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### **Ezekiel chapter 33**

**7**“So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. **8**If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. **9**But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

### **Psalms chapter 32** **English Standard Version**

**1**A Maskil of David. Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. **2**Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. **3**For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. **4**For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah **5**I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah **6**Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. **7**You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah

**What does Psalm chapter 32 mean?** When David committed sin with Bathsheba, then sinned further trying to cover up his crimes, God brought intense misery into his life. It was not until Nathan, a prophet, rebuked David that he finally admitted his guilt before the Lord and found forgiveness (2 Samuel 11 – 12). This psalm corresponds to Psalm 51, which was David's initial response to Nathan's righteous accusation. In Psalm 32, David reflects on the blessing of divine forgiveness. That self-examination is likely part of the meaning of the Hebrew term *Maskiyi*, likely referring to a specific type of musical arrangement.

The psalm begins with David expressing the relief which comes with being forgiven of sin. This can only come when a person confesses to God and accepts that their actions were wrong. Resisting that admission cost David intense emotional and physical distress. God's conviction is unpleasant, but it's part of His mercy (Hebrews 12:6). Forcing a person to confront their own sin leads to repentance, restoration, and growth (1 John 1:8–10). When there is no admission of sin, that relationship remains strained (Psalm 32:1–4).

Confession before God leads to relief. Those who sincerely seek God (John 3:36) can anticipate being forgiven when they acknowledge sin and repent. David encourages others to do the same as he has done (Psalm 32:5–7).

The advice offered next is subject to some level of debate. Interpreters disagree as to whether verses 8 and 9 are "spoken" from the perspective of David, or as God. Neither option changes the truth, meaning, or application of the verses. True wisdom starts with an acknowledgement of God's truth (Proverbs 1:7). Reacting negatively to good counsel is foolish and leads to even more suffering. Those who trust in God's knowledge are not free from all troubles (John 16:33), but they can be assured of His loving care amid those circumstances (Psalm 32:8–9).

The psalm concludes with an encouragement for praise. Compared to those who stubbornly refuse to admit their sin, humble and godly people have every reason to rejoice in God. Receiving forgiveness of sin not only results in an immediate restoration of our relationship with God, but it also gives reasons for us to celebrate (Psalm 32:10–11).

### **Psalm 32:1**

#### **ESV**

A Maskil of David. Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

**What does Psalm 32:1 mean?** David calls himself (Psalm 32:3) "blessed." In Psalm 1:1 the word "blessed" describes the obedient person, whereas here it describes the disobedient person who receives forgiveness. Many commentators associate this psalm with David's sins of adultery, coverup, and murder as recorded in 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12. This would also connect to Psalm 51, which was inspired by David's confrontation with the prophet Nathan.

David refers to his sin as a "transgression," literally meaning "crossing the line." The term is also used in reference to things like property; a related word is "trespass." God set clear lines, commanding, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13) and also, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). David also identifies transgression as "sin," often summarized as "missing the mark." God set the mark as righteousness, but David fell far short when he committed adultery and murder.

In Old Testament times atonement refers to the covering of sin. In New Testament times, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross did not simply cover sin, it removed it entirely. Colossians 2:14 refers to Christ's setting the believer's sin aside, "nailing it to the cross."

The Hebrew term *Maskiy* is not clearly understood. It most likely refers to a particular type of song. Many passages labeled with this word are self-reflective, such as Psalms 32, 52, and 89.

## Psalm 32:2

### ESV

Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

**What does Psalm 32:2 mean?** In this verse David writes again (Psalms 32:1) about the blessedness of the person whom God has forgiven. He most likely is thinking of his own experience (Psalm 32:3) with deep moral failure (2 Samuel 11 – 12). David resisted admitting his own guilt and suffered the consequences.

The word iniquity means something twisted or warped, or to a path which deviates from the intended course. Sinning reveals a twisted heart and mind (Jeremiah 17:9). Instead of hating sin and resisting temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13), the sinful heart and mind are warped. It sees sin as desirable instead of destructive. But the repentant believer (John 3:16–18) receives full pardon for his sin (John 3:36). That full pardon requires an admission of guilt, however—to

stubbornly ignore our own sin is to leave our relationship with God strained (1 John 1:8–10).

According to this verse, the Lord does not count moral errors against the believer who honestly and sincerely confesses them. This statement reminds us the believer is justified: standing before God just as if the sin had never occurred at all. Romans 3:24 affirms that believers "are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Ephesians 1:6–7 attributes the blessings of forgiveness and acceptance to redemption which only comes through the blood of Christ. David experienced forgiveness when he stopped being deceitful (Psalm 51:3–4).

### **Psalm 32:3**

#### **ESV**

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

**What does Psalm 32:3 mean?** David tried to keep his sin of adultery secret (2 Samuel 11:2–5). After learning Bathsheba was pregnant, he brought Uriah, her husband and a soldier, home from the battle zone. David assumed she and her husband would have intercourse and everyone would assume that the husband was the father of the unborn child. But the plan didn't work (2 Samuel 11:6–13). Later, David gave orders to move Uriah to the frontline, arranging for him to be killed in battle (1 Samuel 11:14–15). He then took Bathsheba as his own wife.

For some time after, David continued to deny and ignore his sin, but his failure to repent and confess caused him physical distress. In ancient Hebrew thinking, the bones were the most essential essence of a person's physical body. For the bones to "waste away" implied intense sickness. The Lord was chastening him. Sin has consequences. In David's case, it brought emotional and physical pain. Although not all sickness is the result of sinning, a believer may become weak if he refuses to repent. Paul wrote that some Corinthians were weak and sickly because they partook of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner (1 Corinthians 11:27–30).

