

Matthew 18:15–20

¹⁵ “If your brother sins (against you), go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.¹⁶ If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.¹⁸ Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.¹⁹ Again, (amen,) I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father.²⁰ For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

Liturgical Choices and Narrative Continuity

Choosing readings for liturgy while taking into account the ebb and flow of liturgical seasons is an incredible undertaking that requires study and the blessing of Wisdom. The choices made sometimes leaves unusual gaps in the narrative intended by the sacred author. The move from the 22nd to the 23rd Sunday is such a move. Consider the following flow:

- Jesus, Messiah; Peter as Rock (16:13-20 – 21st Sunday)
- The Cost and Promise of Discipleship (16:21-28 – 22nd Sunday)
- The Transfiguration (17:1-13 – 2nd Sunday of Lent)
- Discipleship and Faith that Moves Mountains (17:13-20 – not a Sunday reading)
- The Second Passion Prediction (17:22-23 – not a Sunday reading)
- Payment of the Temple Tax (17:24-27 – not a Sunday reading)
- The Greatest in the Kingdom (18:1-14 – not a Sunday reading)
- **Discipleship and Discipline in the Church** (18:15-20 – 23rd Sunday)
- Forgiveness and Grace Beyond Imagining (18:21-35 – 24th Sunday)

We move across 1½ chapter of the text which contains important narratives that pertain to the deepening revelation of the person of Jesus to his disciples – recalling and confirming Peter’s confession – and making clear the connection of Jesus as Son of God and as the Suffering Servant who would be the means of reconciling God and God’s people. All the while pointing ahead to the Resurrection.

Context

The previous two Sundays have focused on the gospel narrative that is set at the site of Peter’s great confession of faith: Caesarea Philippi. This is also the place where Jesus’ first passion prediction occurs which leads to Peter’s exclamation: “*God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you*” (16:22) – in effect denying the revealed nature and role of the messiah. Jesus corrects Peter in v.24: “*Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.*” Despite his confession of faith and the blessing in response to it, Peter initially rejects the possibility that Jesus’ messiahship could involve suffering. This leads to Jesus’ instruction to the disciples about the true nature of the cross and the willingness to carry it in accordance with the will of God.

At this point in Matthew’s narrative the scene changes: “*After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them*” (17:1-2). But even after the revelation of the glory of God in the experience of the Transfiguration, the disciples are still plagued by their “little faith” and their inability to perform great signs and wonders (17:16, 19) – almost a counterpoint to the glory just witnessed. Yet in using the symbol of a mustard seed, Jesus still witnesses, that through faith, he is present to the disciples.

The relentless movement towards Jerusalem continues as the disciples gather in Galilee (17:22). This is a community gathered from the “*faithless and perverse generation*” (v.17). Jesus’ witness of the second passion prediction serves to announce the focal point and bases upon which this new community gathers. Nonetheless the gathered disciples are sorrowful because they as yet do not understand. The disciples have a way to go, but slowly they are becoming church.

This perhaps the subtle but often overlooked element of Matthew’s narrative. Throughout the arc of the storyline Jesus has been addressing the gathering community. “*But who do you say that I am?*” is addressed not the singular “you” of Simon Peter, but the plural “you” of all the disciples – Peter is simply the one who steps forward to give voice to the response of the community.

Chapter 18 is considered by most scholars as containing the 4th of the 5 discourses, often labeling this section as “Instructions to the Community.” The fourth major collection of Jesus’ teaching is concerned with relationships among Jesus’ followers, who are clearly seen as a distinct community (as 16:18 has led us to expect). Within such a community there is opportunity both to harm and to care for others, and the health and effectiveness of the group will depend on the attitudes to one another which are fostered. Matthew has brought much of the stories together in this compact form with a view to the needs of the developing church. It is not so much a ‘Manual of Discipline,’ with regulations parallel to those of the so-named document from Qumran, rather it is a guide to relationships within the community. It is only in vv.15–17 that specific procedures are set out, and those are not so much ‘disciplinary’ as pastoral.

