

## Matthew 18:15-17a

### Introduction

We've finally come to the passage that Matthew eighteen is probably most famous for – the passage on “Church discipline”. Now as we've seen, Matthew eighteen is meant to be read as *one* discourse with *one* major theme – How to live **together** in **community**, as the true **assembly** of the Messiah. We can't rightly understand this passage on “Church discipline” without an understanding of how it fits into chapter eighteen *as a whole*!

From the beginning of the chapter until now, Jesus has been talking about the “little ones” – how we are to *be* little ones ourselves, and how we are to *treat* those who are “littler” than we are. And Jesus has especially emphasized the danger of “stumbling blocks.” In verse six Jesus said, “Whoever causes one of these **little ones** who believe in me to **stumble**, 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.” And then we saw last week that in verses 10-14 Jesus continues on with this very same theme! “See that you do not despise one of these **little ones**... It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these **little ones** should **perish [stumble and fall away]**.” To the contrary! Instead of being a cause of stumbling to a little one, we ought to earnestly and diligently seek the little one when he is going astray! But now beginning with verse fifteen, there is no more mention of the “little ones.” Instead of “little ones,” Jesus switches now to speak of our “brother” (15, 21, 35). So what's happening? Clearly, we've reached some kind of a transition. There's some kind of a change here in Jesus' focus and emphasis. But at the same time, we can be sure that verse fifteen flows right out of all that Jesus has been saying in verses 1-14!

So how do these verses **relate** to all that has come before, and how are these verses *at the same time* **different** in their focus? Jesus continues in verse fifteen, “If your **brother** sins, go and tell him his fault... if he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” There are some who see this as a practical application of our text from last week. In other words, this is *how* we seek and find the “little one” that is wandering away. The problem with this is that there is no mention of the “little one”! Instead, Jesus speaks of our “brother.” That would seem to be a pretty big deal. And there's something else...

Did Jesus say, “If your brother sins, go and tell him his fault” [NASB, NIV, NET] or did Jesus actually say, “If your brother sins **against you** [ESV, NRSV, NKJV, HCSB, NLT], go and tell him his fault”? Can you see what a difference this would make in how we understand this passage on “Church discipline”? In verses 1-14, Jesus has warned His disciples about the danger of sinning against **someone else** in the assembly (causing a **little one** to stumble). So now maybe Jesus is instructing the disciples about what to do when the tables are turned – when someone else in the assembly (their **brother**) sins against **them**.

[NOTE: If you want to skip the discussion of this textual variant and simply assume the words (or the meaning) “against you”, go to page 4 and begin with the last paragraph before Roman Numeral I.]

This interpretation would make sense of the change from “little one” to “brother,” and it would help us to see how these verses **relate** to all that has come before, and yet at the same time how they are **different** in their focus. This also fits with the fact that apparently I'm the only one in

the assembly who knows about my brother's sin ("between you and him alone"). But then does this mean that I am actually to initiate "church discipline" for an offense against *me*? But what about when Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, how often will my brother sin *against me*, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" – And Jesus responded, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven"? Doesn't this mean that when my brother sins against me, I must forgive, but when my brother's sin is of another kind, I must pursue the steps of "church discipline (cf. France)? How does "church discipline" fit with my responsibility to forgive? Actually, I think these questions are very easily answered, and hopefully we'll see how as we look at the passage a little more closely.

Now, of course, everything would be very simple if we knew for sure what Jesus said in verse fifteen! Did He say, "If your brothers sins," or did He say, "If your brother sins *against you*"?

### ***External Evidence (manuscripts; translations; quotations)***

The reason our English translations are divided on this question is very simply because the Greek manuscripts themselves are divided. Now in most cases, it's fairly easy to decide which reading is original. Sometimes the manuscript evidence is so much stronger for one reading that we must assume this reading is original. Very often, the *reason* or *explanation* for the discrepancy is obvious (errors of sight, errors of hearing, etc.), and so therefore the original reading is also obvious (*why* or *how* it happened explains *what* happened). Sometimes the surrounding context makes clear what the original reading must be. But sometimes, the choice between two alternate readings is not at all obvious. Now this is *rarely* the case. In fact, in more than 99% of the places where the Greek manuscripts disagree, we can still be absolutely *certain* of the original reading. As a book, the Bible is completely unparalleled when it comes to the *vast* number of *witnesses* to the text, and also the *age* of these witnesses (original language manuscripts, ancient versions and translations, quotations from the church fathers, etc.)! With *no other* ancient book can we be *anywhere near* as certain of what the original "autographs" looked like. But what about the remaining fraction of a percent where we cannot be sure of the original reading, and where the different *readings* actually result in different *meanings*? Well, the most important thing for us to know is that there is *not one single doctrine* of Scripture that depends for its existence on a disputed reading. In other words, there is not one single variant in the Greek manuscripts that *in any way* affects *any one* of the doctrines of the Christian faith. What an amazing and wonderful assurance this is! We can know beyond any shadow of a doubt that what we have written on the pages of our English Bibles is truly the infallible and authoritative revelation of God's Word and will for our lives!

