

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

of the Lord's faithfulness to His covenant promise that would be shown in His acceptance and blessing of a repentant people.

Ezekiel was God's prophet to the people of Judah during the Babylonian exile. He had been part of the first deportation, and during the seven-year period that followed, while Jerusalem still stood, he continually warned that its doom and destruction would come. When the city was destroyed and more exiles joined them in Babylon, Ezekiel's message became one of encouragement. The danger for the exiles was that they might lose hope of restoration, settle into life in Babylon, and forsake their national and covenantal identity—and many did. In this pericope, Ezekiel is designated a watchman and is warned to live up to the resultant responsibilities. The preceding verses give a general picture of a watchman and his responsibilities. (See 33:1–6.)

Ezekiel is called “son of man” by the Lord. This is not the usage of the title that Jesus drew from as He referred to Himself as “the Son of Man.” That was drawn from the messianic thrust of Daniel 7:13–14.

75. What did “son of man” emphasize about Ezekiel?

76. What principle is established by the Lord's words to Ezekiel about his calling as a prophet and a watchman? Is it a fair and true principle?

77. What does this principle say to us regarding the Christian witness we are to bring and the brotherly concern we are to have for one another?

78. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 13:1–10

The remarkable thing about Paul's words is that they were written at a time when Christians were beginning to experience persecution by Roman authorities, who eventually declared Christianity to be an illegal religion. Their doing “what is good” was not always bringing them commendation. Sometimes they lived in fear and terror of the authorities. Paul himself would suffer martyrdom under Emperor Nero. Here Paul did not write just a sociopolitical critique of the Roman government of his day. He gives inspired instruction regarding Christian attitudes toward governing authorities of all times.

79. How are Christians to look at the role of government?

Martin Luther spoke of God's two hands. His right hand is the Church, through which He reaches out in mercy to humanity through the Gospel. His left hand is governmental authority, through which He uses power to ensure the stability of society. Both are God's hands at work, and it is important that their functions not to be confused or mixed. Governing authorities are not intended to dispense mercy and forgiveness, but to maintain order. The Church is not to use power to force people to become "Christians" or their societies to impose Christian morality, but is to preach the Good News of Jesus. Paul's calling the one in governmental authority "God's servant for your good" is made even more striking by his calling public servants "ministers of God," *leitouroi*, a word usually reserved for those who are giving service and offering sacrifices as priests.

80. Is it generally true that one who does what is good as a law-abiding citizen does not need to fear those in authority? What do you do when governing authority becomes oppressive and exploitive of those it is supposed to serve?

81. What is "the sword" that is borne by governing authorities? What effect does it have on society when authorities use the sword as "the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer"? What happens when this is neglected or misused?

82. What higher motivation do Christians have to obey laws and support government? (See 1 Peter 2:13–17.)

83. When is it necessary for Christians to disobey authorities? (See Acts 5:29.)

84. How is agape love "the fulfilling of the law"?