

Lesson 7 | January 14, 2024

Community in the Kingdom

Study Text: Matthew 18:1–35

Central Truth: Church fellowship is Kingdom fellowship.

Key Verse: Matthew 18:15

If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother (KJV).

“If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back” (NLT).

Learning Objectives:

- Students will understand Jesus’ definition of greatness.
- Students will practice biblical principles when the need for discipline in the church arises.
- Students will forgive those who offend them and embrace unity.

Introducing the Study

Say: In the classic television program, *Gilligan’s Island*, seven people were shipwrecked and stranded on a deserted island. The individuals came from various segments of society, and the show depicted their struggles to live and work together so they could survive. The group needed to swiftly deal with any problems that arose to keep peace and prevent disaster.

Opening Activity—Communities

Ask: What communities are you part of? Examples include family, workplace, church, friend group, or sports team. Then ask: What factors make these communities work well or poorly together?

Say: By using the term *kingdom*, Jesus was describing His followers as a community. A kingdom is made up of different kinds of people working together to serve one sovereign. Likewise, the Christian life is not a solo activity. As we serve God together, we enjoy the benefits and encounter the challenges of living in community. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

In today’s lesson, we will consider the community aspects of the kingdom of God. There are tensions in any community, and even with God’s grace, people come to the Kingdom with issues. Some seek to be in control. Others refuse to submit to the standards of the Kingdom. Sometimes the conflict goes beyond hurt feelings and involves physical or financial damage. However, local Christian communities must learn to use God’s wisdom to resolve issues before they thwart their Kingdom impact.

Part 1—Greatness in the Kingdom

Be Humble

Matthew 18:1–5

Say: Sometimes a person asks a question without realizing its significance. This was the case when the disciples asked Jesus who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. They may have been asking about their ranking as disciples or their importance compared to His other followers. But instead of praising those who had worked great miracles or made great sacrifices, Jesus explained that the greatest in the Kingdom were those with humble, childlike faith. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jesus' disciples often misunderstood the values of the Kingdom, and He patiently worked to correct them. It is unclear what their motivation could have been for asking, "Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" (Matthew 18:1, NLT). The Greek term translated "greatest" indicates rank or power, and by this point, the disciples had heard enough of Jesus' teaching to know that worldly power has no value in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus intentionally reached out to those who were considered unimportant by society's standards. The disciples must have also seen how Jesus regarded people who promoted themselves and valued status and rank. Yet it appears the disciples had missed the point. Their prideful question revealed they were thinking more like Pharisees than Kingdom citizens. Jesus ignored their request for ranking and chose to address the heart of the matter instead.

Using a readily available example, Jesus called a little child to His side. The fact a child was close by at the time tells us that women and children were among Jesus' followers—another indication that He cared for those whom society deemed as outcast or of little importance. Jesus explained, "Unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven" (verse 3, NLT). Children often exemplify faith, honesty, and humility—all of which are required for the Kingdom.

Jesus added, "Anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven" (verse 4, NLT). Humility is the foundation on which other spiritual virtues are built and reflects a sense of dependence on God.

Discuss

? In what ways do we sometimes miss the difference between what is valued in the world and what is valued in the kingdom of God?

? How have you witnessed childlike faith in someone else's life?

Seek the Lost

Matthew 18:6–14

Say: God is concerned with the salvation of every person—not just the people we like—and He notices when His children are wounded. Jesus had strong words for people who

tempt others to sin or stand in the way of anyone coming to Him. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jesus issued a severe warning against causing His “little ones” to stumble (Matthew 18:6). He was referring not just to children, but to everyone who believes in Him. Anyone who hinders the faith of a humble follower of Jesus will face severe punishment. In fact, Jesus said such a person would be better off having a millstone placed around their neck and being cast into the sea. The crowd listening to Jesus would have been familiar with the Syrian, Greek, and Egyptian practice of capital punishment by drowning, although the Jews rarely practiced it themselves. Jesus’ point was clear: Leading others into sin has serious consequences. Instead, our respectful treatment of each other should reflect the value God places on every person.

Although believers must be careful not to tempt others, we will each face inevitable temptations because of our own physical and mental desires. Jesus uses strong imagery when He says it would be better to cut off a hand or foot or gouge out an eye than to be subject to the sin they cause (verses 8–9). Jesus was not advocating self-harm; instead, He was using hyperbole (or exaggeration) to make a point. He wanted His listeners to understand the extreme danger of sin.

Resource Packet Item 1: Hyperbole of Jesus

Distribute the worksheet describing Jesus’ use of hyperbole in His teaching. Ask students to complete it in class or at home.