Prelude to a Commentary

Greatness, Stumbling Blocks, and Care for the Little Ones (Mt 18:1-14)

¹ *At that time the disciples approached Jesus and said, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”*² *He called a child over, placed it in their midst,*³ *and said, “Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”*⁴ *Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*⁵ *And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me.*⁶ *“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”*⁷ *Woe to the world because of things that cause sin! Such things must come, but woe to the one through whom they come!*⁸ *If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter into life maimed or crippled than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into eternal fire.*⁹ *And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into fiery Gehenna.*¹⁰ *“See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father.”*^{11 12} *What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray?*¹³ *And if he finds it, amen, I say to you, he rejoices more over it than over the ninety-nine that did not stray.*¹⁴ *In just the same way, it is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost.*

“*Who is greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?*” is a very narrow discussion in Mark 9:33-34 between the apostles on their relative importance. Here in Matthew the discussion is broader, but the intent is the same. People are trying to understand where, how and why they fit it to this newly forming community. Consider it in this light: if Jesus claims a special relation with the ‘king’ of heaven, how do the authority structures of this new kingdom of heaven relate to those of ‘the kings of the earth’? At stake is not a question of church hierarchies or grades of importance in heaven, but about the whole principle of importance in God’s sight. These people are part of a culture that treats questions of rank very seriously. Naturally, they ask how then are they to be treated in God’s society?

Jesus' answer is radical, amounting to a total reversal of human value: "*Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children...*" In first century Jewish life, a child was a person of no particular importance. Children were subject to the authority of the elders, not taken seriously except as a responsibility, one to be looked after, and not one to be considered as a model. To turn and become like children is therefore a radical reorientation from the accepted world view.

The phrase "turn and become" uses the simple verb *strephomai* ('turn'). Matthew does not use the word, as does Luke, to speak to conversion (*metanoia*) in which one would aspire to characteristic quality of children, such as humility, innocence, receptiveness or trustfulness. It is the status of the child that is the point – complete dependence on, and trust in, their parents. To be great, the disciples must have that same status with respect to God. The 'greatness' of such 'children' lies in their relationship to Jesus.

Disciples are vulnerable, and stumbling-blocks are a real danger. They can be found both in ourselves (vv. 8–9) and in other members of the disciple-group (vv. 6–7) and they are a danger to the "little ones." Here the little ones here are not only the less important or more vulnerable members of the congregation, though what is said here applies particularly to them. Anyone who trips a fellow-disciple, whether by attitude or by action, or even by failure to act, incurs such judgment that by comparison a quick drowning would be merciful. The seriousness of all this is seen in "*It would be better for him to*" suggesting not only that it would benefit the community to be rid of him, but as the Greek makes it clear, that it is preferable from his point of view too.

The 'little ones' are the ordinary Christians, who in their vulnerability need the care of their fellow-disciples. That message is now backed up with the thought that God's care extends to every one of them. It is in this connection that Matthew includes the parable of the straying sheep – even the one is important. To look down upon (*despise*) the one is to show that you have not grasped the principle of true greatness (vv. 1–5). It is also to part company with my Father, to whom everyone is important. The point is clear, and the implication for the disciple is that he must share God's concern for each 'little one.' Mt 18:15-20 will show what this means in practice.

Commentary

Long (*Matthew*, Westminster Bible Commentary) begins his comments on this section with: "Matthew has no romantic illusions about the church. He knows that the church is not all sweet thoughts, endlessly patient saints, and cloudless skies. In Matthew's church, people – no matter how committed – are still people, and stormy weather is always a possible forecast" [p. 209]. Our own practical experience with such things often leads us to sometimes see 18:15-29 as a guide to church leaders on disciplinary action. But vv. 15–17 are addressed to 'you' (singular), the individual disciple, and their concern is not with the punishment of an offence but with the attempt to rescue a 'brother' whose sin has put him in danger. The passage is thus a practical guide to how a disciple can imitate his Father's concern for the wandering sheep (vv. 10–14).

Textual Variations. Many people assume there is one Bible manuscript that is the "original." There is not. There are many manuscripts that exist, available to scholars, that agree in very, very high detail, but there are textual variations. The question becomes "are those variations important?" The variations are normally indicated by parentheses – in the case of v.15, "(*against you*)"

"If your brother sins (against you), go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.

