

Matthew 18:15–20

Introduction

Matthew 18:15–20 teaches Jesus' followers how to respond when sin damages a relationship or harms the Christian community. Jesus doesn't tell His disciples to ignore conflict, gossip about it, or rush to judgment. He gives them a patient process that seeks truth while protecting the dignity of everyone involved.

- Jesus begins with direct, private conversation.
- The circle grows only when earlier attempts at reconciliation fail.
- The goal is not punishment but restoration.
- Jesus describes successful correction as having “won” a brother or sister.
- Christ promises His presence while His people do this difficult work.

Setting

Matthew 18 focuses on relationships within the community of Jesus' disciples. The chapter begins with a lesson about humility and includes strong warnings about harming vulnerable people.

- Immediately before this passage, Jesus tells about the shepherd seeking one wandering sheep.
- Immediately afterward, Peter asks how often he must forgive someone who sins against him.
- Matthew therefore places accountability between seeking the wandering and forgiving the sinner.
- The whole setting points toward restoration rather than punishment.
- Jesus expects His Church to combine truth, grace, accountability, and forgiveness.

“Go and Point Out Their Fault”

Jesus begins by telling the person who knows of the wrong to go directly to the brother or sister involved.

- The first conversation is private.
- Jesus does not begin with public accusation or gathering supporters.
- Direct conversation gives both people an opportunity to speak and listen.
- We may discover that our own understanding is incomplete.
- The purpose is to bring the problem into the light where healing can begin.

Not every disagreement is sin. Christians can have different personalities, preferences, and opinions. Jesus is addressing genuine wrongdoing, not every irritation.

“You Have Won Them Over”

Jesus describes reconciliation as gaining or winning a brother or sister.

- The person is more important than winning the argument.
- Christian correction should seek repentance and restoration.
- Grace tells the truth without treating people as disposable.
- The wandering sheep immediately before this passage helps explain Jesus' purpose.
- Restoration is the measure of success whenever restoration is possible.

Grace Seeks Restoration

The process Jesus describes reflects the patience of grace. The person receives repeated opportunities to listen and respond.

- Prevenient grace moves toward people before they respond.
- Convicting grace brings sin into the light.
- Grace makes genuine response possible without forcing it.
- A person may listen, repent, and return, or may continue to refuse.
- The Church can seek restoration, but it cannot force repentance.

This reflects the Wesleyan understanding of responsible grace. God takes the initiative, yet human beings remain free to respond or resist.

“Take One or Two Others Along”

If the private conversation fails, Jesus says to involve one or two additional people.

- This reflects Deuteronomy 19:15 and its concern for fair testimony.
- The others should help establish truth rather than simply take sides.
- They may clarify misunderstandings or help both people hear one another.
- Their presence protects both the person raising the concern and the person being accused.
- Wise witnesses love everyone involved enough to tell everyone the truth.

“Tell It to the Church”

Only after private efforts and the involvement of a few others fail does the matter reach the larger Christian community.

- Jesus moves slowly from private concern to public accountability.
- Persistent refusal to listen eventually affects the whole community.
- Grace does not require the Church to ignore destructive behavior.
- Boundaries may become necessary when someone refuses accountability.
- Even then, the goal should never become humiliation or revenge.

Jesus' words about treating someone as a Gentile or tax collector describe a changed relationship with the community. Yet Jesus Himself reached toward Gentiles and tax collectors with grace. Boundaries may change, but love does not end.

Binding and Loosing

Jesus gives His followers responsibility to "bind" and "loose," language connected with authoritative discernment within the community.

- The Church has real responsibility for teaching and discipline.
- Christian authority remains under the authority of Christ.
- The Church does not create God's truth.
- Prayer, Scripture, wisdom, and the character of Jesus should guide discernment.
- Spiritual authority should produce humility rather than control.

"Where Two or Three Gather"

Jesus promises His presence when His followers gather in His name.

- In context, the two or three are involved in difficult discernment and reconciliation.
- Jesus is present when truth must be spoken.
- Jesus is present when people listen, repent, forgive, and pray.
- Gathering in His name means acting under His character and authority.
- His presence should shape the tone and purpose of every difficult conversation.

Application

Matthew 18 challenges us to talk to people rather than simply talk about them. When a genuine wrong needs to be addressed, Jesus calls us toward honest conversation, careful listening, and a desire for restoration.

The passage also teaches us to bring wise people into conflict rather than people who will automatically take our side.

Christian accountability should seek truth, protect people from unfair accusations, and create room for repentance.

Grace does not mean ignoring harmful behavior. Healthy boundaries may sometimes be necessary, but Christian discipline should always remain connected to love and the hope of restoration.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are related but not identical. Forgiveness may be offered even when trust must be rebuilt slowly. One person can forgive, but reconciliation requires willingness from both sides.

Above all, Jesus reminds us that He is present. Remembering that Christ is in the room should change the way we speak, listen, correct, forgive, and make difficult decisions.

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think Jesus begins with a private conversation?
- What is the difference between winning an argument and winning a brother or sister?
- How can we distinguish genuine sin from personal preference or ordinary disagreement?
- What qualities should the one or two additional witnesses have?
- How can the Church practice accountability without humiliating people?
- What does this passage teach us about grace and human freedom?
- How does Jesus' treatment of Gentiles and tax collectors help us understand Matthew 18:17?
- What is the difference between forgiveness, reconciliation, and restored trust?
- How might remembering Christ's presence change a difficult conversation?
- Where might Jesus be calling you to speak honestly, listen carefully, forgive, apologize, or establish a healthy boundary?

Main Truth

Jesus calls His followers to face conflict with truth and grace, always seeking restoration while remembering that Christ is present in the hard conversation.