

Matthew 18 IS a Chapter¹

A Literary & Conversational Analysis

INTRODUCTION

It is not uncommon in Reformed circles (at least) to hear “Matthew 18 says” or “... the process/steps of Matthew 18” or “Did you follow Matthew 18?” Every time I have heard someone say something like this, he (it has always been a male) is referring to Mt 18.15-19, but always in such a way that a naïve listener would think the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew one of the shortest chapters in the Bible, consisting of just five verses.

This view of Matthew 18 tends to lead in turn into discussions of how to apply the “steps” of these five vv., or of whether or not they have been properly “followed” with regard to a particular situation, because lifting them out of their cotext (the written “context”) encourages us to misread them as programmatic instruction about how to rebuke, correct, and eventual restore (or excommunicate) an errant brother or sister in Christ.²

This paper first demonstrates that Mt 17.24-18.35 comprises a single literary unit (a “discourse”)³ and then uses conversational analysis in order to ask how reading Mt 18.15-19 within their cotext might affect how we understand those vv.

BOUNDARIES

The first step in analyzing any passage of text⁴ is to determine its boundaries—where the particular discourse begins and ends. Narrative onset (as it is called) is often suggested by changes in venue (which can be either time, place, or both), participants, topic, genre (speech, event, genealogy, &c.), or some combination thereof. The greater the number of elements that change, the more likely it is to be a case of narrative onset.

Four such aspects change between Mt 17.23 and 17.24⁵—time, place, participants, and topic—which together strongly suggest that 17.24 opens a new narrative (Table I):

	MT 17.22-23	MT 17.24
Time	they were gathering in Galilee	they reached Capernaum
Place	Galilee	Capernaum (“the house”; v. 25)
Participant(s)	Jesus, disciples	(tax-collectors), Peter, Jesus
Genre	narrative	narrative
Topic	Jesus’ death and resurrection	the temple tax

Table I

¹This informal paper was written for and presented to the members of the Philadelphia Metro-West Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) on 18 May 2013 as part of their Peace, Purity, and Reconciliation Initiative. I thank my fellow presbyters for the opportunity to study this further, who may note that I have incorporated some of their comments without note. I wish to thank the Rev. Dr. David Garner for the title (including the emphatic “IS”) and the Rev. Mr. Mark Johnston for carefully reading and commenting upon drafts of this paper; errors, oversights, and omissions remain my own.

²I do not intend to address the text-critical issue of 18.11 (“for the Son of Man is come to save what is lost”), save to mention that it is usually omitted from or bracketed in printed English texts because it is absent from significant manuscripts.

³Linguists use the term “discourse” to refer to any unit above the level of the sentence—paragraph, story, novel, speech, &c. It does not imply “conversation” or even refer to speech (as in common parlance).

⁴The terms “passage” and “text” have slightly different referents, “passage” being a hyponym of “text”. The word “text” can be used broadly so that it refers any human artifact that is being studied, the product of any sort of artistry. Thus, a sculpture, a picture, article of clothing, or a building, &c. can be “read” (interpreted) as a “text”. The referent of the term “boundary” varies with the nature of the “text”: a sculpture is, by definition, its own boundary, unless it is part of, e.g., a frieze, in which case we might study either one or some combination of individual sculptures (which might then be called a sculptural “group”). The term “passage”, on the other hand, is more specific, referring to all or part of a literary text, prose or poetry. In this paper, the words “passage” and “text” are used interchangeably to refer to literary artifacts.

⁵All references are to the canonical gospel of Matthew, unless otherwise noted.

The term “tax collectors” is in parentheses (under “17.24”) because they function as instigating props rather than as participants in the story (see Grimes 1971). They are so lacking in narrative importance that they are not mentioned after posing their question to Peter.⁶ And since it is usual in narrative to present narrative scenes via the words and actions of two actors/participants,⁷ the passage is internally coherent, Peter and Jesus being the two participants in these vv.

