

Gaining Back Your Brother (Matt. 18:15–20)

By Jacob D. Gerber

In the previous section, Jesus had talked about the great love of God the Father for his wandering, errant people (Matt. 18:10–14). There, Jesus compared the Father’s love to a shepherd who would leave behind his ninety-nine sheep in order to pursue one sheep who had gone astray (Matt. 18:12). Then, when he found that sheep, “he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (Matt. 18:13–14). As the outflow of his Father’s love for wandering sheep, Jesus himself came into this world to pursue sinners to the point of his own death on a cross as an atoning substitute for their sin. Now, Our Lord takes the idea from the previous section one step further by teaching that *Jesus administers his kingdom through the ministry of his church*.

Loving Back a Brother (Matt. 18:15–17)

If our *Father* in heaven so loves his children that he would pursue even one of these little ones, so also we as his children should pursue one another when we see even the “least” among our ranks other wander off into sin.¹ This is, indeed, the first instance in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus calls a fellow believer “your brother,” and he does so to address “a case...in which the continuance of this relation is jeopardized.”² Calvin notes how what Jesus outlines in this whole section charts “a middle course, which does not give too great offense to the weak, and yet is adapted to cure their diseases; for that severity which is employed as a medicine is profitable and worthy of praise.”³

In other words, Jesus describes one brother’s pursuit of another brother in the hopeful expectation of the best possible outcome. A simple test helps to frame the right course of action: Five years from now, what would I hope that I would have said to my sinning brother for the sake of my conscience, not flattering him as he destroys his life by his sin? Additionally, five years from now, what would I hope that I would *not* have said, so as not to crush the spirits of such a wounded sheep? At every point, we are to approach sinners with a love that “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:7)—a love that is not vindictive against the wrongs the sinner has committed, and a love that patiently seeks the full reconciliation and restoration of the wandering brother. As Carson writes, “If it is hard to accept a rebuke, even a private one, it is harder still to administer one in loving humility. Behind this verse stands Leviticus 19:17: ‘Do not hate your

¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 690.

² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 698.

³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:352.

brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.”⁴ Paul, in recognizing the difficulty of calling back a brother from sin, writes, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. *Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted*” (Gal. 6:1). Therefore, before we approach a brother about a speck in his eye, it is imperative that we first seek remove the log of sin from our own eye (Matt. 7:5).

Step One: Go to Your Brother Alone (v. 15)

From this motivation of love for a wandering brother, Jesus offers a simple, single step for brothers who have sinned against us: “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” (v. 15). We must first observe the nature of the sin that Jesus has in mind. Lenski notes that we must be clear in our own hearts that our brother has truly *sinned* (and that we are not being overly sensitive or legalistic), and that this *sin* is not a common frailty that does “not endanger the fraternal bond,” which would “call for a word of rebuke and are then allowed to pass.” Rather, “Jesus has in mind graver sins such as all brethren would be compelled to consider too serious and too dangerous to allow them to pass without plain evidence of repentance.”⁵ In this way, it is important to differentiate between a deep, introspective searching out of one’s *own* sins, and a critical, judgmental scrutiny of *others’* sins. What Jesus says here is true for serious, clear sins; however, the Scriptures also remind us that “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8). We are not to play the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of others, by the “unnecessary discovery of hidden infirmities.”⁶

Second, we must observe *how* Jesus intends for us to address this sin with our brother. In the telling, we must be gentle, as Hagner observes: “The meaning here is not to scold someone or to abuse them verbally for their conduct but rather to bring the offensive matter to their attention in the hope that they will repent of their actions and be restored to the community.”⁷ Additionally, Jesus puts a special emphasis on the privacy of such a conversation: “between you and him alone.” For the vast majority of sins,⁸ Jesus says that we should not involve any other person, but should go directly to the person who has offended us. Some of the worst mistakes I have made in life and ministry have come when I tried to address one person’s sin on behalf of someone else. The faster that two estranged people can talk openly and directly with each other about the sin that divides them, the better the conversation goes for everyone.

Third, Jesus teaches us about the goal of this conversation. If that brother does repent, we will “gain” or “win” back our brother, a word that “suggests that the person was in danger of being lost, and has now been regained; it reflects the preceding image of the shepherd’s delight in getting his

⁴ Carson, “Matthew,” 456.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 698–99.

