

Matthew: 18:1–9

From Catena Aurea:

1. At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?
2. And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,
3. And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.
4. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.
5. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.
6. But 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.

JEROME. The disciples seeing one piece of money paid both for Peter and the Lord, conceived from this equality of ransom that Peter was preferred before all the rest of the Apostles.

CHRYSOSTOM. Thus they suffered a human passion, which the Evangelist denotes by saying, At the same time come the disciples to Jesus, saying, Who, we pray thee, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Ashamed to shew the feeling which was working within, they do not say openly, Why have you honoured Peter above us? but they ask in general, Who is the greatest? When in the transfiguration they saw three distinguished, namely, Peter, James, and John, they had no such feeling, but now that one is singled out for especial honour, then they are grieved. But do you remember, first, that it was nothing in this world that they sought; and, secondly, that they afterwards laid aside this feeling? Even their failings are above us, whose enquiry is not, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? but, Who is greatest in the kingdom of the world?

ORIGEN. Herein we ought to be imitators of the disciples, that when any question of doubt arises among us, and we find not how to settle it, We should with one consent go to Jesus, Who is able to enlighten the hearts of men to the explication of every perplexity. We shall also consult some of the doctors, who are

thought most eminent in the Churches. But in that they asked this question, the disciples knew that there was not an equality among the saints in the kingdom of heaven; what they yet sought to learn was, how they were so, and lived as greater and less. Or, from what the Lord had said above, they knew Who was the best and who was great; but out of many great, who was the greatest, this Was not clear to them.

JEROME. Jesus seeing their thoughts would heal their ambitious strivings, by arousing an emulation in lowliness; whence it follows, And Jesus calling a little child, set him in the midst of them.

CHRYSOSTOM. He chose, I suppose, quite an infant, devoid of any of the passions.

JEROME. One whose tender age should express to them the innocence which they should have. But truly He set Himself in the midst of them, a little one who had come not to be ministered unto, but to minister; (Mat. 20:28.) that He might be a pattern of holiness. Others interpret the little one of the Holy Spirit, whom He set in the hearts of His disciples, to change their pride into humility. (Vid. Origen. in loc.) And he said. Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. He does not enjoin on the Apostles the age, but the innocence of infants, which they have by virtue of their years, but to which these might attain by striving; that they should be children in malice, not in understanding. As though He had said, As this child, whom I set before you as a pattern, is not obstinate in anger, when injured does not bear it in mind, has no emotion at the sight of a fair woman, does not think one thing while he speaks another; so ye, unless ye have the like innocence and purity of mind, shall not be able to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

HILARY. He calls infants all who believe through the hearing of faith; for such follow their father, love their mother, know not to will that which is evil, do not bear hate, or speak lies, trust what is told them, and believe what they hear to be true. But the letter is thus interpreted.

GLOSS. (interlin.) Except ye be converted from this ambition and jealousy in which you are at present, and become all of you as innocent and humble in disposition as you are weak, in your years, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven; and since there is none other road to enter in, whoso shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven; for by how much a man is humble now, by so much shall he be exalted in the kingdom of heaven.

JEROME. Or otherwise; Whoso shall humble himself as this little child, that is, whoso shall humble himself after My example, he shall enter into the kingdom of heaven. It follows, And whoso receiveth one such little one in my name, receiveth me.

CHRYSOSTOM. Not only if ye become such yourselves, but also if for My sake you shall pay honour to other such, ye receive reward; and as the return for the honour you pay them, I entail upon you the kingdom. He puts indeed what is far greater, Receiveth me.

JEROME. For whoever is such that he imitates Christ's humility and innocence, Christ is received by him; and by way of caution, that the Apostles should not think, when such are come to them, that it is to themselves that the honour is paid, He adds, that they are to be received not for their own desert, but in honour of their Master.

