

**Church Discipline Part 2**  
**Matthew 18:17-20**  
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Matthew 18 continues the section of Christ's training of the disciples for their future ministry. Matthew 18 is the fourth major discourse of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Matthew (cf. 5:1-7:29; 10:1-42; 13:1-53; 24:1-25:46). Jesus prepared His disciples for their future ministry of founding His church (cf. Matthew 16:18).

Matthew 18:15-20 describes the approach to restoring a sinning brother to a right relationship with the Lord. There are stages of increasing attempts to see repentance over sin. These stages should not be viewed as a rigid formula since it is more a process of increasing escalation of ministry.

Matthew 18:15 introduces the issue of a sinning brother. If a fellow believer in Christ falls into grievous sin, we have a responsibility to speak with him about this privately. The goal of this ministry is repentance, but if he does not listen, then Jesus instructed two or three others to go also to the brother. The purpose of this was to encourage repentance and to confirm every fact, protecting people against false accusations. Matthew 18:17 addresses the final two stages of this ministry.

**The speaking to the church (18:17a)**

If the sinning brother does not respond in repentance to the ministry of the two or three, the next stage of ministry is to *"tell it to the church."* The reason this situation is being told to the church is because the church has a role in also speaking to the sinning brother in order to encourage repentance. This is clear from the phrase *"if he refuses to listen even to the church."*

In order for the brother to be effectively spoken to about their sin, the church must be told about the sin. Therefore, this is not gossip, for there is a purpose for this information being communicated in order to serve the brother. There must be enough detail given in order to provide the people of the church with the ability to conduct this ministry effectively.

Inherent in the practice of telling it to the church is the involvement of the church leadership. While one believer may choose to speak to another believer about their sin, and while two or three can choose to go with that one, the church leadership has the role of overseeing the church and must be included in the telling of the sin to the church.

There is no time span provided for how long this process should take. Just as the fellow believer must decide when the sinning brother is not listening, so too the church must decide when the sinning brother is not listening. When in doubt, we ought to err on the side of patience, in order to give the person the full opportunity to hear. Yet to wait too long leaves open the possibility of the spread of sin (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:6-7). The church leaders bear the responsibility over the wise timing of this process.

A final issue involves the nature of the church. There is a significant difference between churches of the first century and some churches in America today, which may have many hundreds and even thousands of members. The early church began as house churches, where everyone knew everyone else well. How does this apply when a church is so large that it is impossible to expect one person to know everyone else in the church? Furthermore, does the instruction of Jesus to *"tell it to the church"* demand that everyone in the whole church must be told? If a person is sick at home, or traveling, should there be a special attempt to tell everyone?

The practical nature of this ministry should not miss the overriding purpose of Jesus' words. The reason the church is told is for the purpose of the ministry of the people of the church to the sinning brother. If the sinning brother is being spoken to about his sin by those he knows, there is the expectation that he would listen, while if people he does not know speak with him, it may be provoking.

There is not a specific requirement for every person who is a part of a church to participate in the discipline of a sinning brother for this to be effective. When Paul exhorts the Corinthians to accept the sinning brother back and forgive him, he describes the discipline as being done by the many, rather than by all. *"Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him."* (2 Corinthians 2:6-8).

When Paul instructs Timothy to rebuke an elder *"in the presence of all"* if they fall into sin, it supports the view that if a person is not known to the whole congregation, then only those he does know should be told. *"Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning"* (1 Timothy 5:19-20). Therefore, the church should be told about those who are known to all, but there is no need to inform people who have no relationship with the sinning brother at all.

## **The separation from the church (18:17b)**

If the sinning brother “*refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*” This statement implies that the church should hold greater sway in a person’s life than the individuals who have confronted him earlier. If he does not respond to the church, the final stage of this process applies, which is the severing of the relationship.

Matthew’s Jewish audience would have understood that Jesus meant there ought to be no further relationship, for they had no dealings with tax collectors and sinners. They should now treat the sinner as they would treat a tax collector and have no relational involvement with them.

While Jesus Himself ate with tax collectors in Matthew 9, He did so because “*It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick*” (Matthew 9:12). This was not His relational circle, it was for the sake of ministry to those who were lost. Paul spoke of this same principle in the situation of the immoral man in the Corinthian Church:

*“I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.”* (1 Corinthians 5:9-13).

Therefore, it is the “*so-called brother*” that we must separate from when they are unrepentant after these efforts to help them. We are not to separate from the sinful unbelievers to whom we have been called to bring the gospel of Christ. Note that this separation is on the relational level, “*not even to eat with such a one.*”

This practice is done for two reasons. First is for the sake of the sinful so-called brothers. If he is indeed a believer in Christ, then this will bring him to repentance, “*For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus*” (1 Corinthians 5:3-5).

The meaning of *“the destruction of his flesh”* is debated and there are numerous views (and beyond the scope of this class), but the essence of the end that Paul has in mind is that *“his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”* The Lord can even use the elimination of Christian fellowship to arouse the sinner from his delusion and bring him to repentance. Ultimately, the ministry of repentance is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The second reason this is done is in order to protect the church against the influence of sinful behavior. *“Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened”* (1 Corinthians 5:6-7). The church will be taught the seriousness of sin and will become less likely to succumb to immorality, thus being less of a hypocritical stumbling block to those whom it ministers the gospel to.

