

Matthew 18:17b-20

Introduction

By now it should be obvious to all of us that Matthew eighteen is not “the chapter on church discipline.” Matthew eighteen is the fourth major discourse of Jesus in Matthew and as with all the other discourses, its theme is the kingdom – the rule and reign of God in the person of Jesus, the Messiah. But more specifically, the theme of Matthew eighteen is the kingdom *community*, the *assembly* of the Messiah. Through the first sixteen and a half verses, there has been no mention of “church discipline.” We’ve heard a great deal about how we must all be “little ones” and how we must treat those in the assembly who appear by worldly standards to be “littler” than we are. We’ve especially been warned against causing even one of the least of Jesus’ disciples to stumble in sin. But what about when a brother *sins* against *me*? Then what? Jesus answers:

Matthew 18:15–17 — 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. 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. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church...

Still no mention of “Church discipline.” In fact, the very point of these verses is to *avoid* church discipline if at all possible! We’ve been rejoicing in how patient and longsuffering God is, and we’ve been reminded that we are to show this *same* patience and longsuffering to the brother who sins against us.

Now because the theme of this chapter is how to live *together* in *community*, Jesus specifically says “if your brother *sins against you*.” The focus of Jesus in this chapter is very much on the *relationships* between brothers and sisters in the assembly. We could say much the same thing about the last six commandments which can be summed up like this: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” So God says “You shall not commit adultery” not because other forms of sexual immorality are acceptable, but because the sin of adultery is so clearly a failure to love our neighbor (spouse) as ourselves. When God specifically forbids adultery, He is actually forbidding *all* sexual sin. In the same way, God says “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” not because other forms of lying are acceptable, but because “bearing false witness” is especially and uniquely a failure to love my neighbor as myself. When God forbids false testimony, He is actually forbidding *all* lying and deceit. In a similar way, when Jesus tells us what to do when a brother sins against us, He is actually telling us what to do when a brother is found in any *sin* – whether that sin is specifically against us or not. We saw last week that underlying the focus on sin committed *against a brother* there is the more basic concern that *all* sin is first and foremost a sin against *God* and an affront to His presence in the assembly – which is His *holy* temple. And so this is *why* Jesus says that if a sinning brother refuses to listen even to the church, then, and *only* then:

I. Matthew 18:17b — Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Only now do we come to the point of “Church discipline,” and yet we should make no mistake about the fact that we *have* now come to that point. We saw last week that to regard someone as a Gentile and a tax collector is to exclude that person from all the privileges of membership in the assembly and to treat him as we would an “outsider.” But we’re not just talking about any outsider. We’re talking about someone who willfully and stubbornly persists in his sin despite every attempt to bring him to repentance. This person *must surely* be removed and excluded from this assembly, because this assembly is the dwelling place and temple of God’s holy presence. This would include being barred from the Lord’s Supper and shunned from fellowship in general.

- ✓ 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15 — If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and [do not associate; NASB] with him...
- ✓ Titus 3:10 — As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him.
- ✓ 1 Corinthians 5:11 — I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

Let’s remember again that every day we refuse to associate with that “brother” or “sister” should be a cause of genuine *grief* and *sorrow* – a grief and sorrow that the Holy Spirit produces in our hearts. Every time that this brother is excluded from the Lord’s Supper should be a *painful* reminder of the need to be *praying earnestly* for his repentance and restoration. And yet he *has* been excluded. He *is* being shunned. He *is* to be treated as the worst of outsiders, and therefore cut off from *all* the privileges of membership in the assembly.

But what’s the true meaning and significance of this kind of discipline? What’s really the big deal? No, it’s not at all nice to have my friends withdraw and be aloof, but is that really all this is about? Is church discipline basically just an attempt to make someone feel “lonely”? If that was really the extent of church discipline, then it would have no redemptive *power*! The purpose of church discipline is to restore a *sinner* to right relationship with *God*, and yet the mere fact of being lonely and abandoned has no power to do any such thing – it has no *redemptive* power!