⁶ See *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #145.

⁷ Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 531.

⁸ Abusive crimes, even when committed in secret, are in a different category: “When a crime has been committed, Romans 13 takes precedence over Matthew 18.” (Timothy R. LeCroy, et. al., “Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault to the Forty-Ninth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (2019–2022),” p. 2332, l. 24. <<https://pcaga.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2301-AIC-on-Domestic-Abuse-Updated.pdf>>)

sheep back.”⁹ This process bears fruit! Throughout the history of God’s people, loving and direct confrontation is one of the most effective ways to lead sinners back to faith and obedience.

Step Two: Take Witnesses (v. 16)

Sadly, sometimes those initial, private conversations do not win back sinners to the Lord. Failure at the first step is not grounds for washing our hands of the work altogether. On the contrary, Jesus then says that we should continue to seek the repentance of our wandering brother by widening the range of people involved. Sometimes, this means bringing a close friend or family member to join the next conversation with the individual, in the hopes that a respected third party will help the person to see reason. On this point, Calvin helpfully differentiates between *denial* and *evasion*. In some sad cases, sinners *deny* their sin altogether, calling good what God has called evil. In those cases, even witnesses won’t help much! Yet, “in most cases, men shamelessly evade, or impudently excuse, the improper and unjust actions which they have committed, till greater authority is employed, towards such persons it is useful to observe this method.”¹⁰ So, in private conversation with one person, they may evade the severity of their sins. Once others enter the conversation, however, their shame works to convince them of their sin.

We should note carefully, then, that this process is not merely a *technical* process of proving the biblical basis for a charge against someone; rather, Jesus has set out a thoroughly *social* process that restores sinners by the ministry of fellow believers. In Jesus’ scheme, right theology is necessary, but insufficient. Jesus insists on using *people* in this process. At the same time, this process also helps us to check our hearts along the way, to make sure that we have not also been tempted to sin by over-zealousness. As Hendriksen observes, this second step of involving other people forces us to ask ourselves self-critically, “Is my case really so serious that I can get one or two other persons of sound judgment to go with me; or am I, perhaps, making a mountain out of a mole-hill?”¹¹ The conversation between the accuser and the offender, accompanied by the witnesses, need not be a single conversation in this process. Rather, as Lenski writes, “The idea is, of course, not to go only once, but until there is no further hope of gaining the brother.”¹²

What is the purpose of these other witnesses? While some think that these witnesses would also be witnesses to the original sin,¹³ we should remember that the original sin was “against you” (singular), and the original meeting was between you and the offender “alone.” So, while there will often be cases where one person has sinned against numerous people, the typical role of witnesses in

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 693.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:354–55.

¹¹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 699.

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 700.

¹³ See, for example, Carson: “It is not at first clear whether the function of the witnesses is to support the one who confronts his erring brother by bringing additional testimony about the sin committed (which would require at least three people to have observed the offense) or to provide witnesses to the confrontation if the case were to go before the whole church. The latter is a bit more likely, because Deuteronomy 19:15 deals with judicial condemnation (a step taken only by the entire assembly), not with attempts to convince a brother of his fault.” (Carson, “Matthew,” 456.)

private offenses will be to witness the reconciliation conversation itself.¹⁴ It may be that the one bringing the charges cannot prove what he asserts, and the witnesses should advise the accuser of this fact. Often, though, the witnesses are present to observe the response of the offender in order to give testimony (if the need arises) of the offender's unwillingness to repent.¹⁵ This role for these one or two other witnesses underscores that the most serious offense in the church discipline process is not the original offense, but the offender's ongoing refusal to repent.

Step Three: Tell it to the Church (v. 17a)

After the semi-private step of bringing in witnesses, Jesus says, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church" (v. 17a). For this reason, the *Book of Church Order* for the Presbyterian Church in America does not permit an individual to prosecute personal offenses until all the previous means of private reconciliation in Matthew 18:15–16 have been employed: "An injured party shall not become a prosecutor of personal offenses without having tried the means of reconciliation and of reclaiming the offender, required by Christ" (BCO 31-5). Who, though, is "the church," and what does it mean to "tell" such a matter "to the church"?

