

CHAPTER 18

The gospels are, in short, a record of what Jesus began both to do and to teach. In the foregoing chapter, we had an account of his doings, in this, of his teachings; probably, not all at the same time, in a continued discourse, but at several times, upon divers occasions, here put together, as near akin. We have here,

I. Instructions concerning humility (v. 1-6).

II. Concerning offences in general (v. 7), particularly offences given,

1. By us to ourselves (v. 8, 9).

2. By us to others, (v. 10-14).

3. By others to us; which are of two sorts,

(1.) Scandalous sins, which are to be reprov'd (v. 15-20).

(2.) Personal wrongs, which are to be forgiven (v. 21-35).

See how practical Christ's preaching was; he could have revealed mysteries, but he pressed plain duties, especially those that are most displeasing to flesh and blood.

⌄ MATTHEW 18:1-6

THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMILITY

As there never was a greater pattern of humility, so there never was a greater preacher of it, than Christ; he took all occasions to command it, to commend it, to his disciples and followers.

I. The occasion of this discourse concerning humility was an unbecoming contest among the disciples for precedency; they *came to him, saying*, among themselves (for they were ashamed to ask him, ~~⌄~~ Mark 9:34), *Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?* They mean not, *who* by character (then the question had been good, that they might know what graces and duties to excel in), but *who* by name. They had heard much, and preached much, of the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of the Messiah, his church in this world; but as yet they were so far from having any clear notion of it, that they dreamt of a temporal kingdom, and the external pomp and power of it. Christ had lately foretold his sufferings, and the glory that

should follow, that he should rise again, from whence they expected his kingdom would commence; and now they thought it was time to put in for their places in it; it is good, in such cases, to speak early. Upon other discourses of Christ to that purport, debates of this kind arose (⁴¹⁹Matthew 20:19, 20; ⁴²⁰Luke 22:22, 24); he spoke many words of his sufferings, but only one of his glory; yet they fasten upon that, and overlook the other; and, instead of asking how they might have strength and grace to suffer with him, they ask him, “Who shall be highest in reigning with him.” Note, Many love to hear and speak of privileges and glory, who are willing to pass by the thoughts of work and trouble. They look so much at the crown, that they forget the yoke and the cross. So the disciples here did, when they asked, *Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*

- 1.** They suppose that all who have a place in that kingdom are great, for it is a kingdom of priests. Note, Those are truly great who are truly good; and they will appear so at last, when Christ shall own them as his, though ever so mean and poor in the world.
- 2.** They suppose that there are degrees in this greatness. All the saints are honourable, but not all alike so; *one star differs from another star in glory*. All David's officers were not worthies, nor all his worthies of the first three.
- 3.** They suppose it must be some of them, that must be prime ministers of state. To whom should King Jesus delight to do honour, but to them who had left all for him, and were now his companions in patience and tribulation?
- 4.** They strive who it should be, each having some pretence or other to it. Peter was always the chief speaker, and already had the keys given him; he expects to be lord-chancellor, or lord-chamberlain of the household, and so to be the greatest. Judas had the bag, and therefore he expects to be lord-treasurer, which, though now he come last, he hopes, will then denominate him the greatest. Simon and Jude are nearly related to Christ, and they hope to take place of all the great officers of state, as princes of the blood. John is the beloved disciple, the favourite of the Prince, and therefore hopes to be the greatest. Andrew was first called, and why should not he be first preferred? Note, We are very apt to amuse and humour ourselves with foolish fancies of things that will never be.

II. The discourse itself, which is a just rebuke to the question, *Who shall be greatest?* We have abundant reason to think, that if Christ ever intended that Peter and his successors at Rome should be heads of the church, and his chief vicars on earth, having so fair an occasion given him, he would now have let his disciples know it; but so far is he from this, that his answer disallows and condemns the thing itself. Christ will not lodge such an authority or supremacy any where in his church; whoever pretend to it are usurpers; instead of settling any of the disciples in this dignity, he warns them all not to put in for it.

Christ here teacheth them to be humble,

1. By a sign (v. 2); *He called a little child to him, and set him in the midst of them.* Christ often taught by signs or sensible representations (comparisons to the eye), as the prophets of old. Note, Humility is a lesson so hardly learned, that we have need by all ways and means to be taught it. When we look upon a little child, we should be put in mind of the use Christ made of this child. Sensible things must be improved to spiritual purposes. *He set him in the midst of them;* not that they might play with him, but that they might learn by him. Grown men, and great men, should not disdain the company of little children, or think it below them to take notice of them. They may either speak to them, and give instruction to them; or look upon them, and receive instruction from them. Christ himself, when a child, was *in the midst of the doctors*, ⁴²⁶Luke 2:46.

2. By as sermon upon this sign; in which he shows them and us,

(1.) The necessity of humility, v. 3. His preface is solemn, and commands both attention and assent; *Verily I say unto you, I, the Amen, the faithful Witness, say it, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.* Here observe,

[1.] What it is that he requires and insists upon.

First, “You must be converted, you must be of another mind, and in another frame and temper, must have other thoughts, both of yourselves and of the kingdom of heaven, before you be fit for a place in it. The pride, ambition, and affectation of honour and dominion, which appear in you, must be repented of, mortified, and reformed, and you must come to yourselves.” Note, Besides the first conversion of a soul from a state of nature to a state of grace, there are after-conversions from particular paths

of backsliding, which are equally necessary to salvation. Every step out of the way by sin, must be a step into it again by repentance. When Peter repented of his denying his Master, he was converted. *Secondly*, You must *become as little children*. Note, Converting grace makes us like little children, not foolish as children (^{<440>}1 Corinthians 14:20), nor fickle (^{<404>}Ephesians 4:14), nor playful (^{<4116>}Matthew 11:16); but, *as children*, we must *desire the sincere milk of the word* (^{<402>}1 Peter 2:2); as children, we must be careful for nothing, but leave it to our heavenly Father to care for us (^{<463>}Matthew 6:31); we must, as children, be harmless and inoffensive, and void of malice (^{<440>}1 Corinthians 14:20), governable, and under command (^{<402>}Galatians 4:2); and (which is here chiefly intended) we must be humble as little children, who do not take state upon them, nor stand upon the punctilios of honour; the child of a gentleman will play with the child of a beggar (^{<526>}Romans 12:16), the child in rags, if it have the breast, is well enough pleased, and envies not the gaiety of the child in silk; little children have no great aims at great places, or projects to raise themselves in the world; they *exercise not themselves in things too high for them*; and we should in like manner *behave, and quiet ourselves*, ^{<401>}Psalms 131:1, 2. As children are little in body and low in stature, so we must be little and low in spirit, and in our thoughts of ourselves. This is a temper which leads to other good dispositions; the age of childhood is the learning age.

[2.] What stress he lays upon this; Without this, *you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven*. Note, Disciples of Christ have need to be kept in awe by threatenings, that they may fear *lest they seem to come short*, ^{<301>}Hebrews 4:1. The disciples, when they put that question (v. 1), thought themselves sure of the kingdom of heaven; but Christ awakens them to be jealous of themselves. They were ambitious of being *greatest in the kingdom of heaven*; Christ tells them, that, except they came to a better temper, they should never come thither. Note, many that set up for great ones in the church, prove not only little, but nothing, and are found to *have no part or lot in the matter*. Our Lord designs here to show the great danger of pride and ambition; whatever profession men make, if they allow themselves in this sin, they will be rejected both from God's tabernacle and from his holy hill. Pride threw the angels that sinned out of heaven, and will keep us out, if we be not converted from it. They that are lifted up with pride, *fall into the condemnation of the devil*; to prevent this, we must become as little children, and, in order to do that, *must be*

born again, must put on the new man, must be like the holy child Jesus; so he is called, even after his ascension, ~~402~~ Acts 4:27.

(2.) He shows the honour and advancement that attend humility (v. 4), thus furnishing a direct but surprising answer to their question. He that humbles himself as a little child, though he may fear that hereby he will render himself contemptible, as men of timid minds, who thereby throw themselves out of the way of preferment, yet *the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven*. Note, The humblest Christians are the best Christians, and most like to Christ, and highest in his favour; are best disposed for the communications of divine grace, and fittest to serve God in this world, and enjoy him in another. They are great, for God overlooks heaven and earth, to look on such; and certainly those are to be most respected and honoured in the church that are most humble and self-denying; for, though they least seek it, they best deserve it.

