

Gospel of Matthew



Suggested responses to questions about Matthew 18:1-35

Note: Be sure to respond to all the questions yourself before reading the suggested responses in order to make the most of this study.

1. Matthew 16:16-19 recounts Peter's declaration of faith in Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" and Jesus' changing his name to Peter, saying: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. . . . I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. . . ." In Matthew 17:24-27 the collectors of the Temple tax first approach Peter. Jesus then tells Peter where to find a shekel in the mouth of a fish and instructs him to use the coin to pay the tax for both of them. These incidents in which Peter is singled out and given authority over the other disciples probably prompted the disciples to ask Jesus the question in Matthew 18:1: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"
2. In Matthew 18:2-4, Jesus is explaining something revolutionary to his disciples—in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, it isn't necessary to become like a subject, but rather one must turn and become like a child. Jesus himself is God's Son, and his followers are God's adopted children belonging to the family established by the New Covenant.
3. In Matthew 18:4, Jesus says the virtue of humility is necessary to become childlike: "Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Paragraph 2712 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "Contemplative prayer is the prayer of the child of God, of the forgiven sinner who agrees to welcome the love by which he is loved and who wants to respond to it by loving even more. But he knows that the love he is returning is poured out by the Spirit in his heart, for everything is a grace from God. Contemplative prayer is the poor and humble surrender to the loving will of the Father in ever deeper union with his beloved Son."
4. Paragraph 2284 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains: "Scandal is an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil. The person who gives scandal becomes his neighbor's tempter. He damages virtue and integrity; he may even draw his brother into spiritual death. Scandal is a grave offense if by deed or omission another is deliberately led into grave offense." Paragraph 2285 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out: "Scandal takes on particular gravity by reason of the authority of those who cause it or the weakness of those who are scandalized."
5. Paragraph 329 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that angels are spirits who are servants or messengers of God, the "mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word." Paragraph 336 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches about angels: "From its beginning until death, human life is surrounded by [the angels'] watchful care and intercession. 'Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd

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leading him to life.’ Already here on earth the Christian life shares by faith in the blessed company of angels and men united in God.”

6. When Jesus uses the image of children, he’s addressing the Church in a broad and generic way. Then he switches to the image of sheep and shepherds, addressing the apostles and their successors the bishops. Throughout the New Testament, only leaders are referred to as “shepherds,” and Jesus describes in this eighteenth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel how Church leaders are to watch out for the “little ones” in their care. In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus is the shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep, and he expects all Church leaders to follow his example of counting each one in the flock as worthy of an all-out rescue effort. In addition to earthly shepherds—priests and bishops—Christians have heavenly shepherds—angels. Paragraph 336 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that a guardian angel stands by each believer “as protector and shepherd leading him to life.”
7. Jesus’ pattern for reconciliation with a brother is first to go to one’s brother in private. If the brother won’t listen in private, then a person is to take one or two witnesses along. If the brother still refuses to listen, a person is required to bring the matter before the Church.
8. In Matthew 18:17, Jesus teaches that if a brother “refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Jesus’ phrase, “even to the church,” speaks volumes—Jesus plainly regards refusal to listen to the Church as unthinkable for a disciple and clear grounds for excommunication from the community. In Matthew 18:18, Jesus underscores the Church’s authority with the words: “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.” Jesus spoke these same words to Peter in Matthew 16:19, which indicates that the power to bind and loose applies to all the disciples with Peter as their leader. Paragraph 553 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that Jesus entrusted the authority to “absolve sins, to pronounce doctrinal judgments, and to make disciplinary decisions in the Church” to the “Church through the ministry of Peter, the only one to whom he specifically entrusted the keys of the kingdom.”
9. Genesis 4:17-22 lists a genealogy of Cain’s descendants who lived separated from God—they built cities and invented trades and also were polygamists and vengeful. In Genesis 4:23-24 Lamech says to his wives: “I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-seven fold.” As opposed to such thinking about vengeance, even the vengeance of God, Jesus teaches that forgiveness should be extended without limit. Paragraph 982 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “There is no offense, however serious, that the Church cannot forgive. ‘There is no one, however wicked and guilty, who may not confidently hope for forgiveness, provided his repentance is honest.’ Christ who died for all men desires that in his Church the gates of forgiveness should always be open to anyone who turns away from sin.”
10. The point of Jesus’ parable of the merciless servant in Matthew 18:23-35, is that those entrusted with the mercy of God must show that mercy to others—or receive none themselves. Paragraph 2040 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “Thus a true

filial spirit toward the Church can develop among Christians. It is the normal flowering of the baptismal grace which has begotten us in the womb of the Church and made us members of the Body of Christ. In her motherly care, the Church grants us the mercy of God which prevails over all our sins and is especially at work in the sacrament of reconciliation. With a mother's foresight, she also lavishes on us day after day in her liturgy the nourishment of the Word and Eucharist of the Lord.”

Responses to the Questions for Reflection will vary.

Matthew Notes