It was not until Nathan, a prophet, directly confronted David that he finally broke down and repented (2 Samuel 12:1–15). This inspired David to write Psalm 51.

**Psalm 32:4****ESV**

For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

**What does Psalm 32:4 mean?** Believers who sin experience "conviction:" God's spiritual reminder, associated with guilt, which makes a person aware of their own wrongdoing (John 16:8). Those who have placed their faith in Christ (John 3:36) can admit their sin and repent (1 John 1:8–10), being assured that in Christ they have complete forgiveness. Their fellowship with God can be restored. Until then, God's discipline can come in many forms, including the physical and emotional burdens of conviction (Revelation 3:19).

God's hand weighed heavily on David, because of his grievous sin (2 Samuel 11 – 12). Just as scorching heat and sunlight can shrivel a plant, David's physical stamina vanished. Instead of being full of energy and physical prowess (Psalm 144:1), David felt like a withered old man. God was convicting David of his sin, but David refused to repent. According to Psalm 51:12 he lost the joy of his salvation.

Today, when a believer sins, the Holy Spirit convicts with the purpose of inspiring repentance and confession. Fortunately, our God is a pardoning God. Micah 7:18 assures us He pardons iniquity and passes over transgression. First John 1:9 encourages believers to confess their sins, because God is "faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

**Psalm 32:5****ESV**

I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah

**What does Psalm 32:5 mean?** The Lord sent the prophet Nathan to David to expose his sins and bring about confession and forgiveness (2 Samuel 12). David responded by confessing his sin, and subsequently the Lord forgave him (2 Samuel 12:13; Psalm 51:1). Here, David correctly identifies his sins as "transgressions." This is a term which literally means to "cross lines" and is related to concepts such as "trespassing." He had purposely breached boundaries the Lord had set regarding sins such as adultery and murder (Exodus 20:13–14).

It is important to note that David confessed his transgressions to God—whether he admitted them to other people was not a concern (1 John 1:8–10). God alone can forgive sin. When Jesus healed a paralyzed man, He also forgave the man's sins. The scribes and Pharisees strongly objected to the pronounced forgiveness. They asked, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Luke 5:21). Of course, Jesus was God incarnate with the power not only to heal the paralyzed man but also to forgive him. Anyone who seeks forgiveness must call on the one who can forgive sin (John 3:36).

### Psalm 32:6

#### ESV

Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him.

**What does Psalm 32:6 mean?** No one should procrastinate about calling on the name of the Lord. In this context, "calling" on Him means to seek God in sincerity and prayer, admitting our sin and repenting (2 Corinthians 7:9–10; Romans 10:13). Proverbs 27:1 warns against thinking tomorrow is secure. "Do not boast about tomorrow," this verse instructs, adding, "for you do not know what a day may bring." A person who thinks they can wait to submit to God until later is playing a dangerous, foolish game (Luke 12:19–20).

That sense of urgency is implied when David urges the godly pray to the Lord when He "may be found." Flooding is a common metaphor for great troubles or unexpected catastrophes. Although the Lord doesn't spare believers from every earthly trouble (John 16:33), He works everything for their good (Romans 8:28–30). Trials are not meant to crush believers, but to reveal the genuineness of their faith (1 Peter 1:6–7). Job encountered many tragedies and hardships; these were catastrophic, but not insurmountable or without purpose. They led to a revelation of God's power and glory and to a double blessing for Job (Job 42:10–17).

### Psalm 32:7

#### ESV

You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah

**What does Psalm 32:7 mean?** The Lord adds protection to forgiveness. In this context, this refers to God keeping His people from the distress of conviction. Unconfessed sin creates discomfort in the spirit of a believer (Revelation 3:19; Hebrews 12:6; Psalm 32:1–4). David tried to hide his sins from the Lord; doing so led to great distress. However, when he confessed his sins and received forgiveness (1 John 1:8–10), he found a secure relationship with God (Psalm 51:1).

Using military imagery, David regarded himself as surrounded by the enemy but delivered by the Lord. The deliverance brought shouts of deliverance. Paul perceived the Christian life as under attack from a sinister enemy, the Devil. However, he recognized that victory comes from employing spiritual weapons and prayer. Paul assured the Christians at Rome that believers are on the winning team! He exulted: "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37).

## Romans chapter 13

### English Standard Version

**1**Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. **2**Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. **3**For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, **4**for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. **5**Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. **6**For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. **7**Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed. **8**Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. **9**For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." **10**Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

## Romans 13:1

### ESV

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

**What does Romans 13:1 mean?** In Romans 12, Paul described what it means to be a living-sacrifice Christian. In short, it mostly has to do with setting ourselves aside to serve the Lord, each other, and even our enemies in love.

Now Paul turns to the issue of how Christians who are saved by God's grace should interact with our present governments. He describes the biblical doctrine of submission to human authorities, something Peter also teaches (1 Peter 2:13–17). Again, those in Christ are called to set themselves aside and to trust God to provide what is needed through those in authority, whether good or evil.

Paul is clear that this applies to every person. He calls for us to be in submission to government authorities, though he does not say that we must *obey* them in all cases. Paul and the other apostles refused to obey commands from people in authority to stop preaching the gospel, for instance (Acts 5:27–29). They did, however, submit to those in authority in all matters that were not in contradiction to the will of God.

Why should we submit? Paul is clear: Every authority in the world was established by God. This would include, of course, good leaders, evil leaders, and everyone in-between. Paul's instruction here, then, is not about blind nationalism or absolute obedience to men. Rather, it is a recognition that human government—in general—is a legitimate authority, and that Christians cannot use their faith as an excuse for civil lawlessness. God puts all leaders in place for the specific reasons Paul will describe in the following verses.