Congregationalist and Baptist churches would see this as a straightforward command to tell the matter to the *whole* church—that is, to the entire congregation. Presbyterians recognize, however, that the Bible commits serious questions of doctrine and discipline to the *courts* of the church. In Acts 15, for example, a difficult question about whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised was referred to "the apostles and elders" in Jerusalem (Acts 15:2). The delegation was greeted by the entire congregation ("by the church and the apostles and the elders"; Acts 15:4), but when it came time to hear the matter and to render a decision, only "[the] apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter" (Acts 15:6). Importantly, this practice follows the Jewish system of church government, where "the power of excommunication belonged to the elders, who held the government of the whole Church."¹⁶ Indeed, in the Old Testament, the "elders" (Deut. 31:28) of Israel are called the "whole church" (ESV: "all the assembly"; ἐκκλησίας; *ekklēsias*; Deut. 31:30 [32:1 LXX]).¹⁷

Therefore, Jesus is instructing those who cannot reclaim offenders (not even with witnesses) to bring their charges before the Session of a church for adjudication. The elders will then hear the case, examine witnesses, and make a decision regarding whether a biblical sin has been committed, and, if so, (1) whether (and to what degree) the offender has repented, and (2) which censure would be appropriate for shepherding that sinner back toward repentance and for the preservation of the glory of Christ's holiness within his church.

¹⁴ Morris writes, "Jesus is not, of course, talking about a trial, and in any case the one or two more are not witnesses of the offense; they can testify only that they have tried to help the offender." (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 468.)

¹⁵ "Alluding to that law, Christ says that, when two or three witnesses shall rise up to condemn the obstinacy of the man, the case will be clear, at least till the Church be prepared to take cognizance of it; for he who refuses to hear two or three witnesses will have no reason to complain that he is dragged forth to light." (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:355.)

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:356.

¹⁷ Samuel Miller, *Of the Office of The Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* (Glasgow: John Reid & Co., 1835), 49.

Step Four: Excommunicate the Unrepentant (v. 17b)

If the offender still does not repent, Jesus pronounces a grave sentence: “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (v. 17b). This refers to the censure of excommunication, and Jesus’ process is reinforced by how we see Paul pronounce a sentence of excommunication against an unrepentant sinner in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 5:2–5. As an apostle, Paul himself exercises the authority of the church, so that he “has already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing” (1 Cor. 5:3). Because the office of apostle has ceased, no single individual can pronounce a sentence of excommunication. Rather, this is a joint task taken up by the elders assembled as a court of the church (BCO 1-5; 3-2; 4-3). Yet, this is also something that the entire congregation is called to witness in order to file a complaint (see BCO 43) against actions that are believed to be in error. As Calvin writes about Paul’s actions in 1 Corinthians 5:2–5:

Paul’s course of action for excommunicating a man is the lawful one, provided the elders do not do it by themselves alone, but with the knowledge and approval of the church; in this way the multitude of the people does not decide the action but observes as witness and guardian so that nothing may be done according to the whim of a few.¹⁸

This is a somber task, but when a sinner is unrepentant, it is necessary for “the removal of scandal, the vindication of the honor of Christ, the promotion of the purity and general edification of the Church, and the spiritual good of offenders themselves” (BCO 27-3).

Hagner explains the nature of excommunication well: “the unrepentant offender is not simply put out of the community but categorized as among the worst sort of persons.”¹⁹ To understand what this might look like, imagine how you would act if someone adulterously abandoned your brother or sister, so that your sibling was required to sue for a divorce on account of sexual immorality after repeated efforts to call the offender to repentance. In such a case, you may have liked your sibling’s spouse quite a bit; however, when push comes to shove, you cannot maintain an independent friendship with that person any longer. That person must be cut off from normal relationships so long as he/she pursues their sin. In the same way, we may have enjoyed close relationships with certain individuals before they left the church; however, when they chose their sin over Christ, we cannot continue to enjoy pleasant personal relationships with them. To do so would be to communicate something dismissive about the heinous nature of their sin and of the danger of their eternal prospects.

The Authority of King Jesus (Matt. 18:18)

Earlier, when Peter had confessed Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus then told him, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:16, 19). Here,

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas MacNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1235; book 4; chaps. 12, §7.