Jesus next tells the Parable of the Lost Sheep, a more complete version of which appears in Luke 15:3–7. Like sheep, the little ones Jesus described need to be with the flock where they can be cared for and continue to grow. If one sheep wanders beyond the flock or even chooses to run away, a good shepherd will leave his or her belongings and seek out the lost one. The shepherd in the story is our example. Jesus is teaching His followers to pursue those who wander from the faith. His parable doesn’t belittle the ninety-nine who remained faithful, but elevates the importance of every individual in the kingdom of heaven. It is not the Father’s will for anyone to be lost. He delights when people return to Him. The apostle Peter, who probably heard this parable from Jesus himself, later echoed His words by describing the Father as not being “willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9, KJV).

Discuss

- ? In what ways do believers sometimes hinder other people’s faith?
- ? What steps can Christians take to show everyone is valuable to God?

Part 2—Corrective Discipline in the Church

Address Conflict

Matthew 18:15–17

Say: President Ronald Reagan once said, “Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to cope with conflict by peaceful means.”¹ Any time people form a community, conflict is inevitable. Jesus knew there would be conflict within the family of God, so He detailed a plan for resolving it in a way that benefits each individual and maintains unity and peace in the local church. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jesus describes a four-step method for resolving church conflict. (1) If one believer sins against another, the offended person should go privately to the offender and “tell him his fault” (Matthew 18:15, KJV). This gives the offender an opportunity to repent and restore the relationship. (2) If the offending party refuses to listen and to pursue reconciliation, then the offended party should take one or two others along with them and repeat the process (verse 16). (3) If the individual still refuses to repent and be reconciled, the situation should be brought before the church (verse 17). (4) If the person who has sinned still refuses to respond, he or she should be treated like an unbeliever. If believers follow these steps, the church experiences unity and the Kingdom will expand. If the instructions are ignored, the church will be unhealthy and its mission will be hindered.

Discretion is a key ingredient when following these steps. Most situations can be successfully resolved using just the first step, keeping the issue between the two people who are directly involved. In this way, the little ones Jesus refers to can be gently disciplined and learn to participate in the church community in a healthy, meaningful way. People who make minor errors in judgment as they are growing spiritually should be treated with grace. Sometimes these offenses may not even need to be pointed out. As Proverbs 19:11 says, “Sensible people . . . earn respect by overlooking wrongs” (NLT). And 1 Corinthians 13:5 (TLB) says, “[Love] does not hold grudges and will hardly notice when others do it wrong.”

Resource Packet Item 2: A Christian Response to Wrongdoing

Distribute the worksheet and divide the class into small groups to discuss the process for restoring Christian fellowship and to answer the questions provided. Ask representatives from each group to share their insights with the class.

Discuss

- ? Why do you think Jesus placed a high value on conflict resolution?
- ? If the process Jesus provided for dealing with conflict has been followed without a successful resolution, what is the redemptive value of removing an unrepentant person from the church?

Church Unity

Matthew 18:18–20

1. Ronald Reagan, “Commencement Address” (Eureka College, Eureka, IL, May 9, 1982), www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/reagan-quotes-speeches/commencement-address-eureka-college/.

Say: At this point in His teaching, Jesus' language shifted to indicate He was now directly addressing the twelve disciples. Jesus had already given Peter the power to bind and loosen (Matthew 16:19), and that authority was now extended to all of the apostles, who functioned as the Church (or "called out ones") at that time. Eventually this authority would be passed to the Church at large (although it functions differently from the way some have taught and believed). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jesus continued His teaching about church discipline by stating, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (verse 18, KJV). When a local church recognizes the one who sinned has listened and repented, the church acknowledges and acts, because their brother or sister has already been loosed or set free in heaven. However, if the person refuses to repent, the church has the authority to declare and act on the fact the sinful one has already been bound in heaven and must be considered as outside the body of Christ.

In verse 19, Jesus extended the authority of believers to the issue of prayer. Within the context of His teaching on church discipline, Jesus was emphasizing such matters must be covered in prayer and that prayers offered by His followers would be answered. The requirement in this verse was that the believers be unified, while in John 14:13, Jesus specified that the requests be made "in my name . . . so that the Son can bring glory to the Father" (NLT). Jesus was not providing a formula or blanket statement that guaranteed self-centered requests would be granted. Rather, He was explaining the limitless power of prayer offered by unified believers focused on the Kingdom.

Jesus concluded this portion of His message with a promise that He would be present when "two or three gather together as my followers" (Matthew 18:20, NLT). Not only did this indicate His deity—only God is omnipresent—but it also demonstrated the value of believers regularly gathering in His name. Anytime Jesus' followers unite to worship and serve Him, together they become a temple where the Holy Spirit dwells (1 Corinthians 3:16).

Discuss

? In what ways have you heard Matthew 18:18–20 used out of context?

? How have you seen the power of a unified church impact their world?

