

“RATIFYING HEAVEN’S DECISIONS”

MATTHEW 18:18-20

There is a three-letter word that has nearly disappeared from today’s vernacular. It is a word that has been relegated to a day when people were thought to be unenlightened and unsophisticated. It is a stark word, an uncouth word that produces mental images of Bible toting, pulpit pounding religious fanatics. It is a word that almost always elicits some kind of response from those who hear it—disbelief, disdain, disgust, defensiveness.

It is a word that is thoroughly out of sync with our tolerant, non-judgmental society, and so we have substituted it with a number of milder, less offensive words such as *mistake, imperfection, weakness, failure, growth area*.

Have you figured it out? It is **sin**. A word that Philip Yancey says, “even has a slithery, reptilian sound to it.” He also says it is a concept which is in grave danger of becoming extinct in our culture.

President Calvin Coolidge, noted for being a man of few words, went to church one Sunday without his wife. When he was having supper, she asked him what the preacher talked about that morning. Without looking up from his meal, he casually muttered “sin.”

Curious, and eager to converse, his wife said, “Well, what did he say about it?”

With his head still buried in his food, he replied, “He was against it.”

That story reflects the attitude of our times concerning the subject of sin. Sin gives preachers something to talk about on Sunday, but it makes for an awfully unpleasant topic of conversation around the dinner table, or at any other time for that matter. And that may be the primary reason we tend to avoid talking about it. The subject of sin is too unpleasant and too uncomfortable. It makes people squirm.

A popular television preacher once stated that talking about sin—that is, making people aware of their lost and sinful condition—was “destroying human personality and turning people off to Jesus” (Robert Shuller). And so, the three million people who watched him each week were told that Christ Jesus came into the world, not to save sinners, but to restore their self-esteem.

But the truth is *sin* is the reason Jesus came to this earth. He came because sin is destructive, it is powerful, it is paralyzing, and it results in our eternal condemnation. He came because sin is the number one problem of mankind—it has been ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden. And when we disregard it or minimize it or dismiss it as old-fashioned or unimportant, we trivialize the Lord Jesus. We are declaring that his virgin birth was meaningless, his death irrelevant, and his resurrection inconsequential.

What is more, when we deny sin or minimize it or tolerate it or flirt with it or coddle it, we become susceptible to its deceptive, enslaving power. And sin *is* powerful. It distorts our perspectives. It anaesthetizes our mental and spiritual faculties. It hardens our consciences. It stunts our growth. And when we strike a peace treaty with it, we become susceptible to its destructive influence. We forfeit joy, power, victory, progress, and growth in our lives.

Which is why our Lord Jesus told us to deal with sin directly and immediately, in our own lives *and* in the lives of others. Don’t ignore it, don’t sweep it under the rug, and don’t procrastinate. Deal with it head on and do so in the most constructive manner possible. He gives instruction on how to do this in Matthew 18, **verse 15**. 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.”*

Jesus’ was talking to His disciples about their relationships with each other and all who would believe in Him and become part of His family called the church. Jesus knew about

our inclinations to be selfish and insensitive and inconsiderate and offensive. He knew about our tendencies to get bent out of shape, lose our tempers, dig in our heels, get the upper hand, and jump to conclusions. But He insisted that when that happens, we must deal with it swiftly and constructively. We cannot let sin simmer or hurt fester; we must confront it, otherwise it can destroy us.

And Jesus says that when someone sins against you it is essential that you go to the person privately and try to resolve it between just the two of you, without getting anyone else involved. Why? Because it *contains* the damage. It preserves reputations—not just the reputation of the offender, but of the Lord Jesus. It prevents the matter from unnecessarily escalating. Constructive conflict resolution demands discretion and confidentiality. And the best-case scenario is that it is resolved with only two people knowing about the offense.

But that may not happen, and if it does not, **verse 16**, ***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.***

“If he does not listen” means that he does not accept or agree with the rebuke and he does not take responsibility for his actions and seek forgiveness and reconciliation. If this happens Jesus tells us to return to the offender with one or two others to confront him again. Do not give up, do not stop pursuing reconciliation with him/her. Sin is too serious and too dangerous! Unity and oneness are too important! So, by taking one or two witnesses you are showing the offender just how serious and important this is, and you are still observing the principle of containment, because the people who know about the offense and who are now involved in the process of reconciliation are four at the most.