We should remember that Paul is writing this letter to Christians in Rome. The government of Rome ruled much of the known world at the time. It was led by the Emperor Nero from AD 54–68. Nero is famous for his cruel and unfair treatment of Christians, among other groups. We must not assume that Paul is writing these words lightly. He was aware of the implications of his teaching.

### Context Summary

Romans 13:1–7 describes the responsibility for Christians to live in submission to the human authorities in government. The reason given is that every

government leader has ultimately been established by God for His own purposes. \_\_{Generally speaking, human government serves to rein in and punish those who do evil. Governments do this on God's behalf.}\_\_ Christians must pay their taxes to support this work God is doing. In addition, those in Christ owe respect and honor to the authorities that God has put in place. Other Scriptures, such as Acts 5:27–29, distinguish between "submission" and "obedience."

## **Romans 13:2**

### **ESV**

Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

**What does Romans 13:2 mean?** Paul has spelled out the Christian doctrine of submission to human authorities, including government authorities. The bottom line is that those in Christ should understand every authority to have been placed in his or her position by God Himself and for God's purposes. Christ's kingdom may not be of this world (John 18:36), but that does not mean believers have license to disobey earthly authority for any reason (1 Peter 2:13–17). Only when commanded by government to disobey God are Christians obligated to disobey the government, instead, and accept the consequences (Acts 5:27–29).

Paul now begins to put together the pieces of what that means. Anyone who resists someone in authority is, in truth, resisting God's work. In general terms, human government is one of the ways God restrains the influence of evil in the world (2 Thessalonians 2:7). Resistance to that system will result in judgment. It's not clear if Paul has in mind judgment from the government or judgment from God. Both are possible.

Paul left little room for Christians to tell themselves that they were free to resist human authorities because their first loyalty was to the kingdom of heaven. Those loyal to Christ are specifically instructed to be submissive to human government. Generally, then, civil disobedience is only allowed when a Christian is being asked to sin, disobey God, or act in some ungodly way.

## Romans 13:3

### ESV

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval,

**What does Romans 13:3 mean?** Paul has described the Christian doctrine of submission to human authorities. Since every human leader is established by God, Christians must not resist God's work by resisting those authorities. These verses give important context for understanding his recent comments.

Paul begins to describe why God establishes human authorities in the first place. The God-given role of governmental authorities is to keep order. This is true whether those authorities are good people or not. Broadly speaking, human government is one of the ways God restrains the influence of evil in the world (2 Thessalonians 2:7). Christians cannot embrace anarchy—rejection of all forms of government—or disobey authority simply because they disagree.

Paul describes the way to live without fear of someone in authority: Do good. Authorities are no threat to those who do what is right. In fact, they will approve of you. This teaching is certainly sound to the extent that those in authority are fair-minded and operate out of sense of integrity. Of course, our instinct is to recall moments in history where those in authority were most definitely a terror to people who were doing good, or at least not doing anything wrong, including Paul himself! The fact that Paul, personally, experienced ungodly government should give us pause before we dismiss his command as unrealistic.

Paul's point here is simply the general case. He's not interested—in this passage—in addressing exceptions. Paul's first concern is that Christians be known in their communities as people in submission to authority; those who do what is good. Believers ought not have a reputation as law-breakers living in needless conflict and rebellion against authority.

Of course, Jesus and nearly all the apostles, including Paul, were killed by those in authority over them, often for a refusal to obey laws that were in conflict with God's commands to them (Acts 5:27–29). This is a key subtlety in Paul's teaching: to "submit" does not necessarily mean to "obey." None of the apostles were killed for breaking laws merely for the sake of defying authority; they were "submissive" to the government when they refused to follow ungodly laws.

**Romans 13:4****ESV**

for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

**What does Romans 13:4 mean?** This verse concludes a sentence begun in the previous verse. Paul has written that, by doing good in our communities, we can live without fear of those in authority. It is the God-given role of those in authority to keep order in the community; this is part of how God limits the influence of evil in the world (2 Thessalonians 2:7). Those in authority will most often give their approval to people who are contributing to that order by making things better.

Now Paul describes people in positions of government authority as God's servants for our good. Of course, not everyone in those positions would agree with that statement. They may not see themselves as servants of God. God doesn't care, though. He put them where they are for His own purposes. In fact, Paul boldly states that God's uses men and women in positions of government authority to execute His own wrath on wrongdoers. Whether knowingly or not, those in authority are avengers for God, used by Him to punish criminals. If we as Christians choose to do what is wrong, sinful actions that break the law, we should be afraid of those in authority, as well.

It should be kept in mind that Paul himself was a lawbreaker; he disobeyed the government. However, Paul followed his own teaching here by being *submissive* to that same government: he eventually paid for his crimes against the state with his life, as did many of the other apostles. Paul does not choose this passage to address the need to break the laws of men when they stand against God's direct commands to us (Acts 5:27–29). Instead, Paul makes clear that, in the normal course of life, human authorities instituted by God carry out God's will by punishing people who do what is wrong. Christians, in that sense, should submit to those in authority, doing good in all cases, and obeying all laws that are not a violation of Christian conscience.

**Romans 13:5****ESV**

Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.

**What does Romans 13:5 mean?** This verse is about our ultimate motivation as Christians for submitting to the human authorities in our lives, including those in government. Paul has written in the two previous verses that God uses those in government authority to express His wrath against people who do wrong. The kind of wrong Paul is describing is criminal activity that hurts other people: stealing, murder, etc. This is one way all leaders, even the ungodly, serve God's will: by restraining some kinds of evil on earth (2 Thessalonians 2:7). Even Christians ought to be afraid of government authorities when doing those kinds of wrong things.

