

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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IF YOUR BROTHER SINS

Matthew 18:15-20

Sin in the Christian community is a matter of great concern for Jesus. It can be so damaging to the church that the Lord lays down very specific steps as to how the problem is to be handled. These steps are described in Matthew 18:15-20. This is what Jesus says.

A brother who sins

Matthew 18:15. "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.

16 "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.

17 "And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.

18 "Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

19 "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.

20 "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst."

And if your brother sins... Some Greek texts have two extra words. *And if your brother sins against you...* The addition of *eis se*, 'against you,' significantly affects the way we interpret the whole passage. It changes a concern about a brother's sin, of whatever kind, into a concern with a personal breakdown of relationships.

I understand this verse to refer to sin in general, not to an offense done to the person concerned. When I read the immediate context (Jesus just talked about losing one sheep out of a hundred), it seems to me that it is the brother's welfare which is in focus. We don't want him to be lost. This is different from dealing with a personal conflict. It is true that the text will address this topic later in v. 21 when Peter asks, *Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?* But here in v. 15, which follows immediately after the Parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus is still dealing with the problem of a disciple who is in spiritual danger through sinful living. And He tells us how we are to act when we are aware of that.

Christian confrontation

When a Christian dishonors God, other Christians have a responsibility to go and talk to that person. Two remarks need to be said at this point.

First, it is only the Christian brother whom we are to correct. Remember Jesus' words. *If your brother sins...* The reference is to a brother. Jesus never asked us to go around correcting the moral behavior of the society as a whole. In a certain sense, that is none of our business. But the life of those who belong to our spiritual community is our business. And when a brother lives in sin, it is our Christian duty to deal with that person. We cannot remain passive when we know that Jesus' reputation, the church's integrity, and the person's salvation are at stake.

Second, only behavior clearly and consistently contrary to the word of God is confrontable, nothing else. This passage assumes that the person raising the issue is in the right and that the behavior being criticized is wrong (Jesus spoke about someone who sins). In practice, matters are not always so straightforward and it is extremely important for the person taking the initiative to make sure that the 'sin' he perceives is not a matter of personal preference.

Discussing a personal misbehavior is a very sensitive issue. It is also a risky one because you never know how the other person will react. It can easily arouse negative emotions and may cause bigger problems in the end. If it is a situation where the initiator has not been personally affected by the sin, the first response from the other person might be to say, 'What right do you have to tell me that? It's not of your business. Go away!' Therefore we feel uneasy when we think we must speak to another Christian about sin. We tend to justify inaction by saying that in response to evil we are to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:38-42), or by quoting the warning in Matthew 7:1-5 against finding fault with others while not noticing one's own failings. But Matthew 18 is also in the gospel. And this passage tells us that in the church, each must be concerned and take responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the other.

Just between the two of you

The first step in correcting a brother who sins is to *go and reprove him*. The idea here is not to scold someone or to abuse him verbally for his misconduct, but rather to bring the problem to his attention in the hope that he will repent of it. Needless to say that this requires great sensitivity on the part of the initiator.

This initial stage must be done strictly *in private*, 'between him and you alone.' We go directly to the source and deal with the problem at that level. In this way, the honor of the brother who sins is guarded and it keeps believers from gossiping with one another.

You know, not many people can keep confidences. The moment a matter is shared, it must be understood that it will likely be spread around at some point. Personal behavior and 'juicy news' are what the carnal nature of man enjoys discussing. It is the subject which rumors are made. Few are spiritually free of the urge to talk about the faults and rumors surrounding others. This is true even among professing believers.

Jesus tells us here that we must deal with sin with a minimum of publicity. The principle set out in this passage is of minimum exposure, other people being brought in only when the more private approach has failed. The ideal solution is a discussion 'just between the two of you.'

Lost and found

If the brother listens, i.e., if he responds appropriately, with repentance and a request for forgiveness, then restoration takes place. *You have won your brother*. The purpose of the approach is underlined by the verb 'win,' which shows that the concern is not mainly with the reputation of the community but with the spiritual welfare of the individual. The fault is pointed out to the offender for the purpose of winning him for God.

The word 'win' suggests that the person was lost or in danger of being lost, and now has been regained. It is used elsewhere in the Bible in reference to the conversion of heathens. Let's take two examples.

*1 Corinthians 9:19. For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might **win** the more.*

*1 Peter 3:1. In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be **won** without a word by the behavior of their wives.*

Here in Matthew 18, it is used of a believer who is rescued from spiritual ruin. He is like the stray sheep of the preceding section, which is brought back to the fold.

With two or three witnesses

If the private admonishment is not successful, then the person is to proceed to step two. In this step, he takes one or two others along. While the perception or motives of an individual may be questioned, there is more authority in the united testimony of two or three should the matter be brought before the church. Also, going to the person as a group guarantees a greater persuasive appeal and protects the confronter from misrepresentations.

It is easy to give up after a divisive brother refuses to listen. 'Let him suffer the consequences of his behavior,' we may be tempted to think. 'If he is not going to listen, I'm not going to talk to him.' Sin has the property of closing down communication. Whenever there is a conflict, communication either slows down or stops completely. It is like two countries at war against each other. One says to the other, 'I am shutting off diplomatic relations with you. I will withdraw my ambassadors and you ask yours to leave. If you don't, I will kick them out. We are not in talking terms anymore.'