So what about the disputed reading here in Matthew 18:15? Is it "if your brother sins", or is it "if your brother sins *against you*"? We can't know for sure, but in light of the manuscript evidence alone,\* I definitely lean in favor of the opinion that Jesus actually said the words "against you."<sup>†</sup>

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\* The majority of manuscripts and the majority of manuscript families/traditions support the reading "against you" (cf. Textual Apparatus of the Greek New Testament; Fourth Revised Edition)

<sup>†</sup> It's interesting that the Greek words for "sins against you" go like this: "hamartese eis se." "ese" and "eis se" sound very much alike. So if you were a scribe listening to a reader, what do you think would be a more believable scenario? Would you be more likely to make the mistake of *adding* what your mind wrongly said you *had* heard (the similar sounding words "against you") or *dropping* what your mind wrongly said you had *not* heard (leaving out the

That's what we call the *external* evidence. But what about the internal evidence? What about the evidence within the text itself (context)? Can this give us any clues as to what Jesus actually said? And will these clues agree with the external manuscript evidence or will they contradict that evidence?<sup>‡</sup>

### ***Internal Evidence (context)***

We've already seen how the words "if your brother sins *against you*" would fit with the change from "little ones" to "brother", and how this makes sense of the relationship between verses 1-14 and verses 15-20. So let's skip ahead for a minute and look at verse twenty-one. After Jesus' instructions about what to do if your brother sins, Peter asks, "Lord, how often will my brother sin *against me*, and I forgive him?" Peter, at least, seems to have understood that Jesus was talking specifically about sins *against him* (cf. Hendriksen; contra France), and he was wondering how often he should forgive his brother for these sins against him *rather than pursuing the final steps of "church discipline"* (16-17). In other words, Peter seems to be asking, "How many times should I forgive a brother who sins against me before I finally "write him off" as a Gentile and a tax collector and regard him no longer as a true brother and member of the assembly?"

But now let's look for just a moment at the parallel to these verses in Luke chapter seventeen (cf. chart). In Luke 17:3 Jesus says, "If your brother sins, *rebuke him*." This matches our passage in Matthew on Church discipline. So *in Luke*, when Jesus says, "If your brother sins", does He *mean* "If your brother sins *against you*"? Well, notice that Jesus goes on to say, "And *if* [your brother] repents, *forgive him*. The fact that I am to forgive my brother could certainly *imply* that the sin for which I have rebuked my brother was *against me*. But we can't yet be sure. Did you notice that I am only to forgive him *if* he repents? Now we are *always* to have a forgiving spirit, and we are *never* to harbor bitterness or resentment in our hearts. So when Jesus tells us to forgive our brother *if* he repents, He must be talking *specifically* about our responsibility to accept a repentant brother back into the fellowship of the assembly. In other words, *if* (and only *if*) a brother repents, we *must* forgive him – we must readmit him to full fellowship in the kingdom assembly. This will be Jesus' point when he talks to Peter about how many times he must forgive his brother. In this case I would obviously be responsible to extend "forgiveness" to a brother even when his sin is *not* against me.

But now we come to what I believe is the clinching argument. Let's look at the parallelism between Luke 17:3 and Luke 17:4.

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words "against you")? Actually, in the midst of a very long day of transcribing, it's most likely that either scenario would be equally possible. So in this case, *why* or *how* it happened doesn't necessarily reveal *what* happened.

<sup>‡</sup> If the internal evidence (context) does contradict the external evidence (manuscripts), then we have to decide which evidence is stronger! There are some who assume that the internal evidence (context) *does* contradict the external evidence (manuscripts), and so they choose to give *greater weight* to what they believe the *internal* evidence says (they conclude that Jesus did *not* actually say the words "against you"; cf. France). However, I am strongly of the opinion that the internal evidence (context) actually *supports* the external evidence (manuscripts) so that it is very likely that Jesus did actually say the words "against you."

