

**Christ the King—St. Stephen
Scripture Reflection
23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time
2026—A Cycle**



What do I see?

“Where two or three are gathered in my name....” Matthew 18: 20.

What does the above image say to me about the need for and the power of united prayer? What is my own experience of communal prayer (not counting Mass/church attendance)?

Photo courtesy of [Priscilla Du Preez](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Opening Prayer

Encountering the Eucharistic Christ

Lord Jesus, you are the bread of life...
the one true vine. I believe you are truly present
in the sacrament of Eucharist.
I seek you... worship you... and adore you.
Since I cannot at this moment receive you...
in your eucharistic body and blood...
I pray that you will come into my heart and soul...
that I may be united to you...
by your ever-present Holy Spirit.
Become for me the manna in my wilderness...
the bread of angels for my human journey...
a foretaste of the heavenly banquet...
and solace in the hour of my death.

I pray this... trusting that you are my Life...
my Peace... my everlasting Joy.
Amen.

Source: [Kristine Brown](#), author of *Over It—Conquering Comparison to Live Out God's Plan* and founder of the non-profit organization, [More Than Yourself, Inc.](#)
Ms. Brown writes about her personal God-story to help others discover their own.

Scripture Readings

Ezekiel 33: 7-9 “If you warn the wicked to change their ways and they don’t do it, they’ll die in their sins.”

Psalms 95: 1-2, 6-9 “Come, let’s shout praises to God. Raise the roof for the Rock who saved us!”

Romans 13: 8-10 “Don’t run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other.”

Matthew 18: 15-20 “If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you’ve made a friend.”

Introduction to the 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

Ezekiel was already active as a prophet in the land of Israel before the Babylonian exile. After the foreign King Nebuchadnezzar deposed Israel’s King Jehoiachin in 598 BC/BCE, Ezekiel and his wife suffered exile in Babylon. All of the Jews’ lofty illusions shattered like a smashed windowpane. Ezekiel understood that Israel had come to the end of its political and social independence—perhaps forever.

Fr. [Edelberto B. Cepe](#), CSSR (Redemptorist) comments in the [Bible Diary 2026](#) that St. Paul explains in Romans 13: 8ff the reasons for our acts of love. “This is not merely emotion or a sentimental feeling but a commitment to do good for others.... Love ought to be the power that drives us to connect with others and strive for their well-being.”

In this week’s gospel reading from Matthew 18, Jesus taught his disciples—and us—an important lesson about the need for a forgiving heart. He gave no mandates to construct physical structures (churches, cathedrals, holy shrines) for liturgical worship. Rather, he called for building Spirit-filled communities of believers, who would welcome the poor and lowly... maintain unending forgiveness for sinners... and accept every sort of people they encountered. Jesus *never* disowned anyone. He kept on loving tax collectors and sinners despite their rejection of his call to repentance and conversion. And there we have the essence of true Christian wisdom.

Reading from the Book of Ezekiel (33: 7-9)

[God's message:] "You, son of man, are the watchman. I've made you a watchman for Israel. The minute you hear a message from me, warn them. If I say to the wicked, 'Wicked man, wicked woman, you're on the fast track to death!' and you don't speak up and warn the wicked to change their ways, the wicked will die unwarned in their sins, and I'll hold you responsible for their bloodshed. But if you warn the wicked to change their ways and they don't do it, they'll die in their sins well-warned and at least you will have saved your own life."

Personal Reflection

The expression 'son of man' appears 107 times in the Hebrew Scriptures... 93 times in the Book of Ezekiel alone. As generally interpreted by ancient Jews, the expression denotes mankind in general, with special reference to our weakness and frailty. Reading this ancient passage about our call to repentance, we ponder how we are to hear it *today* and follow its cautions related to our everyday lives and relationships.

— *How hard is it for me to say something to a person close to me about behavior(s) I consider risky or outright wrong? What would Jesus do in this situation? What does he expect me to do?*

Psalm 95 (1-2, 6-9)

Call to praise and worship: a processional hymn by [Assir, Elkanah, and Abiasaph](#), the Sons of Korah

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let's shout praises to God,
raise the roof for the Rock who saved us!
Let's march into his presence singing praises,
lifting the rafters with our hymns!
If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Oh yes, he's our God,
and we're the people he pastures, the flock he feeds.
Drop everything and listen, listen as he speaks:
"Don't turn a deaf ear as in the Bitter Uprising,
as on the day of the Wilderness Test,
when your ancestors turned and put me to the test."
If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

For forty years they watched me
at work among them,
as over and over they tried my patience.

And I was provoked—oh, was I provoked!
If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Personal Reflection

The responsorial refrain repeats that tiny, two-letter zinger—“*if*.” The psalmist adds his own “*if today*.” These conditional conjunctions in the psalm pack a moral wallop. “If” means we cannot take for granted that all people, including ourselves, will “hear God’s voice” and *not* “harden their [our] hearts.”

