

## **“Membership Requirements”**

*Reading: Ezekiel 33:7-11; Matthew 18:15-20*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Here in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew’s gospel we have one of Jesus’ extended discourses recorded by Matthew. There are five such discourses throughout this gospel. Each one has a different general focus, and each one is marked off by certain literary markers to let us know that it’s a distinct unit. One focuses on ethics in the kingdom of God, one focuses on the characteristics of the kingdom of God, one focuses on the mission of the kingdom of God, and so on. Chapter 18 is the fourth of Jesus’ discourses, and the overall focus seems to be on issues of community and dealing with one another in the context of community. It tells us a lot about what Jesus sees as important in those who will be drawn together by His preaching. We don’t know a lot about how Jesus structured and organized the church in the beginning, but this is one of the places where we have preserved some of the things He thought were important for those first believers to take into account in their community of faith.

We have an interesting sense of community here in the Poconos. Every place has its own unique characteristics, but my suspicion is that this place is more unique than most, because we have so many different types of groups coming into contact with one another. We have people from New York and New Jersey and Philadelphia, and each of those places has its own peculiarities. We have families that have been here for generations and can remember when all your houses were trees. We have private communities and people living off on their own lane. We have retirees and working people. And what I’ve learned in the time I’ve been here — and I’m yet another type of person, a transplanted Midwesterner — I’ve learned that all these different groups have their own ideas of what the Poconos are. Some of you think it’s too crowded here, while some of you think you’re lost in the wilderness. Some of you get involved in every social group and cause that will let you in, while some of you keep a little more to yourselves. There are all kinds of perspectives about what it means to be here in this place with this wide variety of people.

And then we look at the world at large, and that’s even more complicated. These are turbulent times, like so many other times before, when people seem to be breaking into groups and factions and sometimes doing terrible things to one another. NATO and Russia are posturing, the Islamic State keeps shocking the world with atrocities while still managing to draw supporters, and here in the United States we have our usual political and cultural warfare. Whose side are you on? Whose side is our nation on? Worldwide communities clash while they reach out for more supporters.

The thing is that we’re always searching for community of one sort or another. We as humans are social creatures. We exist in community and we need the presence of other humans. Some people need more community than others; even surly and antisocial people like me still need some human interaction from time to time. Part of how we define ourselves and know who we are is by knowing how I relate to other people: I’m a part of this family, I live in this community, I’m a member of these groups, I live in this nation, and I have this way of looking at the world. We’re in some groups by default, and there are others that we strive to join.

Those groups matter a great deal to us. And here in this chapter, Jesus is surveying the outlines of another type of group. He’s describing the values of a new community and giving it

boundaries for inclusion: if you hold these values and enter through this boundary, you're in the new community. And what's especially significant for us today is how different this community of the church is from all other communities. There is no other group like the church, and there never has been before, and in fact I'd go so far as to say that there never can be any other group like this one crafted by Jesus.

This discourse begins at the beginning of chapter 18 with a question from Jesus' disciples: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Some of the other gospels say that this is in the context of some of the disciples jockeying for power and position amongst themselves; they're asking because they want to be the greatest. But Jesus' response is not what they're expecting, because He tells them that "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." And so we see something that Jesus points out pretty regularly, that in His kingdom, much is reversed: here, the greatest are the least. Honor comes to those who are humble, and the smallest and most vulnerable are the ones who are recognized. And in fact, He even goes so far as to exclude those who are otherwise: "unless you change...you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

This is a group that is especially for those who are small and humble; they are particularly valued and honored. "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea," Jesus says. Such is the worth of those in the kingdom. And again, later on, Jesus compares God the Father to a shepherd who will leave his safely herded flock of ninety-nine sheep to go in search of one lost sheep. God goes to extravagant and even dangerous lengths in search of the wandering sheep.

But at the same time, for those who are in the kingdom, there is the expectation that they will truly live in that kingdom. If you're in God's group, it only makes sense that you would follow God's desires for that group. Jesus gives us a strong call not only to avoid making other people stumble in their walk with God, but also to hold ourselves and one another accountable. In the end, you're really only in one of two groups: those who are in God's kingdom and those who are not, and those who aren't face a judgment of fire.