But it is possible that the person may not listen to this small group either. If not, we still do not give up, but go to step 3. **Verse 17a**. ***17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.*** “Church” here means the gathered assembly of Christ followers in a particular location. The reason this matter is now to be brought to the assembly is because sin is serious and one person’s unrepentant sin affects the whole church. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul likened sin to leaven that works its way through and affects the entire lump of dough. Another metaphor would be a malignant cancer. Sin, if it is not excised, will metastasize and spread to other members of the body until the whole church is infected.

So, telling it to the church serves two purposes: First, it is a warning to those in the church that they are in danger of being negatively impacted by their brother’s sin. Second, it is so that those who are part of the assembly can attempt to convince the erring brother to repent. This is akin to what we nowadays call an intervention. It is intended to be a last-ditch effort to convince the offender, so that he understands just how consequential his sin is, and just how grievous it is to the Lord Jesus.

But, if the person still refuses, **verse 17b**. ***And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.***”

To treat a person as a “Gentile or a tax collector” means to treat him or her as someone outside the church family. This means not allowing the person to participate in public meetings or corporate fellowship with the church family until he takes responsibility for his offense and repents. That separation is intended to produce grief, remorse, and regret in the offender so that he/she will be compelled to run out of the darkness and back into the light.

Obviously, this is a big deal, and it ought to break our hearts. When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about a matter in which they were not dealing with the sin of someone in their church, he said, *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father’s wife. ² And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship*

the man who did this?

Given how destructive and consequential unconfessed sin is, grief is the appropriate response. It *ought* to break our hearts. Because we love that person who is under its influence. We know that he/she is on a dangerous path that leads to misery and heartache. But Paul says that if the person ignores or rebuffs reproof, the most loving and beneficial thing for the church to do is put him outside your fellowship.

Look at **verses 3-5**. ³ *Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present.* ⁴ *When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present,* ⁵ *hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed, and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”*

To put a person out of the fellowship and to turn him over to Satan is to put that person in a very precarious place. It is a place of darkness and misery and doom and even despair. But it is intended to bring him/her to their senses and make them so sick of their sin and its consequences that they will *want* to repent—they will run from the darkness back into the light.

That is where we ended last week. But Jesus continues to address this solemn matter of church discipline in the next few verses of Matthew 18. **Verse 18**. ¹⁸ *Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*

If this language sounds familiar to you, it is because Jesus said the exact same thing to Peter in chapter 16 after Peter’s confession that Jesus was the Christ, Son of the living God (16:16). In that passage Jesus told Peter that he would have the authority to bind and loose, and in that context, Jesus had some specific things in mind related to Peter being given the keys to the kingdom. Here, in chapter 18, Jesus is speaking about the church—the local assembly of believers. The plural “you” in verse 18 specifically refers those whom He was just talking about in verse 17—members of a local church who follow the guidelines Jesus gave for church discipline. It is the church who is given the authority to bind and loose.

The verbs, “to bind” and “to loose” were often used by Jewish rabbis as metaphors to describe their authority to *prohibit* (bind) and to *permit* (loose). This means, then, that the church has been given authority to prohibit or permit *something* with reference to what Jesus has just been talking about—forgiveness and reconciliation. I believe *binding* refers to prohibiting this person from enjoying the peace of forgiveness and the blessings of fellowship with church family members. *Loosing* refers to permitting the repentant brother to return to the church and enjoy the peace of forgiveness and the blessings of fellowship with church family members.

But notice where this authority to bind and loose is derived. Jesus says, “*...whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*” Heaven is a metaphor that refers to God. In other words, God delegates this authority to the church.

That is not altogether clear in my translation of verse 18. But that is what is suggested by the grammar of the verbs translated, “shall be bound” and “shall be loosed”. They are both future, passive, perfect (future tense, passive voice, and perfect mood). Which means they should be translated, “shall have been bound in heaven” and “shall have been loosed in heaven.”

So, Jesus is not suggesting that the church has the authority to make decisions independently of God that will then become binding on him. He is saying that as the church follows God’s guidance in this matter of church discipline, it will come to the decisions that

have *already* been made in heaven (Morris, PNTC). In other words, God will have used the church to accomplish the purposes he already had regarding this erring brother.

