

Heaven and Earth

Matthew 18:15-20

I have observed over the years that many people will typically deal with conflicts this way. If they are offended by someone else, they might say, “So-and-so offended me, so he, or she, needs to come to me to apologize.” Or they might say, “If so and so was offended by what I did, then he, or she, needs to come to me to tell me.”

Now, of course, when either of those two things happen, you can expect that nobody will actually talk to anyone. Neither the person offended nor the person who committed the alleged offense says anything, at least to each other. Unfortunately, in the worst case, they talk to other people. Either side, either the offender or the offended, might feel the freedom to talk to a third party and tell them all about it. But that, of course, is called gossip. Or maybe slander. And the unreconciled situation just gets worse. And the offense festers. The alienation increases. Ultimately, disaster is inevitable.

I’ve known of families that lived through those sorts of interpersonal interaction for years, even decades. Sadly, many churches have endured divisions and painful separations as a direct consequence of such faulty interpersonal relationships. And if we would but follow Jesus’ clear instructions, so much of that could be avoided. Because actually, Jesus doesn’t pick sides. He doesn’t pick one side or the other and give them the responsibility to resolve matters of sin and offense. He gives that responsibility to both sides. So,

Mat. 5:23 “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

So you can’t wait for him to come to you! Even as a priority before worship, if you “remember that your brother has something against you..., first be reconciled to your brother.” Make it right! If there is offense, if there is alienation caused by your offense, go and be reconciled.

But that doesn’t let the other person off the hook, either! Just look at our text this afternoon. We find such a clear,

I. PATTERN OF RECONCILIATION.

v.15-17

A clear pattern. A clear method. A clear responsibility. With a clear beginning point.

A. A private attempt comes first.

v.15

Let me offer several thoughts about that verse, but with the desire to let the main idea which these simple words express remain as clear as it can possibly be. Notice the goal, and let me start there. Notice the purpose. “If he hears you, you have gained your brother.”

The goal of this private meeting is reconciliation. Many people call that a “confrontation,” and they shy away from such an approach because of a professed desire NOT to be confrontational. Or, even more weakly, they simply admit that they dislike confrontation.

I think there is a danger in defining this in terms of confrontation, however, since that implies a negative attitude. That seems to imply the necessity of an altercation, or at least the anticipation of one. According to Jesus, the goal, the hope, is that “he will hear you!” He will agree with you. He will admit his sin,

confess his guilt, and seek to be restored to you. And what a glorious outcome that would be. So it isn't a confrontation as much as it is a reconciliation.

But we all have to be careful, because if you aren't careful, the sinful desires of the flesh can interfere. So that you end up seeking a pound of flesh! You desire some sort of revenge. Retaliation. You want to punish, or at least cause some sort of affliction. After all, they afflicted you in the first place! So the danger is any desire to get even. Any desire to make it hard, or to make them pay, or to endure some consequence for their sin.

There is also the danger of nursing a grudge, of preserving the offense and feeding your own ill-will. But Jesus gives us another goal—to win your brother. To gain your brother. To restore your brother, as your brother! And don't forget the context, from our study last week,

v.12 “What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? 13 And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. 14 Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

God is seeking the one who is lost! God is the father in the parable of the prodigal son, looking for and longing the return of his son, seeing him while he was still far off. So it is for us, when following these instructions. We should be seeking to gain our brother or our sister! To lead him away from his sin, not to punish him for sinning against you!

Luke gives us this shortened version of the process, with an emphasis upon both the sin and goal of forgiveness.

Luke 17:3 “Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.”

So the issue is a matter of sin, not simply a matter that I am offended, but that you committed some specific sin. But I must then go to you in the spirit of brotherly love to rebuke you, to correct you, in the desire to be restored by the granting of forgiveness in response to your repentance.

To do that correctly, you need to deal with the situation privately, first! I can't stress enough the straight-forward simplicity of the words. “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.”

Now, a brief caveat. First, this pursuit of reconciliation through a personal “confrontation” is not always necessary, because the Scriptures also teach that “love covers a multitude of sins.” In other words, you can choose to forgive, in love, without even making the offense of the sin known. With smaller matters, in relationships of love, you don't need to follow this first step of reconciliation if you are willing and able to forgive unilaterally. If you are married, aren't you thankful that every offense you commit against your husband or your wife doesn't require this sort of meeting according to Matthew 18! No, so many matters are forgiven in love. So many offenses are covered in love. They are put aside overlooked, removed from the record, simply because one person chooses to love in that way. With the added encouragement of 1 Corinthians 13 that “love does not keep a record of wrongs.” The NKJV simply says that love “thinks no evil.” Love does not keep such accounts. So I am not suggesting that you store away a catalog of these offenses so that you can bring them all up together at the appropriate time in your own judgment. No, when love covers a multitude of sins, that means that love is the sufficient ground to forgive the sin and to

determine not to hold it against the other person.