Jesus makes His point

Luke 17:3a – *If your brother sins*, rebuke him.

Luke 17:3b – And if [your brother] *repents*, *forgive* him.

Jesus *restates* and *amplifies* His point

Luke 17:4a – And *if [your brother] sins AGAINST YOU* *seven times in the day...*

Luke 17:4b – ... and turns to you *seven times*, saying, ‘I *repent*,’ you must *forgive* him

I think this proves beyond any doubt that in Luke, Jesus had in mind all along sins *against me* (cf. NIV, Luke 17:3). And I don’t know of any reason why the same shouldn’t be true in Matthew.

Whether or not Jesus said the words “against you” in Matthew 18 (and I lean in favor of the opinion that He *did* say these words), it seems clear to me that this *is* what Jesus meant.<sup>§</sup> So I conclude that in verses 1-14, Jesus warned His disciples about the danger of sinning against *someone else* in the assembly (causing a *little one* to stumble). But now in verses 15-35, Jesus tells His disciples what to do when the tables are **turned** – when someone else in the assembly (their *brother*) sins against **them**. This is going to make a huge difference in how we read and apply this very familiar passage on “Church discipline.”

**I. Matthew 18:15** – If your brother sins [*against you*], go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

Let’s look first of all at what Jesus commands us to *do*. Jesus commands us to go to our brother when he sins against us and *tell him* (Greek: *elegcho*) his fault. This really isn’t a very good translation of “*elegcho*”. Some translations say that we are to go to our brother and “*show*” him his fault (NASB; NET). The point here is that I am to *expose* to my brother where he has wronged me with the goal of bringing about true *conviction* in his heart. “*Elegcho*” can be actually be translated both with the word “*expose*” (Jn. 3:20; Eph. 5:11, 13), and with the word “*convict*” (Jn. 8:46; 16:8; Jude 15). But the HCSB actually translates “*elegcho*” with the word “*rebuke*” – “If your brother sins against you, go and *rebuke* him in private.” This is also a very legitimate way to translate the Greek word “*elegcho*” (Luke 3:19; 1 Tim. 5:20; Tit. 1:13; 2:15; Rev. 3:19)! In the parallel passage in Luke Jesus actually uses a different Greek word that can *only* be translated “*rebuke*” (or perhaps “*warn*”; NCV & Mat. 12:16) – “If your brother sins, *rebuke* him” (17:3). So we see that we are to do so much more than simply *tell* our brother his fault. We are to *show* him his fault, and even rebuke him for his fault with the goal of bringing about true conviction in his life. And we are to take the *initiative* in doing this! We are not to wait until the subject happens to come up in conversation, we are to “*go*” and show him his fault.

Now we might think at first that this is a recipe for disaster. So whenever my brother sins *against me*, I am commanded to *go* and *rebuke* him? But isn’t this just asking for trouble? Won’t this just encourage vengeful feelings on my part and ultimately make the problem worse? Actually, *not at all!* Indeed, *far from it!* First of all, if we are to show our brother his fault, and even rebuke him

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<sup>§</sup> The fact that the reading “against you” even exists says a lot about how many people understood this passage early on.

with the goal of bringing about true conviction, then obviously we must be dealing with a *clear* matter of *sin* in his life! And this is exactly what Jesus says: “If your brother *sins* against you.” Notice Jesus didn’t say: “If your brother hurts your feelings.” There is *often* a very *big* difference between hurting my feelings and *sinning* against me! Jesus didn’t say: “If your brother offends you.” There is *often* a very *big* difference between offending me and *sinning* against me! Jesus didn’t say: “If your brother makes you angry.” There is *often* a very *big* difference between making me angry and *sinning* against me! The issue here is not first of all how we *feel*. (How easily will we be offended, or have hurt feelings, or become angry if we have assumed for ourselves the status of a little child surrounded by important grownups?) The issue is “*sin*” and *nothing less* than “*sin*.” *Whenever* a brother *sins* against us, we are *commanded* to go to him and show him his fault with the goal of bringing about true conviction in his life.