CHRYSOSTOM. And to make this word the rather received. He subjoins a penalty in what follows, Whoso offendeth one of these little ones, & c. as though he had said, As those who for My sake honour one of these, have their reward, so they who dishonour shall undergo the extreme punishment. And marvel not that He calls an evil word an offence, for many of feeble spirit are offended by only being despised,

JEROME. Observe that he who is offended is a little one, for the greater hearts do not take offences. And though it may be a general declaration against all who scandalize any, yet from the connection of the discourse it may be said specially to the Apostles; for in asking who should be greatest in the kingdom of heaven, they seemed to be contending for preeminence among themselves; and if they had persisted in this fault, they might have scandalized those whom they called to the faith, seeing the Apostles contending among themselves for the preference.

ORIGEN. But how can he who has been converted, and become as a little child, be yet liable to be scandalized? This may be thus explained. Every one who believes on the Son of God, and walks after evangelic acts, is converted and walks as a little child; but he who is not converted that he may become as a child, it is impossible that he should enter into the kingdom of heaven. But in every congregation of believers, there are some only newly converted that they may become as little children, but not yet made such; these are the little ones in Christ, and these are they that receive offence.

JEROME. When it is said, It is better for him that a mill-stone be hanged about his neck, He speaks according to the custom of the province; for among the Jews this was the punishment of the greater criminals, to drown them by a stone tied to them. It is better for him, because it is far better to receive a brief punishment for a fault, than to be reserved for eternal torments.

CHRYSOSTOM. To correspond with the foregoing, He should have said here, Receiveth not Me, which were bitterer than any punishment; but because they were dull, and the before-named punishment did

not move them, by a familiar instance He shews that punishment awaited them; for He therefore says, it were better for him, because another more grievous punishment awaits him.

HILARY. Mystically; The work of the mill is a toil of blindness, for the beasts having their eyes closed are driven round in a circle, and under the type of an ass we often find the Gentiles figured, who are held in the ignorance of blind labour; while the Jews have the path of knowledge set before them in the Law, who if they offend Christ's Apostles it were better for them, that having their necks made fast to a mill-stone, they should be drowned in the sea, that is, kept under labour and in the depths of ignorance, as the Gentiles; for it were better for them that they should have never known Christ, than not to have received the Lord of the Prophets.

AUGUSTINE. (Quæst. Ev. i. 24) Otherwise; Whoso offendeth one of these little ones, that is so humble as He would have his disciples to be, by not obeying, or by opposing, (as the Apostle says of Alexander,) it were better for him, that a millstone should be hanged about his neck, and he be drowned in the depths of the sea, (2 Tim. 4:15.) that is, it were better for him that desire of the things of the world, to which the blind and foolish are tied down, should sink him by its load to destruction.

18:7-9

7. Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh.

8. Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire.

9. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.

GLOSS. (non occ.) The Lord had said, that it is better for him who gives offence, that a mill-stone be hanged about his neck, of which He now subjoins the reason, Woe unto the world from offences! i. e. because of offences.

ORIGEN. This we may understand not of the material elements of the world; but here the men who are in the world, are called the worlda. But Christ's disciples are not of this world, whence there cannot be woe to them from offences; for though there be many offences, they do not touch him who is not of this

world. But if he be yet of this world in loving the world, and the things in it, as many offences will seize him as those by which he was encompassed in the world. It follows, For it must needs be that offences come.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. lix.) This does not subvert the liberty of the will, or impose a necessity of any act, but foreshews what must come to pass. Offences are hindrances in the right way. But Christ's prophecy does not bring in the offences, for it is not done because He foretold it, but He foretold it because it was certainly to come to pass. But some one will say, If all men are recovered, and if there be none to bring the offences, will not His speech be convicted of falsehood? By no means; for seeing that men were incurable, He therefore said, It must needs be that offences come; that is, they surely will come; which He never would have said, if all men might be amended.

GLOSS. (interlin. 1 Cor. 11:19.) Or they must needs come because they are necessary, that is, useful, that by this mean they that are approved may be made manifest.