But the nature of the concern is also important in this regard. Verse 15 begins with a significant variant reading; the words "*against you* (singular)" are not in some ancient manuscripts. This is significant and raises the question. Do I go and point out the fault only when a fellow believer has wronged me, or

whenever I think that he or she has committed a sin whether or not it affects me? The scholars' arguments are balanced and divided on this. Take a look at the note of Mt 18:15 in the Notes section for some of the technical issues Scripture scholars face. In these particular notes I will take the avenue that "*against you*" is a later addition and thus the concern is for the spiritual welfare of a person, even absent sin against you personally. This is one way in which Jesus begins to delineate the role of discipleship in a way that expresses the interrelationships of all members of the community.

How serious a sin? One should note that in this section, the sin and the sought for reconciliation is within the community rather than with God. At one level our text is about life together as a community of believers, rather than our lives in relationship with God (although the two should not be separated.)

Whether the sin is against an individual or the community, what sin would result in the member being confronted? The Greek word *harmartano* (sin) has the sense of "to miss the mark" and thus "to fail." Should this only refer to the "big sins" that are worthy of prison sentences? Would this be a member who steals from the community or leads a life wholly against the gospel values? This word *harmartano* only occurs three times in Matthew: One other time in the verses for next week (18:21), and in reference to Judas betraying Jesus (27:4). Could Jesus have restored Judas to the fellowship after this sin? Would the disciples have accepted Judas back in? We'll never know. Judas, in Matthew, hangs himself.

Whatever the sin might be, the process begins with going to the sinful one and beginning a dialogue. This step is not new with Jesus. The same Greek word, *elegcho*, is used in the LXX (Greek version of OT): "*You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*" Lev 19:17-18.

Brian Stofferger writes: "It is characteristic of God's people, whether old or new covenant, to love one another -- and sometimes that love takes on a tough character when it is required to confront fellow believers with their sin. However, the purpose of such confrontations is always restoration. It cannot be done from an attitude of 'I've better than you,' because we are all sinners."

Hare (*Matthew*, Interpretation Commentaries) suggests the more common, modern day approach: "We are inclined to 'forgive' sins in advance of repentance rather than have to confront the guilty parties" [p. 213]

Long (*Matthew*) makes a similar statement: "In contrast to the attitudes of the prevailing culture ('If somebody hassles you, forget them. It's their problem, not yours'), relationships are of precious and enduring value in the church. When a relationship is broken, it is worth going back over and over to work toward reconciliation" [p. 210]

Malina and Rohrbaugh (*Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*) write:

In an honor-shame society, sin is a breach of interpersonal relations. In the Gospels the closest analogy to the forgiveness of sins is the forgiveness of debts (Matt. 6:12; see Luke 11:4), an analogy drawn from pervasive peasant experience. Debt threatened loss of land, livelihood, family. It made persons poor, that is, unable to maintain their social position. Forgiveness would thus have had the character of restoration, a return to both self-sufficiency and one's place in the community. Since the introspective, guilt-oriented outlook of industrialized societies did not exist, it is unlikely that forgiveness meant psychological healing. Instead, forgiveness by God meant being divinely restored to one's position and therefore being freed from fear of loss at the hands of God. Forgiveness by others meant restoration to the community. Given the anti-introspective attitude of Mediterranean people, "conscience" was not so much an interior voice of accusation as an

external one -- what the neighbors said, hence blame from friends, neighbors, or authorities.... An accusation had the power to destroy, while forgiveness had the power to restore. [pp. 63-64]

If their understanding of the cultural situation is right, then the one sinned against had the power to destroy (through accusing the sinner) or to restore (through forgiving the sinner).

However, our immediate text never uses the word "forgive.," While the word "forgiveness" is not used, it is clear that the primary purpose of the process is to restore the wayward one back into the family relationship (reconciliation -- which according to the above quote, is the definition of "forgiveness"). The fact that the sinner is won over (v. 15b) indicates that the brotherly relationship between the two or between the community and the one had been lost.

What is at stake? Sin, of whatever form, is not to be tolerated within the disciple community, but is to be dealt with when it is noticed. But what is at stake is winning over the brother or sisters. The pastoral purpose of the approach is underlined by the verb "win," which shows that the concern is not mainly with the safety and/or reputation of the whole community but with the spiritual welfare of the individual. "Win" suggests that the person was in danger of being lost, and has now been regained; it reflects the preceding image of the shepherd's delight in getting his sheep back (v.12).