Paul writes, though, that such fear of those in authority is not the only reason to obey the law. We should do so for the sake of conscience. By that, Paul means that we should be in submission to human authorities because we know, as Christians, that it is the right thing to do. It is God's will for our lives. In a general sense, it's part of the Christian sense of humility. We are not the ultimate authority, so we ought to be submissive to those in power over us.

It goes without saying that there are exceptions to the idea that government is a force for good. Paul was painfully aware of this himself. He spent much of his life in Roman prisons. He did so without attempting to harm or overthrow his captors—that's submission. However, Paul was not "obedient" to the ungodly parts of Roman law. He refused to stop preaching about Jesus, even when those in authority told him to. He understood that he was responsible to obey God first if it came to a choice between that and obeying human laws (Acts 5:27–29).

Paul chooses not to address that in this passage, however. Truthfully, that is the exception and not the rule. In the case of almost every law and human authority, submission is God's will for His children during our short time on this side of eternity. Submission and obedience are normally the same thing—but they are not *always* the same.

## Romans 13:6

### ESV

For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.

**What does Romans 13:6 mean?** Paul has been teaching the Christian doctrine of being submissive to our human authorities, including and especially

government authorities. Christians are called to do this because we believe that God is the one who has put every human authority in their position. They exist to serve His purposes, including the purpose of punishing people who do bad things (2 Thessalonians 2:7). Context of this and other passages makes it clear that Christians are obligated to disobey government when—and only when—compelled to disobey God (Acts 5:27–29). As a general rule, believers are commanded to cooperate with their government authorities.

Now Paul gets to a specific example of submission to human government: paying taxes. Christians are taxpayers, Paul writes, because those taxes support the work God intends to do through the human authorities He has put in place. Even when those men or women stand against the truths of God, their fundamental role as order-keepers is still part of God's will.

This was a controversial position even among the Jewish leaders of Jesus' and Paul's day. Critics tried to trip Jesus up by asking Him if it was lawful to pay taxes to the Roman ruler, Caesar. Jesus, pointing out that Caesar's picture is on the money, stated flatly that the taxes should be paid (Matthew 22:15–22). In a similar manner, some in the modern day have suggested Christians should not pay taxes if the government is funding evil practices. Jesus and Paul disagree. Both paid taxes to the same government that ultimately killed them and persecuted other Christians, as well. Neither endorsed the option of not paying taxes as a matter of conscience.

Paul's larger point is that we must trust God to provide for us as His children. In the case of this passage, that includes provision through the government authorities He puts in place. God is fully capable of using them for our good no matter who they are or what their intentions.

## **Romans 13:7**

### **ESV**

Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

**What does Romans 13:7 mean?** Paul concludes this section on submitting to government authorities with a broader statement about paying what is owed in every sense of the word. In short, Paul describes Christians as people who pay what is owed in all cases. This includes taxes, as described in the previous verse, revenue—meaning money—as well as respect and honor. While we're

obligated to disobey openly ungodly commands (Acts 5:27–29), Christians are to live lives, in general, of lawful obedience.

Within the context of this section, adding the words *respect* and *honor* to what believers owe government may make Paul's teaching even more difficult. Peter's letters go even further when he instructs that we must honor the emperor (1 Peter 2:13–17). It's important to note the difference between giving respect and honor versus having a high opinion of, or voicing praise for someone. Paul does not command living-sacrifice Christians to have positive thoughts for every authority figure. Nor does he command believers to advocate or defend them when they are wrong. Instead, Paul eliminates the option for us to speak and act in ways that are disrespectful and dishonoring.

As other Scriptures make clear, this also does not mean believers are to be unquestioningly obedient. Beginning with Jesus and Paul and the other apostles, Christianity has a long history of civil disobedience to those in authority. Most famously, Peter and the other apostles continued to preach the gospel when ordered not to. They said, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Most of them paid for that position with their lives: that's "submission" in contrast to "obedience."

Even in those circumstances, though, those martyred believers did not refuse to be respectful or honoring toward those in positions of what they believed to be God-given authority. Paul's larger point is that Christians should never be known as people who defy and disrespect authority, especially in matters not related to obeying God. In addition, he insists that our acts of respect, honor, and submission to human authorities are, in truth, acts of faith in the God who provides for us.

## **Matthew chapter 18**

### **English Standard Version**

**1**At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" **2**And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them **3**and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. **4**Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

**5**"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, **6**but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

**7**“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! **8**And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. **9**And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

**10**“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. **11**

**12**What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? **13**And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. **14**So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

**15**“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. **16**But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. **17**If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. **18**Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. **19**Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. **20**For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

## Matthew 18:1

### ESV

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

**What does Matthew 18:1 mean?** Matthew skips the set-up to the question the disciples ask Jesus in this verse. Mark and Luke reveal that the disciples were disputing with each other about who among them was the greatest (Mark 9:33–34; Luke 9:46). It shouldn't surprise us that the disciples would end up jockeying for position and pecking order among themselves. Not only is that human nature, but rank and honor were significant in the culture of the day.

Perhaps it was apparent to all of them that Peter, James, and John were the preferred disciples. After all, they were selected to go with Jesus to the mountain to witness the transfiguration. Peter often appears to be their de-facto

leader, but he is also the one who is most often called out by Jesus for blunders. In Matthew 20, the mother of James and John will attempt to manipulate Jesus into promising that her two boys will be the greatest in His kingdom, showing that neither she nor the disciples yet understand that Jesus has not come to establish a political kingdom on earth at this time.

Instead of revealing their selfish ambition, Matthew begins the story with a simple question from the disciples: Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? To modern ears, the idea that some are greater than others in heaven's kingdom might seem unimportant. Jesus, though, will give a very specific and surprising answer.

