiveness comes from Corrie Ten Boom who had her family killed by the Nazis and still chose to forgive. It can be easy to forgive someone who stole your pencil, cut you off in traffic, or accidentally sneezed on you. It’s difficult to forgive when someone you love is harmed, or whenever someone you love harms you. Jesus had to suffer both of those realities.

Jesus loved the people of Israel, but they were being harmed by those in charge of them. Mark tells us that Jesus had compassion on the crowd because they were like “sheep without a shepherd.” He had to see His people abused and neglected by the shepherds put in charge. He also was forced to see the temple made for His Father used as a marketplace to take money from those seeking to sacrifice to the one true God. He had more of a right to be angry than any of us ever will. He had a true righteous anger that

could have led to a complete destruction of all the Jewish leaders, but it did not. Jesus decided to forgive anyone who repents and turns to Him. Jesus also experienced betrayal from one He loved. He was betrayed by His own disciple Judas, whom He was going to give a throne to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Some believe that Judas had no chance of redemption for His sin, but God's forgiveness is for all who turn to Him (which Judas never did).

Jesus said He would forgive everyone who would speak against Him (Matt 12:32). Jesus forgave those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34). He commanded all His disciples to forgive, but what does that mean? God describes His forgiveness as no longer remembering sins (Isaiah 43:25). Is that even possible for us? Does it mean not to hold anything against someone anymore? Does it mean not to treat a person any different than before? Does it simply mean not to retaliate? Also, what happens if the person who wronged us doesn't repent? What then? We know that God only forgives all of the sins of someone who repents so does that mean we don't need to forgive those who don't repent?

All of these questions are difficult and a neat, clear-cut answer is not found in Scripture. What we know for sure is that we operate on the basis of loving our neighbor. To love our neighbor at minimum is to want the best for them and desire their repentance and salvation. Forgiveness must begin with a removal of bitterness from our hearts, and we let God work on us from there.

BIG IDEA: Forgiving from the heart begins with removing all bitterness from it.

APPLY:

- **Challenge:** Speak to someone you have or have had bitterness towards and ask for their forgiveness.



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