

Matthew 18:15-20: 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. 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. ¹⁷ 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 collector. 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. 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.

Intro: This chapter is about how to relate to one another in the church – how to love one another in the church – how do deal with offenses and sins and temptations in the church – how to forgive one another in the church.
- **Verses 15-20:** Jesus shows us how to pursue the straying brother or sister in love & for their own good.

Last week, we saw that Jesus Christ, the God-Man, loves His people so much that He calls us to pursue the one caught in sin, just like He and His Father do, so that the lost or straying might be rescued, restored, & redeemed from the road to destruction.

This text is about the practice of church discipline (there's formative discipline & corrective discipline). Why do it? 1) Jesus commands it; 2) It expresses God's great love for us; 3) It expresses our love for fellow church members; 4) We want to be holy – like Christ; 5) It keeps others in the church from sin; 6) It protects the reputation of Christ & His church – it's for the glory of God!; 7) It helps us know if we truly belong to Christ

Jesus has given the church the authority to exercise this corrective church discipline.

This week we see that Jesus Christ, the God-Man, is present with His gathered church, & He gives His church the authority to declare who is & who is not trusting Him & living according to His commands, & thus who is and who is not a part of His church.

1. Jesus Gives His Church The Authority Of Binding And Loosing

Matthew 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.

Remember the church is like an embassy of heaven: the church represents and speaks for heaven!

a. The church binds and looses through the preaching of the Gospel: GOSPEL! As the church goes forth and preaches the Gospel, many believe and are bound back to God, Who is in heaven – they are saved, forgiven, justified, and adopted into God's heavenly family. Those who hear the Gospel on earth and repent and believe – heaven shall smile upon them! They belong to God and His dwelling in heaven – the kingdom of heaven is theirs!
Matthew 5:3: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Those who hear the Gospel and reject it are loosed from God – they remain in their sins, they remain under God's curse, and they are excluded or loosed from God's heavenly dwelling.

b. The church binds and looses through declaring who is and who is not forgiven: As the church goes through the process we've been studying in Matthew 18:15-20, those who repent and turn from sin are bound to God by the pronouncement of the church: they are declared forgiven. Those who refuse to repent are treated as sinful Gentiles and godless tax collectors: they are loosed from God and from among His people – they are under God's curse.

John 20:23: If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.

Leon Morris: To the church as a whole there is committed the responsibility of declaring what conduct is forbidden to the believer & what is permitted . . . we must bear in mind that the verbs are future perfect: “shall have been bound” & “shall have been loosed.” Jesus is not giving the church the right to make decisions that will then become binding on God. Such a thought is alien from anything in his teaching. He is saying that as the church is responsive to the guidance of God it will come to the decisions that have already been made in heaven. In John 20:23 it is made clear that this is because of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is not saying that the church will be full of natural, human wisdom. He is referring to decisions made in the light of the guidance of the Spirit of God.

D. A. Carson: God’s realm [Heaven, is] breaking into the sinful, human realm. “Heaven” has revealed the gospel in the person of Jesus the Messiah, and heaven’s rule has thereby broken in . . . [The church] accomplishes this binding and loosing by proclaiming a gospel that has already been given and by making personal application on that basis. Whatever [the church] binds or looses will have been bound or loosed, as long as [the church] adheres to that divinely disclosed gospel . . . [the church] may be authoritative in binding and loosing because heaven has acted first. Those [the church] ushers in or excludes have already been bound or loosed by God according to the gospel already revealed

David Platt: Jesus is not giving some special authority to us outside of Himself, but rather it is attached to Him and His Word. He is saying that what we do as a church in His name, with His authority, is a reflection of what He does in heaven. So, if someone comes to the church and says, “I am living in sin and I am unrepentant – I will not turn to Christ,” then we can say to that person with authority, “You are living bound in sin and your sin is not forgiven.” To be clear, their sin is not unforgiven because we said so; their sin is unforgiven because Christ has said so in His Word. Similarly, if someone says that they are willing to turn from their sin, then we can say to them with full confidence that their sin is forgiven and they are now free from it. Jesus has given us the privilege of proclaiming what He has said to be true.

Jonathan Leeman: I used to live and work in Brussels, Belgium. The U. S. Embassy there formally recognized me as a U. S. citizen and gave me a new passport when my old one expired. Even though I am a U. S. citizen, the embassy possesses an authority I don’t possess—the authority to speak for and make provisional decisions on behalf of the government of the United States . . . Jesus gave churches a similar authority to the U. S. Embassy in Brussels: the authority to make provisional judgments concerning what is a right confession of the Gospel (Matt. 16:13–19) and who is a citizen of the kingdom of heaven (18:15–20). This is what Jesus meant when he said churches possesses the authority to bind and loose on earth what’s bound and loosed in heaven (16:18; 18:17–18). He didn’t mean they could make people Christians or make the Gospel what it is, no more than the embassy could make me an American or make American laws. Rather, Jesus meant they could make official pronouncements or judgments concerning the what and the who of the Gospel. What is a right confession? Who is a true confessor?

c. Jesus has given His church great authority: 1 Corinthians 6:1-8: When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? ² Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? & if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³ Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! ⁴ So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? ⁵ I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, ⁶ but brother goes to law against brother, & that before unbelievers? ⁷ To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? ⁸ But you yourselves wrong and defraud - even your own brothers!

