

# OFFENCE AND FORGIVENESS

The thoughts of the exhortation are based upon the 18th chapter of Matthew. A very serious and powerful chapter. It describes a way of life, the very opposite of the natural way of the flesh. If we are not living in harmony with it, we not only have no hope of life, but we have assurance of the very dreadful punishment to which it alludes.

It has to do with offences—causing them and dealing with them—and with the spirit of forgiveness to the utmost depths of the heart.

The chapter begins, v. 1, with the disciples asking Christ who will be greatest in the Kingdom. Mark and Luke add more revealing details. From them we learn that they had been disputing among themselves about this; that Jesus knew their thoughts and asked them what they had disputed about, and that they were ashamed and would not say.

They were fleshly enough to dispute about it. They had enough discernment to be ashamed of it before him. They were learning. Only just before (17:23) he had told them of his coming suffering and death and they had been very saddened. Now they are squabbling among themselves like children. These men went on to be mighty, unshakeable pillars of faith. They had deep devotion and love and complete dedication of their lives to him and they grew up, they matured unto him.

Jesus, v. 2, called a little child to him. Luke says he “*set him beside him,*” Mark says “*he put his arms around him,*”—both very significant and very revealing details. And he said to the disciples, v. 3, “*Except ye be converted*”—the word means completely reversed, turned around in the opposite direction,—“*Ye shall not even enter the Kingdom.*”

There must be a complete reversal from fleshly thinking and doing to Spiritual thinking and doing.

How often proud wives or doting parents tell us about their husbands or children being ‘over’ so many people at their work. Being ‘over’ people seems to be such a wonderful thing to be had!—it’s power—it’s glory—it’s success.

But Jesus said, v. 4, “*Whosoever humbleth himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the Kingdom.*” Any desire to be great and important and powerful is fatal to the achieving of it. God has no place for that kind—that is the flesh.

A child is not consciously humble. It does not think about humility or deliberately try to act humble. To act humble or talk about our humility is not humility at all—no matter how sincere. That’s just well-meaning hypocrisy. Humility is simply recognizing that we are nothing and having no difficulty facing the fact and living with it. We are no use to God until we have accumulated enough Spiritual wisdom to eliminate pride and desire for place and position. Humility cannot be contrived or consciously developed. It must happen to us as a result of learning and wisdom. It comes from seeing through the falseness and emptiness and

groundlessness of pride.

It must have been a very little child. As soon as children become conscious of themselves they cease to be humble, the flesh takes over. They become greedy and selfish just like adults. Stupid, foolish boasting and pride begin increasing more and more as the flesh develops and matures.

Christ goes right on to the subject of offenses. This whole chapter is a consecutive, related discourse and it gives more meaning to all the individual parts if we recognize that fact.

We remember that the disciples had pushed little children away from Christ on an earlier occasion. It was part of their unbalanced outlook of their over-importance.

Jesus says, v. 5, *“That whoso receiveth one such little child in his name,—because of him and his name— receiveth him himself.”* Mark and Luke go further and say that, *“whosoever receiveth such receiveth God,”* who had sent Christ and was in Christ.

It is clear there is now a transition from the literal little child Christ had set before them and had chosen as an example to the seemingly insignificant among the believers. These he begins to talk about now. Those who may not have a deep grasp, and may be in special need of consideration and care. To receive them is to receive Christ; and to offend them is to offend Christ. A dreadful responsibility upon those who consciously and unconsciously think themselves the strong, the capable, the more understanding, as, of course, most of us naturally do.

Verse 6, *“Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.”* This is a terrible warning! Have we given it sufficient thought as it applies to ourselves and our actions and our course of life?

The word ‘offend’ has somewhat contracted its meaning in modern use. Throughout the chapter and throughout the New Testament it generally means to cause others to sin or to stumble, or be discouraged or weakened. This is still the first definition that Webster gives, although not the common one at the present time.

This verse 6 teaches a very dreadful responsibility that we can never fully comprehend. All our actions have a bearing upon others. We either help or hinder them; strengthen or weaken them. And for the results of all our actions or failures to act, we must give an account at the judgement seat before Christ Jesus.