There is a passage in John's gospel that clarifies this principle. Jesus is addressing His disciples after rising from the dead. He says in **20:22-23**, ²² *...When He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."* ²³ *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."*

The power and authority to forgive and withhold forgiveness is enormous. Who of us is capable of deciding such a thing? God told Samuel, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart." That authority can only be properly understood in light of Jesus giving His Holy Spirit to the disciples, and it is assumed that they will exercise this authority only when they are under the influence of the Holy Spirit and are being guided by Him. I believe this is also true in matters of church discipline.

Look at Matthew 18 **verses 19-20**. 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.* ²⁰ *For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."* (ESV).

Some New Testament commentators believe that Jesus is moving on to a new subject in these verses—the subject of *prayer*. That is problematic for a number of reasons, the first of which is that the statement in verse 19 is simply not true if it refers to God answering all our prayer requests. God does not give us anything and everything we ask for, for a variety of reasons.

However, if one interpreted Jesus' statements in verses 19-20 in relation to the matter of church discipline, it makes a lot of sense. First, Jesus says at the beginning of the sentence, "Again I say to you..." which suggests that He was restating what He had just said in verse 18. Secondly, the word translated "anything" (*pragma*) specifically refers to a task or undertaking that is difficult or complex and requires a high degree of wisdom and understanding. It is a term frequently used in the context of complex court rulings and judicial decisions.

That certainly describes church discipline. Navigating the process of church discipline can be a complicated, time-consuming, messy, and potentially volatile ordeal and it requires extraordinary wisdom and understanding. Without divine assistance we can easily end up in the weeds by following our own opinions, assumptions, biases, emotions, and interpretations.

So, it makes a lot of sense to interpret verses 19-20 as simply Jesus restating for emphasis what He stated in verse 18. And I believe He restates it in order to give churches courage to proceed in this matter confidently, even though it is hard, even though it is delicate, even though there are risks. As we follow His guidelines under the influence of His Holy Spirit, we can be assured that He is present in our midst, He is listening to what we say, and He is endorsing what we decide. This is true even if church discipline is administered in a very small church, where there are only two or three members.

As we close our time together today please remember why Jesus gave us this instruction. It is not to be mean to people in the church who sin, or to be intolerant of sinners. We are all sinners, and all of us sin every day, more than we know. John told us that if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8). But in the very next breath he said, *"If we confess our sins He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9).

We need the Lord's forgiveness every day, and it is available to us whenever we need it, because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. However, when we do not avail ourselves of His forgiveness because we refuse to acknowledge the sin or refuse to repent of the sin,

even after it has been pointed out by church family members, then we are in a precarious place spiritually. And if we stubbornly persist in that refusal, even when our sin has been pointed out to us in the most loving, constructive way, we risk being handed over to Satan and floundering in spiritual darkness until we come to our senses and repent.

I assure you that if you are a sinner, you will feel right at home at Emmanuel Bible Church, because we are all sinners. But if you sin against your brother or sister, and you've been approached about that sin in order to be reconciled, but you refuse to be reconciled, we, as a church, by God's grace and enablement, will pursue you and plead with you to repent—for your sake and for Jesus' sake and for the church's sake. If you refuse to listen, we must hand you over to Satan and put you out of the church, so that you will feel about your sin what God feels about your sin, and you will want to repent and run back into the light.

When you repent, I assure you, we will receive you back with open arms. We will follow the Jesus' guidelines in Matthew 18, not only because we want to obey Him, our Lord, but because we do it because we love you. Church discipline is ultimately an expression of love—pure love, true love, deep love. Never forget, the one who loves you the most is the one who tells you the truth, and the one who wants you to walk in the truth, even if the truth hurts.

May God help us to take sin seriously! And may He help us to deal with it constructively! For His honor and His glory, Amen.

Ratifying Heaven's Decisions

Matthew 18:18-20

Main Idea: *Church discipline done God's way has heaven's endorsement.*

The Force of Church Discipline (18)

The "you"

The meaning of binding and loosing

The grammatical significance

The condition of this authority

The Father's Endorsement (19)

The significance of just "two"

The meaning of "anything"

The implication of the Father's involvement

The Son's Confirmation (20)

The significance of "two or three"

Gathered in Jesus' "name"

Jesus in the middle

Application