Also, these verses refer somewhat obviously to personal and private sins, rather than to public offenses that are known publicly. “If your brother sins against you.” That’s a matter between you and him. I believe that with sins that are widely known, or committed in much more public sort of manner, that a personal, private approach is not necessarily required as a first step, even though it still might be wise.

Thus I have, at times, heard this text misapplied, or overused, as if sins that are notorious and known widely still required the first step of a private rebuke. More accurately, the better principle is to respond to sin according to its own nature. Public sins can be addressed more publicly. But that really is for another time, for our focus here today is the much more common personal conflicts. Private sins. Often resulting from misunderstandings between individuals. And if there is an individual problem, if there is an individual conflict, then there needs to be the attempt at an individual resolution. A private attempt comes first. With the goal of winning your brother—restoration and reconciliation.

Unfortunately, however, that doesn’t always work. Then what? Well, then, go gossip and slander, right? You’ve tried to make it right, the right way, and that failed. So now go talk about it to someone else! No! Now go back, and take a witness.

v.16

In other words, the Bible never allows for a simple “he-said-she-said” conflict. There has to be witnesses, and Jesus quotes a very appropriate Old Testament law.

Deut. 19:15 “One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.”

That is one of those regulations that has obvious and easily applied principles that remain valid even in the context of the civil government today, what our confession calls the general equity of the law. It is a principle that the OPC rigorously applies in cases of church discipline, according to our book of church order. There has to be at least two witnesses. No conviction can be achieved without a corroborating witness. One, individual accusation is simply not enough to convict of sin. So we see here...

B. The benefit of witnesses in every accusation of sin.

Actually, what is before us is the provision for a victim of a private offense to obtain a second witness. You don’t just drop the case of a private offense because of the absence of two witness, rather Jesus provides the opportunity for the victim of a private sin to gain that second witness.

Now, unfortunately, there is often some obstinacy. There is often an unwillingness to acknowledge or admit sin. So hopefully, still with the desire for restoration, you take a witness. Or two. Still, you desire to see repentance, and you desire to respond with forgiveness. Perhaps the weightiness of a witness will help and assist in bringing that about. Many times, it does.

But the reality is also, many times it doesn’t. So now there is another witness to prove your case as an “accuser.” We simply cannot exist together as brothers and sisters if unresolved personal offenses remain one-on-one conflicts. Others have to be involved, for the sake of the peace of the whole body. For we do live together in that body. We are members of one another, with duties and obligations toward one another. Personal conflicts and matters of personal offense cannot be ignored and allowed to fester.

So, if your brother sins against you and your own personal

and private attempt to bring about repentance has failed, then Jesus says, get someone else involved. A witness. And if that doesn't work, if that isn't effective or successful, if the matter remains unresolved and the offense unforgiven, then "tell it to the church."

Clearly, the idea is that the ministry of the church would include a primary responsibility in this matter of bringing matters of sin to repentance. And I do want to emphasize again, that although the same principles are useful in the context of personal disagreement or even conflict over matters of personal judgment or individual personality, this is not simply a matter of a conflict or misunderstanding between two people. This is the context of sin. Your brother has sinned against you, and here, pointing to a particular passage of the Bible, here is the definition of that sin. So this is not a matter of counseling, but ultimately a matter of church discipline in response to unconfessed sin.

I believe Jesus is making explicit reference to,

C. The role of church discipline.

"Tell it to the church" doesn't mean send an email to everyone in the church telling them what so-and-so has done to you. No, it means bring it to the elders of the church for a final adjudication. This is a legal process, begun with a private meeting, extended to calling of witnesses. If that fails to stimulate repentance, then the church needs to address the matter in terms of church discipline.

Jesus doesn't give us all the details of that process, but as the New Testament continues, we learn much more about that process. For example,

1 Cor. 5:4 "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, 5 deliver such a one to Satan for the

destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."

Paul continues,

1 Cor. 5:11 "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. 12 For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? 13 But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person."

The church is to be the judge in such matters! The church is to be the judge. And the judges within the church are the elders, those entrusted with the authority to be overseers. Sadly, in the very worst cases, the judgment will be severe.

v.17 "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."

It is a difficult and grievous responsibility, but one that is necessary for the well-being of the church. "Put away from yourselves the evil person." Other English translations use the word "purge". Yet, I should add, even then, it is done with the hope and desire for restoration. As I read from 1 Cor. 5, "deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."

Even then, even in what we would call excommunication, even then the desire is restoration. Repentance. Forgiveness. That's the role of church discipline.