He plainly tells us here that if we are the cause of just one believer, however insignificant, stumbling or being weakened, we’d be far better off if we were obliterated in the sea and did not have to face him at the last day. This is not exaggeration for affect, this is plain, cold, sober fact. We shall, of course, repeatedly fail in this. The flesh is weak. But one of our greatest concerns in life should be to recognize our failures in this and seek forgiveness and as far as possible repair the damage.

Paul said that if meat made his brother to offend, he would eat no meat while the world standeth. This is not a special example of outstanding consideration on Paul's part. It is simply a plain statement of the necessary required working out of this solemn and dreadful warning of Christ to all his professed followers.

If we willfully seek our own pleasure and desires in anything, knowing it is upsetting and distressing sincere brethren and sisters and disturbing to the ecclesia, then we are completely cutting ourselves off from any hope of life. Love of Christ, we are told, is essential to salvation. Love of Christ means love of the Brethren. And love of the Brethren means always putting their welfare ahead of our own selfish pleasure and desires and gratifications. These are not our teachings, they are Christ's. We endeavor to extract them, so we may escape the judgement.

Jesus continues his terrible warning in verse 7. Truly there must be offenses, as he said, and divisions, and ecclesial and personal problems and difficulties. In the wisdom of God, these things are necessary for our development and training that the approved may be made manifest. That His people may be developed and His purpose fulfilled.

But woe indeed, woe indeed, to those who in any way are responsible for these things! How careful and prayerful we should be in everything we do! At best we shall repeatedly fail and need forgiveness, but any selfish willfulness or even thoughtless, self-centered carelessness, is absolutely fatal, unless thoroughly repented of and purged from our hearts.

Verses 8 & 9 still pursue this solemn warning—If thy hand, foot, or eye offend thee—cause thee to stumble, or to be a cause of stumbling to others—cut it off! Pluck it out! Cast it away. Get rid of it while there is time—for it is better to enter eternal life maimed, than to be cast whole into the latter-day awful Gehenna of Christ's coming judgment.

How can we enter eternal life maimed with some part missing? Actually a lot will have to be missing and amputated. What does hand, foot and eye mean here—that must be ruthlessly cut off and cast away? Anything—however close to us, however useful to us, however precious or desirable to us, that stands in the way of the race for life, or that hinders anyone else in that race, must be cast off and gotten rid of.

Jesus is trying to get us to realize the terrible urgency and importance of these things, for this is life and death and time is short and we are so slow to comprehend this urgency, like a drowsy sleeper in a burning building.

We tend to just comfortably assume that we'll comfortably drift through life; comfortably attend the meetings (unless some worldly matter interferes or for some reason we do not feel like it); and then at last comfortably drift into God's Kingdom, who is so anxious to preserve us in glory forever, even though He is letting the common billions pass away daily into oblivion. What a delusion. What a pitiful delusion. One thing is certain, from this chapter and many Scriptures: if we are not very sincerely aware and concerned about the effect of all

our actions upon the welfare and salvation of others, we shall never see life.

Jesus comes back in verse 10 to his little ones, the weak ones, the shallow, easily-offended ones. How easy to lose patience! How easy to feel superior! How easy to just plain forget and neglect! And that—the forgetting and neglecting—is what he is speaking of here.

*“Take heed,”— verse 10,—“that ye despise not,”—think little of—be unconcerned about—“these little ones . . . for their Guardian Angels stand in the presence of God.”*

Perhaps they won't ultimately make it. We know many will not. Only a few. But woe to us in that day if anything we have done has contributed in the slightest way to their loss, or if we have failed to do everything humanly possible to prevent that loss.

What time or energy, therefore, do we have—or dare we waste—for anything except these urgent, eternal things? How can anyone waste their time and be comfortable, or say they do not know what to do with it. How pitiful, when there is so much that's crying out to be done and is not being done. What does life in the Truth mean—life in Christ? A dreamy drift or a 24-hour-a-day dedication? Do Christ's words leave any doubt?

Verses 11-14 are about the lost sheep. The concern and exhortation is still about the weakest of the little ones. One of the first—and worst—things that evil man has ever been recorded as saying is, *“Am I my brother's keeper?”*

We righteously and rightly profess to abhor the callous cruelty of Cain's outlook, but how easily, in our pleasure and pre-occupations, we manifest the same selfish disregard and forget we are our Brother's keeper.