(3.) The special care Christ takes for those that are humble; he espouses their cause, protects them, interests himself in their concerns, and will see that they are not wronged, without being grieved.

Those that thus humble themselves will be afraid,

[1.] That nobody will receive them; but (v. 5), *Whoso shall receive one such little child in my name, receiveth me*. Whatever kindnesses are done to such, Christ takes as done to himself. Whoso entertains a meek and humble Christian, keeps him in countenance, will not let him lose by his modesty, takes him into his love and friendship, and society and care, and studies to do him a kindness; and doth this in Christ's name, for his sake, because he bears the image of Christ, serves Christ, and because Christ has received him; this shall be accepted and recompensed as an acceptable piece of respect to Christ. Observe, Though it be but one such little child that is received in Christ's name, it shall be accepted. Note, The tender regard Christ has to his church extends itself to every particular member, even the meanest; not only to the whole family, but to every child of the family; the less they are in themselves, to whom we show kindness, the more there is of good will in it to Christ; the less it is for their sakes, the more it is for his; and he takes it accordingly. If Christ were personally among us, we think we should never do enough to welcome him; *the poor, the poor in spirit, we have always with us*, and they are his receivers. See ~~425~~ Matthew 25:35-40.

[2.] They will be afraid that every body will abuse them; the basest men delight to trample upon the humble; *Vexat censura columbas — Censure pounces on doves*. This objection he obviates (v. 6), where he warns all people, as they will answer it at their utmost peril, not to offer any injury to one of Christ's little ones. This word makes a wall of fire about them; he that touches them, touches the apple of God's eye.

Observe, *First*, The crime supposed; *offending one of these little ones that believe in Christ*. Their believing in Christ, though they be little ones, unites them to him, and interests him in their cause, so that, as they partake of the benefit of his sufferings, he also partakes in the wrong of theirs. Even the little ones that believe have the same privileges with the great ones, for they have all obtained like precious faith. There are those that offend these little ones, by drawing them to sin (~~480~~ 1 Corinthians 8:10, 11), grieving and vexing their righteous souls, discouraging them, taking occasion from their mildness to make a prey of them in their persons, families, goods, or good name. Thus the best men have often met with the worst treatment in this world.

Secondly, The punishment of this crime; intimated in that word, *Better for him that he were drowned in the depth of the sea*. The sin is so heinous, and the ruin proportionably so great, that he had better undergo the sorest punishments inflicted on the worst of malefactors, which can only kill the body. Note,

1. Hell is worse than the depth of the sea; for it is a bottomless pit, and it is a burning lake. The depth of the sea is only killing, but hell is tormenting. We meet with one that had comfort in the depth of the sea, it was Jonah (~~300~~ Jonah 2:2, 4, 9); but never any had the least grain or glimpse of comfort in hell, nor will have to eternity.

2. The irresistible irrevocable doom of the great Judge will sink sooner and surer, and bind faster, than *a mill-stone hanged about the neck*. It fixes a great gulf, which can never be broken through, ~~263~~ Luke 16:26. Offending Christ's little ones, though by omission, is assigned as the reason of that dreadful sentence, *Go ye cursed*, which will at last be the doom of proud persecutors.

☞ MATTHEW 18:7-14

CAUTIONS AGAINST OFFENCES

Our Savior here speaks of offences, or scandals,

I. In general, v. 7. Having mentioned the offending of little ones, he takes occasion to speak more generally of offences. That is an offence,

1. Which occasions guilt, which by enticement or affrightment tends to draw men from that which is good to that which is evil.

2. Which occasions grief, which *makes the heart of the righteous sad*. Now, concerning offences, Christ here tells them,

(1.) That they were certain things; *It must needs be, that offences come*. When we are sure there is danger, we should be the better armed. Not that Christ's word necessitates any man to offend, but it is a prediction upon a view of the causes; considering the subtlety and malice of Satan, the weakness and depravity of men's hearts, and the foolishness that is found there, it is morally impossible but that there should be offences; and God has determined to permit them for wise and holy ends, that both *they which are perfect, and they which are not, may be made manifest*. See ☞¹¹⁹1 Corinthians 11:19; ☞²⁷¹⁵Daniel 11:35. Being told, before, that there will be seducers, tempters, persecutors, and many bad examples, let us stand upon our guard, ☞⁴²²Matthew 24:24; ☞⁴⁰⁹Acts 20:29, 30.

(2.) That they would be woeful things, and the consequence of them fatal. Here is a double woe annexed to offences:

[1.] A woe to the careless and unguarded, to whom the offence is given; *Woe to the world because of offences*. The obstructions and oppositions given to faith and holiness in all places are the bane and plague of mankind, and the ruin of thousands. This present world is an evil world, it is so full of offences, of sins, and snares, and sorrows; a dangerous road we travel, full of stumbling-blocks, precipices, and false guides. Woe to the world. As for those whom God hath chosen and called out of the world, and delivered from it, they are preserved by the power of God from the prejudice of these offences, are helped over all these stones of stumbling. *They that love God's law have great peace, and nothing shall offend them,* ☞¹³⁹⁶Psalm 119:165.

[2.] A woe to the wicked, who wilfully give the offence; *But woe to that man by whom the offence comes.* Though it must needs be, that the offence will come, that will be no excuse for the offenders. Note, Though God makes the sins of sinners to serve his purposes, that will not secure them from his wrath; and the guilt will be laid at the door of those who give the offence, though they also fall under a woe who take it. Note, They who any way hinder the salvation of others, will find their own condemnation the more intolerable, like *Jeroboam, who sinned, and made Israel to sin.* This woe is the moral of that judicial law (⁽¹²¹³⁾Exodus 21:33, 21:34-22:6), that he who opened the pit, and kindled the fire, was accountable for all the damage that ensued. The antichristian generation, by whom came the great offence, will fall under this woe, for their delusion of sinners (⁽⁵¹¹⁾2 Thessalonians 2:11, 12), and their persecutions of saints (⁽⁶⁷¹⁾Revelation 17:1, 2, 6), for the righteous God will reckon with those who ruin the eternal interests of precious souls, and the temporal interests of precious saints; for *precious in the sight of the Lord is the blood of souls and the blood of saints;* and men will be reckoned with, not only for their doings, but for the fruit of their doings, the mischief done by them.

II. In particular, Christ here speaks of offences given,

1. By us to ourselves, which is expressed by our hand or foot offending us; in such a case, it must be *cut off*, v. 8, 9. This Christ had said before (⁽⁴¹⁵⁾Matthew 5:29, 30), where it especially refers to seventh-commandment sins; here it is taken more generally. Note, Those hard sayings of Christ, which are displeasing to flesh and blood, need to be repeated to us again and again, and all little enough. Now observe,

(1.) What it is that is here enjoined. We must part with an *eye*, or a *hand*, or a *foot*, that is, that, whatever it is, which is dear to us, when it proves unavoidably an occasion of sin to us. Note,

[1.] Many prevailing temptations to sin arise from within ourselves; our own eyes and hands offend us; if there were never a devil to tempt us, we should be drawn away of our own lust: nay, those things which in themselves are good, and may be used as instruments of good, even those, through the corruptions of our hearts, prove snares to us, incline us to sin, and hinder us in duty.

[2.] In such a case, we must, as far as lawfully we may, part with that which we cannot keep without being entangled in sin by it. *First*, It is

certain, the inward lust must be mortified, though it be dear to us as an eye, or a hand. *The flesh, with its affections and lusts, must be mortified,* ^{<8824}Galatians 5:24. *The body of sin must be destroyed;* corrupt inclinations and appetites must be checked and crossed; the beloved lust, that has been rolled under the tongue as a sweet morsel, must be abandoned with abhorrence. *Secondly,* The outward occasions of sin must be avoided, though we thereby put as great a violence upon ourselves as it would be to cut off a hand, or pluck out an eye. When Abraham quitted his native country, for fear of being ensnared in the idolatry of it, and when Moses quitted Pharaoh's court, for fear of being entangled in the sinful pleasures of it, there was a right hand cut off. We must think nothing too dear to part with, for the keeping of a good conscience.

(2.) Upon what inducement this is required; *It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than, having two hands, to be cast into hell.* The argument is taken from the future state, from heaven and hell; thence are fetched the most cogent dissuasives from sin. The argument is the same with that of the apostle, ^{<8823}Romans 8:13.