From our own experience as people we know that such situations must be dealt with sensitively and with a minimum of publicity. The principle set out in these verses is of minimum exposure, other people being brought in only when the more private approach has failed. The ideal solution is "*you and him alone.*" But it is to be explicit and robust in the telling of the sin witnessed: *elenchō* is not a gentle verb. It is not easy to capture the force of *elenchō* here in a single English word. It includes the related ideas of reprimand, of bringing the wrong to light, of trying to bring the person to recognize that they are in the wrong, and of correcting them.

Elenchō assumes, as this whole passage assumes, that the person raising the issue is in the right and that the behavior being criticized is self-evidently wrong. In practice matters are not always so straightforward, and it behooves the person taking the initiative to make sure that the "sin" is not simply a matter of personal preference; the eventual involvement of the "one or two" and then of the church should minimize that danger.

Sin and Listening. The hoped for response is *akouo*, -- that the sinner might "listen," but this word can extend beyond what the ears do, to what the mind does, "understand, comprehend." Twice in v. 17 a form of this word is used, *parakouo*. Our NAB version translates it "refuses to listen," which grows out of its more literal meanings: "to mis-hear" or "to misinterpret." A good bit of advice is that if we want people to *akouo* to us in such situations, the words we say must be true, necessary, and helpful -- so that they more than just hear the words, but open hearts and minds to receive the word.

Brian Stoffregen notes that in Scott Peck's book, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* [69] Peck writes it "is not their sins *per se* that characterize evil people, rather it is the subtlety and persistence and consistency of their sins. This is because the central defect of the evil is not the sin but the refusal to acknowledge it." But if in the encounter instead of *akouo* we experience *parakouo*, we have no option -- for the sake of the sinner and the community -- but to begin to consider a more robust response. According to Peck, committing sins is not the same thing as being evil. We all commit sins. However, the sinners who won't listen to the one, or the two or three, or to the church, need to be removed not because they are sinners, but because they are evil -- unwilling to listen to the truth about their sins -- attacking others instead of facing their own failures. In this case, it is healthier for the body to remove the evil (cancerous) part that would destroy the whole, than to try and keep the "family" together.

Why Witnesses? The initial one-on-one approach has not been successful, so more drastic action is needed. Again there is no suggestion that the “one or two others” hold any position of leadership, and no indication of how they should be selected. Why take along one or two others after the first non-listening response?

First of all, Jewish law required two or three witness to uphold a complaint (Dt 19:15). Secondly, the witnesses need to be present, because they may conclude that the confronter may be in the wrong. The accusations against a fellow member may be way off-base. The one or two then may become the confronters against the original accuser. A third reason might be deduced from the last line in our text: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." We don't often connect these two verses -- as well as v. 19: "if two of you agree on earth about anything for which you are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father." Note that the word (*pragma*) translated "thing" in "anything," can have the more specific meaning of a legal case, litigation (see 1 Cor 6:1 where it is translated "grievance," but refers to a legal complaint). Malina and Rohrbaugh suggest the translation: "For where two or three 'convene to hear a case' in Jesus' name, Jesus is there as well." [p. 119]

...tell the Church. We now come to the last resort, which the earlier approaches have been designed to avoid. To “*tell the church*” must presumably require a public statement when the community is gathered (rather than a whispering campaign). Such publicity must be avoided where possible, but may prove to be inevitable if the problem is to be solved. The object of the gathering is not to pronounce judgment but to strengthen the pastoral appeal, in the hope that the offender may yet “listen” (*akouo*). The offender, faced by the disapproval of the whole local disciple community, ought surely to recognize that this was not just a personal grievance on the part of the initiator. Anyone who is not willing to accept such united testimony may then properly be regarded as no longer a fit member of the community. “You” (singular, referring to the individual who raised the issue, not, at least explicitly, to the community as a whole) should then treat them as “*a Gentile and a tax-collector.*”

Gentile and tax collector. The two words (*ethnikos* and *telones*) have mixed usage in Matthew. Sometimes it refers to a way not to act, sometimes to a group of people who will enter heaven before the apostles, and in other ways. Perhaps it might be best to say that the Gentiles and tax collectors were people who were not Christians or at least they were "outside the fellowship," or, from our context, their sins had made them "non-brothers", but they are also people for whom the church had a special concern to bring them gospel so that they might repent and become part of the fellowship again.

Remember that the one seemingly charged with action is “you” (singular), presumably, the one who first raised the concern.

