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### **Matthew 18:1-6, English Standard Version**

**18** *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”<sup>2</sup> And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them<sup>3</sup> and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.<sup>4</sup> Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

*<sup>5</sup> “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,<sup>6</sup> but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.*

### **Wearing that Millstone.**

I want to talk about a place named Capernaum today. It’s a very important city in the New Testament, but few of us know much about it. Consider this passage from the fourth chapter of Matthew. It reveals a lot about the foundations of our faith. But this passage is widely misunderstood:

**12** Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee.  
**13** And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali,<sup>14</sup> so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

**15** “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,  
the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—  
**16** the people dwelling in darkness  
have seen a great light,  
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on  
them a light has dawned.”

**17** From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of

heaven is at hand.”

Here is the context. John the Baptist has just been taken prisoner. Jesus decides to go from Nazareth, his hometown, to Capernaum, which is on the edge of the Sea of Galilee. In Matthew, we see him as fulfilling the prophesy of what early Christians widely considered the most important prophet: Isaiah. Jesus is bringing a new, great light to the world, and he is doing it from Capernaum, not his hometown, Nazareth. Not Bethlehem, where he was born. Not Jerusalem, the Capital of the Promised Land. Importantly, the actual wording of this passage is that Jesus “withdrew” to Capernaum. Some translations say “retired” to Capernaum. There is one that says that he “departed” to Capernaum. *Withdrew* is actually an accurate translation, and what’s interesting is that this one word has caused people to misunderstand this passage. It makes it sound like the Romans arrested John the Baptist, and so Jesus decided to leave the chaotic, dangerous world of Nazareth and go hide out in a quiet little town on the Sea.

But it’s just the opposite. Remember that the extended reference to Isaiah, which takes up much of our Matthew quote, refers to “*the way of the sea*”, which is a heavily traveled route between Damascus and the Mediterranean Sea. The point is that Nazareth was in the middle of nowhere, far from the major roads that ran between the Holy Land and Egypt to the south, and the ancient, great conqueror Assyria to the north.

Jesus didn't seek seclusion when he went to the Galilee: he deliberately moved to a place that was near major roads. And this passage from Matthew reminded readers of the Gospel of the violent history of the area. In 733 B.C., the Assyrian ruler Tiglath-pileser III launched a two-year-long invasion of Israel. He conquered the northern portion of the country, including the Galilee and what later became Capernaum. Much later, Assyria went on to conquer the rest of Israel. But the Galilee was closer to Assyria and was on a strategic road connecting Israel to empires in the north and the south. Indeed, Capernaum, which, again, was located far north of Jerusalem, on the Sea, was on a very major trade route that the Assyrians wanted to control; it's what led to them to invade Israel. Nazareth, on the other hand, was off to the west, on the other side of some hills. Nazareth was thus a safer place. It was the more remote area. Jesus left Nazareth and "withdrew" to Capernaum not to hide out, but rather, because he wanted to be in a more international area. This area was vulnerable to invasion. Still, the population there was far more diverse. It was a wealthier, more educated, more influential community, full of people who carried on international trade. It was a place where Jesus' message was more likely to be accepted – and passed on to others far away. These people were already exposed to very diverse ways of thinking. So, this is where Jesus went to fulfill the prophesy of bringing light to people who were in darkness.

Let me make a diversion. My father's name was Roger L'Heureux, at least originally. That's the name he used when he served as a Marine Corps Sargent in World War II. After the war, he changed his name. Our family went through a few different names, finally ending up with King. But why did my father change his name? Well, to listen to him, it was because he was ashamed of his own father, who used the name L'Heureux, for running off and abandoning him and his mother when my father was a boy. My father simply did not want to have the name of a man who had walked away from his duty as a father. And my father didn't want his own children growing up with the name of a man who had left his family. In fact, my father's father didn't just run off. He didn't go and start a new happy life somewhere, free of the obligations of a husband and father. No, my father's father proceeded to leave the U.S., go back to French Canada, where he had been living, and live on the street for decades. He never again had a permanent home or a real job. What he did was commit violent crimes, shaming his family - shaming my father who, as a boy growing up, kept hearing stories of his father's criminal acts. Even though my father was in Massachusetts and his father was in Quebec, relatives carried the stories back to Massachusetts, making my father all too aware of just what his father was up to. That was why he changed our family name – because he was ashamed of his father who had run off and become a criminal. I'll get back to this and tell you about my mother's thinking about my grandfather.

But first, let's step back and look again at Capernaum. Capernaum was on a

pathway of major international trade, a place where Jesus' message would quickly move to the far ends of the earth. Today, the ruins of Capernaum still sit on the northern shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, and at the southern base of a large basalt rock outcropping. This basalt, which proved critical to the economy of Capernaum, was the result of a series of extinct volcanoes that dotted the eastern shore of the Sea. They had little wood, and this durable basalt was a fantastic building material, and the remains of ancient houses built with it still stand to this day. When this basalt finally does erode, it creates nutrient-rich soil perfect for growing crops. The area was known for producing first-rate grain. Capernaum wasn't a huge city, but it was a beautifully designed city, with a synagogue at its center. All major structures were built with this almost-black basalt. The basalt was also used to create long-lasting agricultural tools, and again, many ancient basalt tools still survive. These tools included olive presses, mortars, household grinding stones, and large industrial millstones. So many of these millstones survive, in fact, that they couldn't possibly have been built for local use: making millstones must have been a large local industry. We can assume that Capernaum was known for its giant millstones, and they probably were moved over great distances for resale after being purchased. Capernaum also had a big fishing industry, and the remains of at least eight piers, made of basalt, of course, can be found there today. So, fishing, farming, and manufacturing produced goods left Capernaum

and then traveled far to the south and north, and the east and west. There was one more important export of Capernaum, of course - and that was Christianity.