Matthew 19.1 signals the onset of the next narrative portion by a change in all five parameters:

	MT 18.35	MT 19.1
Time		“when Jesus finished these words” ⁸
Place	“he left Galilee ...”	“... and entered trans-Jordanian Judaea”
Participant(s)	Jesus, Peter	Jesus, multitudes (2), Pharisees (3)
Genre	speech	narrative (1-2), followed by speech (3)
Topic	forgiveness	healing (2), divorce (3-12)

Table II

The change of both time and place is explicit; the disciples and Peter disappear from the narration, unmentioned until 19.10 and 19.27, respectively, and two new “participants” enter the story: “crowds” (*ochloi*; 19.2) and “Pharisees” (19.3). These changes as well as the changes in genre, from speech (18.22-35) to narrative (19.1-2), and topic, from forgiveness (18.21-35) to healing (2) and eventually divorce (19.3), signal onset, which means that the narrative unit that begins in 17.24 ends in 18.35.

Two “onsets” within these vv. are more apparent than real: the questions raised by the disciples (18.1) and Peter (18.21).

Matthew 18.1 introduces a change of both participant and topic:

	MT 17.27	MT 18.1
Time		“in that [very] hour”
Place		
Participant(s)	Peter, Jesus	disciples, Jesus
Genre	narrative (miracle)	narrative (teaching)
Topic	temple tax	rank in kingdom

Table II.

That this is *not* the onset of a new narrative is implied by Matthew’s use of the temporal indicator *en ekeine te hora*, “in that [very] hour” (18.1a), which links the disciples’ question to the events of 17.24-27, suggesting that the disciples’ question (18.1b) is prompted by his willingness to pay a tax from which—by his own argument (17.25-26)—he and they should be exempt.⁹

⁶Nor can we object that we are not told that Peter did in fact, toss a hook into the water and find a coin in the mouth of the first fish which he caught; implicit obedience to a superior’s command is a common motif in biblical stories (and an aspect of their well-known reticence), especially when that superior is divine. Peter is implicitly present throughout this short unit as the person to whom Jesus’ instructions are addressed.

⁷Jesus and his disciples are frequently treated as the two “participants” in the gospels; even when speaking “only” with Peter, we should assume that the other disciples are present and privy to their conversation. In this sense, Peter “stands for” the entire band of disciples. Two other common “participant pairs” in the gospels consists of Jesus (on the one hand) and a group of his opponents (Pharisees, Sadducees, *et al.*) or the individual with whom he is interacting (e.g., Jairus’ daughter).

⁸The statement *kai egeneto ote etelesen o Iesous ...* (καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ...), “And it happened, when Jesus finished ...”, is repeated five times with different objects, following each of the “teaching” sections of Matthew’s account of Jesus’ life and ministry (7.28; 11.1; 13.53; 19.1; 26.1). Although two of its occurrences are terminal (7.28; 13.53) and three initial (11.1; 19.1; 26.1), each marks a transition from one of Matthew’s “instructional” sections (i.e., Mt 5-7; 10; 13; 18; 24-25) to a section devoted to describing Jesus’ “actions”.

⁹“The disciples” function *en masse* as a single, collective “participant”, alongside Jesus.

The second apparently irruptive onset is Peter’s question, which prompts Jesus’ second discourse. By bringing Peter back onto the stage¹⁰ with “*Then (tote; τότε) ...*” (18.21a), Matthew again uses a chronological indicator to create explicit narrative cohesion (as in 18.1a).

Nor does this question introduce a new topic (18.21). Peter’s question instead grows out of and continues the conversation begun by the disciples in 18.1, an impression confirmed by Jesus’ response (below). The only change that occurs in 18.21 is therefore a “narrowing” of the circle of explicit participants: from the disciples and Jesus (18.1-20) to Peter and Jesus (18.21-35).¹¹

A more subtle cohesive tie within the larger unit of 17.24-18.35 is that of humility. Jesus says explicitly that “enter[ing] the kingdom of heaven” (salvation) requires one’s having the same sort of humility as the child that is standing among them (4a). Forgiving someone—allowing ourselves to be wronged—requires just such humility (30, 35), whether the wrong is cancelling a bad debt, or the more personal offense implied by Peter’s question.