Jesus said, “Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” But if I am to *the assembly* as a Gentile and a tax collector, then that begs the question: “What am I to *God*?” The problem in our day and age is that many of us don’t see a connection, but this is to our own detriment. In the Old Testament, to be cut off and excluded from the covenant community was to be cut off and excluded from the blessings of God’s rule and of God’s *salvation*. To be cut off and excluded from the covenant community was to be cut off and excluded from the blessings of God’s special *presence* – especially as His presence was revealed at the temple. To be cut off from the covenant community was figuratively – and oftentimes literally – a sentence of death. But surely things are different now, right? God’s presence is no longer *contained* in a physical temple. God is everywhere! So I may be cut off from the assembly, but this doesn’t mean that I’m cut off from God! But *even in the Old Testament*, God’s presence was never restricted to the physical temple. *Even in the Old Testament*, God was everywhere. But that *special* revelation of God’s *saving* presence could be found *only* within the covenant community, and especially at the temple in Jerusalem. And so it is in the New Testament. God is at all times *everywhere* (He is

omnipresent), and yet the *special* manifestation of His *saving* presence, and the blessings of His saving rule are to be found *only* within the covenant community, and especially in the gathered assembly – which is God’s temple. So to be cut off and excluded from the assembly is a terrible and a fearful thing! It is to be cut off and excluded from the blessings of God’s saving rule and presence! To be *to the assembly* as a Gentile and a tax collector is in some sense to be *to God* as a Gentile and a tax collector! Let me say this again, as it is so very important for us to understand: To be *to the assembly* as a Gentile and a tax collector is in some sense to be *to God* as a Gentile and a tax collector – as one who stands *outside* of His redeemed and chosen people! What a terrible, and horrible, and wretched place to be standing. Jesus makes all these things very clear and explicit in verses 18-20.

II. Matthew 18:18 — Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth [is]^{*} bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth [is] loosed in heaven.

In Matthew 16, Jesus spoke these very same words:

✓ Matthew 16:18-19 — And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth [is] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth [is] loosed in heaven.

We saw then that this binding and loosing is really a binding and loosing of men and of women. To bind and to loose is to declare with authority who is saved and forgiven, and who is judged and condemned. This is not based on our own authority, but on the authority of God’s Word, which promises forgiveness to those who repent and believe and warns of condemnation for all those who refuse to repent and believe. Remember that the Bible pictures God’s **Word** not just as a neutral message that is at the mercy of those who hear, but rather the Bible pictures God’s **Word** as an *active agent* that *powerfully works to accomplish* God’s purposes in those who hear (Hos. 6:5; Jer. 1:9-10; 5:14). In *our* mouth, the word of the Gospel is powerful to **do** and to **accomplish** all that it proclaims – to *open* the doors of the kingdom to those who believe and *shut* the doors of the kingdom against those who refuse to believe! Or we could put it this way: To bind and to loose is a **verdict** about who is granted entry, and who is denied entry into the *church* – which is the kingdom community.

Now this is important! Matthew 16 and Matthew 18 are the *only* two places in Matthew where the church (or the assembly) is mentioned, and in *both* of these places we also find the *only* two mentions of “binding and loosing”! In Matthew 16 this binding and loosing includes the preaching of the Gospel to the **unsaved** or the “**unchurched**”, and the admitting or the excluding of these people from the assembly according to the verdict of God’s Word. But here in Matthew 18, this binding and loosing is specifically related to church discipline, and so it actually applies to the **professing believer** and **member** of the assembly! Jesus is basically saying this: “Whoever you regard as a Gentile and a tax collector on earth is also regarded as a Gentile and a tax collector *in heaven*. Whoever you exclude from the assembly on earth is also excluded from the

* I take “shall be” in the sense of “is” (cf. Blomberg) But I still agree with the excellent conclusions of Carson who translates “shall have been”.

assembly *in heaven*. Whoever you exclude from the blessings of God's saving rule, *God* also excludes from the blessings of His saving rule."

