

Bible Study Guide: Week of 8-31-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 18:15-20

15 "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

15 "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

In this passage Jesus gives instruction to his disciples about how to handle community conflicts and how to address issues of sin within the community of believers. The NRSV here translates the Greek *adelphos* as "another member of the church." The basic meaning of the word is "a brother." By extension, since the gathering of Jesus' disciples has always included men and women, we often see this translated as "a brother or sister." The reason the NRSV translates this phrase as "another member of the church" is because of the context provided in v. 17 ("tell it to the church.") Along with Matthew 16:17, this is one of only two times in Matthew that the word "church" is mentioned. Indeed, Jesus' instruction here seems to look ahead to a time when the disciples would in fact form a church. Some manuscripts of this passage include the phrase "against you," but several reliable manuscripts do not. It is interesting to consider the implications of this phrase: Without it, the instruction is "if someone in the church sins, go and point it out to them when you're alone." With the phrase, however, the instruction more narrowly means, "if someone in the church sins against you, go and point it out to them when you're alone." The first meaning is more problematic from a practical perspective because it would involve church members regularly policing one another's behaviors (not that any church has ever had nosy members, right?) Of course, given the consequences at stake here (v. 17—the expulsion of the sinful member) we can infer that such instruction is only to be applied to serious sins, not trivial matters. Still, the burden of monitoring one another's sinful actions on an ongoing basis seems difficult to imagine. If we take the second possibility as the more likely—as the NRSV does—that these sins that warrant such action are sins against one another—we can see how such discipline is to be administered gently and compassionately.

The idea is to go privately to the member who has sinned against you to avoid bringing the other member to shame before the whole church. Such direct and honest conflict resolution is rarely practiced in any setting today, much less in the church. Of course Jesus gave this command knowing full well that most people are uncomfortable with conflict and are reluctant to handle conflict privately and directly in this way.

16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

In this verse, Jesus gives further instruction in case the first attempt at resolution is unsuccessful. Adapting earlier Jewish custom, Jesus instructs the offended party to take one or two others as witnesses to protect both parties from misrepresentation or misunderstanding.

17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Here “church” (Greek *ecclesia*) refers to a local assembly or gathering of believers. Jesus is clearly looking beyond his own day and age and into a time when such gatherings will exist. Yet he is already handing down rules for his disciples to live by. Again, as I said earlier, given how serious the consequences are to the offending member, it is likely that this teaching would be applied in cases of serious charges, not petty concerns. The widening circles of witness—from the one who was offended to the witness(es) to the whole assembly is not intended to bring shame or scrutiny upon the offender, but rather to gently correct and restore the sinful one to the community. Remember, the Greek term used in v. 15 was “brother or sister”—the church as Jesus envisions it is a family gathered in his name, so love and care must abound in all actions of the assembly toward one another. Interestingly, Jesus’ mission and ministry was often precisely to Gentiles and tax collectors. Obviously the meaning here seems to be for the church to shun or reject or distance from those who are unrepentantly sinful. At the same time, the gospel is precisely for those (like Gentiles and tax collectors) considered to be unworthy or unholy. We might say that even in creating distance between the assembly and the sinful one, the church’s concern is always the love and care of one another, even the errant member.

18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Here Jesus repeats to the whole church what he said to Peter in Matthew 16: The church has authority to make decisions about church discipline matters and such earthly decisions will have eternal consequences of some sort.

19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Once again Jesus emphasizes the eternal ramifications of earthly decisions made by the church. God’s promise is to be present with and prosper the church and its members when they are in agreement with one another and with the will of God. In v. 20 we hear one of the most familiar promises of Jesus—that Christ himself is present within a gathered community of faith.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. In chapter 15 of our congregational constitution, the formula of Matthew 18:15-17 is to be used as a model for resolving conflict and discipline issues in the church. How else might we use these instructions of Jesus in our day-to-day life of faith?**
- 2. What would it mean to treat someone as a tax collector or a Gentile? Does this necessarily mean exclusion and excommunication, or is there room for continued grace in such a harsh command?**
- 3. What does Jesus’ promise that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” mean to you? How have you experienced that promise in your own walk of faith?**