The narrative onsets in 17.24 and 19.1 and the internal cohesion of 17.24-18.35 demonstrate that this portion of Scripture should be seen, read, and interpreted as a literary unit; it represents a single “scene” in Matthew’s telling of Jesus’ story.

STRUCTURE

The passage divides chiasmically into three main sections (17.24-27; 18.1-20, 18.21-35), based on the participants that are identified in each section.¹²

MT 17.24-18.35		
Vv.	Participants	Chiasm ¹³
17.24-27	Jesus & Peter	A ¹
18.1-20	Jesus & disciples	B
18.21-35	Jesus & Peter	A ²

Table III

This threefold division is further strengthened by the question that opens each of these sections (17.24; 18.1, 21):

INITIATING QUESTIONS			
V.	Questioner(s)	Asked of	The Question
17.24	tax-collectors	Peter	“Doesn’t your master pay ...?”
18.1	disciples	Jesus	“Who is greatest ...?”
18.21	Peter	Jesus	“How many times ...?”

Table IV.

The tax-collectors ask Peter, “Your teacher pays the *didrachma*, doesn’t he?”¹⁴ but when Peter enters “the house”¹⁵, Jesus forestalls him (the Greek is explicit) by posing a question of his own, a rhetorical move that takes the

¹⁰The language of textlinguistics often uses the language of drama to describe the contents of narrative (e.g., “background”, “setting”, “prop”, bringing participants “onto” or removing them from the “stage”). See Grimes 1971.

¹¹This may appear to contrast “Peter” on the one hand with “the disciples” on the other. It is not a contrast, since by the time a reader or hearer reaches this point in the book, he or she knows that the phrase “the disciples” refers to all of the Twelve, including Peter. Nor should we assume that the individual reference to Peter means that this was a private conversation between Jesus and Peter, apart from the rest of the disciples. That is not the point, which is merely that Peter is the *named* participant—the one who raised the question. Jesus’ use of the plural at the end of the parable shows that he was speaking to the group as a whole: “My heavenly father will also treat *you* the same way, unless each of *you* forgives his brother from *your* heart.” (18.35; italics indicate plural)

¹²The tax-collectors, mentioned only in 27.24, function as a foil; their narrative purpose is to “set up” Jesus’ argument and the subsequent miracle.

¹³The raised numerals show that the two “A” sections are not identical.

conversational initiative away from both the tax-collectors and Peter.¹⁶ Jesus explicitly rejects the tax-collectors' attempt to gain the upper hand by refusing to allow them to dictate the topic of conversation; when his own disciples raise questions (18.1, 21), on the other hand, he responds, implicitly signalling their right to question him based on their relationship to him. This difference in the nature of Jesus' response divides the story at 18.1.

At the same time, however, at least three lexical factors suggest a two-fold division: 17.24-18.20 and 18.21-35:

1. The Greek noun *skandalizo* ("stumble/offend") and noun *skandalon* ("stumbling-block/offense") occur six times from 17.26 through 18.9, but not thereafter;
2. Terms referring to children occur nine times in 18.2-14, but not thereafter;¹⁷ and
3. The Greek noun *ouranos* ("heaven") occurs eleven times in 18.1-20, as well as in 18.23 (in Peter's question); Jesus uses the related adjective *ouranios* ("heavenly") to describe his "heavenly Father" (18.35). The two later occurrences bracket the second section (18.21-35) and link it to the first (17.24-18.20).¹⁸

These three factors (and others, below), suggest that this passage is best read as containing two main "chunks": 17.24-18.20 and 18.21-35.

THE PARABLES

Each "half" of the discourse contains a parable. The first (18.12-14) is a version of the parable of "the lost sheep" (cf. Lk 15.4-7), which follows Jesus' warning against offending "one of these little ones" (18.7) and his instructions about how to deal with personal causes of stumbling (18.8-9). He then applies the parable in two ways: (1) there will be (should be) joy when one who was lost is found and restored (18.13); and (2) how to "search out" and restore an errant brother or sister, the passage commonly referred to as the "steps of church discipline" (18.15-19).

