

Matthew 18:15-20 Fact Sheet

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Context: All of Matthew 18 is one conversation Jesus had with His disciples and is the broader context of these six verses. They speak of a humble heart and a sensitivity to sin, both in ourselves and those who have strayed from Christ.

Parallel passages: Matthew 18:1-35; Mark 9:33-50; Luke 9:46-50
(*underlined verses indicate last verse of chapter*)

Time and place: Jesus and His disciples had come to Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, about a month prior to His crucifixion. They were making their last journey to Jerusalem during His public ministry.

I have quoted the ESV text and have divided this passage according to the Greek sentences.

Matthew 18:15a

^{15a} **"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone."**

"If your brother sins"

Notice that the assumption in these verses is that the brother has indeed sinned. You don't pick-up the inference that there is a question about this. Jesus did not say, "If you *feel* your brother *may have* sinned, have a conversation with him to see *if it is true*." The kind of sin that Jesus refers to is apparently obvious.

His sin is also something major enough to call into question his continued open fellowship with the community of believers if he remains unrepentant.

"against you"

There is some good manuscript evidence that suggests these words may not be in the original text. Explanations have been advanced to either *include* them or *exclude* them.

If the words "against you" are *included*, Jesus is looking at sin from the viewpoint of the brother against whom the sin is committed. If "against you" are *excluded*, Jesus is giving instruction for the whole church in how to handle a situation when a brother is in obvious and major sin. The New American Standard Bible (95 Update) and Net Bible exclude these words and take this second view.

I also feel these words should be excluded for the following reasons. All of Matthew 18 is a single conversation Jesus had with His disciples. In verses 1-14 Jesus instructs them, on the occasion of their discussion of which of them was the greatest, on having a humble attitude, not causing others to sin or sinning yourself, but seeking (as the Father does) those who have gone astray. Jesus is directing them to be other-centered rather than self-centered. He has not spoken of someone having sinned against you. It would seem quite natural in 18:15-20 for Jesus to continue His instruction for the whole community about how to deal with someone who has gone astray and remains unrepentant.

It is Peter who diverts Jesus' progression of thought from the community to himself when he wants to know how often he is required to forgive a brother if he sins "against *me*."

"tell him his fault"

What does this word "tell" mean (Jesus will use a different word later in verse 17)? The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol II, p. 474 has these two quotes:

"It means 'to show someone his sin and to summon him to repentance.'"

"The word does not mean only 'to blame' or 'to reprove,' nor 'to convince' in the sense of proof, nor 'to reveal' or 'expose,' but 'to set right,' namely, 'to point away from sin to repentance.'"

This word is redemptive and sets the tone for all of 18:15-20. You can see this tone in other New Testament passages where it is used.

ESV **1 Timothy 5:19-20** Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁰ As for those *who persist in sin*, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

ESV **2 Timothy 4:1-2** I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

ESV **John 16:8** And when he (the Holy Spirit) comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment:

ESV **John 8:46** Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?

Matthew 18:15b-17

^{15b} **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.**

"If he listens to you"

In other words, "If he repents of his sin."

"you have gained your brother"

Another good translation of these words is found in the NASAB, "you have won your brother."

"two or three witnesses"

This is a clear reference to Deut. 19:15.

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 19:15** A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.

Two or three bringing the same reproof would carry more authority for this brother.

“tell it to the church”

This word “tell” is different than that 18:15a. Here the meaning is “say” or “speak.”

Verse 17 includes the only other references to “church” in the Gospels outside of Matthew 16:18. Remember that this is less than a month prior to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. He is giving instruction that the disciples will later convey to the churches.

“let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”

This action has come to be known in church circles as “excommunication” or “disfellowshipping.” It has also been employed by some groups as the basis for shunning. But how are these words really to be applied? Professor Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary has written, “To treat a person as a ‘pagan or a tax collector’ means to treat him or her as unredeemed and outside the Christian community” (The New American Commentary, vol. 22, p. 279). This doesn’t mean you should stop speaking to them, treat them harshly, or walk the other direction if you see them coming. It also does not mean they have lost their salvation, if indeed they really are saved. It does mean however that we should treat them as we would any other unredeemed person, and we should seek to call them to repentance.

Matthew 18:18

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.**

Consider Jesus’ earlier and similar words to Peter.

^{ESV} **Matthew 16:18-19** And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ 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.” (Mat 16:18 ESV)

This is a Jewish figure of speech referring to people exercising God-given authority.

And, “you” is no longer singular as in 15a, it is now plural. It is most certainly a reference to the whole church.

The result is that a proper decision made by a local assembly of believers (the church) to treat such a person as unregenerate carries with it not just their own authority, but in fact God’s.

Now Jesus brings us back again to the two or three.

Matthew 18:19

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.

“anything”

A literal translation of this word is “any matter,” and is frequently used of judicial matters. We get our English “pragmatic” from this word.

“they ask”

They are to *ask* for wisdom in this matter *from God*. Consider a similar passage in which the same word for “ask” is used.

^{ESV} **James 1:5** If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

“it will be done for them by my Father in heaven”

These words can be well translated, “they will receive it from my Father in heaven.”

Matthew 18:20

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

Allow me now to paraphrase these verses with the above understanding.

"If your brother sins go show him his sin and summon him to repentance, but do this between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may properly 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, treat him as if he were unredeemed. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever the church binds on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever the church looses on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth concerning any matter like this they may ask wisdom from God for, it will be given to them from my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are so gathered in my name, there I am among them.