CHRYSOSTOM. For offences rouse men, and make them more attentive; and he who falls by them speedily rises again, and is more careful.

HILARY. Or; The lowliness of His passion is the scandal of the world, which refused to receive the Lord of eternal glory under the disgrace of the Cross. And what more dangerous for the world than to have rejected Christ? And He says that offences must needs come, forasmuch as in the sacrament of restoring to us eternal life, all lowliness of suffering was to be fulfilled in Him.

ORIGEN. Or; The scandals that are to come are the Angels of Satan. But do not look that these offences should shew themselves in a substantial or natural shape, for in some the freedom of the will has been the origin of offence, not liking to undergo toil for virtue's sake. But there cannot be real good, without the opposition of evil. It must needs be then that offences come, as it must needs be that we encounter the evil assaults of spiritual powers; whose hatred is the more stirred up, as Christ's word invading men drives out the evil influences from them. And they seek instruments by whom the offences may the rather work; and to such instruments is more woe; for him who gives, it shall be worse than for him who takes, the offence, as it follows, But woe unto that man by whom the offence cometh.

JEROME. As much as to say, Woe to that man through whose fault it comes to pass, that offences must needs be in the world. And under this general declaration, Judas is particularly condemned **HILARY.** Or; By the man is denoted the Jewish people, as the introducers of all this offence that is about Christ's passion;

for they brought upon the world all the danger of denying Christ in His passion, of whom the Law and the Prophets had preached that He should suffer.

, who had made ready his soul for the act of betrayal.

CHRYSOSTOM. But that you may learn that there is no absolute necessity for offences, hear what follows, If thy hand or thy foot offend thee, & c. This is not said of the limbs of the body, but of friends whom we esteem as limbs necessary to us; for nothing is so hurtful as evil communications.

JEROME. So all affection, our whole kindred, are severed from us; lest under cover of duty any believer should be exposed to offence. If, He says, he be united to thee as close as is thy hand, or foot, or eye, and is useful to thee, anxious and quick to discern, and yet causes thee offence, and is by the unmeetness of his behaviour drawing thee into hell; it is better for thee that thou lack his kindred, and his profitableness to thee, than that whilst thou seekest to gain thy kindred or friends, thou shouldst have cause of fallings. For every believer knows what is doing him harm, what troubles and tempts him, for it is better to lead a solitary life, than to lose eternal life, in order to have the things necessary for this present life.

ORIGEN. Or, The priests may with good reason be called the eyes of the Church, since they are considered her watchmen, but the deacons and the rest her hands, for by them spiritual deeds are wrought; the people are the feet of the body, the Church; and all these it behoves not to spare, if they become an offence to the Church. Or, by the offending hand is understood an act of the mind; a motion of the mind is the offending foot, and a vision of the mind is the sinning eye, which we ought to cut off if they give offence, for thus the acts of the limbs are often put in Scripture for the limbs themselves.

From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture:

18:1 Who is Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?

Whether Peter Is First.

Jerome: We must seek for reasons for individual sayings and actions of the Lord. After the coin was found, after the tribute paid, what do the apostles' sudden questions mean? Why precisely "at that time" did the disciples come to Jesus saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Because they had seen that the same tax had been paid for both Peter and the Lord. From the equal price they inferred that Peter

may have been set over all the other apostles, since Peter had been compared with the Lord in the paying of the tax. So they ask who is greater in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus, seeing their thoughts and understanding the causes of their error, wants to heal their desire for glory with a struggle for humility. Commentary on Matthew 3.18.1.

Why They Were Upset.

Chrysostom: The disciples experienced some human weakness; therefore the Evangelist also shows this, adding “in that hour,” when he honored Peter more than all others. For though Peter was a firstborn son along with James and John, he did nothing similar for them. Then being ashamed to admit what they felt, they did not openly say, “Why have you honored Peter above us?” or “Surely he is not greater than us?” When they became ashamed, they asked less definitely, “Who then is greater?” When they had seen the three honored above the rest, they had felt nothing of the kind. But when one took the highest honor, then they were hurt. Apparently it was not for this alone but piling up many feelings they became incensed. For Jesus had said to Peter, “I will give you the keys,” and “You are blessed, Simon Bar-Jonah,” and to Peter here he instructed, “Give it to them for me and for yourself.” And seeing the great freedom allowed him elsewhere they were upset. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 58.3.