2. Jesus Promises That His Church’s Prayers Will Be Effective For The Purpose Of Holiness

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.

a. The “two of you” agreeing refers back to verse 16: two or three witnesses: The focus of this verse is on the judicial, corrective church discipline action, not prayer in general, though there are implications for all prayer here.

b. God does give us many wonderful promises about answering our prayers: 1 John 5:14: And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

R. T. France: No doubt the primary application is to their prayer for the sinner of vv. 15-17, but the principle of Jesus’ presence among his people, and therefore of the efficacy of their agreed request, can hardly be confined to that specific situation (even though, like other such promises . . . it is not to be regarded as an automatic formula for success where prayers are agreed which are not compatible with the one in whose name they are uttered).

c. This prayer has a focus on obeying the commands of Jesus to accomplish corrective church discipline so that God’s people will be holy: D. A. Carson: These two verses should not, in this setting, be taken as a promise regarding any prayer on which two or three believers agree. Scripture is rich in prayer promises, but if this passage deals with prayer at all, it is restricted by the context and by the phrase (“about anything”), which should here be rendered “about any judicial matter”: the [Greek] word *pragma* often has that sense: **1 Corinthians 6:1:** When one of you has a **grievance** against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?

d. God the Father smiles on and fully supports His church obeying Jesus and her pursuit of holiness through corrective church discipline: 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.**

3. Jesus Will Be With His Church In Her Pursuit Of Holiness

Matthew 18:20: For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

a. Some misuses of this verse: 1) This verse does not mean that Jesus is not with us if we are alone.
2) This verse is not a justification for not being a member of a local church. (Saints; Word; Ordinances; Discipline)

b. The “two or three” being gathered refers back to verse 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.

c. The witnesses and the church gather in Jesus’ name: We gather as those who are united to Jesus; We gather as those who have Jesus dwelling in us by His Spirit; We gather in the authority of Jesus; We gather with the blessing and presence and help of Jesus!

d. Jesus is the God-Man Who is present with His people to love and to judge: Isaiah 3:13-14: The LORD has taken his place to contend; he stands to judge peoples. ¹⁴ The LORD will enter into judgment with the elders and princes of his people

Matthew 1:23: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

1 Corinthians 5:4-5: When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

e. Jesus is present with His gathered people in a special way: Nick Batzig: A friend of mine was recently speaking to a pastor of a large congregation about how things were going in ministry. This particular pastor proceeded to tell my friend that a prominent public figure was coming to speak at the church he pastored. He then went on to boast about the large turnout that they expected at this event. To this, my friend said, "Oh yeah. Jesus comes to our church every Sunday."

Though some might consider this to be a flippant, cynical or juvenile response, it is, in fact, one of the most under-acknowledged and under-appreciated truths to cherish. In every church where the word of God is faithfully proclaimed, the sacraments are rightly observed and discipline is administered, God has promised to attend His people with His presence.

The true and living God has promised to manifest His presence when His people gather together to worship Him according to His appointed means of grace on the Lord's Day. If we really believed that God manifests His presence in a special way in the gathered assembly, we would prepare ourselves accordingly to come into His presence. We would prayerfully desire to come every Lord's Day in brokenness, humility, thankfulness and joy. We would, in the words of the writer of Hebrews, "draw near with boldness" (Heb. 4:16) as we come to worship Him in "reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28).

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul explained that Christ "came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near" (Eph. 2:17). The question is, "When did Jesus go to the church in Ephesus and preach to those who would come to believe the Gospel?" There is only one possible answer. Christ was present in the preaching of the Gospel through the ministers He appointed. When the word is faithfully preached, Christ is preaching. The Apostle Peter explained this when he referred to Gospel ministers as "those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven" (1 Peter 1:12). The Holy Spirit is none other than "the Spirit of Christ" who spoke in the Old Testament prophets about the sufferings of Christ and the glories that follow (1 Peter 1:10-11). It was "by the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18) that Jesus went and preached to those who were on the earth "in the days of Noah" (1 Peter 3:20). Noah was a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5) through whom Christ was preaching by the Holy Spirit. So it is with those men whom Christ has commissioned to preach today. Whenever Gospel ministers are preaching the word of God to the people of God through the Spirit of God, Christ is preaching through them. In a very real sense, in every true church where the word is faithfully proclaimed, the risen and reigning Christ is the minister who is preaching salvation and judgment.

