Disciples Contend About Greatness (Mt. 18:1-35; Mk. 9:33-50; Lk. 9:46-50)

1. This single “episode” is actually a series of events which all center on the need for humility.
2. Matthew’s Events.
   a. Disciples argue about greatness (Mt. 18:1; Mk. 9:33-35; Lk. 9:46).
      1) Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? μείζων meizōn compar. of μέγας, μεγάλη, μέγα #3187
      2) Modern American English is rather fond of the mega prefix (megabit, megabyte, megacorporation, megahertz, megalomania, megamerger, megaphone, megapixel, megaplex, megalon, megawatt).
      3) Christ had previously taught His disciples regarding Kingdom Greatness (Mt. 5:19; 11:11) and will have to do so again (Mt. 18:2-6) and again (Mt. 20:25-28) and again (Mt. 23:11-12).
      4) The disciples conversation regarding greatness was out of Jesus’ earshot, but not His awareness (Mk. 9:33-34; Lk. 9:47). The diligence He manifest through His prophetic office and ministry is significantly geared towards spotting the roots of pride and working on them immediately.
   b. Christ illustrates with a child (Mt. 18:2-5; Mk. 9:36-37; Lk. 9:47-48).
      1) Application #1: become childlike (Mt. 18:3). Αορ.pass. στρέφω strephō #4762 21x & Αορ.mid. γίνομαι ginomai #1096 621x.
         Conversion is necessary for entrance into the Kingdom.
      2) Application #2: become humble (Mt. 18:4). Φυτ.ακτ. ταπεινόω tapeinoō #5013 14x. Humility is necessary for exaltation within the Kingdom.
      3) Application #3: receive such childlike brethren (Mt. 18:5; Mk. 9:37; Lk. 9:48). Our treatment of Christ through the treatment of others is an essential feature of the Kingdom of Heaven—Mystery state (cf. Matt. 25:40,45).
   c. Christ warns about stumbling blocks (Mt. 18:6-10; Mk. 9:42-48).
      1) Following three positive applications, Jesus delivers one very strong warning: do not cause such childlike brethren to stumble (Mt. 18:6). Αορ.ακτ. σκανδαλίζω skandalizō #4624 20x.
         a) The Divine discipline consequences for permitting and/or producing such stumbling blocks are only comparable to an unthinkable alternative.
         b) One way in which we might cause a childlike brother to stumble is to despise them (Mt. 18:10a).
         c) “Their angels in heaven” are an interesting subject for study (Mt. 18:10b). Even better than a guardian-angel personal bodyguard is a servant-messenger with continuous access to God the Father.
      A difficult verse; but perhaps the following may be more than an illustration:—Among men, those who nurse and rear the royal children, however humble in themselves, are allowed free entrance with their charge, and a degree of familiarity which even the highest state ministers dare not assume. Probably our Lord means that, in virtue of their charge over His disciples (Heb. 1:13; Jn. 1:51), the angels have errands to the throne, a welcome there, and a dear familiarity in dealing with “His Father which is in heaven,” which on their own matters they could not assume. Jamieson, Fausset & Brown
      2) The κόσμος receives a “woe” proclamation for its “σκανδαλοῦς” nature (Mt. 18:7a).
         a) The perfect plan of God in creating volition beings and permitting the exercise of that volition in a manner contrary to His directive will creates a situation in which stumbling blocks are inevitable (Mt. 18:7b).
         b) Individuals who are the tools for the κόσμος become individual objects for God the Father’s “woe” proclamation (Mt. 18:7c).
      3) Metaphoric self-amputation is only comparable to an unthinkable alternative (the lake of fire).
         a) Hands, feet, and eyes are important, but a person can live without them if they had to. It may hurt to cut off our stumbling blocks, but that hurt is only comparable to an unthinkable alternative.
         b) “Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” is a remarkable textual criticism exercise followed by a notable hermeneutics exercise and an interesting homiletic exercise (Mk. 9:44,46,48).
      (1) Verses 44&46 are scribal insertions from verse 48. MT keeps all three, NA/UBS does not.
      (2) Gehenna is perhaps the most vivid description of the eternal fire (Jer. 7:31; 19:5-6; 32:35; 2nd Kgs. 23:10; Isa. 66:24).
   d. The Ninety and Nine (Mt. 18:12-14).
      1) This message is also given in Luke’s parable triad of Luke 15 [PM23: Parables of Lost Sheep, Coin, The Prodigal Son]. It is likely that the Lord delivered this message repeatedly to His disciples during this time (cf. Jn. 21:15-17).
      2) The question “what do you think” and the manner in which it is asked lead the disciples to only one possible answer.
      3) Humanity may be content with a 99% retention rate, but God the Father’s standard is 100% safe and secure.
4) The parable pictures a wandering believer. πλανάω #4105 3x, used three times in this passage (Mt. 18:12,13).
5) Leaving the ninety-nine “on the mountains” does not risk them in the man’s absence. They are presumably in a secure sheepfold with a doorkeeper (Jn. 10:7-10).
6) Bringing back the lost is a prime shepherding activity (Ps. 23; Jer. 40:6-7; Ezek. 34:1-16; Mt. 12:11-12; Jn. 10:11-18; 1st Pet. 2:25).
7) Rejoicing “more” is not a license for wandering! (Lk. 15; Rom. 6:1-2)
8) The Ninety and Nine is a beautiful hymn described in 101 Hymn Stories.
e. Corporate Discipline (Mt. 18:15-20).