18:2 A Child in the Midst of Them

The Image of Innocence.

Jerome: He called a child to him to ask its age or to show the image of innocence. Or perhaps he actually set a child in their midst—he himself, who had not come to be served but to serve—to show them an example of humility. Commentary on Matthew 3.18.2.

18:3 Unless You Become Like Children

Think of the Holy Spirit as a Child.

Origen: Beside this obvious explanation let another be given as well. As an act of theological and ethical reflection, let us ask what sort of a child Jesus called to him and has set in the midst of the disciples. Think of it this way: The child called by Jesus is the Holy Spirit, who humbled himself. He was called by the Savior and set in the middle of the disciples of Jesus. The Lord wants us, ignoring all the rest, to turn to the

examples given by the Holy Spirit, so that we become like the children—that is, the disciples—who were themselves converted and made like the Holy Spirit. God gave these children to the Savior according to what we read in Isaiah: “Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me.” To enter the kingdom of heaven is not possible for the person who has not turned from worldly matters and become like those children who had the Holy Spirit. Jesus called this Holy Spirit to him like a child, when he came down from his perfect completeness to people, and set it in the middle of the disciples. Commentary on Matthew 13.18.

18:4 Humble as a Child

Return to the Simplicity of Children.

Hilary of Poitiers: The Lord teaches that we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven unless we revert to the nature of children, that is, we must recall into the simplicity of children the vices of the body and mind. He has called children all who believe through the faith of listening. For children follow their father, love their mother, do not know how to wish ill on their neighbor, show no concern for wealth, are not proud, do not hate, do not lie, believe what has been said and hold what they hear as truth. And when we assume this habit and will in all the emotions, we are shown the passageway to the heavens. We must therefore return to the simplicity of children, because with it we shall embrace the beauty of the Lord’s humility. On Matthew 18.1.

Humbling Oneself.

Jerome: “Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Just as this child whose example I show you does not persist in anger, does not long remember injury suffered, is not enamored inordinately by the sight of a beautiful woman, does not think one thing and say another, so you too, unless you have similar innocence and purity of mind, will not be able to enter the kingdom of heaven. Or it might be taken in another way: “Whosoever therefore humiliates himself like this child is greater in the kingdom of heaven,” so as to imply that anyone who imitates me and humiliates himself following my example, so that he abases himself as much as I abased myself in accepting the form of a servant, will enter the kingdom of heaven. Commentary on Matthew 3.18.4.

18:5 Receiving Christ

Who Receives Such a Child.

Jerome: Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. Whoever lives so as to imitate Christ's humility and innocence, in him Christ is taken up. And he is careful to add—so that when the apostles heard of it, they would not think that they had been honored—that they would not be taken up for their merit but for the honor of the master. Commentary on Matthew 3.18.5.

What It Means to Become a Child.

Epiphanius the Latin: Here the Lord not only repressed the apostles' thoughts but also checked the ambition of believers throughout the whole world, so that he might be great who wanted to be least. For with this purpose Jesus used the example of the child, that what he had been through his nature, we through our holy living might become—innocent, like children innocent of every sin. For a child does not know how to hold resentment or to grow angry. He does not know how to repay evil for evil. He does not think base thoughts. He does not commit adultery or arson or murder. He is utterly ignorant of theft or brawling or all the things that will draw him to sin. He does not know how to disparage, how to blaspheme, how to hurt, how to lie. He believes what he hears. What he is ordered he does not analyze. He loves his parents with full affection. Therefore what children are in their simplicity, let us become through a holy way of life, as children innocent of sin. And quite rightly, one who has become a child innocent of sin in this way is greater in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives such a person will receive Christ. Interpretation of the Gospels 27.