Yahweh God claimed a double kingship over the people of Israel, first as their creator, and second for having chosen them to be Yahweh’s own special people. The psalmist also invites us to celebrate both our creation... and our being chosen by God. The psalmist recalls that Israel had received a warning. The flock divinely led from Egypt had disputed with Moses and tested God’s patience by its constant griping and complaints. Later generations—including our own—must take heed not to follow suit.

— *How do I assess the quality of (1) my hearing God’s voice... (2) my personal faith... and (3) my religious practice?*

From St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans (13: 8-10)

“Don’t run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other. When you love others, you complete what the law has been all along. The law code—don’t sleep with another person’s spouse; don’t take someone’s life; don’t take what isn’t yours; don’t always be wanting what you don’t have; and any other ‘don’t’ you can think of—finally adds up to this: *Love other people as well as you do yourself*. You can’t go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is *love*.”

Personal Reflection

Living in a first-world society as we do, Paul’s statement, “Don’t run up debts,” seems naïve. Most of us spend our adult lives in debt to someone or to some institutions (banks, education loans, car payments, *et al.*). But Paul has in mind something much more valuable than money. It is the gift of *wholehearted* love—of God... of self... of neighbor... especially of those we find *hardest* to love (including ourselves).

— *How can I apply St. Paul’s advice about indebtedness in a way that makes sense in my real, everyday life? In other words, to whom am I “indebted” freely and out of love?*

The Gospel According to Matthew (18: 15-20)

“If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you’ve made a friend. If he won’t listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If he still won’t listen, tell the church. If he won’t listen to the church, you’ll have to start

over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love.

"Take this most seriously: A 'yes' on earth is 'yes' in heaven; a 'no' on earth is 'no' in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this. When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action. And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I'll be there."

Personal Reflection

The context for this passage is Matthew's challenging advice to fellow Christians of the mid-first century AD/CE, *among* whom and *for* whom he wrote. Modern believers also must attempt to settle their differences among themselves, knowing that Christ is with them as Emmanuel ("God-with-us").

Verses 15-17 of this gospel might be difficult to get a grip on. Over the centuries, Christians have used—and misused—Jesus' words to bolster a particular (mostly negative) point of view.

In a 2020 homily on this passage, Fr. Paulson Mundanmani, pastor of Christ the King-St. Stephen Parish, shared this all-important insight: "Though Jesus rejected what pagans and tax collectors stood for, he kept on loving them."

— *Who comprises my own most intimate circle of love—[name each one]? Did I include Jesus?*

For Inspirational Listening, Watching, and Reading

Listen

"[Where Two or Three are Gathered](#)"—a hymn sung by Irish priest, musician, and composer [Liam Lawton](#)

Watch

"[The REAL Meaning of Matthew 18: 20](#)" by [Jeffery Poor](#) (10 min.)

Read

[Run with the Horses](#) by Rev. Dr. [Eugene H Peterson](#)

In a series of profound reflections on the life of Jeremiah the prophet, Peterson explores the heart of what it means to be fully and genuinely human. His writing is filled with humor and self-reflection, insight and wisdom, helping to set a course for others in the quest for life at its best.

Preview of Next Weekend's Scriptures

Readings for the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Book of Sirach 27: 30 to 28: 7 "Forgive your neighbor's mistakes, and you may ask for your sins to be forgiven." (Catholic Pastoral Edition)

Psalms 103 (1-4, 9-12) "God forgives your sins—every one. He heals your diseases—every one."

Romans 14: 7-9 “None of us are permitted to insist on our own way in these matters. It’s God we are answerable to—all the way from life to death.”
Matthew 18: 21-35 “Peter got up the nerve to ask, ‘Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?’”

Closing Prayer

(edited, abridged, and adapted for use here)

All Creation Sings Your Praise

Father, Creator of all...
thank you for these late summer days...
for the warmth of the sun...
the hours of daylight...
and the beauty around me.
Thank you for the ability to revel...
in the beauty of your creation...
and for time to share it with family and friends.
Allow me to see you more vividly....
in the world around me...
and draw me closer to you...
as we approach the end of summer.
Teach me how to pray with wonder and awe...
at the world around me...
no matter where I am... or what I’m doing.
Warm my soul with the continued gift of your presence...
and guide my feet with the light of your love.
Amen

Unless otherwise indicated, the Sunday readings are from *The Message Bible*
translated by Rev. Dr. Eugene H. Peterson (Catholic Edition)

Peterson’s translation of the Bible is a highly interpretive paraphrase,
celebrated for its readability.

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(algarrotto@comcast.net)