[1.] *If we live after the flesh, we shall die;* having two eyes, no breaches made upon the body of sin, inbred corruption like Adonijah never displeased, we shall *be cast into hell-fire.*

[2.] *If we through the Spirit mortify the deeds of the body, we shall live;* that is meant by our *entering into life maimed*, that is, the body of sin maimed; and it is but maimed at the best, while we are in this world. If the right hand of the old man be cut off, and its right eye be plucked out, its chief policies blasted and powers broken, it is well; but there is still an eye and a hand remaining, with which it will struggle. They that are Christ's have nailed the flesh to the cross, but it is not yet dead; its life is prolonged, but its *dominion taken away* (^{<2712}Daniel 7:12), and the deadly wound given it, that shall not be healed.

1. Concerning offences given by us to others, especially Christ's little ones, which we are here charged to take heed of, pursuant to what he had said, v. 6. Observe,

(1.) The caution itself; *Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones.* This is spoken to the disciples. As Christ will be displeased with enemies of his church, if they wrong any of the members of it, even the least, so he will be displeased with the great ones of the church, if they

despise the little ones of it. “You that are striving who shall be greatest, take heed lest in this contest you despise the little ones.” We may understand it literally of little children; of them Christ was speaking, v. 2, 4. The infant seed of the faithful belong to the family of Christ, and are not to be despised. Or, figuratively; true but weak believers are these little ones, who in their outward condition, or the frame of their spirits, are like little children, the lambs of Christ's flock.

[1.] We must not despise them, not think meanly of them, as lambs despised, ^{<827B>}Job 12:5. We must not make a jest of their infirmities, not look upon them with contempt, not conduct ourselves scornfully or disdainfully toward them, as if we cared not what became of them; we must not say, “Though they be offended, and grieved, and stumble, what is that to us?” Nor should we make a slight matter of doing that which will entangle and perplex them. This despising of the little ones is what we are largely cautioned against, ^{<84B>}Romans 14:3, 10, 15, 20, 21. We must not impose upon the consciences of others, nor bring them into subjection to our humours, as they do who say to men's souls, *Bow down, that we may go over*. There is a respect owing to the conscience of every man who appears to be conscientious.

[2.] We must take heed that we do not despise them; we must be afraid of the sin, and be very cautious what we say and do, lest we should through inadvertency give offence to Christ's little ones, lest we put contempt upon them, without being aware of it. There were those that hated them, and cast them out, and yet said, *Let the Lord be glorified*. And we must be afraid of the punishment; “Take heed of despising them, for it is at your peril if you do.”

(2.) The reasons to enforce the caution. We must not look upon these little ones as contemptible, because really they are considerable. Let not earth despise those whom heaven respects; let not *those* be looked upon by us with respect, as his favourites. To prove that the little ones which believe in Christ are worthy to be respected, consider,

[1.] The ministration of the good angels about them; *In heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father*. This Christ saith to us, and we may take it upon *his* word, who came from heaven to let us know what is done there by the world of angels. Two things he lets us know concerning them,

First, That they are the little ones' angels. God's angels are theirs; for all his is ours, if we be Christ's. ^{<482>}1 Corinthians 3:22. They are theirs; for they have a charge concerning them to minister for their good (^{<3014>}Hebrews 1:14), to pitch their tents about them, and bear them up in their arms. Some have imagined that every particular saint has a guardian angel; but why should we suppose this, when we are sure that every particular saint, when there is occasion, has a guard of angels? This is particularly applied here to the little ones, because they are most despised and most exposed. They have but little that they can call their own, but they can look by faith on the heavenly hosts, and call them theirs. While the great ones of the world have honourable men for their retinue and guards, the little ones of the church are attended with glorious angels; which bespeaks not only their dignity, but the danger those run themselves upon, who despise and abuse them. It is bad being enemies to those who are so guarded; and it is good having God for our God, for then we have his angels for our angels.

Secondly, That *they always behold the face of the Father in heaven*. This bespeaks,

- 1.** The angels' continual felicity and honour. The happiness of heaven consists in the vision of God, seeing him face to face as he is, beholding his beauty; this the angels have without interruption; when they are ministering to us on earth, yet even then by contemplation they behold the face of God, for they are *full of eyes within*. Gabriel, when speaking to Zecharias, yet stands in the presence of God, ^{<608>}Revelation 4:8; ^{<219>}Luke 1:19. The expression intimates, as some think, the special dignity and honour of the little ones' angels; the prime ministers of state are said to *see the king's face* (^{<7014>}Esther 1:14), as if the strongest angels had the charge of the weakest saints.
- 2.** It bespeaks their continual readiness to minister to the saints. They behold the face of God, expecting to receive orders from him what to do for the good of the saints. *As the eyes of the servant are to the hand of his master*, ready to go or come upon the least beck, so the eyes of the angels are upon the face of God, waiting for the intimations of his will, which those winged messengers fly swiftly to fulfil; they *go and return like a flash of lightning*, ^{<3014>}Ezekiel 1:14. If we would behold the face of God in glory hereafter, as the angels do (^{<276>}Luke 20:36), we must behold the face of God now, in readiness to our duty, as they do, ^{<496>}Acts 9:6.

[2.] The gracious design of Christ concerning them (v. 11); *For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost.* This is a reason, *First*, Why the little ones' angels have such a charge concerning them, and attend upon them; it is in pursuance of Christ's design to save them. Note, The ministration of angels is founded in the mediation of Christ; through him angels are reconciled to us; and, when they celebrated God's goodwill toward men, to it they annexed their own. *Secondly*, Why they are not to be despised; because Christ came to save them, to save them that are lost, the little ones that are lost in their own eyes (~~266B~~ Isaiah 66:3), that are at a loss within themselves. Or rather, the children of men. Note,

1. Our souls by nature are lost souls; as a traveller is lost, that is out of his way, as a convicted prisoner is lost. God lost the service of fallen man, lost the honour he should have had from him.
2. Christ's errand into the world was to *save that which was lost*, to reduce us to our allegiance, restore us to our work, reinstate us in our privileges, and so to put us into the right way that leads to our great end; to save those that are spiritually lost from being eternally so.
3. This is a good reason why the least and weakest believers should not be despised or offended. If Christ put such a value upon them, let us not undervalue them. If he denied himself so much for their salvation, surely we should deny ourselves for their edification and consolation. See this argument urged, ~~645~~ Romans 14:15; ~~468D~~ 1 Corinthians 8:11, 12. Nay, if Christ came into the world to save souls, and his heart is so much upon that work, he will reckon severely with those that obstruct and hinder it, by obstructing the progress of those that are setting their faces heavenward, and so thwart his great design.

[3.] The tender regard which our heavenly Father has to these little ones, and his concern for their welfare. This is illustrated by a comparison, v. 12-14. Observe the gradation of the argument; the angels of God are their servants, the Son of God is their Saviour, and, to complete their honour, God himself is their Friend. *None shall pluck them out of my Father's hand*, ~~618B~~ John 10:28.

Here is, *First*, The comparison, v. 12, 13. The owner that had lost one sheep out of a hundred, does not slight it, but diligently enquires after it, is greatly pleased when he has found it, and has in that a sensible and affecting joy, more than in the ninety and nine that wandered not. The fear

he was in of losing that one, and the surprise of finding it, add to the joy. Now this is applicable,

1. To the state of fallen man in general; he is strayed like a lost sheep, the angels that stood were as the ninety-nine that never went astray; wandering man is sought upon the mountains, which Christ, in great fatigue, traversed in pursuit of him, and he is found; which is a matter of joy. Greater joy there is in heaven for returning sinners than for remaining angels.

2. To particular believers, who are offended and put out of their way by the stumbling-blocks that are laid in their way, or the wiles of those who seduce them out of the way. Now though but one of a hundred should hereby be driven off, as sheep easily are, yet that one shall be looked after with a great deal of care, the return of it welcomed with a great deal of pleasure; and therefore the wrong done to it, no doubt, will be reckoned for with a great deal of displeasure. If there be joy in heaven for the finding of one of these little ones, there is wrath in heaven for the offending of them. Note, God is graciously concerned, not only for his flock in general, but for every lamb, or sheep, that belongs to it. Though they are many, yet out of those many he can easily miss one, for he is a *great* Shepherd, but not so easily lose it, for he is a *good* Shepherd, and takes a more particular cognizance of his flock than ever any did; for he *calls his own sheep by name*, ^{<BIB>}John 10:3. See a full exposition of this parable, ^{<BIB>}Ezekiel 34:2, 10, 16, 19.