When the church exercises church discipline, it's not inventing a fiction! When the church excludes someone from the blessings of God's saving rule, it's not playing a game of pretend. It's for *real*! When we faithfully and properly exercise church discipline, we can be sure that Jesus Himself is guaranteeing and validating our word – because it is *His* word. We can be sure that there is true agreement between earth and heaven – between our decisions and declarations and the decisions and declarations of Jesus in heaven! It has been given to the *church* to share in the authority of *heaven*. Maybe now we can make sense of these words from Paul:

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 5:5 — You are to deliver this man (who has remained unrepentant) *to Satan* for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.
- ✓ 1 Timothy 1:19–20 — By rejecting [faith and a good conscience], some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over *to Satan* that they may learn not to blaspheme.

To exclude someone from the assembly (binding) is actually and truly to exclude that person from the blessings of God's saving rule *and therefore* to hand that person over to the *domain* of Satan (cf. Fee). On the other hand, when we restore a repentant sinner to the assembly (loosing), we are actually and truly restoring this person to all the blessings of God's saving rule. And, of course, that's the *goal*. The goal of excluding someone from the assembly is *always* and *only restoration*. Jesus puts it this way in John twenty verse twenty-three:

- ✓ John 20:23 – If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any [through church discipline and exclusion from the assembly], it is withheld.

Now at this point, some of us may be thinking of the medieval Roman Catholic Church, and how it so terribly and shamefully abused the power of "excommunication." The first thing we need to remember is that as a general rule, the Roman Catholic Church was not at all practicing *biblical* church discipline! "Excommunication" was almost always a unilateral, one-sided decision or "decree" of the leadership (hierarchy) rather than a united action taken by the *entire assembly*. That's the first thing that we have to keep in mind. But there's something else we need to remember: "Only repentant sinners are to be freed of their sins, only the impenitent are to be sent away unforgiven. The keys are stronger than we; they never work according to any man's perverted will. Each fits its own lock, nor can you work the loosing key where the binding key alone fits, or vice versa" (Lenski). In other words, an unrepentant sinner may be welcomed in some assemblies, but this obviously does not mean that the unrepentant sinner has been welcomed by God! Compared to the New Testament church, we obviously live in a very different world. Today, if an unrepentant person is excluded from one assembly, he can simply go down the street or to a neighboring city and find welcome at another church! In this case, the assembly at the first church has a responsibility to communicate to the second church that this person is under church discipline, and also the reasons why. The second church then has a responsibility to confirm the decisions of the first church. However, when another assembly welcomes the unrepentant person who has been excluded from his home assembly, this cannot

undo the binding of heaven. As long as this person remains under the discipline of an assembly somewhere in the world, he remains to God as a Gentile and a tax collector. “Whatever you bind on earth,” Jesus said, “is bound in heaven.” But on the other hand, if an innocent or repentant person is excluded from the assembly, he can have a true peace and certainty that he has *not* been excluded from the blessings of God’s saving rule. Now this is still not something to take lightly. In light of the gravity of Jesus’ words in Matthew 18, the person under church discipline must be *absolutely* and *positively sure* that the entire assembly has acted in error! And even when he is sure, he will want to do *everything he can* to set things right (if *at all* possible). To be under the sentence of church discipline, even *wrongfully*, is not something to be laughed at or taken lightly. The words of Jesus are very solemn: “**Truly, I say to you**, whatever you bind on earth [is] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth [is] loosed in heaven.”

III. Matthew 18:19 — Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

Notice that Jesus says: “*Again* I say to you.” So the point of this verse is basically to *confirm* the truth of what Jesus has just said.

Matthew 18:18 — **Truly, I say to you**, whatever you bind ON EARTH [is] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose ON EARTH [is] loosed in heaven.

Matthew 18:19 — **Again I say to you**, if two of you agree ON EARTH about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

The HCSB translates like this: “If two of you on earth agree about any *matter* that you pray for.” The Greek word for “matter” can mean “specifically ‘legal process,’ [or] ‘trial’” (BAGD). Paul uses this word in 1 Corinthians:

✓ 1 Corinthians 6:1 [NASB] — Does any one of you, when he has a case [lit. “matter”] against his neighbor [brother], dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints?