Then notice something else. Look at what Jesus says next. These words are unintelligible to many Christians today who see

no place for the church to be involved in such personal matters. Many people today have an extremely low view of the church, an extremely low priority for the involvement of the church in their lives. And an extremely low awareness of the position to which God assigns the church! Just look at the words,
v.18-20

Again, let me stress, many people have never heard an exposition of God's word that so emphasizes the work of the church. Many people would specifically and consciously reject any notion of this sort of authority being granted to the church, and would instead declare the right of their own mind and will to do whatever they want, regardless of what the church says. Many people would claim some undefined commitment to what is called the "invisible church," claiming to belong to the invisible and undefined "body of Christ," while rejecting and rebelling against the very things that the Bible says about the visible church. "Tell it to the church." Ultimately, "Purge the evil person from among you." That requires church government. That requires church discipline. That requires faithful elders. That refers to a very visible church, an organized, established church, with its own government and organizational structure.

And Jesus says is that what the church binds on earth, what the church determines on earth, shall be bound in heaven! I admit, even to this day, those words astound me. But let me try to explain them to you, and I begin with what I would describe as,

II. THE UNISON OF HEAVEN AND EARTH.

Or perhaps, the unity of heaven and earth. At the very least, the interconnectedness of heaven and earth. "Binding on earth" must certainly have reference to the actions and determinations of the church on earth, the visible church. Certainly, the reference must be to this work of church discipline, the administration of the

government of the church.

But what about "binding in heaven?" And "loosing in heaven?" I believe that is to have reference to the very judgments and determinations of God in heaven. And there is a unison between those two things, what is bound in heaven and what is bound on earth.

Now, I don't want to go too far. Men on earth cannot speak for God. We are not infallible. God does not abdicate his throne in order to leave us in ultimate authority. The elders of the church today do not speak with the weight of, "Thus says the Lord..." God is not obligated to enforce what we determine, nor can we conclude that we here on earth never err in our judgments. All of that is right and good, and necessary to say at the outset. But what, then, do these words mean? How far can we go, in light of what the whole of Scripture teaches? I would answer those questions this way, that,

A. God accomplishes his will through human judgments.

In other words, the judgments and determinations made by the visible church of our Lord Jesus Christ are to be a reflection of the judgments of God in heaven. That must be the intention. The words seem plain enough, "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

So God entrusts the oversight of his church to men, mere men, fallible men. And yet, he works through those men to put into practice the determinations of heaven. So we admit people to the membership of the church upon their public profession of faith, and while I would never declare that church membership saves you, I would say this, that membership in the visible church reflects and demonstrates the declaration of heaven, that you are,

indeed, citizens of the kingdom of heaven. And we used the keys of the kingdom to open that door to the church. And to close it, in terms of church discipline. Thus a declaration of excommunication is a declaration on earth of what the church believes to be the declaration of God in heaven, that one who is put out would “be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” In other words, excluded from the people of God.

The declarations of the church, the declarations of lawful human judgments, are to be seen as an outward and visible expression of what is bound and loosed in heaven itself. Thus, through the ministry of the church, through the discipline of the church, there is something of a unison between heaven and earth. Something of a consistency.

And, to take that one step further, with Jesus’ words here in our text, God does all of that in the context of our relationship to one another within the church.

B. God accomplishes his will in the context of human fellowship.

We read the familiar phrase, “two or three are gathered together in my name.” We read,
v.19

That’s not a “name-it-and-claim-it” promise. That’s not a testimony of the power of positivism, or any doctrine of positive confession—just claim it and it will be yours. Rather, those words of verse 19 reflect that the judgment of the church is not the judgment of any private individual, or individuals. It is the judgment of the church as God has established it and ordered it. There is no individual power or authority, but there is in the body. And the authority to rule within the body of the whole church is the body of elders ordained for that purpose.

That’s the context for God accomplishing his will. That’s the context for, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” The context is our fellowship as we are joined together in the church. And the significance of that fellowship cannot be overstated, as Jesus declares so wonderfully,
v.20

We are the temple of God, the dwelling place of God, we the church. We are the household of God, the family of God. And the secret will of God, as he has ordained in the counsel of his own will, that secret will is made evident and made visible “where two or three are gathered in my name.” For as a church, together, Jesus is with us.

So where does that leave us today? I hope with a very high sense of the importance of the church as the body of Christ. I hope it leaves you with a great sense of the priority of Jesus’ headship and leadership in the church. Perhaps it will also leave you amazed that he would accomplish his purpose through the leadership of mere men, men who are “keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”

So delight yourself in this great glory that we have, with heaven and earth joined together here in the church. And accept the responsibilities God would give each of you to pursue peace with one another through the process of reconciliation Jesus has so clearly defined. With one final exhortation,

Eph. 4:1 “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”