18:6 Causing a Believer to Sin

A Spiritual Understanding of the Millstone.

Hilary of Poitiers: These important items of comparison are not idle. Such an offender is to be sunk in the sea with both a millstone and an asses' pack load, and even this is better for him! What is better in the accepted sense of the word is always beneficial. What then is the utility of being sunk with an asses' millstone hung around one's neck? So harsh a death will profit him in terms of future punishment. In some way it will be beneficial to meet that death which is the ultimate of evils.

But how should we understand this spiritually? That is the deeper question. The millstone stands for blind toil, for pack animals are driven around in a circle with their eyes closed. And we frequently find the Gentiles referred to under the name ass. The Gentiles do not know what they do. They are in ignorance, and their life's work is like blind labor. Not so the Jews. For them the path of knowledge has been set forth in the law. Insofar as they gave offence to Christ's apostles, it was more just for them to be sunk in the sea with an asses' millstone tied to their neck. On Matthew 18.2.

It Would Be Better for Whom?

Jerome: This can be viewed as a general sentence against all who raise a stumbling block. Yet according to the context of the discourse, it can also be understood as spoken against the apostles. In asking who was greater in the kingdom of heaven, they seemed to have just previously been contending among themselves for honor. If they persisted in this misbehavior they could lose those whom they were calling to the faith, if they should see the apostles fighting among themselves for honor.

But when Jesus said, "It would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck," he is following the rite of the province and telling how among ancient Jews this was the punishment for major crimes, that they be sunk in the deep with a rock attached to them. It is better for him, because it is much better to receive a short, quick punishment for one's sin than to be reserved for eternal tortures. For the Lord will not punish the same fault twice. Commentary on Matthew 3.18.6.

18:7 Temptations to Sin

Woe to the World.

Origen: Jesus pronounced "woe for temptations to sin" on people scattered throughout the whole world who are subject to temptations. But the disciples, who do not contemplate the things that are seen, are not of the world. Neither is their Master of the world. Therefore the "woe for temptations to sin" does not apply to Jesus' faithful disciples. Rather, "great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble." But there are some who appear to be disciples yet are still of the world. They love the world, and they love inordinately what is in it. They love the life that is led in these earthly places or the money which is in them, or the possessions or any resources whatsoever. The words "they are not of the world" do not apply to them. But "woe for temptations to sin" will apply to them since they are indeed of the world. Commentary on Matthew 13.21.

Necessary That Temptations Come.

Chrysostom: Perhaps one of our adversaries may think, If it is necessary that temptations come, why does he call woe down on the world when he ought to help it and offer a hand? For this is the task of the physician and the protector. Cursing the world is what the man in the street does. So what are we to reply to this shameless questioner? What equal of this therapy do you seek? For though he is God, he was made man for you, took on the form of a servant, suffered all the harshest treatment and still did not fail in anything that was assigned him. But because nothing further happened among ungrateful people, for this reason he calls woe down on them, because after so much fostering care they continued in their unsoundness. It is just as if some sick man were enjoying fine care but refused to follow his physician's regimen. Suppose someone lamented the patient, saying, "Woe to that man for his sickness, which he has increased by his own laxity!" But in that case no benefit comes from the lament. Here, however, there is also a kind of therapy, in that Jesus foretells what will happen and laments it. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 59.1.

Woe to the One by Whom Temptations Come.

Augustine: Of what world are we speaking when we say "Woe to the world for temptations to sin"? We speak of that world of which it is said, "And the world knew him not." We are not speaking of that world of which it is said, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." There is an evil world, and there is a good world. In the evil world are all the evil ones of this world. In the good world are all the good ones of this world. We often hear it said of a field: his field is full. Of what? Of wheat. Yet we say also, and say truly too, his field is full of chaff. So with a tree, one says that it is full of fruit while another says it is full of leaves. Both speak truly. The supply of leaves has not usurped the place of the fruit, nor has the supply of fruit driven out the mass of leaves. The tree is full of both. But one thing is plucked by the wind; the other is picked by the harvester. So therefore when you hear, "Woe unto the world because of offenses," do not be afraid. Love the law of God, and you will have no temptation to sin. Sermon 81.3.