### **Matthew 18:2**

#### **ESV**

And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them

**What does Matthew 18:2 mean?** The disciples have asked Jesus a very revealing question: Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? The very fact that they are asking the question and some of the events to follow show that they do not yet understand that Jesus has not come to set up His kingdom on earth at this time (John 18:36). It also shows that they do not yet understand how different Jesus' kingdom will be from every other kingdom that has ever existed.

Jesus begins to answer their question by calling a little child to come over to Him. Some commentators speculate this scene is unfolding at Peter's house so, perhaps, this is one of his children. Jesus sets the child in the middle of this group of disciples.

Children are the most powerless members of most societies. This was especially true in ancient times. Jewish people loved their children, but children had no rights under the law of Moses. They had no status in a very status-conscious culture. They were completely dependent on those who cared for them to provide everything they needed and to protect them from harm.

The very fact that Jesus focused the attention of this ambitious group of men on a child may have been remarkable. What He will say about children and the kingdom of heaven will be astounding (Matthew 18:3).

**Matthew 18:3****ESV**

and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

**What does Matthew 18:3 mean?** It may be impossible for modern readers to understand how truly shocking Jesus' statement in this and the following verse is. Little children had no status in the very status-conscious culture of the Jewish, Greek, and Roman worlds of this day. Children may be loved and valued and dearly cared for, but they had no say in the choices that impacted their lives. Compared to adults of any age, children were powerless.

The disciples had asked Jesus a question that came from their own disputes about who among them was the greatest. They wanted to know who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus begins by telling them that they need to "turn" to become like children or they would not even enter the kingdom of heaven.

In other words, entrance into heaven's kingdom cannot be gained by defeating all opponents or demonstrating personal accomplishment. Those who would enter must make themselves humble by recognizing that, like little children, they are powerless over the circumstances of their own lives. They are completely dependent on God to provide for them what they need and to protect them from harm. Only with that kind of honest humility and dependence on God can anyone come into His kingdom.

Jesus is not pointing to children as the ideal of maturity. He is not suggesting that they are sinless or innocent or noble, necessarily, only that they are without hope of providing for themselves and making themselves great. They understand that they are dependent. The disciples had not yet reached that level of humility in relationship to faith in Christ and their total dependence on Him to work through them to accomplish what was needed.

**Matthew 18:4****ESV**

Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

**What does Matthew 18:4 mean?** The disciples have asked Jesus a question out of their own ambition for greatness (Matthew 18:1–3). They see themselves as twelve men on the ground floor of an organization that will soon explode into a kingdom. They seem to imagine themselves occupying the most significant positions in this new kingdom Jesus will establish on the earth and it is only a question of which one among them will be the most important. They do not understand yet that Jesus has not come to set up His political kingdom (John 18:36), but to suffer and die for the sins of humanity.

Jesus now offers His first direct answer to their question, and it must have baffled them in the moment. He points to the child He has placed in the midst of their group and says that whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

What does it mean to humble oneself like a child? Jesus is not saying that children are naturally wise, pure, innocent, and mature. We all know better than that. Children are humble in the sense that they recognize they are not in control of their own lives. They are dependent on others to receive everything they need and want. They have no power not granted by the adults in their lives. They have no status in society as a whole. They are, in reality, humble, no matter their attitude on any given day.

The greatest in the kingdom, then, is the one who is most humble, most aware of his or her lack of power, most dependent on God to provide all that is needed.

## **Matthew 18:5**

### **ESV**

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,

**What does Matthew 18:5 mean?** Jesus is answering a question from the disciples with some shocking statements. They have asked who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. He has replied that unless one turns to become like a child, that person will not even enter the kingdom. He has also said that the one who humbles himself like a child will be the greatest in the kingdom.

Now Jesus continues to talk about children, perhaps giving an example of the kind of humility He means. He says that whoever receives a child in His name also receives Him. Most commentators believe Jesus was no longer talking about actual children but was describing His adult followers as such children

because of the child-like faith and humility required to enter the kingdom of heaven.

If so, this statement is similar to what Jesus said in Matthew 10:40-42: "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me...And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward."

### **Matthew 18:6**

#### **ESV**

but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

**What does Matthew 18:6 mean?** Jesus has been describing the child-like faith and humility required to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:1–5). Now He seems to be describing those who believe in Him, including adults, as "little ones."

He warns that a harsh judgment will come on those who cause one of the little ones who believe in Him to sin or to stumble. This would include falling away from faith in and commitment to Christ. It would be better for that person to have a large millstone tied around his neck and to be drowned in the deep part of the sea. Drowning was a form of execution used in the ancient world, but rarely in Israel. Jesus' harsh description of death by drowning includes being strapped to the enormous and heavy millstone pulled by a donkey as it crushes the grain. This would assure no hope of escape.

Jesus has regularly warned about a judgment to come when He returns to earth with His angels, where people will be repaid for what they have done, including their sin (Matthew 16:27). This is the first time, though, that Jesus has mentioned a judgment for those who cause others to sin, including leading those who believe in Him into sin.

Jesus' warning here reveals that believers in Jesus are not perfect and can sin and that the consequences are serious both for them and for those who lead them into that sin. Peter, for instance, will commit the grave sin of denying faith in and relationship to Jesus. This will bring him great sorrow, but he will be restored and go on to be used by God to accomplish powerful things for Christ.

**Matthew 18:7****ESV**

“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!

**What does Matthew 18:7 mean?** Jesus began by stating that His disciples will need to be like little children both to enter the kingdom of heaven and to be great in it. He was describing holding on to a childlike faith and humility instead of relying on one's own goodness, skill, or achievement (Matthew 18:1–6).