Jesus' comments come to a high point in verses 19 and 20: "Truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." I don't think we can overstate how significant this statement is. The church, this community founded by Jesus Christ and continuing uninterrupted into the here and now, is made up of this remarkable conjunction of a community of believers joined by nothing less than the presence of Jesus Christ Himself. In other words, if you have more than one person who are living in that humility Jesus calls us to, and you have them gathered together in Jesus' name — you can't have a church of one person — Jesus promises to be present there. In fact, this promise is so extraordinary that this meeting between heaven and earth is so close that "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." He's referring there to binding and loosing sins; if we are in tune with the Spirit of God as the community of faith, God places enormous trust in our ability to forgive.

To understand how radical this is, we need to remember how other communities work. In most other communities and groups in our world, you need to pay a membership fee, or go through an initiation to prove your worth, or apply to convince the group that you're good enough for them. You join the group to get something out of it, and the group lets you in for their mutual benefit, and if you stop benefitting the group, you're liable to get kicked out. The group exists for a stated purpose, whether it's a social group or a homeowner's association or a country.

There's also the contrast to be made with how God's people had worked up to this point. Jesus is putting forward a massively different sort of community than God's people had previously lived in. The community of Israel was defined by a set of factors that God laid out to them in a series of covenants, and they could only really be God's people if all these factors were in place. There were the people and the presence of God, just like in Jesus' description of the church. But there was more: God especially dwelt in His sanctuary, which was either a mobile tabernacle or a monumental temple, and that was the center of their worship. That sanctuary was presided over by a large tribe of priests, and having a valid priesthood was required for proper worship. The people were gathered together in the land God had given them; that physical space was a sign of their status with God. And all of it was dependent on their obedience to the instructions for how to live their lives that God had given them in the Torah.

So prior to Jesus, the existence of the people of God required all of those things being together: the people together, following the Torah, living in the land, worshipping God at the temple, aided by the priesthood. But here in Matthew 18, Jesus is founding a radically different community of God's people. The church is not Israel, the church is something new. The church is defined as a gathering of people who are gathered in Jesus' name and have Jesus present among them, which He promises to do. As we gather, we carry out this business that He has outlined: we humble ourselves, we seek the lost sheep, we call one another to holiness, we forgive sins, we seek God in Christ, and we gather in His name. The external signs of the land and the temple and the priesthood are not present, or at least not required: what matters instead is *being* the people gathered with one another in the presence of Jesus. God incarnate is offering Himself to His people in a new way.

The expectation is that we would be righteous people, but we need to pay attention to how Jesus describes our accountability. The emphasis is on repentance, not on maintaining the purity of the church. If the priority was on keeping the church absolutely pure from sin, it would be a one strike and you're out policy. But instead, Jesus calls us to confront one another in love, gently at first and then with increasing pressure, so that the wrongdoer may be won over. There comes a point when a person must be cut off from the church, but the goal is that they will repent and rejoin the fellowship. The Lord "takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live," as He proclaimed through Ezekiel.

And so this group of people, this community of God, that we call the church, is founded on the expectation of grace and gracious growth in holiness. It's a community that allows for God to be present among His people, and the membership requirements are, in a sense, surprisingly easy: He's just looking for people who will gather in His name and take holiness seriously. Of course, at the same time, the bar is raised to a difficult level, because He calls us to humility and love and mission and accountability and forgiveness.

There is room in this community for more lost sheep. There is room for more little ones in the faith, who are willing to be as humble as a child in their pursuit of God. If you have not yet committed to this community of faith, there is room for you. If you have sinned, and think that there cannot be room for you because of what you've done, this is a community of grace and joyful repentance.

Later today we will gather to celebrate the great sacrament of initiation into this community. We will celebrate baptism, the ancient sign of those who have committed themselves to Jesus and want to be a part of His body. It symbolizes our dying to sin and rising to life in Christ. It symbolizes the cleansing from sin that comes with the blood of Christ applied to our souls. It symbolizes the soaking indwelling of the Holy Spirit that is promised to those who become a part of Christ's community. And it marks those who have been baptized as entering into the church. This community of Jesus Christ is a beautiful thing. Let us celebrate what He has made us.

Benediction: "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish." Therefore, go and seek the lost sheep.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)