

Focus Text

“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. 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. 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. 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. 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.”

(Matthew 18:15–20, ESV)

Reconciliation

In the first part of Matthew 18, Jesus shows how serious sin is and the real cost of leading one of His “little ones” into it. Now He moves into a solution—the ministry of reconciliation. Jesus teaches that if someone has wronged you, or “sinned against you,” the goal should be to restore the relationship.

In Jewish thought, sin wasn’t just personal—it affected the whole community. This reminds us today: our actions, even if they feel private, can affect the entire body of Christ. Because of this, Jesus gives a biblical way to respond. He calls us to approach others with humility and kindness, even when we’ve been hurt. He gives us a three-step pattern for reconciliation.

Step One: Private Conversation

To protect the other person’s dignity, start privately. Talk one-on-one about the wrong. This was unusual in the Jewish context, where most issues were handled publicly. But Jesus, in kindness, tells us to begin by going directly and lovingly to the person. A note of caution: if you have been physically harmed, this step should not be done alone. But for other offenses, start with direct, loving conversation. This is hard for us in the modern church, where gossip often replaces honest dialogue. If you believe someone has wronged you, begin by meeting with them personally.

Step Two: Bring Witnesses

If the person refuses to listen, Jesus leans on the principle from Deuteronomy. You then bring one or two others with you. Multiple witnesses allow for fairness—they help confirm the truth and prevent “he-said, she-said” confusion. The goal is still restoration, and the accused still has dignity in this step. It is not yet a matter for the entire church.

Step Three: Involve the Church

If the person still refuses to repent, the issue comes before the church. By this point, witnesses have confirmed the wrongdoing. The individual is asked, in front of the community, to humbly repent. This may feel humiliating, but it is done out of love, not anger. In Jewish culture, helping someone leave sin was one of the most loving acts because staying in sin meant staying under God’s judgment. The church pleads for repentance out of care for the person’s soul.

If, after all of this, the person remains unrepentant, Jesus says they are to be treated as a Gentile or tax collector. This does not mean hatred—Jesus ate with tax collectors and loved them—but in the Jewish context, these people were outside the community. The principle is that an unrepentant person cannot continue to participate in the life of the church because their pride and sin endanger the whole body. Just as a shepherd protects sheep from wolves, the church protects its people from the harm of unrepentant sin.

This process may seem harsh by modern standards, but it is actually loving. The person has had several chances to turn back. Refusing to acknowledge sin shows they are choosing a path away from Jesus. Protecting the community, while still longing for their repentance, is the way of the Good Shepherd.

In the end, Matthew 18 reminds us of two truths:

1. Jesus loves His people and calls us to love and protect one another.
2. Our actions toward God and each other matter—they can bring life or destruction. Jesus takes sin seriously, and He calls His church to do the same.

Application

- **Have you ever had to make things right with someone, or has someone reached out to make things right with you?**

Your answer:

- **What was that experience like?**

Your answer:

- **Is there someone you feel you need to reconcile with because of a hurt or misunderstanding?**

Your answer:

- **What has kept you from having that conversation?**

Your answer:

Prayer

“Lord, help us to love You and love one another. If we have wronged a brother or sister, give us the courage and grace to make it right. May Good Shepherd always be a place where Your love is shown to everyone. Amen.”

Additional Notes

Presumably the purpose of the private conversation is to protect the brother’s feelings; without witnesses present he will not be embarrassed. The primary meaning of ἐλέγχω here is “to take to task, to call to account,” since hovering in the background is Lev 19:17* with the Niphal of יכח (= “to reprove,” instead of “anger”).”¹

“The addition of ‘one or two’ gives the ‘two or three’ stipulated by Dt. 19:15 (cf. 17:6).⁹¹ The presence of the supporting parties ensures that the initiative is not a confused one, based on a misunderstanding, but is also concerned to enhance in the eyes of the one being approached the seriousness of what is at stake”²

“To treat someone as a tax collector and Gentile does not mean final condemnation, but from the perspective of Jewish Christians who are faithful to the Torah it does mean that one has nothing more to do with him. For all practical purposes that means not only breaking off all private contact between two individuals but expulsion from the church”³

¹ * 17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.
Leviticus 19:17 (NRSV)

Luz, Ulrich. 2001. Matthew: A Commentary. Edited by Helmut Koester. Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.

² ⁹¹ Note the similar appeal to Dt. 17:6 in Jn. 8:17; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19. The Matthean language is very close to the LXX of Dt. 17:6 (slight abbreviation and change of verb form to fit the ἵνα construction).

Nolland, John. 2005. The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

³ Luz, Ulrich. 2001. Matthew: A Commentary. Edited by Helmut Koester. Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.

“We saw at 16:19 that the binding and loosing is best understood as having to do with the regulation of behaviour. It has to do with bringing to bear on the lives of those who would be disciples the significance of all that Jesus was and brought. Having been instructed by Jesus, the church is able to prohibit and command in a manner that is backed by God himself. In the context of the attempt to bring back an erring brother or sister, the specific point will be that the church is able to confirm the standard of behaviour to which the erring one is being called to conform once more. The movement from individual reproof to the involvement of others and finally of the whole church ensures that severing a person from the fellowship of the church, where this needs to happen, is finally based on the most assured understanding of what God requires and therefore what God will give his backing to. The one whom the church declares to be out of step with God is indeed out of step with God!”⁴

⁴ Nolland, John. 2005. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.