Secondly, The application of this comparison (v. 14); *It is not the will of your Father, that one of these little ones should perish*. More is implied than is expressed. It is not his will that any should perish, but,

1. It is his will, that these little ones should be saved; it is the will of his design and delight: he has designed it, and set his heart upon it, and he will effect it; it is the will of his precept, that all should do what they can to further it, and nothing to hinder it.

2. This care extends itself to every particular member of the flock, even the meanest. We think if but *one* or *two* be offended and ensnared, it is no great matter, we need not mind it; but God's thoughts of love and tenderness are above ours.

3. It is intimated that those who do any thing by which any of these little ones are brought into danger of perishing, contradict the will of God, and highly provoke him; and though they cannot prevail in it, yet they will be reckoned with for it by him, who, in his saints, as in other things, is jealous of his honour, and will not bear to have it trampled on. See ^{<B15>}Isaiah 3:15, *What mean ye, that ye beat my people?*
^{<B16>}Psalm 76:8, 9.

Observe, Christ called God, v. 19, *my Father which is in heaven*; he calls him, v. 14, *your Father which is in heaven*; intimating that he is not ashamed to call his poor disciples *brethren*; for have not he and they one Father? *I ascend to my Father and your Father* (^{<B17>}John 20:17); therefore ours because his. This intimates likewise the ground of the safety of his little ones; that God is their Father, and is therefore inclined to succour them. A father takes care of all his children, but is particularly tender of the little ones, ^{<B18>}Genesis 33:13. He is their Father in heaven, a place of prospect, and therefore he sees all the indignities offered them; and a place of power, therefore he is able to avenge them. This comforts offended little ones, that their Witness is in heaven (^{<B19>}Job 16:19), their Judge is there, ^{<B20>}Psalm 68:5.

^{<B21>}MATTHEW 18:15-20

THE REMOVAL OF OFFENCES

Christ, having cautioned his disciples not to give offence, comes next to direct them what they must do in case of offences given them; which may be understood either of personal injuries, and then these directions are intended for the preserving of the peace of the church; or of public scandals, and then they are intended for the preserving of the purity and beauty of the church. Let us consider it both ways.

I. Let us apply it to the quarrels that happen, upon any account, among Christians. If thy brother trespass against thee, by grieving thy soul (^{<B22>}1 Corinthians 8:12), by affronting thee, or putting contempt or abuse upon thee; if he blemish thy good name by false reports or tale-bearing; if he encroach on thy rights, or be any way injurious to thee in thy estate; if he be guilty of any of those trespasses that are specified, ^{<B23>}Leviticus 6:2, 3; if he transgress the laws of justice, charity, or relative duties; these are

trespasses against us, and often happen among Christ's disciples, and sometimes, for want of prudence, are of very mischievous consequence. Now observe what is the rule prescribed in this case,

1. *Go, and tell him his fault between thee and him alone.* Let this be compared with, and explained by, ^{CRUI.} Leviticus 19:17, *Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart;* that is, “If thou hast conceived a displeasure at thy brother for any injury he hath done thee, do not suffer thy resentments to ripen into a secret malice (like a wound, which is most dangerous when it bleed inwardly), but give vent to them in a mild and grave admonition, let them so spend themselves, and they will expire the sooner; do not go and rail against him behind his back, but *thou shalt in any ways reprove him.* If he has indeed done thee a considerable wrong, endeavour to make him sensible of it, but let the rebuke be private, between thee and him alone; if thou wouldest convince him, do not expose him, for that will but exasperate him, and make the reproof look like a revenge.” this agrees with ^{CRUI.} Proverbs 25:8, 9, “*Go not forth hastily to strive, but debate thy cause with thy neighbour himself,* argue it calmly and amicably; and *if he shall hear thee,* well and good, *thou hast gained thy brother,* there is an end of the controversy, and it is a happy end; let no more be said of it, but let the falling out of friends be the renewing of friendship.”

2. “*If he will not hear thee,* if he will not own himself in a fault, nor come to an agreement, yet do not despair, but try what he will say to it, if thou take *one or two or more,* not only to be witnesses of what passes, but to reason the case further with him; he will be the more likely to hearken to them because they are disinterested; and if reason will rule him, the word of reason in the mouth of two or three witnesses will be better spoken to him” (*Plus vident oculi quam oculus — Many eyes see more than one*), “and more regarded by him, and perhaps it will influence him to acknowledge his error, and to say, *I repent.*”

3. “*If he shall neglect to hear them,* and will not refer the matter to their arbitration, then *tell it to the church,* to the ministers, elders, or other officers, or the most considerable persons in the congregation you belong to, make them the referees to accommodate the matter, and do not presently appeal to the magistrate, or fetch a writ for him.” This is fully explained by the apostle (1 Corinthians 6), where he reproves those that went to law before the unjust, and not before the saints (v. 1), and would have the saints to judge those small matters (v. 2) that pertain to this life,

v. 3. If you ask, “Who is *the church* that must be told?” the apostle directs there (v. 5), *Is there not a wise man among you?* Those of the church that are presumed to be most capable of determining such matters; and he speaks ironically, when he says (v. 4), “*Set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church;* those, if there be no better, those, rather than suffer an irreconcilable breach between two church members.” This rule was then in a special manner requisite, when the civil government was in the hands of such as were not only aliens, but enemies.

4. “If he will not *hear the church*, will not stand to their award, but persists in the wrong he has done thee, and proceeds to do thee further wrong, *let him be to thee as a heathen man, and a publican;* take the benefit of the law against him, but let that always be the last remedy; appeal not to the courts of justice till thou hast first tried all other means to compromise the matter in variance. Or thou mayest, if thou wilt, break off thy friendship and familiarity with him; though thou must by no means study revenge, yet thou mayest choose whether thou wilt have any dealings with him, at least, in such a way as may give him an opportunity of doing the like again. Thou wouldest have healed him, wouldest have preserved his friendship, but he would not, and so has forfeited it.” If a man cheat and abuse me once, it is his fault; if twice, it is my own.

II. Let us apply it to scandalous sins, which are an offence to the little ones, of bad example to those that are weak and pliable, and of great grief to those that are weak and timorous. Christ, having taught us to indulge the weakness of our brethren, here cautions us not to indulge their wickedness under pretence of that. Christ, designing to erect a church for himself in the world, here took care for the preservation,

1. Of its purity, that it might have an expulsive faculty, a power to cleanse and clear itself, like a fountain of living waters, which is necessary as long as the net of the gospel brings up both good fish and bad.

2. Of its peace and order, that every member may know his place and duty, and the purity of it may be preserved in a regular way and not tumultuously. Now let us see,

(1.) What is the case supposed? *If thy brother trespass against thee.*

[1.] “The offender is a brother, one that is in Christian communion, that is baptized, that hears the word, and prays with thee, with whom thou joimest

in the worship of God, stately or occasionally.” Note, Church discipline is for church members. *Them that are without God judges,* ⁴⁶⁵²⁻¹ Corinthians 5:12, 13. When any trespass is done against us, it is good to remember that the trespasser is a brother, which furnishes us with qualifying consideration.

[2.] “The offense is a trespass against thee; if thy brother sin against thee (so the word is), if he do any thing which is offensive to thee as a Christian.” Note, A gross sin against God is a trespass against his people, who have a true concern for his honour. Christ and believers have twisted interests; what is done against them Christ takes as done against himself, and what is done against him they cannot but take as done against themselves. *The reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me,* ⁴⁶⁹⁹ Psalm 69:9.