  1) Although Matthew recorded these written words during the Dispensation of the Church, Jesus Christ spoke these words during the Dispensation of Israel (32AD).
  a) Matthew’s written word in Greek was ἐκκλησία ekklēsia #1577 114x. What was Jesus’ spoken word? See comments in [GM46] Peter’s Great Confession for ἐκκλησία ekklēsia & συναγωγή sunagōgē #4864 in the LXX for the Hebrew term קָהָל qahal #6951. Another consideration is the Aramaic term קָנִישׁתָּא kaniyshta'. See TDNT vol. 3, pp.518-526.
  b) “Brother” and “assembly” were Mosaic-Jewish terms before “brother” and “church” became ecclesiastical terms (Lev. 19:17-18; Deut. 31:10). The terms “Gentile” and “tax collector” were never pejorative in an ecclesiastical context.
 2) The fundamental principle of corporate discipline is to “win” a brother with the least amount of involvement.
  a) A one on one rebuke may be sufficient (v.15).
  b) A two or three delegation may be sufficient (v.16).
  c) A unified congregational stand may be required (v.17a).
  d) Separation is the last resort (v.17b).
 3) The like-mindedness of two or three, and the unity of mind throughout a congregation, is a reflection of the divine attitude concerning the matter (vv.18-20 cf. Matt. 16:19 [GM46]).
f. Seventy times Seven (Mt. 18:21-22).
  1) In response to the teaching about corporate discipline, Peter wanted to know how far the forgiveness should extend (Mt. 18:21 cf. v.15).
  2) The rabbis used Amos 1:3; 2:6 to teach a three times forgiveness pattern. Peter probably felt that seven times forgiveness would be a righteousness that exceeds the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 5:20).
  3) The idiom Jesus uses comes from Gen. 4:24 and speaks of an uncountable number.
g. An Old Account Settled (Mt. 18:23-35).
  1) The series of messages on humility concluded with an unlimited call for forgiveness (Mt. 18:21-22) and wrapped it up with a powerful parable on forgiveness (Mt. 18:23-35).
  2) Humility is required for entrance into the kingdom (Mt. 18:1-6), and that humility is evidenced by forgiveness for others (Mt. 18:21-35).
  3) The parable king desired to settle accounts (συναίρω sunairō #4868 3x) (Mt. 18:23,24 cf. 25:19).
  a) Accounts are settled when the servant is indebted. This pictures the unbeliever who can only have his debts released by grace.
  b) Accounts are also settled when the servant is entrusted with a stewardship. This pictures the believer who is expected to be productive with the master’s wealth.
  4) The two debts in this parable are incomparable to each other (Mt. 18:24,28). Debt between slaves is insignificant when contrasted with the infinite eternal debt the one slave had to the king.
  5) The first slave is forgiven for his impossible debt (Mt. 18:24-27).
  a) The king felt compassion (σπλαγχνίζομαι splanchnizomai #4697 12x), released him (ἁπολύω apoluō #630 66x) and forgave him (ἀφίημι aphiēmi #863 143x).
  b) Yet, the slave remained a slave (Mt. 18:32) and remained in debt (Mt. 18:34).
  c) This parable does not describe a substitute who pays the slave’s debt in full. It simply presents a king’s compassion & forgiveness without that king’s satisfaction or the payment made.
  d) So, the slave’s “release” was not an emancipation and the king’s “forgiveness” was not based on propitiation through a sufficient redemption.
  e) The slave asked for patience (Mt. 18:26) so he could work for his own release. The king is indeed patient (2nd Pet. 3:9), but his compassion cannot violate his righteousness (Rom. 3:25; 1st Jn. 2:2).
   a. A non-follower was casting out demons (Mk. 9:38-41; Lk. 9:49-50).
      1) The apostle John was concerned over what a non-follower was doing in Jesus name (Mk. 9:38; Lk. 9:49).
         a) The ἐκβάλλω ekballō isn’t named but Pastor Bob calls him Tina. The apostles saw τινα tina casting out (pres.act.ptc. ἐκβάλλω ekballō #1544) plural demons.
         b) “We tried to prevent him” indicates that John wasn’t the only disciple who had a problem with what Tina was doing. 1p.pl.imperf.act.ind. κωλύω kōluō #2967 hinder, prevent, forbid.
      2) This episode is similar to a concern that Joshua had for Moses’ reputation (Num. 11:27-30).
      3) The disciples weren’t bothered by the activity itself but were unwilling to accept an outsider doing what they were authorized to do.
      4) In their minds, Tina was not an acolyte of Jesus, because Tina was not in their group.
      5) Although the disciples repeatedly hindered Tina, Jesus ordered them to stop hindering him (Mk. 9:39; Lk. 9:50).
      6) “He who is not against us is for us.” This grace orientation serves believers well today in terms of Biblical ecumenicalism.
      7) Miracles in Jesus’ name and ministry to Jesus’ followers will be key features in the coming Tribulation of Israel (Mk. 9:39,41 cf. Mk. 13:22; Mt. 24:9-13,23-24; 25:40,45).
   b. Salted with fire (Mk. 9:49-50).
      1) This doctrinal principle can be found in Matthew (5:13) and Luke (14:34), but is unique to Mark as an epilogue to the self-amputation Gehenna message (cf. Mk. 9:42-48).
      2) ἁλίζω halizō #233 † (Mt. 5:13; Mk. 9:49) and ἁλας halas #217 † (Mt. 5:13x2; Mk. 9:50; Lk. 14:34x2; Col. 4:6) are boring word studies but important for application.
      3) Lev. 2:13 influences our interpretation of salt and also influenced the manuscript tradition. As a hermeneutical guide, we observe the connection between salt and fire in every offering.
      4) Since the destruction of Gehenna’s fire is not for our destruction (cf. Jdg. 9:45), the refining fire of our testing in time is for our seasoning (1st Pet. 1:7; 4:12).
      5) The seasoning of the believers’ salt is a grace application (Col. 4:6) for the production of peace (Mk. 9:50).