Our every act is for good or evil—for ourselves and for others. Nothing is neutral. Nothing is unimportant. Any missed opportunity for help or service is a sin that must be answered for. We are not put here just to fill space or to please ourselves.

Verses 15-17 deal with serious offences within the fellowship of God. Verse 17 makes it quite clear that these verses are within the ecclesial fellowship circle—for the final step, if necessary, is withdrawal.

Christ's first rule here is, and it is vitally important: speak to no one else about it, but go directly and privately to the individual concerned. What crowds, what vast crowds, will be turned away at the judgment seat of Christ just for neglect of this one command alone! How little its urgency is realized! How quick the tongue is to run on about others. How little its spirit is manifested!

And yet ignoring it or treading it down, the spirit of this command is probably worse in Christ's sight than any offense that we may be concerned about in others.

Must this course that Christ outlines here be followed in every case of offense and must it always be carried through to the final step?

There is much practical apostolic example showing that many errors and failures and shortcomings and offences fall short of requiring this serious course outlined here.

The general picture of New Testament instruction reveals that offenses fall into 3 categories—

1. Those that should be lovingly overlooked, yet prayed for.
2. Those that should be lovingly approached with an attempt at correction, but short of disfellowship.
3. Those that must be carried through to disfellowship.

Paul said: —*“Put on, as the elect of God, bowels of mercy, kindness, longsuffering: forbearing one another and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any, even as Christ forgave you.”* (And obviously here he is speaking of legitimate quarrels and concerns.)

John said, *“If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death what must he do? He shall ask, that is in prayer of course, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death.”*

The Law of Moses said on this subject and these verses come together in Leviticus 19, they are part of a pattern:

“Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer.

“Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart.

“Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor and not suffer sin upon him.”

We find these same 3 basic principles here in this Law of Christ: —

No repeating of the matter to others.

No secret bearing of grudges or offenses.

And a duty to personally and privately attempt to persuade and correct.

On this last point, everything depends on purpose, motive and previous preparation. The previous preparation must have been a consistent course of manifested concern and love. It is hypocrisy to profess that we are rebuking someone in love when we have never previously done anything else for them in love. The foundation of love must have been previously laid.

The pattern of Christ's commands is a solid, consistent, whole-life pattern. Not pieces we can pick out to suit us. We are in no position to rebuke if we have not previously and consistently loved and served. If our pattern is not full and balanced, then our rebuke is

merely from the flesh. Let us not add hypocrisy to our neglect, but let us leave the rebuke to someone else, who unlike ourselves, has been faithful and obedient in love and service.

V. 17 "If he neglect to hear the ecclesia (interestingly enough this is the second place the word ecclesia occurs—the first is that very well known passage "Upon this rock will I build my ecclesia), let him be unto thee as a heathen and a publican." Let us get the whole meaning out of this, but let us not let the flesh go beyond the legitimate meaning. How are we to treat heathens and publicans? Certainly we can have no fellowship or intimate communion or association with them, but equally certain we must treat them, as we must treat all, with kindness and courtesy and helpfulness and graciousness and Christ-like love—not the love of fellowship, but the love of concern, service and desire for their well-being, as God loves the world.

Vs. 18-20 are a wonderful and unearthly promise, very difficult for us to comprehend the magnitude thereof, but they bring also a tremendous weight of responsibility and accountableness in all we do.

Jesus says: "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.

"If 2 agree on anything they ask of God, it shall be given them.

"Where 2 or 3 are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Who is sufficient for these things? Our natural reaction is like Peter's: "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man."

God, through Christ, is offering us, is freely offering us participation and responsibility in eternal things.

It may be argued that since God is all powerful and knows everything from the end to the beginning, that this is actually meaningless. This is a matter of our bringing ourselves into line with what God Himself, from the beginning, intends shall be and shall be done. But there is more to these 3 verses than this. God is not just mocking us with a powerless, puppet-appearance of reality.

We are told that "The fervent, effectual prayer of a righteous man availeth much"—and not just in relation to himself, but to others. This certainly means that things occur because of his prayer that would not have occurred without it. He has had a real effect on the Divine Plan—an effect programmed in from the beginning by God's foreknowledge. But none the less real and effective.