(2.) What is to be done in this case. We have here,

[1.] The rules prescribed, v. 15-17. Proceed in this method:

First, “Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone. Do not stay till he comes to thee, but go to him, as the physician visits the patient, and the shepherd goes after the lost sheep.” Note, We should think no pains too much to take for the recovering of a sinner to repentance. “*Tell him his fault,* remind him of what he has done, and of the evil of it, *show him his abominations.*” Note, People are loth to see their faults, and have need to be told of them. Though the fact is plain, and the fault too, yet they must be put together with application. Great sins often amuse conscience, and for the present stupify and silence it; and there is need of help to awaken it. David's own heart smote him, when he had cut off Saul's skirt, and when he had numbered the people; but (which is very strange) we do not find that it smote him in the matter of Uriah, till Nathan told him, *Thou art the man.*

“*Tell him his fault,* *elenxon auton* — *argue the case with him*” (so the word signifies); “and do it with reason and argument, not with passion.” Where the fault is plain and great, the person proper for us to deal with, and we have an opportunity for it, and there is no apparent danger of doing more hurt than good, we must with meekness and faithfulness tell people of what is amiss in them. Christian reproof is an ordinance of Christ for the bringing of sinners to repentance, and must be managed as an ordinance. “Let the reproof be private, between thee and him alone; that it

may appear you seek not his reproach, but his repentance.” Note, It is a good rule, which should ordinarily be observed among Christians, not to speak of our brethren's faults to others, till we have first spoken of them to themselves, this would make less reproaching and more reprovng; that is, less sin committed, and more duty done. It will be likely to work upon an offender, when he sees his reprover concerned not only for his salvation, in telling him his fault, but for his reputation in telling him of it privately.

“*If he shall hear thee*” — that is, “heed thee — if he be wrought upon by the reproof, it is well, *thou hast gained thy brother*; thou hast helped to save him from sin and ruin, and it will be thy credit and comfort,”

^{<515>}James 5:19, 20. Note, The converting of a soul is the winning of that soul (^{<413>}Proverbs 11:30); and we should covet it, and labour after it, as gain to us; and, if the loss of a soul be a great loss, the gain of a soul is sure no small gain.

Secondly, If that doth not prevail, *then take with thee one or two more*, v. 16. Note, We must not be weary of well-doing, though we see not presently the good success of it. “If he will not hear thee, yet do not give him up as in a desperate case; say not, It will be to no purpose to deal with him any further; but go on in the use of other means; even those that harden their necks must be often reprovng, and those that oppose themselves instructed in meekness.” In work of this kind we must *travail in birth again* (^{<409>}Galatians 4:19); and it is after many pains and throes that the child is born.

“*Take with thee one or two more*;

1. To assist thee; they may speak some pertinent convincing word which thou didst not think of, and may manage the matter with more prudence than thou didst.” note, Christians should see their need of help in doing good, and pray in the aid one of another; as in other things, so in giving reprovngs, that the duty may be done, and may be done well.

2. “To affect him; he will be the more likely to be humbled for his fault, when he sees it witnessed against by *two or three*.”

^{<585>}Deuteronomy 19:15. Note, Those should think it high time to repent and reform, who see their misconduct become a general offence and scandal. Though in such a world as this it is rare to find one good

whom *all men speak well of*, yet it is more rare to find one good whom *all men speak ill of*.

3. “To be witnesses of his conduct, in case the matter should afterward be brought before the church.” None should come under the censure of the church as obstinate and contumacious, till it be very well proved that they are so.

Thirdly, If he neglect to hear them, and will not be humbled, *then tell it to the church*, v. 17. There are some stubborn spirits to whom the likeliest means of conviction prove ineffectual; yet such must not be given over as incurable, but let the matter be made more public, and further help called in. Note,

1. Private admonitions must always go before public censures; if gentler methods will do the work, those that are more rough and severe must not be used, ⁵⁶⁸⁰Titus 3:10. Those that will be reasoned out of their sins, need not be shamed out of them. Let God's work be done effectually, but with as little noise as may be; his kingdom comes with power, but not with observation. But,

2. Where private admonition does not prevail, there public censure must take place. The church must receive the complaints of the offended, and rebuke the sins of the offenders, and judge between them, after an impartial enquiry made into the merits of the cause.

Tell it to the church. It is a thousand pities that this appointment of Christ, which was designed to end differences, and remove offences, should itself be so much a matter of debate, and occasion differences and offences, through the corruption of men's hearts. What church must be told — is the great question. The civil magistrate, say some; The Jewish sanhedrim then in being, say others; but by what follows, v. 18, it is plain that he means a Christian church, which, though not yet formed, was now in the embryo. “*Tell it to the church*, that particular church in the communion of which the offender lives; make the matter known to those of that congregation who are by consent appointed to receive informations of that kind. Tell it to the guides and governors of the church, the minister or ministers, the elders or deacons, or (if such the constitution of the society be) tell it to the representatives or heads of the congregation, or to all the members of it; let them examine the matter and, if they find the complaint frivolous and groundless, let them rebuke the complainant; if they find it just, let them

rebuke the offender, and call him to repentance, and this will be likely to put an edge and an efficacy upon the reproof, because given,”

1. “With greater solemnity,” and,
2. “With greater authority.” It is an awful thing to receive a reproof from a church, from a minister, a reprover by office; and therefore it is the more regarded by such as pay any deference to an institution of Christ and his ambassadors.

Fourthly, “If he neglect to hear the church, if he slight the admonition, and will neither be ashamed of his faults, nor amend them, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and publican; let him be cast out of the communion of the church, secluded from special ordinances, degraded from the dignity of a church member, let him be put under disgrace, and let the members of the society be warned to withdraw from him, that he may be ashamed of his sin, and they may not be infected by it, or made chargeable with it.” Those who put contempt on the orders and rules of a society, and bring reproach upon it, forfeit the honours and privileges of it, and are justly laid aside till they repent and submit, and reconcile themselves to it again. Christ has appointed this method for the vindicating of the church's honour, the preserving of its purity, and the conviction and reformation of those that are scandalous. But observe, he doth not say, “Let him be to thee as a devil or damned spirit, as one whose case is desperate,” but “as a heathen and a publican, as one in a capacity of being restored and received in again. Count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” The directions given to the church of Corinth concerning the incestuous person, agree with the rules here; he must be *taken away from among them* (~~1~~ 1 Corinthians 5:2), must be *delivered to Satan*; for if he be cast out of Christ's kingdom, he is looked upon as belonging to Satan's kingdom; they must not keep company with him, v. 11, 13. But when by this he is humbled and reclaimed, he must be welcomed into communion again, and all shall be well.

[2.] Here is a warrant signed for the ratification of all the church's proceedings according to these rules, v. 18. What was said before to Peter is here said to all the disciples, and in them to all the faithful office-bearers in the church, to the world's end. While ministers preach the word of Christ faithfully, and in their government of the church strictly adhere to his laws (*clave non errante — the key not turning the wrong way*), they may be assured that he will own them, and stand by them, and will ratify

what they say and do, so that it shall be taken as said and done by himself. He will own them,

First, In their sentence of suspension; *Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven*. If the censures of the church duly follow the institution of Christ, his judgments will follow the censures of the church, his spiritual judgments, which are the sorest of all other, such as the rejected Jews fell under (~~418~~Romans 11:8), a *spirit of slumber*; for Christ will not suffer his own ordinances to be trampled upon, but will say *amen* to the righteous sentences which the church passes on obstinate offenders. How light soever proud scorers may make of the censures of the church, let them know that they are confirmed in the court of heaven; and it is in vain for them to appeal to that court, for judgment is there already given against them. They that are shut out from the *congregation of the righteous* now shall not *stand in it* in the great day, ~~405~~Psalm 1:5. Christ will not own those as his, nor receive them to himself, whom the church has duly delivered to Satan; but, if through error or envy the censures of the church be unjust, Christ will graciously find those who are so cast out, ~~408~~John 9:34, 35.

Secondly, In their sentence of absolution; *Whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven*. Note,

1. No church censures bind so fast, but that, upon the sinner's repentance and reformation, they may and must be loosed again. Sufficient is the punishment which has attained its end, and the offender must then be forgiven and comforted, ~~406~~2 Corinthians 2:6. There is no unpassable gulf fixed but that between hell and heaven.

2. Those who, upon their repentance, are received by the church into communion again may take the comfort of their absolution in heaven, if their hearts be upright with God. As suspension is for the terror of the obstinate, so absolution is for the encouragement of the penitent. St. Paul speaks in the person of Christ, when he saith, *To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also*, ~~400~~2 Corinthians 2:10.

Now it is a great honour which Christ here puts upon the church, that he will condescend not only to take cognizance of their sentences, but to confirm them; and in the following verses we have two things laid down as ground of this.