The second parable—far longer and more detailed—is that of "the unforgiving servant" (18.23-34), which Jesus uses to illustrate his answer to Peter's question and to end the conversation.¹⁹ The question and parable may seem to change the topic under discussion (18.21); three considerations (at least) suggest that it does not.

Peter came to him and said, "Master, how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "I tell you, not 'up to seven times', but rather up to seventy times seven." (18.22)

First, Jesus accepts Peter's question by responding to its specificity ("seven times") with corresponding specificity ("seventy times seven").²⁰

Secondly, Jesus not only answers Peter's question literally, but uses it to extend the conversation far beyond the disciples' opening question by telling one of the longest parables in the gospels, that of "the unforgiving servant" (18.23-35).

¹⁴The form of the question (*ou telei [ta] didrachma*) implies that they expected Peter to say "Yes". The *didrachma* was a two-*drachma* (or half-*shekel*) coin, the amount of the annual "poll tax" levied to raise money for the care and maintenance of the Temple in Jerusalem. It was thus a religious tax, not a political one. (I.e., Matthew the Levite would not have collected it—he collected taxes for the Roman government.) This is not a question with the political subtext of paying taxes to Caesar (Matthew 22.15-22), although refusing to pay it would have given his enemies grounds on which to attack his claim to religious leadership.

¹⁵The use of the article with the first reference to the house may imply that this was Peter's own house, which Jesus apparently used as a home base for his ministry in Galilee (cf. cf. Mk 1.29-31).

¹⁶For a helpful discussion of conversational analysis, see Cotterell & Turner (1989), ch. 6.

¹⁷The terms are *paidion*, "child" (18.2, 3, 4, 5), *ton mikron touton*, "these little ones" (18.6, 10a, 14), and the pronominal referents *auto*, "him" (18.2b), and *auton*, "their" (18.10b).

¹⁸The noun next occurs in 19.12; the adjective occurs primarily in Matthew (5.48; 6.14, 26, 26, 32; 15.13; 18.35; 23.9) and twice in the writings of Luke (Lk 2.13; Ac 26.19).

¹⁹At least, as far as the gospel writer reports.

²⁰Whether or not his response is hyperbolic is beyond the scope of this paper; the following parable suggests that it is not.

Thirdly, Peter's question itself assumes and builds on Jesus' preceding speech: Jesus talked about the need to address a brother's sin;²¹ Peter asks about forgiving a brother who has sinned "against me" (as he says).²²

Each parable ends with a paternal reference to God: "your [the disciples'] father who is in heaven" (18.14) and "my heavenly father" (18.35), which closes the discourse (above), providing further conceptual and lexical cohesion between its two main parts.

SOME OBSERVATIONS

1. Matthew 17.24-18.35 is a "chapter" in our modern sense of "narrative unit"—or a "scene" as understood by textlinguistics—set off from the preceding and following contexts by changes in location, participants, topic (focus), &c.

This implies that all of its parts are somehow related, and that each of its "sub-topics" (or topical "foci") flows logically from the preceding (i.e., that it is not a random concatenation of subjects), whether or not that logic is clear to us.

2. The disciples' question (18.1) is related to Jesus' response to the tax-collectors (17.25-27); perhaps they wonder why he submits himself to it, especially since he proved (syllogistically) that he and they should have been exempt (17.25-26).
3. Child-likeness is a fundamental virtue, required for salvation (18.4); humility is an even greater virtue (18.5). I suspect that we do not really believe this.

4. To receive, accept, welcome (&c.) children is to welcome, receive, accept Jesus himself (18.5), a statement reminiscent of his earlier statement that whoever "... in a disciple's name, gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink ... shall not lose his reward" (Mt 10.42).

What does the act of "receiving" look like? I suspect strongly that he is not thinking of chucking them under the chin or mussing their hair, but rather of treating them as we ourselves would like to be treated.²³

5. His implicit command to receive children (18.5) leads to his horrific warning against offending or causing "one of these little ones" to stumble (18.6-7)—a deep-sea drowning would have been emotionally devastating in a culture that cherished being buried in one's own ground (cf. Ru 1.17).