These verses create a tremendous responsibility, they lift our every thought and action to a much higher level of accountability. We are partners with God in eternal things. Our whole life must be in harmonious conformity with this same high level, or it is a mockery or hypocrisy. We cannot have one foot in these things and one foot in the flesh. If we want to be a part of eternity, we must leave the flesh behind.

We would perhaps prefer a less demanding role in the pattern of eternity, but God gives us no choice. It is this or nothing. The way of life is all or nothing. It must mean everything to us, and permeate every thought and action of our life or it means nothing at all.

V. 21: "Then came Peter to him and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Till 7 times?"

Seven times is quite a lot to forgive the same brother for perhaps the same repeated, serious offense. There is nothing really small about Peter's viewpoint here, although it did not begin to be big enough to fit the glorious, spiritual way of life.

Jesus' answer must have been a terrible shock. For Peter felt very magnanimous with his seven times. On a similar occasion when he said they must forgive a brother 7 times in one day, they had cried, "Lord, increase our faith!"

But beginning with v. 23 Jesus gives a parable which, when properly thought through, shows that any reluctance in or restriction of full, eager, uncounted forgiveness by man destroys, for him, the whole way of salvation.

Divine forgiveness is the foundation of salvation, without immeasurable and innumerable divine forgiveness no man can be saved. The Body of Christ—the Redeemed—is pre-eminently the Society of the Forgiven.

If we are in the slightest degree restrictive in our forgiving, then we repudiate the whole foundation upon which our salvation is based.

Jesus makes this very prominent in the "Lord's Prayer"—Forgive us, as—to the same degree, in the same spirit, as we forgive others. We shall receive as we forgive.

We shall receive mercy, as we show it. We shall be judged, as we judge. We shall be forgiven, as we forgive.

Now, the question arises. Are we required to forgive if there is no correction or repentance, and forgiveness is not sought?

I am sure that pondering upon this question can lead to only one answer, for several reasons.

Jesus prayed for his murderers—"Father, forgive them."

He knew there could be no divine forgiveness without repentance and confession, but he made his desire and spirit in the matter very clear and put his powerful weight of prayer on the side of mercy. In pity for misguided ignorance he cleared his own spirit of bitterness and resentment. This is our example and it is wisdom. Forgiveness does more for the forgiver than the forgiven. Harbored resentment is a gangrenous, rottenness in the bones. We owe it

to our own peace of mind to flush it out of our systems.

To bar the spirit of forgiveness from our heart until forgiveness has been sought is to rob it of 99% of its value and beauty. It is the largest heart that makes the first move.

If forgiveness is not asked, and we consequently carry resentment in our heart to the judgment seat of Christ, does it add to our hope and chances for divine mercy, or detract from them? Surely the answer is obvious.

We are commanded to manifest the spirit of beneficial love toward all. Non-forgiveness toward any breaks the universal pattern of this spirit, and therefore, destroys its meaning and power.

Jesus has told us in this chapter how fatal it is to our salvation to offend, or cause to stumble, the least and weakest of his brethren. He has labored over and over on this point with terrible words and warnings.

In closing this chapter, he has another dreadful warning to any who harbor the slightest, ugly seeds of unforgiveness in their hearts.

He speaks of the very well-deserved fate of the unmerciful creditor, himself so mercifully forgiven—"Delivered to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due."

There is an awful and awesome reality to this in the fiery judgment of the last day. "Delivered to the tormentors, till all is paid for." For some—the critical, the harsh judging, the unmerciful, the unforgiving—there will be many stripes, before final annihilation.

The chapter closes: —

"So likewise shall my Heavenly Father do likewise unto you, if ye from your heart forgive not every one his brother."

And it is at such a time as this, as we solemnly partake of the New Covenant in his blood, that we more fittingly examine ourselves in this respect, and so partake not to our condemnation.

The calling is high. The associations are divine. The responsibilities are great. The prize is infinite, endless joy. The mind must be holy and spiritual, purged of all the evil of the flesh, lifted up from the animal level to the divine level. Let us live wholly in the atmosphere of the Spirit and the mind of Christ.

*Bro. Gilbert V. Growcott*