Now how many of us are “comfortable” initiating a conversation with a brother or a sister in which we plan on “rebuking” him or her for a sin against us? I’m assuming that the answer to this question is very few, if any of us! But *why* not? I believe that in most cases, the reason we are not comfortable confronting a brother for his “sin” against us is because it’s *not actually* a case of “sin” in his life! Remember, either it is sin or it’s not sin. If it’s not a matter of sin, then the problem is with us. We are dealing with hurt, and offended, and angry feelings *because we have failed* to assume the status of a little child surrounded by important grownups! But if it is an issue of sin, then we have no excuse for our failure to go to our brother and show him his fault with the goal of bringing true conviction in his life! I must either get over it because it’s *not* a matter of sin, or I must be *willing* to confront my brother because it *is* a matter of sin! In one very real sense, these are our only two options. There is no middle ground! So one reason we don’t feel comfortable confronting a brother for his “sin” against us is because very often it’s *not* actually an issue of *sin*.

But there is another reason that we would rather not confront a brother for his sin against us. Very simply, we would *rather* stay bitter, and angry, and resentful. It’s far more easy and even in a fleshly sense “satisfying” to show *someone else* my brother’s sin against me rather than to go and show my brother. But notice that Jesus says: “Go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” And remember, too, that Jesus has already reminded us about the radical measures we must be taking against the sin that resides in our own flesh (8-9; cf. Mat. 7:1-5). So if I truly go to my brother in the right and proper way (*privately* and with true *humility* and *gentleness*; cf. Gal. 6:1) – this can only have the effect of *killing and annihilating* all feelings of bitterness, and anger, and resentment! But again, this is exactly why so many of us refuse to confront our brother. We would *rather stay* bitter, and angry, and resentful – and so in this way we place ourselves in danger of stumbling. When I cause even one “little one” to stumble, I must bear the full weight of responsibility. But when a brother sins against me and I stumble, I cannot blame my brother. Instead, I must avoid all possibility of *stumbling* by going to my brother and seeking in true humility and love to show him his sin!

Remember that Greek word, “elegcho”, which means “show”, “convict”, or “rebuke”? Well, in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament (which Jesus and His disciples read and memorized from) we find this same word in Leviticus 19. In fact, we can be almost certain that Jesus had these very verses in mind as He was instructing His disciples.

- ✓ Leviticus 19:17–18 (HCSB) — “You must not harbor hatred against your brother. [Instead] **rebuke [LXX: “elegcho”] your neighbor directly**, and you will not incur guilt because of him [you will not be caused to stumble]. Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against members of your community, but love your neighbor as yourself.

When my brother sins against me, I can become guilty by taking revenge or simply by bearing a grudge. But the one sure way to avoid incurring this guilt is to rebuke my neighbor directly (privately, humbly, and gently), with the *goal* of bringing about true conviction in his life. Notice the conclusion of the verses from Leviticus! “You must not harbor hatred against your brother. [Instead] **rebuke your neighbor directly**, and you will not incur guilt because of him. Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against members of your community, **BUT LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF**. In Matthew Jesus says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. **IF HE LISTENS TO YOU, YOU HAVE GAINED YOUR BROTHER.**” So our goal in rebuking our brother for his sin against us is not simply to avoid stumbling and incurring guilt ourselves, but in order that we might *love* our brother as ourselves – in order that we might *gain* our brother.

To sum up, there is no good or noble reason *whatsoever, at all*, for our failure to confront a brother when he has *sinned* against us – or for that matter, when he has *sinned* against anyone else! When we fail to confront a brother for his sin against us (or anyone else) we must *know this*: our reasoning is *always* sinful and wicked. But oh how we whitewash and sugarcoat the filthiness of our own thoughts and motives, so that we even succeed in deceiving ourselves! “If your brother sins [*against you*], go and show him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”

**II. Matthew 18:16** — But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Now once again, here is a powerful safeguard against “confronting” a brother for issues *other* than “*sin*”! *Before* I go to my brother and show him his fault against me, I had better be ready to take the next step of bringing one or two others along with me. Once again, I must either get over it because it’s *not* a matter of sin, or I must be *ready* to take one or two others along with me because it *is* a matter of sin! In one very real sense, these are our only two options. There is no middle ground! But if it truly is a matter of a brother’s sin against me, and I am still not willing to bring along one or two others in the event that he refuses to listen to me, what does this say about my *heart*? Well, it says one of two things: Either I would *rather* stay bitter, and angry, and resentful, or I simply don’t *love* my brother as I should because I’m not willing to do whatever it takes to *gain* my brother.