However, the Lord says, 'Keep the line of communication open at all cost. Stay with him. Don't let the line break down. Do everything possible to remain in communication with him.' So this is the demand of Jesus throughout the whole process: maximum communication and minimum publicity.

Inform the church

If the additional witnesses can accomplish nothing and the person still refuses to listen, then the third step is to inform the church. The objective at this point is still to help the sinning person to see his fault, repent, and be restored. Faced by the disapproval of the whole community, the offender ought surely to recognize that this was not just a personal grievance from 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.

The fourth and last step is to dissociate with that person. He should be treated as *a Gentile and a tax-gatherer*. A Gentile and a tax-gatherer were people from whom a good Jew kept his distance. While Jesus rejected this attitude in its literal application (Matthew 8:5-13; 9:9-13; etc), here He uses the expression metaphorically for someone to be avoided. There can be no real fellowship with an unrepentant sinner.

Not only is he to be excluded from the church, he is also to be categorized as a person who is 'at the bottom of the moral scale' - like the Gentiles and the tax-collectors. It is not a small matter when a congregation decides that a person who was once a brother is no longer considered as a brother anymore. When the whole church participates in this decision, the whole church experiences the fear of the Lord and the gravity of sin.

This passage rules out any notion of an isolated, individual Christian (i.e., a TV or internet Christian). The Christian is always to be accountable to a community. This leads me to talk to you about the expression 'two or three' which is repeated several times in our passage. It appears in v. 16, v. 19, v. 20, and indirectly in v. 18. We find in these words, 'two or three,' a spiritual principle of great importance. And the principle is this. The Christian life cannot proceed as God meant it to proceed unless there is an open communication, a union, an agreement between at least two or three people. Without that, there is simply no spiritual life.

Let me share with you four thoughts about this 'two or three' expression.

When two or three disciples get together

In v. 16, we see that there needs to be two or three people to establish a witness to the truth. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 19:15. *That by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.* The point of the OT reference is that multiple testimony is much more effective in establishing the truth. The witness of two people is incomparably greater than the witness of one person.

There is a passage in Deuteronomy 32:30 which shows the greater effectiveness of two people instead of one.

Deuteronomy 32:30. "How could one chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight, unless their Rock had sold them, and the Lord had given them up?"

Unless God had intervened, unless He had delivered them into your hands, how would you have been able to win? That is the question.

But notice the beginning of the sentence. One person chases a thousand; two people chase two thousand? No. Two make ten thousand flee. Where there is one, you chase one thousand. Where there are two, you put ten thousand to flight. The increase is not double, but tenfold. God's power works so much more effectively through two people than through one person.

Evil is to be dealt with on the testimony of several, at least two or three. This is what makes the church to be more effective in our battle against sin. Remember that Matthew 18 is about the struggle against sin. The battle is easier when we fight together, shoulder to shoulder, in harmony with one another. One person wins against a thousand, maybe. But if you have two such warriors, they would put ten thousand to flight. Imagine what would happen with the whole church fighting together for the truth!

The second point is in v. 18, on authority. *Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*

The 'you' here is plural. Whatever you, disciples (plural), bind on earth will be bound in heaven. If you, i.e. two or three people, act together in harmony, with one spirit and one mind, what you bind or loose will also be approved by God. To bind and loose, in the context of this passage, refers to the pronouncement of what is or is not sin. The same words were previously addressed to Peter (Matthew 16:19). Now they are addressed to the church. God is willing to entrust His authority to a team of two or three people who function together in spiritual unity.

The third point is the favor from the Lord. V. 19. *Again I say to you, that if **two of you** agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.* I have mentioned in previous lessons the limitations which the broader biblical context imposes on such apparently open-ended promises. Here we find that the promise is made with respect not to the whims

of the individual but to the agreed request of 'two of you,' using the same principle of requiring the testimony of two or three witnesses. God is willing to answer the requests of believers, even if they are only two, who come together for prayer in firm agreement on a matter.

And finally, the fourth point concerns God's special presence. V. 20. *For where **two or three** have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.* What does that mean, *there I am in their midst*? Isn't God there all the time? Yes, God is omnipresent. But here Jesus is talking about His special presence.

You see, we can say that there are two kinds of presence of God in the Bible. There is the general presence of God, the kind of presence that Paul speaks about in Acts 17 to the unbelievers. He says that *in Him we live and move and have our being*. God is everywhere. We live and move in Him. We cannot take in a breath without God being there.

But the other kind of presence is a special presence. For example, we are told that God was especially present in the tabernacle. Although He was with the Israelites all the time, His special presence was in the tabernacle so that anyone who entered the holiest place without God's permission would promptly drop dead. Similarly, Jesus promises that He is present in a special way wherever two or three are gathered in devotion to Him.

Have you often felt that God seems to be far away from you when you are alone? But when you are with two or three believers who share the same desire to be in spiritual union with Christ and who seek to act only for His glory, then you sense that God's presence becomes very real. You are filled with an awareness, a deep consciousness of God's Spirit communing with your spirit.