This concept of separation from an unrepentant sinning brother is viewed as harsh and unloving by many. To view these words of Jesus as unloving would mean that we then consider our understanding of love to be better than Jesus’ understanding of love. If we are a disciple of Christ, we must submit ourselves to His word as revealed to us by the Scripture. Our goal ought to be learning from God’s word about how to love Him and serve others, not be the critics of our Lord based upon our own preconceptions.

The word “you” in Matthew 18:17 is singular, meaning each one should treat the unrepentant one this way. As we saw earlier in 2 Corinthians 2:6-8, not all may end up following these directions of the New Testament, but God is still able to use this for His purposes.

As with any command of Scripture this command to *“not even eat with such a one”* regarding the sinning brother can be applied regardless of the faithfulness of anyone else. If we are convinced that a so-called brother is unrepentant, yet others are less concerned with this, we still have a responsibility to follow the word of God. This should even hold true if a person’s local church does not see the purpose for Matthew 18:15-20, or if they do not see the significance of such sinfulness, or if they are too concerned about how they may be viewed by others. We are still able to obey the Lord ourselves, and trust Him to accomplish His will through His means.

When we separate ourselves from a so-called brother who remains unrepentant, we must not be hateful, angry, or disrespectfully rude. We are called to *“honor all people”* (1 Peter 2:17) and we can be kind without continuing the social engagement with such a one.

## **The significance of the church (18:18-20)**

Matthew 18:18, "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" is a restatement of Matthew 16:19, where we find this statement in Jesus' revelation that He will build His church.

The meaning of "*whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven*" is dependent upon the proper observation of the Greek tense and voice used. What is translated as "*shall have been bound*" (ESTAI DEDEMENON) and "*shall have been loosed*" (ESTAI LELUMENON) is a future, perfect, passive construction used to designate what will happen based upon something else that has occurred.

This leads to the English translation of the NASB of "*shall have been,*" which while slightly awkward, preserves the best sense of the literal meaning of these words of Christ. What had already been determined in heaven will become manifested upon earth. In other words, it is the church that carries out heaven's will, rather than heaven simply ratifying the decisions of the church.

The reference to binding and loosing has nothing to do with some ecclesiastical judgment or control over God's people. It is rather a statement about God's work through the local church in their obedience to His will. Jesus is validating the ministry of the local church in the application of the practice of church discipline that is done according to His will.

Matthew 18:19-20 is in this context of church discipline. It does not refer to what two or three agree upon in prayer. While coming together with fellow believers to pray is good, claiming this verse with the expectation that God will do what they request of Him is taking this statement out of its context. It is also ignoring the prerequisite that we must ask in faith according to His will (1 John 5:14-15).

The reference to two or three connects with the two or three who join with this process in verse 16, for the purpose of confirming every fact. This is a wonderful promise of the Lord's commitment to support His disciples in their attempt to follow His will in ministry to sinful professing believers. This promise extends to the two or three that join together to speak to the sinning one with the Scripture. Therefore, it is also for the church that joins together when the one does not listen to the two or three. But of course this must be done in accordance with the facts of sinful behavior that have been confirmed.

## **Conclusion**

While these words of Jesus are clear, they are not easily embraced. Many churches avoid the application of Matthew 18:15-20 because it appears to be unloving. Yet *“those whom the Lord loves, He disciplines”* (Hebrews 12:6). If the Lord does not ignore sin but moves to help us mature, then it is not unloving to do what He does. We must adjust our perspective on love to align with the will of God, rather than our preconceived notions.

We recognize that Hebrews 12:11 tells us “all discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful” and yet though there will be momentary sorrow, we recognize this verse also says, “...yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” Therefore, though it is not easy, we believe that we must obey God’s commands, trusting Him that His church will be served.

Churches also may be reluctant to practice church discipline because of the criticism they may incur. The teaching of this passage should be clear so that no one is surprised when this is done. When a church values the word of God and is taught the word of God, criticism will be diminished. The motivation to follow these words of Jesus should be high, knowing that we are serving not only the individual, but the entire church as well.

Indeed, when church discipline is taught, the reality becomes the need for it lessens. This is not only because people will become more circumspect with regard to sin, but also because when they desire to continue in sin, they will leave the church. When someone is determined to continue in their sinful rebellion, they often seek to diminish any criticism by leaving.

When a person announces that they are leaving, and follows this up by truly leaving the church, the responsibility to pursue them for repentance should end. Everyone has the freedom, legally and ethically, to choose whether or not to participate with a church. Many of Jesus' disciples withdrew from following Him (John 6:66), and He did not chase after them. If someone is unwilling to listen, and separate themselves from their relationship with their fellow believers, they have effectively brought the ministry of the church to a conclusion. This assumes they not only end their attendance at worship services, but also end their relationships with the people of the church. If this occurs, the church is protected from the spread of sin and the person is left to live out their sin in the domain of the world, and the Lord is able to use this to bring them to repentance.

Occasionally, a professing believer who indulges himself in unrepentant sin will leave the church that practices church discipline and find a different church to attend that does not know them. This is able to happen when a community is large enough that many churches exist. It is much more difficult in a small town or an area where there are very few believers.

When it becomes apparent that the sinful brother has left to attend a different church, the leaders of the church ought to notify that different church of the sinful situation. Even if other church leaders do not follow these words of Jesus in practice, the opportunity should still be afforded them to engage with the sin and protect their church.

In the end, a true believer in Christ will be characterized by repentance. Christians will care about sin and desire to turn away from it and to the Lord. We can have confidence that *“the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and, ‘Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness’”* (2 Timothy 2:19).