(1.) God's readiness to answer the church's prayers (v. 19); *If two of you shall agree harmoniously, touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them.* Apply this,

[1.] In general, to all the requests of the faithful praying seed of Jacob; they shall not *seek God's face in vain*. Many promises we have in scripture of a gracious answer to the prayers of faith, but this gives a particular encouragement to the joint-prayer; "the requests which two of you agree in, much more which many agree in." No law of heaven limits the number of petitioners. Note, Christ has been pleased to put an honour upon, and to allow a special efficacy in, the joint-prayers of the faithful, and the common supplications they make to God. If they join in the same prayer, if they meet by appointment to come together to the throne of grace on some special errand, or, though at a distance, agree in some particular matter of prayer, they shall speed well. Besides the general regard God has to the prayers of the saints, he is particularly pleased with their union and communion in those prayers. See ~~453~~2 Chronicles 5:13; ~~446~~Acts 4:31.

[2.] In particular, to those requests that are put up to God about binding and loosing; to which this promise seems more especially to refer. Observe, *First*, That the power of church discipline is not here lodged in the hand of a single person, but two, at least, are supposed to be concerned in it. When the incestuous Corinthian was to be cast out, the church was gathered together (~~459~~1 Corinthians 5:4), and it was a punishment inflicted of many, ~~406~~2 Corinthians 2:6. In an affair of such importance, *two are better than one, and in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.* *Secondly*, It is good to see those who have the management of church discipline, agreeing in it. Heats and animosities, among those whose work it is to remove offences, will be the greatest offence of all. *Thirdly*, Prayer must evermore go along with church discipline. Pass no sentence, which you cannot in faith ask God to confirm. The binding and loosing spoken of (~~413~~Matthew 16:19) was done by preaching, this by praying. Thus the whole power of gospel ministers is resolved into the word and prayer, to which they must wholly give themselves. He doth not say, "If you shall agree to sentence and decree a thing, it shall be done" (as if ministers were judges and lords); but, "If you agree to ask it of God, from him you shall obtain it." Prayer must go along with all our endeavours for the conversion of sinners; see ~~556~~James 5:16. *Fourthly*, The unanimous petitions of the church of God, for the ratification of their just censures, shall be heard in heaven, and obtain an answer; "*It shall be done*, it shall be bound and

loosed in heaven; God will set his fiat to the appeals and applications you make to him.” If Christ (who here speaks as one having authority) say, “It shall be done,” we may be assured that it is done, though we see not the effect in the way that we look for it. God doth especially own and accept us, when we are praying for those that have offended him and us. *The Lord turned the captivity of Job*, not when he prayed for himself, but when he prayed for his friends who had trespassed against him.

(2.) The presence of Christ in the assemblies of Christians, v. 20. Every believer has the presence of Christ with him; but the promise here refers to the meetings where two or three are gathered in his name, not only for discipline, but for religious worship, or any act of Christian communion. Assemblies of Christians for holy purposes are hereby appointed, directed, and encouraged.

[1.] They are hereby appointed; the church of Christ in the world exists most visibly in religious assemblies; it is the will of Christ that these should be set up, and kept up, for the honour of God, the edification of men, and the preserving of a face of religion upon the world. When God intends special answers to prayer, he calls for a solemn assembly, ²⁰²⁵ Joel 2:15, 16. If there be no liberty and opportunity for large and numerous assemblies, yet then it is the will of God that two or three should gather together, to show their good-will to the great congregation. Note, When we cannot do what we would in religion, we must do as we can, and God will accept us.

[2.] They are hereby directed to gather together in Christ's name. In the exercise of church discipline, they must *come together in the name of Christ*, ⁴⁸⁸ 1 Corinthians 5:4. That name gives to what they do an authority on earth, and an acceptableness in heaven. In meeting or worship, we must have an eye to Christ; must come together by virtue of his warrant and appointment, in token of our relation to him, professing faith in him, and in communion with all that in every place call upon him. When we come together, to worship God in a dependence upon the Spirit and grace of Christ as Mediator for assistance, and upon his merit and righteousness as Mediator for acceptance, having an actual regard to him as our Way to the Father, and our Advocate with the Father, then we are met together in his name.

[3.] They are hereby encouraged with an assurance of the presence of Christ; *There am I in the midst of them*. By his common presence he is in

all places, as God; but this is a promise of his special presence. Where his saints are, his sanctuary is, and there he will dwell; it is his rest (^{<B24>}Psalm 132:14), it is his walk (^{<A21>}Revelation 2:1); he is in the midst of them, to quicken and strengthen them, to refresh and comfort them, as the sun in the midst of the universe. He is in the midst of them, that is, in their hearts; it is a spiritual presence, the presence of Christ's Spirit with their spirits, that is here intended. *There am I*, not only *I will be* there, but *I am there*; as if he came first, is ready before them, they shall find him there; he repeated this promise at parting (^{<B30>}Matthew 28:20), *Lo, I am with you always*. Note, The presence of Christ in the assemblies of Christians is promised, and may in faith be prayed for and depended on; *There am I*. This is equivalent to the Shechinah, or special presence of God in the tabernacle and temple of old, ^{<B34>}Exodus 40:34; ^{<H34>}2 Chronicles 5:14.

Though but two or three are met together, Christ is among them; this is an encouragement to the meeting of a few, when it is either, *First*, of choice. Besides the secret worship performed by particular persons, and the public services of the whole congregation, there may be occasion sometimes for two or three to come together, either for mutual assistance in conference or joint assistance in prayer, not in contempt of public worship, but in concurrence with it; there Christ will be present. Or, *Secondly*, By constraint; when there are not more than two or three to come together, or, if there be, they dare not, *for fear of the Jews*, yet Christ will be *in the midst of them*, for it is not the multitude, but the faith and sincere devotion, of the worshippers, that invites the presence of Christ; and though there be but two or three, the smallest number that can be, yet, it Christ make one among them, who is the principal one, their meeting is as honourable and comfortable as if they were two or three thousand.

^{<A22>}MATTHEW 18:21-35

THE CRUEL CREDITOR

This part of the discourse concerning offences is certainly to be understood of personal wrongs, which is in our power to forgive. Now observe,

I. Peter's question concerning this matter (v. 21); *Lord, how oft shall my brother trespass against me, and I forgive him? Will it suffice to do it seven times?*

1. He takes it for granted that he must forgive; Christ had before taught his disciples this lesson (^{<1064>}Matthew 6:14, 14), and Peter has not forgotten it. He knows that he must not only not bear a grudge against his brother, or meditate revenge, but be as good a friend as ever, and forget the injury.

2. He thinks it is a great matter to forgive till seven times; he means not *seven times a day*, as Christ said (^{<274>}Luke 17:4), but seven times in his life; supposing that if a man had any way abused him seven times, though he were ever so desirous to be reconciled, he might then abandon his society, and have no more to do with him. Perhaps Peter had an eye to ^{<246>}Proverbs 24:16. *A just man falleth seven times*; or to the mention of *three transgressions*, and *four*, which God would no more pass by, ^{<101>}Amos 2:1. Note, There is a proneness in our corrupt nature to stint ourselves in that which is good, and to be afraid of doing too much in religion, particularly of forgiving too much, though we have so much forgiven us.

II. Christ's direct answer to Peter's question; *I say not unto thee, Until seven times* (he never intended to set up any such bounds), but, *Until seventy times seven*; a certain number for an indefinite one, but a great one. Note, It does not look well for us to keep count of the offences done against us by our brethren. There is something of ill-nature in scoring up the injuries we forgive, as if we would allow ourselves to be revenged when the measure is full. God keeps an account (^{<524>}Deuteronomy 32:34), because he is the Judge, and vengeance is his; but we must not, lest we be found stepping into his throne. It is necessary to the preservation of peace, both within and without, to pass by injuries, without reckoning how often; to forgive, and forget. God multiplies his pardons, and so should we, ^{<373>}Psalms 77:38, 40. It intimates that we should make it our constant practice to forgive injuries, and should accustom ourselves to it till it becomes habitual.

III. A further discourse of our Saviour's, by way of parable, to show the necessity of forgiving the injuries that are done to us. Parables are of use, not only for the pressing of Christian duties; for they make and leave an impression. The parable is a comment upon the fifth petition of the Lord's

prayer, *Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us*. Those, and those only, may expect to be forgiven of God, who forgive their brethren. The parable represents the *kingdom of heaven*, that is, the church, and the administration of the gospel dispensation in it. The church is God's family, it is his court; there he dwells, there he rules. God is our master; his servants we are, at least in profession and obligation. In general, the parable intimates how much provocation God has from his family on earth, and how untoward his servants are.

There are three things in the parable.