So in Matthew 18, Jesus seems to be saying something like this: “If two of you on earth agree about *any case of Church discipline* that you pray for, it will be done for you by My Father in heaven.” Even in a place where the assembly is made up of only a few adult believers (because there are only a few adult believers in that geographical area), if these believers agree about any matter of *Church discipline* that they may *pray* for, it will be done for them by God Himself (cf. 18:20; Hendriksen).

One very clear application of this verse is that we need to see the importance of humbly *praying* and *asking* God to *establish and confirm* the decision of the assembly – *whether that decision is to exclude a person in discipline or to restore someone in forgiveness*. When it comes to Church discipline, Jesus promises that God will hear the prayer of the assembly and confirm in heaven whatever decisions that the assembly has made on earth. But the most important application of this verse become even more clear in verse 20. If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven...

IV. Matthew 18:20 — For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.

How does the Father grant the prayer of the assembly? How does God “do” what the assembly has agreed upon? It’s really very simple. God confirms the decisions of this assembly by granting the powerful presence of Jesus in our midst (cf. 1 Cor. 5:4). “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, *I am there in their midst.*” When the assembly agrees together on a matter of Church discipline and brings that matter to God in prayer, God will confirm that decision by granting the full power of *Christ’s presence* as that decision is carried out (whether to “bind” in church discipline or to “loose” in forgiveness). This should be a wonderful *comfort and encouragement* to the church (to *us*) because it reminds us that our work is not empty and it’s not in vain! We can know that because God promises to answer our prayer through the powerful presence of Jesus in our midst, *we don’t ever have to give up on the hope of restoration.* If church discipline was basically just making someone feel like a lonely outcast, then it would have no *redemptive power* – it would have no power to bring a sinner back into right relationship with God. But since Church discipline is the exercise of ***the full power and authority of heaven itself(!)***, *therefore* it is powerful to *reclaim and restore* the one who has sinned! Church discipline is a serious and scary thing! – But that’s exactly what gives it its redemptive power.

Conclusion

In our day and age, we are *guilty of hugely* underestimating the importance of the assembly. But if we see church discipline for what it really is, then we’ll see the *assembly* for what it really is. Yes, it is true that God is *everywhere* at all times, and yet the *special* manifestation of His *saving* presence, and the blessings of His saving rule are to be found *only* within the covenant community, and especially in the gathered assembly – which is God’s temple. So to be cut off and excluded from the assembly is a *terrible and a fearful* thing! And yet there are many Christians who freely choose of their own accord to live their life apart from, and *outside of* the church. This is truly incomprehensible! And to Jesus, and to the apostles, we can only say that it would have been the epitome of foolishness. If there is no true assembly nearby, then the Christian should be willing to drive very long distances to get to one. And if there is no true assembly even for many miles around, then we must ask ourselves if we’re ***absolutely sure*** that there is no true assembly for many miles around! I often look at the terrible moral and doctrinal condition of the assembly at Corinth and wonder if we would have stripped it of its status as a true church even while the Apostle Paul himself affirmed that it was, in fact, the “church of God that is in Corinth” (1 Cor. 1:2)?

Through your membership and involvement in this church, have you placed yourself in a true position of *accountability* to the assembly? Are you diligently and joyfully committed to the weekly meetings of the church? By faith in God’s Word, let us have the eyes to *see* what the assembly *really is*.

But then we also need to be exhorted to be a church that is not afraid to exercise the power of the keys in church discipline. In this area of discipline, there are many churches that have been disobedient to God’s Word. We need to put aside our own human wisdom and our own ideas

about what is loving and right, and submit ourselves to the wisdom of God. And God, in His infinite *wisdom*, has given to this assembly the exceedingly *powerful* and *redemptive* tool of Church discipline. Let us *always be ready* to exercise this authority for the good of our brother and for the glory of God. Here, once again, is the key to living together in true community, as the true assembly of the Messiah.