6. Jesus then appears to wander from the point, discussing the need for a radical discipleship that is willing to give up anything in order to gain "life" (18.8-9),²⁴ in language that reflects Mt 5.29-30.

Lacking any suggestion to the contrary, we should read this exhortation as flowing from the preceding topic. Perhaps he is telling his disciples how important it is that they protect "the least of these my brethren" from their own sinfulness at whatever personal cost (18.8-9), since he returns to the subject of their attitude toward and treatment of children, warning his disciples that they must not only avoid causing them to stumble, but that they must be careful not to scorn or dismiss children because they are young (or naïve or ... humble!): "their angels in heaven always see my father's face" (18.10).²⁵ If they are significant enough to have been assigned angels, they should be treated with respect, especially if we think that "offending" them means not to respect them as human beings,²⁶ however young and socially insignificant they may be.²⁷

²¹The prepositional phrase *eis se*, "against you", is text-critically dubious (18.15).

²²There is no textual issue with the phrase *eis eme*, "against me" in Peter's question.

²³I think here of the example of Steve Ford here at Covenant PC, who would lean down or squat so as to talk with them at eye level.

²⁴In the context, "life" is a synecdoche for the kingdom of heaven (cf. 18.1, 3, 4).

²⁵This is almost certainly the biblical passage that has given rise to the popular "doctrine" of guardian angels.

²⁶This point resonates far beyond the "adult-child" relationship to all disenfranchised portions of society.

²⁷The term refers to despising or looking down on someone: Mt 6.24; 18.10; Lk 16.13; Ro 2.4; 1 Cor 11.22; 1 Tim 4.12; 6.2; Hb 12.2; 2 Pet 2.10 (all NT references).

7. Jesus' parable of the lost sheep (18.12-14) then grows out of his warning against despising children. Although it is common to think of the sheep as "wandering" away from the flock, the primary meaning of *planao*—to "mislead", "deceive", or even "seduce"—and its frequent use in the NT to describe false teaching and false claims may imply that the sheep has not merely wandered off, but rather has been enticed away from its flock (and shepherd).²⁸

Perhaps in saying this he was also warning his disciples to examine their "lives and their doctrine closely"; the act of "misleading" may not be limited to doctrinal deficiency due to, e.g., poor catechesis, faulty preaching or invalid teaching, but refer also to their example as (future) leaders of the Church.

8. The statement which closes the parable, that "it is not the will of your father in heaven that one of these little ones perish" (18.14), implies that offending them or causing them to stumble destroys them. Jesus does not elaborate or explain the nature or manner of this "perishing" or "destruction", he merely notes that causing a child to stumble sets one against the purposes of his heavenly Father, who is also the children's (cf. 18.10).

Elements mentioned in a story remain implicitly "onstage" until they are removed from the scene by the narrator or until the scene ends (i.e., the next occurrence of narrative onset). This means that Matthew expected his readers to assume that "the child" whom Jesus calls to himself (18.2) is present for the entire scene—the warning against causing "one of these little ones" such to stumble, the warning against looking down on "one of these little ones", the mention of "their angels in heaven", the parable of the lost sheep with its application, along with that of the unforgiving servant—all would have been spoken by Christ with the child at his side, a living object lesson in the middle of the circle of the disciples.

9. Now come the vv. for which we've all been waiting. Jesus (apparently) changes the topic, turning to what are called the "rules (or steps) of church discipline" or "how to deal with sin in the church".

Since, however, we have seen that this larger passage is a narrative unit, we assume that this is a continuous conversation, which means that we read these vv. assuming that they relate to or build on what precedes them.

In other words, they "apply" (implicitly) the parable of the lost sheep.²⁹

This parallel between the parable and its application implies that someone who sins is a deceived sheep, led astray by one or more of three things: (1) his own desires; (2) someone else's teaching; or (3) someone else's example—he follows some will-o'-the-wisp into the dark, wandering away from the truth of the gospel and the life of Christ, perhaps without realizing it—like the sheep, merely doing what comes naturally, what he considers right.³⁰

Jesus parallels the shepherd's actions with those of his disciples: both "go" (12d, 15b) and both "find" (12e, 15c (implicitly)), but here the stories diverge. Once found, the sheep has no choice but to return with the shepherd. The sinner, however, must listen ("hears you") when you confront him (the verb is *elengchein*); if so, Jesus says, you will have won your brother (15b): the sheep will have returned to the fold, and all will rejoice.