The people of God should love Lord's Day worship more than anything because of the confident anticipation that they are going to hear from God . . . Professor John Murray gave the following observation about God's word:

"The Scripture is God speaking – as if we heard the word of God directly from heaven . . . I suppose that if we were told that at a certain location, on a certain day, at a certain hour a voice was to be heard from heaven – I suppose that if that were plainly certified . . . I am sure that all that community would be filled with people from hundreds of miles away. They would come from countries. I don't suppose that the fields would hold them. They would be there out of curiosity, if for no other reason. And yet, in the Scripture we have the voice of God just as surely as if God the Father spoke directly from heaven in an audible voice. And it is more sure (2 Peter 1:19) because it is more permanent . . . with the Scripture there is a permanent deposit and it is the voice of God with continuousness. And, it is the voice of God just as if we heard God speaking to us directly from heaven."

We should also acknowledge that Jesus is present at the table [the Lord's Supper] when believers are gathered together in worship to feed on him by faith. The Westminster Confession of Faith explains the corporate nature of the Lord's Supper in chapter 29.3:

"The Lord Jesus has, in this ordinance, appointed His ministers to declare His word of institution to the people, to pray, and bless the elements of bread and wine, and thereby to set them apart from a common to an holy use; and to take and break the bread, to take the cup, and (they communicating also themselves) to give both to the communicants; but to none who are not then present in the congregation."

The corporate nature of the Supper is taught in 1 Corinthians when the Apostle came to address matters of the Supper. Paul repeatedly uses the phrase "when you come together," after explicitly tying the observation of the Supper to the weekly assembly on the Lord's Day. In 1 Corinthians 11:18, he writes, "When you come together as a church . . ." After that, he repeats the phrase, "when you come together" three times (1 Cor. 11:20, 33 and 34).

If there is any question about the meaning of this phrase, Paul again uses it when addressing how we are to conduct ourselves in the worship service (1 Cor. 14:26).

Then in WCF 29.7, we find the doctrine of the real, spiritual presence of Christ at the table when the divines assert the following:

"Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but spiritually, receive and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses."

There is the promise of the covenant blessing of God attached to the worthy partaking of the sacrament. Paul writes, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10:16). There is also the promise of covenant curses attached to the unworthy partaking of the sacrament in the warnings of 1 Cor. 11:27-32.

Finally, there is the promise of Jesus being present when the church gathers to carry out discipline, according to his word. Murray again explained:

"Many have more respect for the presence of people than the presence of the Savior. And, if numbers are the criteria for our esteem for the presence of God then we miss entirely the comfort of our Lord where he says, 'Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in the midst of them.'"

Jesus is highlighting the collective nature of the judicial pronouncement of . . . his church when he promises to make his presence known in this context. It is with a view of the church collectively conceived (Matt. 18:17) – making a judgment about the spiritual condition of a professing believer who refuses to repent. Jesus is promising his presence to the gathered assembly who are seeking to obediently carry out his ordained process of discipline (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:3-5).

Jesus Christ is the King and the only head of the church. He mediates the presence of God to his people when he stands in the midst of the people of God who are gathered together to worship the living God. Jesus acts as the worship leader of the people of God (Heb. 2:12). He stands as the great High Priest of the Church, making the worship, prayers and praises of his people acceptable before the throne of God (Rev. 1:12-20). Whenever the people of God are gathered together to worship God in Spirit and in truth, according to the means that He has appointed for His church, God is present. Why wouldn't we long to be gathered together with the people of God every Lord's Day to listen to our great God and Savior speak, to receive his sacrificial service and to acknowledge his rule over us?

Jesus Christ, the God-Man, is present with His gathered church, & He gives His church the authority to declare who is & who is not trusting Him & living according to His commands, & thus who is and who is not a part of His church.

This whole section of Scripture (Matthew 18:15-20) is focused on the holiness of God's people. Jesus Christ died and rose again to make us forgiven, happy (in God's presence!), and holy!

Hymn: He breaks the power of canceled sin, He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean; His blood availed for me.

Christ Jesus' Presence Everywhere
Shows He Is God, None Can Compare
Yet In His Gathered Church With Care
In A Special Way He's There
Judging, Loving, Always Fair
Granting Authority That's Rare
Gives Binding, Loosing Power There
To Declare Who's His For They're
The Ones He Died And Rose To Spare
From All God's Wrath And Death And Share
With Them New Life And Pleasures Where
There's Only Joy, Nothing Can Scare
So Worship! Go To Him In Prayer
To Ask Him All That You Would Dare
According To His Will He'll Share
With You His Gifts, No Mercy Spare!