Now, He seems to have begun describing His disciples, those who believe in Him, as little children or little ones. From God's perspective, even the most experienced believers are still little children. Jesus has spoken of them with harsh and protective language, warning of judgment for anyone that would cause one of His little ones to fall into sin.

Now Jesus uses one of the familiar words Old Testament prophets often used when describing God's judgment: "Woe." Woe on the world for temptations to sin, those stumbling blocks it puts in the way of believers in Jesus to trip them up into sin. Judgment will come for them.

Jesus adds that such temptations are necessary. He does not mean by this that God is directly causing His little ones to experience temptation to sin. He seems to be saying that temptation to sin is part of living in a world that is full of sin. Facing temptation may be unavoidable for Christians, but those who lead them into sin will face God's painful judgment.

Two other things Jesus is not saying here: He is not saying it is necessary for Christians to *give in* to temptation. Temptation to sin may be a fact of life for believers but giving in to it is always avoidable (1 Corinthians 10:13). Second, Jesus is not saying that believers who sin, who stumble, are lost to Him. They can get up and continue to follow after Him.

**Matthew 18:8****ESV**

And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.

**What does Matthew 18:8 mean?** Jesus has placed "woe" on anyone who would cause those who believe in Him, His little ones, to stumble into sin. God's judgment will come on those who set temptation to sin in the path of Jesus' followers.

Jesus has said that temptations in this world, in this life, are necessary. This simply means that they're natural to the human life (Hebrews 4:15). It does not mean Christians must give into them (1 Corinthians 10:13). In fact, Jesus now uses hyperbole to command His followers to take sin so seriously that they go to extraordinary lengths to avoid giving into temptation.

Jesus says to His little ones that if their hand or foot causes them to sin, they should cut those appendages off and throw them away. By comparison, it would be better to live crippled in this way than to be thrown into the eternal fire of hell. Jesus used similar language when preaching about lust in Matthew 5:27–30.

Again, we must understand that Jesus is not saying that anyone who sins will irrevocably be bound for hell. If He were, all of us would go to hell (Romans 3:23). Those who sin can be restored, as Peter will be after denying Jesus before His crucifixion (Matthew 26:74–75; John 21:15–19). Jesus did not truly want His disciples to maim themselves to avoid sin; He did want them to take their own sin—and anything they might do to cause others to sin—with extreme seriousness. He wanted them to see that sin was a life-and-death issue.

Paul also described the seriousness with which believers should deal with their own sin. He described it as an execution: "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth" (Colossians 3:5–8).

### **Matthew 18:9**

#### **ESV**

And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

**What does Matthew 18:9 mean?** Jesus has pronounced "woe," God's judgment, on those who place temptation in the path of His "little ones," believers in Jesus. He has said temptation is a necessary part of life, but He is

now telling believers to go to great lengths to keep themselves from giving in to temptations to sin (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Does Jesus really want His followers to cut off hands or feet or to tear out their eyes in order to avoid sinning? No. He is using the communication technique of hyperbole to communicate to His disciples the degree of seriousness with which they should deal with sin. Jesus did not want any of them to have a casual attitude to the deadly consequences of sin.

Was Jesus really warning that any believer who sins—ever—will go into the "hell of fire"? Again, we would say no. If He had meant these two things to be taken literally, first-century Christians would have been maimed and blind, and all of us would be destined for hell. Jesus will restore Peter after his sin of denying Christ and, by His death on the cross, will make it possible for all people to be forgiven for all their sin through faith in Him. In fact, Jesus will illustrate in the following verses the great lengths the Father will go to in order not to lose a single one of His little ones who have gone astray (Matthew 18:12–14).

Jesus is showing, though, that sin is the reason for the coming wrath of God. Those not forgiven for sin will face God's judgment in hell. Those who believe in Him must not tolerate giving in to the temptation to sin or, especially, leading anyone else into sinfulness. Jesus does not allow for any casualness about sin or its consequences.

### **Matthew 18:10**

#### **ESV**

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

**What does Matthew 18:10 mean?** Scholars and commentators offer several interpretations for what Jesus might mean in this verse. He seems to be warning the disciples not to despise or disrespect any believers in Jesus. Some Bible teachers believe Jesus is speaking of actual little children, but most agree that Jesus is talking about His little ones, meaning all believers in Jesus, whatever their ages.

Why would the disciples ever despise or disrespect another believer in Jesus? It's hard to know, but Jesus may just be describing the way that human beings often treat each other. Jesus-followers, though, must not despise or be hurtful to each other in the normal ways of humans. Jesus seems to be telling His disciples to elevate the value they place on other believers because of the value

God places on those believers. After all, Jesus says, their angels always see the face of God the Father in heaven.

Over the years, people have pointed to this verse as evidence that every believer has his or her own "guardian angel." This verse does not suggest that, however. For one thing, those angels are in heaven seeing the face of God. They are not on earth protecting the believers. That doesn't mean it could not be true that specific angels or groups of angels are assigned to specific Christians, just that it can't be taken from this verse.

Jesus' point seems to be that these angels are connected in some way to these human believers while also being in the presence of God's glory. As such, every believer is valuable and worthy of respect.

Some Bible scholars offer one other possible reading of this verse. They interpret the word "angels" to mean the spirits of those believers instead of actual angels. In that case, Jesus would be saying that the human believers we see on earth are also looking at the face of God in heaven or will be at some point. In other words, God has valued them so highly that He has already reserved a place in heaven for them. Who are we to disrespect them now?

### **Matthew 18:11**

[ESV](#)

[NIV](#)

[NASB](#)

[CSB](#)

[NLT](#)

[KJV](#)

For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost.

