

Lesson 5

Proper 18

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 18:1–20

When Cain killed his brother Abel and was confronted by God, he tried to excuse himself from responsibility by asking, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” However, God’s second basic command is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In the family of man, we are responsible for one another just because we are God’s creatures together. In the Christian family, the Body of Christ, we have even greater reason for responsible, caring love for one another: we together have been redeemed by Christ, and His Spirit lives in us. (See 1 John 4:19–21.)

66. “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” What does asking the question reveal about the questioners? How did Jesus deflate any such indications of self-importance in the Kingdom?

67. How did Jesus emphasize the importance of responsibility for the spiritual welfare of our fellow Christians? How did He show that Christians should go to any length to avoid willful sinning ourselves?

Jesus repeated His gift of the Keys of the Kingdom, bestowing the authority to represent Him in human interaction on all of His disciples. He shows us that sometimes, love for a brother or sister in Christ has to be “tough love”—love that admonishes and corrects and, we hope, restores the erring. This is why our Lord “places the solitary into a family,” also in the context of the Church. We are not alone as Christians; we have brothers and sisters with whom we are one Body in Christ.

In that Body, we love to use the “right-hand key” to assure one another that we are forgiven. But sometimes also the “left-hand key,” which binds the sins of the unrepentant to them, must be used. The practice of church discipline and its goals are clearly spelled out here. It is always to be person oriented, more concerned about restoring erring people than about issues. But it is indispensable to the Christian community. *Disciple* and *discipline* are basically the same word and cannot be separated as we follow Jesus.

68. “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault.” What kind of sins are included in this, and what kind of sins are excluded in applying Jesus’ instruction?

69. The sin may be public, an offense to the whole Body of the Church, and not just a sin against an individual. Give an example of an obvious sin of commission and of an obvious sin of omission that would require bold, personal, loving admonition.

70. Why is the first step always to be “between you and him alone”? What happens if this first private step is bypassed and others are involved immediately? What does “If he listens to you” imply? To what have you “gained your brother”?

If he will not listen, taking one or two with you adds weight.

71. Who would these “one or two others” probably be in the life of a congregation? Who are “the church” to whom a refusal to repent is to be reported?

72. What does it mean for the Church to treat the stubbornly unrepentant “as a Gentile and a tax collector”?

Excommunication, after persistent, loving admonition, simply recognizes and makes clear to the sinner that unrepentant sin is a sinner choosing to be lost and rebuffing the Seeker. It is the most powerful application of the either/or demands of the Gospel.

“If two of you agree . . . , it will be done for them.” *Symphonein* means agreeing after having rehearsed and discussed a matter sufficiently.

73. Is this an open-ended promise that God will do whatever two Christians might agree on?

74. What is the source of power behind this agreement of the Church in prayer?

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 33:7–9

The Old Testament prophets generally were called by the Lord to address the people of Israel during ebb times in their religious and moral life. The prophets brought a message of judgment against perfunctory religious practice and against social injustice and, at times, had to speak out boldly against outright idolatry and the immorality that idolatry encourages. They called God’s chosen people to repentance and to living, personal faith. Their message always included assurance