¹⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 532.

Jesus makes the same proclamation about binding and loosing in nearly the same words, except that Jesus now speaks not in the second person *singular* (to Peter alone), but in the second person *plural* (to the whole church, as exercised by representative elders).²⁰ This is one more clue that “Peter’s ‘power of the keys’ is thus to be not an exclusive authority given to him alone, but one shared by the whole disciple group.”²¹

Theologians, therefore, speak of the two “keys” of the kingdom, the first being the key of doctrine (related to rightly teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God), and the second being the key of discipline, as Jesus discusses in this passage. In both keys, it is not that what we do on earth constrains God in some way, but the opposite. The church is to faithfully proclaim what God has already declared about the kingdom, so that we “do no injury to the authority of God, when they pronounce nothing but what comes from his mouth, and only endeavor faithfully to execute what he has commanded.”²²

The Presence of King Jesus (Matt. 18:19–20)

Jesus’ point is that he administers the reign of his kingdom in his church by the faithful proclamation of true doctrine, and by the faithful carrying out of true discipline. When we follow his commands, what we do within the church is what King Jesus is doing from heaven. Therefore, Jesus continues, saying, “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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (vv. 19–20). These verses are often taken out of context in two ways. First, Blomberg makes an important observation when he writes that the “word for any ‘thing’ (*pragma*) is a term frequently limited to judicial matters. Here Jesus reiterates that actions of Christian discipline, following God’s guidelines, have his endorsement.”²³ Thus, we cannot make “anything” refer to any prayer request whatsoever; Jesus is talking about specifically what will happen as the courts of the church dedicate disciplinary proceedings to the direction and leading of the Lord, in accordance with his Word. Therefore, these are promises wherein “God is declared to have the sole claim to the government of the *Church*, so that he approves and ratifies the decisions of which he is himself the Author.”²⁴

Second, this verse is often taken to refer generally to any small groups of Christians gathered for prayer. The Holy Spirit does indeed indwell individual believers (1 Cor. 6:19); however, the context is very clearly about discipline, which is exercised by the elders of the church. The point is that even on small Sessions composed of two or three elders, King Jesus is present, exercising his reign and dominion in their midst. Matthew has a special interest in Jesus’ being “with” his people, as underscored at the beginning of the Gospel by citing the prophecy from Isaiah that Jesus should be called “Immanuel” (“God with us”; Matt. 1:23), and at the very end of the Gospel when Jesus

²⁰ For the grammatical observation, see Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 748. Nolland would not, however, follow the Presbyterian understanding of “the church” (see Nolan, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 747).

²¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 697.

²² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:358–59.

²³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 281.

²⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:361.

promises, “behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). In this promise in the present passage, Jesus is promising that he will be present in the church as the courts of the church make determinations about the discipline of the members for the length of time until Jesus returns.²⁵

Discussion Questions

1. How does the context of the parable of the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine to reclaim the one lost sheep shape our interpretation of this passage (Matt. 18:10–14)? When should you confront a brother in sin (v. 15)? How should you confront a brother in sin? What should your goal be when you go to confront a brother in sin? What are a few practical ways for you to avoid being tempted in this process (Gal. 6:1)?
2. What should you do if your brother fails to listen to you (v. 16)? What is the purpose of bringing along one or two others as witnesses? What is your goal if you are asked to accompany someone else as a witness? How does the requirement of bringing along witnesses provide a check against scurrilous charges of sin? Why do you think that Jesus teaches us such a social process for engaging sin in our midst?
3. Who is “the church” in v. 17? What biblical evidence do we have that the whole church is represented in church discipline by the elders? Why is excommunication sometimes necessary? What significance does the “binding” and “loosing” in v. 18 have? Who are the “two or three” of vv. 19, 20? What is included in the “anything” upon which they might agree? Why does Jesus assure us at this point that he will be among those “two or three”?
4. How does this passage about church discipline teach us to love our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ more fully? Is there a relationship where you feel the need to confront a brother about how he or she has sinned against you? What tempts you to delay that conversation? Or, what tempts you to handle that conversation wrongly, whether by gossiping with others or by speaking the truth without love? How has Jesus taught you to love your brothers better?

²⁵ Carson, “Matthew,” 457.