Part 3—Forgiveness in the Kingdom

The Mercy of God Displayed

Matthew 18:21–28

Say: After Jesus' discussion of conflict resolution and corrective discipline, Peter asked about the limits of forgiveness. Jesus responded with another parable describing the way radical forgiveness reflects the heart of God. Before we can freely forgive others as God requires, we must recognize how freely He has forgiven us. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Peter asked a logical follow-up question to Jesus' teaching about correction and reconciliation. "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" (Matthew 18:21, NLT). The Pharisees taught that people should only be required to forgive someone three times, so Peter was being generous by offering sevenfold forgiveness. However, Jesus was far more generous. His figure of speech—"seventy times seven" (verse 22, NLT)—implies there is no limit to the number of times we should forgive fellow believers. If we expect the Father to exercise unlimited forgiveness toward us, how could we offer anything less to others?

The setting of Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor was a royal court to which a king would call his subjects to account for what they had borrowed from him. One individual owed the king ten thousand talents—equivalent to 340 tons of silver, worth millions of dollars today. The man would never have been able to repay such an enormous debt. When the king realized he would never get full payment, he decided to cut his losses by selling the debtor, his family, and all his possessions. This was well within his rights as king.

Hearing his sentence, the debtor fell before the king and desperately begged him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all" (verse 26, KJV). This was a promise everyone in the room knew he couldn't keep, even if he worked toward it for the rest of his life.

The king seemed to dismiss the man's promise, instead showing mercy in three ways: setting him free, forgiving the debt in full, and returning him to his place of responsibility. Essentially, the king restored his life and his hope. One would think such an act of mercy would cause the debtor to learn his lesson and serve the king with loyalty and gratitude.

Resource Packet Item 3: Forgiveness Isn't Easy!

Distribute the case study and ask someone to read it aloud. Then discuss the questions together.

Discuss

? If you were one of the followers in the crowd who heard Jesus tell this parable, how would you have felt at this point in the story?

? How has God restored your life and your hope? How can you use that testimony to reach others?

The Effects of Unforgiveness

Matthew 18:29–35

Say: When someone hurts us, we are often tempted to harden our hearts or even seek retribution, forgetting the magnitude of God's forgiveness and grace toward us.

Unwillingness to forgive demonstrates selfishness and a rebellious attitude, and it carries severe spiritual consequences. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

In the next scene in Jesus' parable, the forgiven debtor searched out another servant who owed him one hundred denarii—equivalent to one hundred days' wages, worth a few thousand dollars today. Although the debt was a fraction of what had been canceled for him, the forgiven man grabbed the other servant by the throat and "demanded instant payment" (Matthew 18:28, NLT).

The second servant made the same request the first servant had made: "Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all" (verse 29, KJV). Yet the forgiven man refused to extend the same mercy he had so willingly received from the king. Instead, "he had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full" (verse 30, NLT). The other servants noticed his hypocrisy and reported the event to the king, who retracted his mercy. The once-forgiven servant was sent to prison to be tortured until the debt was paid in full. No doubt, it was a lifetime sentence.

Jesus concluded the parable with a stern warning to His followers—both then and now. We have been forgiven an insurmountable debt of sin; we must extend the same mercy to others. If we withhold forgiveness, Jesus says we will suffer the same punishment as the unforgiving debtor in His parable. Put simply, "if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins" (6:15, NLT).

Discuss

- ? Why do you think Jesus taught about forgiveness so intently?
- ? What does a Christian's unwillingness to forgive reveal about his or her heart?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Church fellowship is Kingdom fellowship. Believers must live by Kingdom principles in order to thrive in community. Humility is one of God's requirements for His children. Instead of seeking positions of honor, we are to submit ourselves to and willingly serve the King. When others inevitably violate Kingdom standards, we must resist the temptation to stir up strife, choosing instead to use the process Jesus described to maintain unity. Those who have caused hurt should seek forgiveness. Those who have been hurt should show mercy. This kind of community life will increase our effectiveness, allowing us to reach new people and bring them into the Kingdom.

Living It Out Ministry in Action

- Evaluate your desire for power and position in the local church and resolve to show humility.
- Avoid gossip and follow the process of biblical church discipline when someone in the fellowship violates Kingdom principles.
- Consider those close to you who have hurt you and choose to forgive them, just as God has forgiven you.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Convocations for God's People.

Leviticus 23:1–8

Tuesday:

God's People Celebrating.

Esther 9:20–28

Wednesday:

Worship in the Great Congregation.

Psalms 22:22–28

Thursday:

Laborers Together with God.

1 Corinthians 3:1–9

Friday:

Share Burdens and Do Good.

Galatians 6:1–10

Saturday:

Rules for Right Living.

Ephesians 4:25–32