The Community. The commission given to Peter in 16:19 is repeated almost verbatim except that the verbs are now plural, addressed to the disciples as a group, and the introductory “*Amen I say to you*” gives it added weight. Here, as in 16:19, the object of the “*binding*” is expressed in the neuter, not the masculine: it is things, issues, actions that are tied or untied, not people—though of course, as v. 17b has made clear, the decision made in principle will have practical implications for the person involved. The individual who was at first concerned over the offender’s action has, in v. 17, found it necessary to appeal to the gathered community, and the community has endorsed that individual’s assessment that this was “sin.”

In so doing the community has exercised the same authority to declare God’s will which was given to Peter earlier, and that authority is now spelled out in exactly the same way as in that earlier saying; Peter’s “power of the keys.” Different denominations understand this differently. Roman Catholics discuss it in terms of “ordinary” and “extraordinary” teaching authority. Orthodox Catholics see it in terms of their ecclesiology (study of being church) in which the Patriarchs operate in union with

Ecumenical Councils. The Reformed churches (looking to Calvin) see it in terms of polity and democratization of authority arising from the “priesthood of all believers.” Independent Bible congregations see it only in Scripture and the local elders.

In whatever way it is understood, it must be remembered that it is rooted in prayer. In v. 19 prayer was expressed as a direct transaction between the two on earth and God in heaven. But now a third party is introduced into the scene. The wording makes sense only as a forward look to the presence of the risen Christ among his earthly followers. Its thrust is thus similar to that of 28:20, but whereas there the presence of Jesus “*with you*” is expressed in relation to the new post-Easter situation, here it is, remarkably, already in the present. The perspective is thus that of Matthew’s church rather than of the disciple group during Jesus’ ministry. The saying is linked to v. 19 with a “for,” which indicates that this is the basis for expecting united prayer to be answered: it is not just the prayer of the two who agree, but also that of Jesus who is “among them” because they have come together “in his name,” that is as his disciples representing him (cf. on v. 5, and cf. 10:40–42). While Jesus is on earth his disciples are his brothers and sisters (12:49–50) but even when he is no longer on earth he remains spiritually present as the focus of their unity.

Notes

Matthew 18:15 *brother*: The person at risk is described as *adelphos*. This family language imports a note of personal care rather than objective censure. It has been used already in the gospel to refer to a fellow-disciple; see 5:22–24, 47; 7:3–5, and especially Jesus’ designation of those who follow him as “my brothers” in 12:49–50 (cf. also 25:40; 28:10), who are therefore also brothers to each other. The same usage will recur within this discourse at vv. 21 and 35 and later at 23:8. The language is more indicative of a “horizontal” peer relationship than of a hierarchical discipline relationship.

Matthew 18:15 *against you*: The addition of εἰς σέ, “against you,” at this point in the majority of manuscripts, but some of the oldest manuscripts do not have “against you.” The net effect is that it changes an altruistic concern about another’s spiritual danger into a personal grievance. The latter concern will be well treated in just a few verses (v.21) but is it appropriate here? Is it original or a later insertion? One group of scholars believes it to be a later addition – and they offer an interesting possibility of how it might have happened. In the course of creating a copy, it was sometimes the habit to have a reader with multiple scribes. The scholars suggest the possibility of a mishearing, since the additional εἰς σέ (against you) would probably sound very like the final two syllables of ἡμαρτήσῃ, “sins;” this could work either way, either (as many commentators believe) causing the omission of an original εἰς σέ because it sounded like a repetition of -ησῃ or causing the insertion of the extra words because someone thought they heard εἰς σέ.

Matthew 18:16 *listen*: *akouō* listen or hear, but primarily “come to know.”

Matthew 18:17 *church*: Here the reference is clearly more local, so that the *ekklēsia* is the gathering of the brothers and sisters who are accustomed to meet in that place. No mention is made of any officers or leadership within the group; the added force of this third level of appeal derives from the greater number of people who agree in disapproving of the offender’s action, not from any defined “disciplinary” structure. The group share corporately in the pastoral concern which motivated the individual disciple to raise the issue, and in the event of a rebuff we may reasonably suppose that they would share that individual’s attitude of disapproval and even ostracism (see above), but to speak of anything so formal as “excommunication” is to import an anachronistically developed concept of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. [R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 691]

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