**What does Matthew 18:11 mean?** This verse is not in the earliest manuscripts of the book of Matthew, which translators use to develop modern English Bibles. That's why it is not included in many translations, including the English Standard Version (ESV) or New International Version (NIV). That these words were not originally part of Matthew's writing does not make them *untrue*. Most likely, these

were added at some point to harmonize the account with Luke 19:10, which is included in all translations: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

The sentiment is correct, but modern translators don't believe Matthew wrote those specific words at this point in his own account of Jesus' life.

## **Matthew 18:12**

### **ESV**

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?

**What does Matthew 18:12 mean?** Jesus has just warned His disciples in verse 10 not to despise any of "these little ones," most likely meaning any of the believers in Jesus. Why not disrespect other believers? Because God the Father has decided they are of such great value that they are worthy of sharing in His glory.

Now Jesus begins to illustrate the value His Father, God, places on every single person who believes in Jesus. He will picture the Father as a shepherd with 100 sheep. Jesus asks what a shepherd with that many sheep will do if just one of them goes astray. Won't the shepherd leave behind the 99 to go search for the one?

Historians suggest that 100 would have been about the average size of a flock in Palestine during this era. Given this scenario and value of sheep, the shepherd would leave his flock with other shepherds in the area who were tending their own sheep in order to go and find his own wandering animal. The implication is that God the Father would have the same attitude toward His own "little ones," believers in Jesus, who go astray (Matthew 18:13–14).

## **Matthew 18:13**

### **ESV**

And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.

**What does Matthew 18:13 mean?** Jesus is comparing His Father, God, to a shepherd with 100 sheep. If one of those sheep wandered off away from the flock, the common practice would be for a shepherd to leave the other 99 sheep with another shepherd in order to find the one that had gone astray. Why? Because sheep are valuable, and the shepherd cares for His sheep.

Now Jesus continues that when the shepherd finds the missing sheep, he will be truly excited. He will rejoice more over finding the one missing sheep than the 99 that stayed with the flock. That's just human nature. Jesus is showing that it is also the nature of God to rejoice over restoring one of His own "little ones," believers in Jesus, who have gone astray.

What does it mean for a believer in Jesus to go astray? It seems pretty clear that Jesus is talking about believers who give in to temptation and sin. He has warned His disciples with harsh hyperbole in the previous verse just how seriously they should confront their own sinfulness, but He followed that by warning them not to despise any of the other believers in Jesus, even apparently those who fall into sin. His Father is like a shepherd who goes after a missing sheep and brings it home.

God often compared the people of Israel to sheep in the Old Testament. Jesus came to pay the price for our sinfulness and to make it possible for sinful sheep to be forgiven and be given a place with the Father. Isaiah 53:6 puts it this way, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

### **Matthew 18:14**

#### **ESV**

So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

**What does Matthew 18:14 mean?** Christ seems to be saying, "Don't give up on any of those who believe in me." Why? Because God the Father is like a shepherd who never gives up on a single wandering sheep. He always searches for them and rejoices when they are found and brought back to the flock.

Jesus has warned the disciples not to despise or disrespect any of His "little ones," meaning those who believe in Him. This verse helps explain why. God places enormous value on each one of Jesus' followers. It is His Father's will

that none of them should perish or die, and the Father is able to accomplish His will.

This verse does not mean that none of those who follow Jesus will die physically. Of course, most of Jesus' disciples were killed for continuing to preach the gospel in His name. Even those believers who lived long and natural lives died physically. Instead, we understand that Jesus means His Father's will is for every believer in Jesus to live eternally with Him in heaven, even those who go astray into sin and must be brought back.

### **Matthew 18:15**

#### **ESV**

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

**What does Matthew 18:15 mean?** In the previous verses, Jesus has warned His disciples about the grave seriousness of leading any of the other believers into sinfulness. He has also warned them not to despise or disrespect other believers, even ones who have gone astray. After all, God the Father's will is that none of the believers in Jesus should perish or be eternally separated from Him (Matthew 18:10–14).

But what should the community of believers do if someone does fall into sin? How can they both take sinfulness seriously and attempt to bring the sinner back to faithfulness? Jesus gives a process for doing exactly that.

He begins by describing a scenario in which one among them sins. Some scholars question how the words "against you" should be read in this verse. Some earlier Greek manuscripts don't have those two words, simply saying "If your brother sins." Is Jesus talking about someone who sins only against another believer? Or someone who offends or does something disagreeable? Or is this someone who sins in any obviously and truly clear way? It's reasonable that the same process should be applied in all cases.

If another believer in Jesus sins against us—or if we become aware of the clear and obvious sin of another Jesus-follower—Jesus insists that the first step is always to have a private conversation with the person. This is often the most effective step in helping anyone to recognize and repent from sin. However, it's only likely to work if one approaches that person in childlike love and humility and without despising him or her. The goal is to keep this person as a brother or sister, not to shame or humiliate them.

If the result is not repentance, and we are still convinced of this person's ongoing sin, it is time to carefully bring someone else into the conversation (Matthew 18:16).

### **Matthew 18:16**

#### **ESV**

But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

**What does Matthew 18:16 mean?** This is the second step in a process Jesus taught His disciples for confronting believers who have sinned or are continuing to sin. The beginning of the process involves only the person who is wronged and the one who has sinned. Or, perhaps, it involves the person who has witnessed another person sinning in some specific way. In either case, one person approaches another about the sin. The goal is confession and repentance in order to restore the relationship (Matthew 18:15).

More often than we realize, a simple conversation between two people is all that is needed for someone to admit wrongdoing and to begin to make different choices. Sometimes, though, the sinful person refuses to see their sin. He or she may deny it. They may refuse to stop.

If that is the case, Jesus now describes the next step in the process. The person who initiated the complaint should return, this time with a small group, such as one or two other people. Jesus is confirming here the principle established in the law in Deuteronomy 19:15, "A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established."