1. The master's wonderful clemency to his servant who was indebted to him; he forgave him ten thousand talents, out of pure compassion to him, v. 23-27. Where observe,

(1.) Every sin we commit is a debt to God; not like a debt to an equal, contracted by buying or borrowing, but to a superior; like a debt to a prince when a recognizance is forfeited, or a penalty incurred by a breach of the law or a breach of the peace; like the debt of a servant to his master, by withholding his service, wasting his lord's goods, breaking his indentures, and incurring the penalty. We are all debtors; we owe satisfaction, and are liable to the process of the law.

(2.) There is an account kept of these debts, and we must shortly be reckoned with for them. This king *would take account of his servants*. God now reckons with us by our own consciences; conscience is an auditor for God in the soul, to call us to account, and to account with us. One of the first questions that an awakened Christian asks, is, *How much owest thou unto my Lord?* And unless it be bribed, it will tell the truth, and not write fifty for a hundred. There is another day of reckoning coming, when these accounts will be called over, and either passed or disallowed, and nothing but the blood of Christ will balance the account.

(3.) The debt of sin is a very great debt; and some are more in debt, by reason of sin, than others. When he *began to reckon*, one of the first defaulters appeared to owe *ten thousand talents*. There is no evading the enquiries of divine justice; your sin will be sure to find you out. The debt was ten thousand talents, a vast sum, amounting by computation to one million eight hundred and seventy-five thousand pounds sterling; a king's ransom or a kingdom's subsidy, more likely than a servant's debt; see what our sins are,

[1.] For the heinousness of their nature; they are talents, the greatest denomination that ever was used in the account of money or weight. Every sin is the load of a talent, *a talent of lead, this is wickedness*, ^{<3817>}Zechariah 5:7, 8. The trusts committed to us, as stewards of the grace of God, are each of them a talent (^{<4255>}Matthew 25:15), a talent of gold, and for every one of them buried, much more for every one of them wasted, we are a talent in debt, and this raises the account.

[2.] For the vastness of their number; they are ten thousand, a myriad, more than *the hairs on our head*, ^{<3902>}Psalms 40:12. Who can understand *the number of his errors, or tell how oft he offends?* ^{<3902>}Psalms 19:12.

(4.) The debt of sin is so great, that we are not able to pay it; *He had not to pay*. Sinners are insolvent debtors; the scripture, *which concludes all under sin*, is a statute of bankruptcy against us all. Silver and gold would not pay our debt, ^{<3906>}Psalms 49:6, 7. Sacrifice and offering would not do it; our good works are but God's work in us, and cannot make satisfaction; we are without strength, and cannot help ourselves.

(5.) If God should deal with us in strict justice; we should be condemned as insolvent debtors, and God might exact the debt by glorifying himself in our utter ruin. Justice demands satisfaction, *Currat, lex — Let the sentence of the law be executed*. The servant had contracted this debt by his wastefulness and wilfulness, and therefore might justly be left to lie by it. *His lord commanded him to be sold*, as a bond-slave into the galleys, sold to grind in the prison-house; *his wife and children to be sold, and all that he had, and payment to be made*. See here what every sin deserves; this is *the wages of sin*.

[1.] To be sold. Those that *sell themselves to work wickedness*, must be sold, to make satisfaction. Captives to sin are captives to wrath. He that is sold for a bond-slave is deprived of all his comforts, and has nothing left him but his life, that he may be sensible of his miseries; which is the case of damned sinners.

[2.] Thus he would have *payment to be made*, that is, something done towards it; though it is impossible that the sale of one so worthless should amount to the payment of so great a debt. By the damnation of sinners divine justice will be to eternity in the satisfying, but never satisfied.

(6.) Convinced sinners cannot but humble themselves before God, and pray for mercy. *The servant*, under this charge, and this doom, *fell down* at the feet of his royal master, *and worshipped him*; or, as some copies read it, *he besought him*; his address was very submissive and very importunate; *Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all*, v. 26. The servant knew before that he was so much in debt, and yet was under no concern about it, till he was called to an account. Sinners are commonly careless about the pardon of their sins, till they come under the arrests of some awakening word, some startling providence, or approaching death, and then, *Wherewith shall I come before the Lord?* ^{<306>}Micah 6:6. How easily, how quickly, can God bring the proudest sinner to his feet; Ahab to his sackcloth, Manasseh to his prayers, Pharaoh to his confessions, Judas to his restitution, Simon Magus to his supplication, Belshazzar and Felix to their tremblings. The stoutest heart will fail, when God sets the sins in order before it. This servant doth not deny the debt, nor seek evasions, nor go about to abscond.

But,

[1.] He begs time; *Have patience with me*. Patience and forbearance are a great favour, but it is folly to think that these alone will save us; reprieves are not pardons. Many are borne with, who are not thereby *brought to repentance* (^{<304>}Romans 2:4), and then their being borne with does them no kindness.

[2.] He promises payment; *Have patience awhile, and I will pay thee all*. Note, It is the folly of many who are under convictions of sin, to imagine that they can make God satisfaction for the wrong they have done him; as those who, like a compounding bankrupt, would discharge the debt, by giving their *first-born for their transgressions* (^{<307>}Micah 6:7), who *go about to establish their own righteousness*, ^{<308>}Romans 10:3. He that *had nothing to pay* with (v. 25) fancied he could pay *all*. See how close pride sticks, even to awakened sinners; they are convinced, but not humbled.

(7.) The God of infinite mercy is very ready, out of pure compassion, to forgive the sins of those that humble themselves before him (v. 27); *The lord of that servant*, when he might justly have ruined him, mercifully released him; and, since he could not be satisfied by the payment of the debt, he would be glorified by the pardon of it. The servant's prayer was, *Have patience with me*; the master's grant is a discharge in full. Note,

[1.] The pardon of sin is owing to the mercy of God, to his tender mercy (^{<K17>}Luke 1:77, 78); *He was moved with compassion*. God's reasons of mercy are fetched from within himself; he has mercy *because he will have mercy*. God looked with pity on mankind in general, because miserable, and sent his Son to be a Surety for them; he looks with pity on particular penitents, because sensible of their misery (their hearts broken and contrite), and accepts them in the Beloved.

[2.] There is forgiveness with God for the greatest sins, if they be repented of. Though the debt was vastly great, he *forgave it all*, v. 32. Though our sins be very numerous and very heinous, yet, upon gospel terms, they may be pardoned.

[3.] The forgiving of the debt is the loosing of the debtor; *He loosed him*. The obligation is cancelled, the judgment vacated; we never walk at liberty till our sins are forgiven. But observe, Though he discharged him from the penalty as a debtor, he did not discharge him from his duty as a servant. The pardon of sin doth not slacken, but strengthen, our obligations to obedience; and we must reckon it a favour that God is pleased to continue such wasteful servants as we have been in such a gainful service as his is, and should therefore *deliver us, that we might serve him*, ^{<K17>}Luke 1:74. *I am thy servant, for thou hast loosed my bonds*.

2. The servant's unreasonable severity toward his fellow-servant, notwithstanding his lord's clemency toward him, v. 28-30. This represents the sin of those who, though they are not unjust in demanding that which is not their own, yet are rigorous and unmerciful in demanding that which is their own, to the utmost of right, which sometimes proves a real wrong. *Summum jus summa injuria* — *Push a claim to an extremity, and it becomes a wrong*. To exact satisfaction for debts of injury, which tends neither to reparation nor to the public good, but purely for revenge, though the law may allow it, *in terrorem* — *in order to strike terror*, and for the hardness of men's hearts, yet savours not of a Christian spirit. To sue for money-debts, when the debtor cannot possibly pay them, and so let him perish in prison, argues a greater love of money, and a less love of our neighbour, than we ought to have, ^{<K17>}Nehemiah 5:7.

See here,

(1.) How small the debt was, how very small, compared with the *ten thousand talents* which his lord forgave him; *He owed him a hundred*

pence, about three pounds and half a crown of our money. Note, Offences done to men are nothing to those which are committed against God. Dishonours done to a man like ourselves are but as *peace, motes, gnats*; but dishonours done to God are as *talents, beams, camels*. Not that *therefore* we may make light of wronging our neighbour, for that is also a sin against God; but *therefore* we should make light of our neighbour's wronging us, and not aggravate it, or study revenge. David was unconcerned as the indignities done to him; *I, as a deaf man, heard not*; but laid much to heart the sins committed against God; for them, *rivers of tears ran down his eyes*.