18:8 Cutting Off Causes to Sin

Cut It Off.

Chrysostom: He is not saying this about human limbs. Far from it. This is said about friends, about relatives, whom we regard in the rank of necessary limbs. Jesus also said this earlier, and now he says it again. For nothing is so harmful as bad company.

For what relationship cannot do, often friendship can do, both for harm and for benefit. So he orders us with great emphasis to cut off those who are harmful to us, implying that these are people who supply temptations to sin.

Do you see how he checks the future damage from temptations? First he predicts that they will happen, so that no one should be lazy, but everyone should be awake expecting them. Then he predicts that the evils will be very great. For Jesus did not simply say, "Woe to the world for temptations to sin," but showed their great damage. For when he says, "But woe to that man by whom temptation comes," he indicates a great punishment. He does not only mention this, but he increases the fear by adding a comparison.

And he supplies incontrovertible reasoning. If they remain your friends, you will not benefit them and you will destroy yourself. If you cut them off, at least you will preserve your own salvation.

Then, not content with this, he shows us the way by which we can escape temptations to sin. What is that? The wicked, he says, even if they are very friendly to you, cut them off from your friendship. Therefore if someone's friendship harms you, cut him off from you. For if at times we cut off our limbs when they are incurable and are doing damage to our other members, how much more should we do this in the case of friends. If the limbs were evil by nature, all this advice and counsel would be useless; the warning of what is preached would be superfluous. If it is not superfluous, as in fact it is not, then it is clear that wickedness comes from the will. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 59.4.

18:9 Plucking Out an Eye

Better One Eye.

Origen: If somebody, in the whole body of the congregations of the church, is industrious and handy for practical action and he changes and his hand causes him to sin, the eye should say to this hand, "I have

no need of you.” And after it has said it, let him cut it off and throw it from him. All will still be well if his head is still blessed and his feet worthy of his blessed head, so that the head, doing its duty, may not be able to say to the feet, “I have no need of you.” But if some foot is found which is a temptation to sin for the whole body, the head should say to this foot, “I have no need of you,” and should cut it off and throw it away from him. It is far better for the rest of the body to go on into life lacking the foot or hand that offers temptation to sin than for the whole body to be exposed to temptation and to be sent into eternal fire with two whole feet or hands. Likewise it is good if what could be the eye of the whole body shows itself worthy of Christ and of the whole body. But if at some time it happens that this eye so changes that it becomes a temptation to sin for the whole body, it will be better for it to be ripped out and thrown from the whole body ... than for the whole body together with the soul to be condemned. Commentary on Matthew 13.24.

Forbidding Corrupt Church Leaders.

Chromatius: This sentence of the Lord can faithfully be understood about any one of us. Yet in cutting off a hand or foot or in plucking out an eye, it is clear that family relations or unbelieving ministers and leaders of the church are signified.

And so by “hand” we understand that priests are signified; like a hand their work in every area is necessary to the body of the church, about whom we find it written in the Song of Solomon: “his arms”—that is, the body of the church—“are rounded gold set with jewels.” By “foot” we recognize that deacons are signified. In busying themselves with the sacred mysteries of the church they serve the body like feet, about which it is written in the same Song of Solomon: “His legs are alabaster columns, set upon bases of gold.” And so, if hands or feet of this sort, that is, any priest or deacon, either through heretical faith or through depraved living, has become a stumbling block to the church, the Lord orders that such a man be plucked from the body of the church and thrown out. The example of his life and heretical doctrine endangers all the body of the church, that is, the whole people, when it follows or imitates such doctrine. Tractate on Matthew 56.2–4.