There are clear advantages to making this the next step in conflict resolution. The addition of one or two other people still keeps the matter fairly private. The goal remains repentance and restoration, not public shaming. However, adding more witnesses ensures that the issue is not merely about differing opinions or perspectives. Both the accuser and the accused have the opportunity to make their case to a third party. It may even be decided by those new participants that it's the accuser, not the accused, who is in the wrong.

If the additional witnesses agree that the accused is participating in sin, he or she has the opportunity to repent. Otherwise, the witnesses can confirm to the larger body in the next step of the process the refusal to repent (Matthew 18:17).

### **Matthew 18:17**

#### **ESV**

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

**What does Matthew 18:17 mean?** Jesus has been describing a process for confronting another believer who is guilty of sin. It begins with one person, likely someone wronged by the sinful person, approaching him privately about the issue. If they can agree and resolve things—especially if the wrongful person confesses and repents of the sin—then the process stops there. All is made right (Matthew 18:15).

If not, the accuser must recruit one or two other people to return with him or her to the sinful person and try again. Ideally, additional witnesses will objectively establish the truth. This is an opportunity to weed out rivalry or misunderstanding or inconclusive difference of perspective. However, if those new participants agree sin has taken place, this gives the wrongful one another chance to admit the sin, repent, and make things right (Matthew 18:16).

Now Jesus prescribes what must happen if the sinful person continues to refuse repentance and restoration. The accuser and the witnesses must accept the unpleasant task of presenting the situation to the church or the assembly. Again, ideally, those assembled as believers in Jesus will hear the issue and agree with the accused and the witnesses that sin has taken place. If the larger body does not agree wrong has been done, the process would stop here. If they do agree the accused is wrong, he or she is given one last chance to repent and make things right, now in a public setting.

Finally, if the sinfulness of the accused has been established and he or she continues to refuse to repent and make things right, then the church is to begin to treat this person as an outsider—in essence, as if they were a non-Christian. Jesus' description of this consequence, using the examples of tax collectors and Gentiles, shows He is talking to His group of Jewish disciples within the context of their Jewish culture. The Jewish religious community also had a process for removing someone from their community who was in rebellion against God.

It's important to understand that none of these steps involve treating the unrepentant person with disrespect. Jewish people had working relationships with Gentiles and even tax collectors. They simply did not allow them into the heart of their community and religious life. It's also important to notice that Jesus is not describing these excommunicated people as condemned by God at this point. As Paul will show in 1 Corinthians 5:1–13, the goal for the church remains the restoration of the sinful person once he or she has finally come to repentance.

Also, it should be noted that banishment from a community should never be practiced lightly. Christian leaders should never despise those under their care, even those in rebellion. Much harm has been done by Christian leaders who have mishandled the application of this passage. The final step in this process should only ever be entered into with humility and great love for everyone involved—it is literally presented as the last resort.

### **Matthew 18:18**

#### **ESV**

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

**What does Matthew 18:18 mean?** Prior verses outlined out a process for Christians to follow when dealing with a believer who refuses to repent of sinful behavior. That process ends, as a last resort, with the person being removed from the community and treated as an outsider (Matthew 18:15–17).

Now Jesus extends what He has said to Peter earlier in Matthew to include the rest of the disciples. After Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God, Jesus said, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19).

In this context, Jesus seems to be telling the disciples that heaven will confirm their decisions to include or remove people from the community of believers in Jesus. It's important to see that this is a privilege and power given to the twelve disciples who will become the twelve apostles as the Holy Spirit comes and the church is born. For now, Jesus makes this promise to them and not to others. They will fill a unique and special role in the history of God's people and the church that will set them apart from most other people.

**Matthew 18:19****ESV**

Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

**What does Matthew 18:19 mean?** In these words, often misinterpreted and misapplied, Jesus is talking to the Twelve within the context of a sinful believer who is being removed from the community of Christians. These men will become the apostles of Jesus, given enormous power to represent Him on earth after He departs for heaven and the church is born. One power He will give to them is accurately presenting godly truth (John 14:25–26).

Jesus does not give these men authority *over* heaven by saying that whatever they bind or loose on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven. Rather, when they describe a person as bound by sin or freed from sin, they are speaking truth. If they describe someone as included in the church or removed from it—according to these teachings of Jesus—that statement holds true. It is an enormous responsibility.

Likewise, Jesus' comments on prayer must be carefully understood. This promise follows the statement on binding and loosing, which itself is a continuation of remarks about church discipline. In this case, that seems to limit application to the disciples' prayer of removing a believer from the community for a refusal to repent. Again, this would be a very solemn and heavy responsibility.

It is drastically against the context of this passage to assume this is a promise from God that any two or three Christians who come together to ask for anything from God will receive what they ask for.

**Matthew 18:20****ESV**

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

**What does Matthew 18:20 mean?** This is another one of Scripture's more famous and often-quoted statements. This simple promise from Jesus to His disciples follows a teaching about what God the Father would do for them when two or three of them agreed in prayer about a specific subject (Matthew 18:15–19).

Now Jesus adds the reason the Father will do what these two or three disciples of Jesus ask. The key is not their personal power or merit. It is because when two or three of them gather in the name of Jesus, Jesus is there with them. This is a promise for the days to come after Jesus returns to heaven. It is an assurance that He will, in some way, be present among them. It also explains why God the Father will grant these requests made by the disciples. It will be because Jesus is omnipresent—existing in all places—and therefore with them.

This must have been comforting to Jesus' disciples as they thought about carrying out these heavy responsibilities He was giving to them. What a weight of responsibility, as well, to make the right choices about what to request from the Father.