(2.) How severe the demand was; *He laid hands on him, and took him by the throat*. Proud and angry men think, if the matter of their demand be just, that will bear them out, though the manner of it be ever so cruel and unmerciful; but it will not hold. What needed all this violence? The debt might have been demanded without taking the debtor by the throat; without sending for a writ, or setting the bailiff upon him. How lordly is this man's carriage, and yet how base and servile is his spirit! If he had been himself going to prison for his debt to his lord, his occasions would have been so pressing, that he might have had some pretence for going to this extremity in requiring his own; but frequently pride and malice prevail more to make men severe than the most urgent necessity would do.

(3.) How submissive the debtor was; *His fellow servant*, though his equal, yet knowing how much he lay at his mercy, *fell down at his feet*, and humbled himself to him for this trifling debt, as much as he did to his lord for that great debt; for *the borrower is servant to the lender*, ^{PROV} Proverbs 22:7. Note, Those who cannot pay their debts ought to be very respectful to their creditors, and not only give them good words, but do them all the good offices they possibly can: they must not be angry at those who claim their own, nor speak ill of them for it, no, not though they do it in a rigorous manner, but in that case leave it to God to plead their cause. The poor man's request is, *Have patience with me*; he honestly confesses the debt, and puts not his creditor to the charge of proving it, only begs time. Note, Forbearance, though it be no acquittance, is sometimes a piece of needful and laudable charity. As we must not be hard, so we must not be hasty, in our demands, but think how long God bears with us.

(4.) How implacable and furious the creditor was (v. 30); *He would not have patience with him*, would not hearken to his fair promise, but without

mercy cast him into prison. How insolently did he trample upon one as good as himself, that submitted to him! How cruelly did he use one that had done him no harm, and though it would be no advantage to himself! In this, as in a glass, unmerciful creditors may see their own faces, who take pleasure in nothing more than to swallow up and destroy (~~188~~ 2 Samuel 20:19), and glory in having their poor debtors' bones.

(5.) How much concerned the rest of the servants were; *They were very sorry* (v. 31), sorry for the creditor's cruelty, and for the debtor's calamity. Note, The sins and sufferings of our fellow-servants should be a matter of grief and trouble to us. It is sad that any of our brethren should either make themselves beast of prey, by cruelty and barbarity; or be made beasts of slavery, by the inhuman usage of those who have power over them. To see a fellow-servant, either raging like a bear or trampled on like a worm, cannot but occasion great regret to all that have any jealousy for the honour either of their nature or of their religion. See with what eye Solomon looked both upon *the tears of the oppressed*, and *the power of the oppressors*, ~~200~~ Ecclesiastes 4:1.

(6.) How notice of it was brought to the master; *They came, and told their lord*. They durst not reprove their fellow-servant for it, he was so unreasonable and outrageous (*let a bear robbed of her whelps meet a man, rather than such a fool in his folly*); but they went to their lord, and besought him to appear for the oppressed against the oppressor. Note, That which gives us occasion for sorrow, should give us occasion for prayer. Let our complaints both of the wickedness of the wicked and of the afflictions of the afflicted, be brought to God, and left with him.

3. The master's just resentment of the cruelty his servant was guilty of. If the servants took it so ill, much more would the master, whose compassions are infinitely above ours. Now observe here,

(1.) How he reprov'd his servant's cruelty (v. 32, 33); *O thou wicked servant*. Note, Unmercifulness is wickedness, it is great wickedness.

[1.] He upbraids him with the mercy he had found with his master; *I forgive thee all that debt*. Those that will use God's favours, shall never be upbraided with them, but those that abuse them, may expect it, ~~210~~ Matthew 11:20. Consider, It was *all that debt*, that great debt. Note, The greatness of sin magnifies the riches of pardoning mercy: we should think *how much has been forgiven us*, ~~214~~ Luke 7:47.

[2.] He thence shows him the obligation he was under to be merciful to his fellow-servant; *Shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow-servant, even as I had pity on thee?* Note, It is justly expected, that such as have received mercy, should show mercy. *Dat ille veniam facile, cui venia est opus* — *He who needs forgiveness, easily bestows it.* Senec. Agamemn. He shows him, *First*, That he should have been more compassionate to the distress of his fellow servant, because he had himself experienced the same distress. What we have had the feeling of ourselves, we can the better have the fellow feeling of with our brethren. *The Israelites knew the heart of a stranger, for they were strangers;* and this servant should have better known the heart of an arrested debtor, than to have been thus hard upon such a one. *Secondly*, That he should have been more conformable to the example of his master's tenderness, having himself experienced it, so much to his advantage. Note, The comfortable sense of pardoning mercy tends much to the disposing of our hearts to forgive our brethren. It was in the close of the day of atonement that the jubilee trumpet sounded *a release of debts* (¹⁰³⁹Leviticus 25:9); for we must have compassion on our brethren, as God has on us.

(2.) How he revoked his pardon and cancelled the acquittance, so that the judgment against him revived (v. 34); *He delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.* Though the wickedness was very great, his lord laid upon him no other punishment than the payment of his own debt. Note, Those that will not come up to the terms of the gospel need be no more miserable than to be left open to the law, and to let that have its course against them. See how the punishment answers the sin; he that would not forgive shall not be forgiven; *He delivered him to the tormentors;* the utmost he could do to his fellow servant was but to cast him into prison, but he was himself delivered to the tormentors. Note, The power of God's wrath to ruin us, goes far beyond the utmost extent of any creature's strength and wrath. The reproaches and terrors of his own conscience would be his tormentors, for that is a worm that dies not; devils, the executioners of God's wrath, that are sinners' tempters now, will be their tormentors for ever. He was sent to Bridewell till he should pay all. Note, Our debts to God are never compounded; either all is forgiven or all is exacted; glorified saints in heaven are pardoned all, through Christ's complete satisfaction; damned sinners in hell are paying all, that is, are punished for all. The offence done to God by sin is in point of honour, which cannot be compounded for without such a diminution as

the case will by no means admit, and therefore, some way or other, by the sinner or by his surety, it must be satisfied.

Lastly, Here is the application of the whole parable, (v. 35); *So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you*. The title Christ here gives to God was made use of, v. 19, in a comfortable promise; *It shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven*; here it is made use of in a terrible threatening. If God's governing be fatherly, it follows thence, that it is righteous, but it does not therefore follow that it is not rigorous, or that under his government we must not be kept in awe by the fear of the divine wrath. When we pray to God as *our Father in heaven*, we are taught to ask *for the forgiveness of sins, as we forgive our debtors*. Observe here,

1. The duty of forgiving; we must *from our hearts* forgive. Note, We do not forgive our offending brother aright, nor acceptably, if we do not forgive from the heart; for that is it that God looks at. No malice must be harboured there, nor ill will to any person, one or another; no projects of revenge must be hatched there, nor desires of it, as there are in many who outwardly appear peaceable and reconciled. Yet this is not enough; we must from the heart desire and seek the welfare even of those that have offended us.

2. The danger of not forgiving; *So shall your heavenly Father do*.

(1.) This is not intended to teach us that God reverses his pardons to any, but that he denies them to those that are unqualified for them, according to the tenour of the gospel; though having seemed to be humbled, like Ahab, they thought themselves, and others thought them, in a pardoned state, and they made bold with the comfort of it. Intimations enough we have in scripture of the forfeiture of pardons, for caution to the presumptuous; and yet we have security enough of the continuance of them, for comfort to those that are sincere, but timorous; that the one may fear, and the other may hope. Those that do not *forgive their brother's trespasses*, did never truly repent of their own, nor ever truly believe the gospel; and therefore that which is *taken away* is only what *they seemed to have*, ^{<488>}Luke 8:18.

(2.) This is intended to teach us, that *they shall have judgment without mercy, that have showed no mercy*, ^{<523>}James 2:13. It is indispensably necessary to pardon and peace, that we not only *do justly*, but *love mercy*. It is an essential part of that religion which is *pure and*

undefiled before God and the Father, of that wisdom from above, which is gentle, and easy to be entreated. Look how *they* will answer it another day, who, though they bear the Christian name, persist in the most rigorous and unmerciful treatment of their brethren, as if the strictest laws of Christ might be dispensed with for the gratifying of their unbridled passions; and so they curse themselves every time they say the Lord's prayer.