The human "sheep", however, is not automatically "saved" by being found; unlike the sheep, he can refuse to return. He can remain lost (insisting that he is not), even after having been "found". And because this is true, Jesus tells his disciples not to stop searching, but to return with increasingly large numbers of searchers ("one or two ... the church"). Only when everyone has become involved in the search and failed, is the shepherd allowed (n.b.) to give up and consider the sheep lost.

He then warns his disciples of the weight of their decision to give up and stop seeking the brother who sinned (18-19), and either promises them of or warns (threatens?) them with his presence as they decide (20).

²⁸It refers to those who are, Jesus says, ignorant of Scripture, and therefore mistaken (Mt 22.29; Mk 12.24, 27; cf. Ga 6.7; Jas 1.16(?)); to those who are deceived by false teachers (2 Tim 3.13; 2 Pet 2.15; 1 Jo 2.26; 3.7; Rv 2.20), especially false messiahs (Mt 24.4, 5, 11, 24; Mk 13.5, 6; Lk 21.8); to those who are "deceived" about morals (1 Cor 6.9; 15.33; Ti 3.3; 1 Jo 1.8); to those who are "going astray" without any further description (Hb 3.10; Jas 5.19; 1 Pet 2.25), a group that seems to include the "ignorant and misguided" who are pitied by Christ (Hb 5.2); to those who "wander" in faith (Hb 11.38), and, finally, to Satan and the "beast's" eschatological deception (Rv 12.9; 13.14; 19.20; 20.3, 8, 10) and Babylon's seduction (Rv 18.23). It is also used by the crowds and chief priests to accuse some of having been "misled" by Jesus' teaching (Jo 7.12; 7.47).

²⁹At the end of the larger passage, he explicitly applies the parable of the unforgiving servant (18.35).

³⁰As all human beings do all the time (cf. Pr 16.2). See Schulz 2011b.

10. Into this context Peter raises a question of his own (21),³¹ that of forgiveness. He is not changing the subject (above), which means that something in Jesus' words reminded Peter of his duty to forgive. Since forgiveness requires a transgression (without offense, there is nothing to forgive), Peter's question is directly linked to Jesus' parable and warning. It is perhaps even more striking that Peter does not ask "... what should I do?", but rather assumes that it is his responsibility to forgive the offender.
11. Jesus illustrates his command to forgive "without ceasing" (490 times) by telling his longest recorded parable,³² that of the "unforgiving servant" (23-35), which closes with a warning that is (again) reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6.12, 15). Because this warning not only closes the parable also ends his recorded Galileean ministry,³³ it gains great weight, as do all "last words".³⁴ It should have scared his listeners and Matthew's readers into examining their hearts into making sure that they harbour no resentments against anyone, for anything.

IN CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates two points about Matthew 17.24-18.19, viz.:

1. Matthew 17.24-18.35 forms a narrational and conceptual literary unit, which implies that each of its "parts" should be read in the light of the whole, and that each of those parts should be read as it relates to the immediately preceding "chunk".
2. Matthew 18.15-19 must be read in light of the preceding vv. and in light of the entire discourse, which (to return to the beginning of this paper) raises two questions:
 - a. How does the parable of the lost sheep inform our reading of Mt 18.15-19?
 - b. How does Jesus' final warning (18.35) inform our reading of Mt 18.15-19?

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³¹Peter does not ask, e.g., "Should(n't) he be punished?" but "How many times must I forgive him?"—a very different question.

³²Although this may remind us of the parable of the two forgiven servants (Lk 7.36-50), they two make different points.

³³From here he goes to Judah, Decapolis, and (eventually) Jerusalem; this discourse ends his Galileean ministry, until after his resurrection.

³⁴Cf. Paul's last words to the elders of the Ephesian church (Ac 20.18-35). See also Lockyer 1969 and Thigpen 2006.

RESOURCES

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