Consider this passage from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew:

**18** *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"* <sup>2</sup> *And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them* <sup>3</sup> *and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* <sup>4</sup> *Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

<sup>5</sup> *"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,* <sup>6</sup> *but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.*

Let's zoom in on the end of this passage, where Jesus creates one of his most memorable metaphors. This is what Jesus says: *"...whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,* <sup>6</sup> *but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."* This "great millstone" presumably refers to one of those industrial millstones that Capernaum was so famous for exporting far and wide. Interestingly, the adjective great also means heavy, and the Greek word, *onikos*, actually means "having to do with a donkey", and it refers to the fact that donkeys were used to turn these giant millstones. Jesus says that rather than cause an innocent person to sin, it would be better to tie a giant millstone around your neck and jump into the Sea

of Galilee. He thus forms a memorable metaphor by making use of the basalt millstones and the Sea which provided fish for food and water for farming. It was a metaphor that would ring powerfully for ancient listeners of the Gospel of Matthew.

I want to get back to my father. My mother had a different take on my father's father, compared to my father's opinion of him. She said that my grandfather, whose name was Earnest L'Heureux, served in the trenches in World War I, for a couple of years. At the time, my father was a very young boy living back home in Massachusetts with his mother. Over and over, as my mother told it, my dad's dad took part in charges out of the trenches and saw all of the men to his left and his right get shot down – but somehow, he survived. The problem is that when he finally did come home from World War I he was very seriously mentally ill. He had probably been mentally ill, my mother thought, before he went off to war, and what he witnessed pushed him way over the edge. In fact, my mother told me, my father's father, Earnest, ran off, not because he didn't want to be a husband and a father, but because he didn't want to bring his son down with him. My grandfather knew that he was spiraling out of control – and he felt that it was better for him to put a millstone around his neck and jump into the sea rather than to lead his son down the wrong path. He just didn't realize that even from far away, he would be impacting his son in a very negative way by having stories of him get back to my dad.

But could it be possible that my grandfather Earnest did the right thing by running off? Could my father have ended up mimicking his father's criminal behavior if my dad had grown up with his father? I don't think so. But my mother was at least convinced that his son's best interests were in my grandfather's heart. That's the critical thing for me. My grandfather was trying to do what was best for his son.

Years later, when I was a grown man and my father was near the end of his life, I asked him about his father – who had died on the street in Quebec when I was boy growing up in L.A. I asked him if he realized that his father was simply sick, that there was no reason to be ashamed of him. I asked him if he understood that his father never meant to do his son and his wife any harm, that he apparently left because he didn't want to expose his son to the man he had become. Now, as we talked, my father and I were doing what people in L.A. do: we were driving down the freeway late at night. I was behind the wheel. I remember my father lighting a cigarette. My father had always been an extremely strong, tough man. But when he turned to face me, I saw that his eyes were wet. He said that the last straw was when he, my father, came home from World War II just fine. That was when he finally decided that he couldn't forgive his father for not coming home from war and then being a husband and father. My dad said that he decided that his father had no excuse, because my father managed to go through a war and come home okay. But then my dad shook his head, and I knew what he was thinking, even though he never said it: yes, his father was simply sick.



That night on the freeway, I didn't think of this metaphor of Jesus'. I didn't tell my father that his dad had decided it was better to put a millstone around his neck and jump into the Galilee, just like Jesus said. But that's what had apparently happened, at least in my grandfather's mind. I wish I had thought of saying this at the time.

This brings us to the last quote I want to look at today. It's from a bit later in Matthew, 18:21-35. In it, a master forgives a huge debt owed by a servant when the servant begs for mercy. But when that same servant refuses to forgive a tiny debt owed by a fellow servant, the master comes back and has the first servant tossed in jail. This is how the story ends:

*Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.<sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'<sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.<sup>35</sup> So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."*

This is an intriguing passage, because it doesn't just say that we must forgive. It seems to say that God will forgive us only if we forgive others. In other words, God's forgiveness is *not* unconditional. For us to be forgiven, we must pass it on. To be honest, I see something else in this. To me, this parable says that our ability to forgive minor offenses is nothing compared to God's ability to forgive absolutely everything – and this should humble us into forgiving others for minor earthly offenses. There's another way of looking at this. Our reflex should always be to forgive, because we often don't see the

bigger context. God sees it, though. My father couldn't forgive his father because my dad couldn't see the big picture. He didn't know that there wasn't much to forgive. His father had been guilty of something far more minor than my dad had realized.

I have something to propose to you. If there is someone in your past whom you think wronged you, consider giving them a call. Don't even assume you have much to forgive. You don't know their perspective. You don't know God's perspective. We see things through a very narrow lens, and this leads us to a lot of misunderstandings, between us and fellow humans, and between us and God. Our reflex should always be to forgive, because that is what Jesus taught us, and because that is the best way to be humble in the eyes of an all-forgiving God.

In sum, remember Capernaum. It represents that powerful metaphor of a millstone. Capernaum reminds us about our responsibility to never put someone on the wrong moral or ethical path. Capernaum also represents Jesus fulfilling Old Testament prophecies, bringing a powerful new light to the world, and spreading a faith of forgiveness to this world. That is the core of Christianity: forgiveness.