Now one point of bringing one or two others along with is so that they also might try to *show* the brother his sin and bring about true *conviction* in his heart (“If he refuses to listen to them”; v. 17a). But there is another reason. Jesus says, “Take one or two others along with you, *that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.*” That’s a direct quote from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy (19:15), and in the context of Deuteronomy, the point was that no one should be convicted or punished for a crime that only one person could claim to have witnessed. Now in the context of Matthew eighteen, it seems that no one else was even

aware of this brother's sin, much less witnesses. The sin was against one specific person, and to this point that person has approached his brother only in the utmost privacy and confidentiality. So the point of the "one or two others" is not that they have been eye-witnesses of the original sin, but rather so that they might *become* eyewitnesses of the attempt to gain the brother and the brother's continued refusal to listen. This, then, sets us up for the next step in the attempt to gain back the brother who has sinned against us. Jesus continues:

**III. Matthew 18:17a** — If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

First of all, the *reason* we tell it to the church (assembly) is so that the whole assembly can try to *show* the brother his sin with the goal of bringing about true *conviction* and *repentance* ("If he refuses to listen even to the church; 17b). The brother is still treated *as a brother*, and as one who shares in the full privileges of membership in the assembly. In other words, when we "tell it to the church," we have *not yet* reached the final step of "church discipline"! Can you see how very *patient and longsuffering* Jesus is calling us to be?

But now *especially*, I wonder if we might want to reevaluate what really constitutes a *sin* against us! Brothers and sisters, *before* I go to my brother and show him his fault against me, I had better be ready to take the third step of bringing his fault before the entire assembly with the confirming testimony of one or two additional witnesses! Can't we see now how these steps that Jesus prescribes have the powerful effect of helping us *distinguish* between those times when I have been sinned against and those times when my feelings have been hurt? So I think my brother has sinned against me... *Really?* Is this really a case where steps two and three would be appropriate? But if not, then I can most assuredly know that my brother has *not* sinned against me! I may be angry, I may be hurt, I may be offended – but this is my own fault because of my own failure to assume the status of a little child surrounded in the assembly by important grownups. Once again, I must either get over it because it's *not* a matter of sin, or I *must* be *ready* to bring my brother's sin before the entire assembly with the confirming testimony of one or two additional witnesses because it *is* a matter of sin! These are our only two options. There is no middle ground! But if it truly is a matter of a brother's *sin* against me, and I'm still not willing to bring this sin before the church in the event that he refuses to listen to me *or* to the additional witnesses, what does this say about my *heart*? Well, it says one of *only* two things: Either I would *rather* be bitter, and angry, and resentful, or I simply don't *love* my brother as I should because I'm not willing to do whatever it takes to *gain* my brother.

### **Conclusion**

How desperately we need God's Word to clear the fog of our own sinful thinking and reveal to us what is the true nature of the case – what is, in fact, the *reality*! Who is it that has sinned against us? We are obligated to go to that person immediately and show him his sin in private. But if I have already revealed his sin to someone else, then I am now the one who has sinned against my brother. Before we go to show our brother his sin we should make sure that we're ready to take the second and third steps of bringing additional witnesses and then bringing his sin before the entire assembly. We must make *sure* that this is truly a matter of being *sinned* against, and not simply a matter of feeling angry, hurt, and offended. And when we do actually go to our brother to show him his sin against us, we must go to him as a little child, and as those who are

very much aware of our own desperate need to be tearing out our own eyes, and cutting off our own hands and feet.

Brothers and sisters, *for more reasons that one* it should be obvious by now that we ought to be earnestly *hoping* and *praying* that our brother never, ever sins against us! But in the event that he does sin against us, our biblical **responsibility** and **obligation** is crystal clear. For every angry thought and for every bitter feeling God will hold us accountable. For our failure to go to our brother and show him his sin against us God will hold us accountable. For our failure to *love* our brother as ourselves, God will hold us accountable. Here, once again, is the secret to living *together* in true *community*, as the true *assembly* of the Messiah.

- ✓ Leviticus 19:17–18 (HCSB) — “You must not harbor hatred against your brother. [Instead] **REBUKE your neighbor directly**, and you will not incur guilt because of him. Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against members of your community, but **LOVE your neighbor** as yourself.