

The Application of Matthew 18: 15ff

There are two things that must be considered in examining this passage. First, what is the contextual background out of which Christ spoke? Second, what is the significance of the phrase, “gathered together in my name”? In the points to follow we will briefly consider each of these issues.

In the section that begins with verse 15, Jesus introduced a theoretical case in which a disciple is wronged by a Christian brother. How is the matter to be remedied—if possible? First, let us see the text as a whole, and then note some constituent elements of it.

The Text

“And if your brother sins against you, go, show him his fault between you and him alone: if he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take with you one or two more, that at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church: and if he refuses to listen to the church also, let him be to you as the Gentile and the tax collector. Verily I say unto you, whatever you shall bind on earth must have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth must have been loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth concerning anything they shall ask, it shall be done for them by my Father who is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt. 18:15-20).

For convenience sake, we will break this biblical admonition into segments.

1. The offended party is to approach the transgressor and “show” him his error. The Greek term *elegcho* carries the idea of presenting evidence and making a case. The charge of having been wronged must be one of verifiable substance, not a mere perception on the part of an over-sensitive person.
2. The contact with the offender is to be made privately, likely so that no unnecessary embarrassment is brought upon the guilty party. The environment for correction must be as ideal as possible. The reclamation of a soul is the goal, not personal victory.
3. If the offender resists his aggrieved brother’s advance, a second attempt is to be made —this time, though, in the company of witnesses. The purpose of these witnesses is to document the procedure. Probably, their function will be to listen to the case that is being prosecuted, and also to observe the accused person’s response. This method contains a subtle warning that the matter is not being dropped, and may be pursued before the whole church.
4. If it is the case that the second stage of the disciplinary action is resisted (either overtly, or by merely ignoring the pleading), the issue is then to be laid before the whole church for judgment. Surely the pressure of the corporate group will prevail with any person who has a respectable level of conscience.

5. Some, however, are incorrigible. In such circumstances, a single recourse remains. The church is obliged to withdraw its fellowship from the rebel. In the language of the Lord, “treat him as a heathen and a tax-collector” (Charles B. Williams, **The New Testament in the Language of the People**, Chicago: Moody, 1937). The meaning of this latter phrase, which possibly appears harsh to the modern mind, is simply this: “Cut off social interaction with this spiritually dull person” (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9-13; 2 Thes. 3:6,14-15; Tit. 3:10).

The design behind the command is to make the apostate “ashamed” of his conduct (2 Thes. 3:14). The term “ashamed” in the Thessalonian letter derives from a Greek term that, etymologically speaking, signifies “to turn in.” The meaning seems to be this: social isolation may produce a turning inward, i.e., conscience introspection, that could lead to repentance. Too, hopefully, the estrangement imposed will generate a loneliness in the transgressor that will nudge him back into the warm fellowship of Christian people who care for him.

6. Jesus then made remarks about binding and loosing, as such pertained to the topic of church discipline. The verbal forms indicate that, in the matter of disfellowship, the binding and loosing (i.e., the enactment of discipline, or the removal thereof), must be in conformity to what has been decreed in heaven (and made known through apostolic instruction). This is reflected in the translation of the text rendered above. See also the footnote of the new English Standard Version. Discipline, therefore, is never to be attempted for arbitrary or personal reasons, but strictly in harmony with the New Testament.
7. The Lord concludes this discussion by suggesting that when the church is gathered together for the purpose of formalizing a case of discipline (cf. 1 Cor. 5:4), *he himself* will be there. He sanctions the action with his own presence (just as he joins his saints in the communion service). Verse 19 may be designed to inoculate against timidity in carrying out the courageous act of disfellowship. Perhaps the Savior is saying, “Even if only two or three have the fortitude to implement this procedure, I will accompany them.” Loving discipline needs to be enacted when the circumstances dictate such, even if weak brethren will not throw their support behind the action (cf. 2 Cor. 2:6, “majority,” ESV).
8. Finally, there is the phrase “gathered together in my name.” The preposition “in” derives from the Greek *eis*, which, in this case is virtually the equivalent of the term *en* (A.T. Robertson, **Historical Grammar of the Greek New Testament**, London: Houghton & Stoughton, 1919, p. 593). The sense thus is “by the authority of” Christ (see T. Mueller, **Wycliffe Dictionary of Theology**, Harrison, Bromiley, Henry, Eds., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999, p. 371; cf. Col. 3:17). Or, as R.C.H. Lenski noted, “in my name” is the same as “in connection with my revelation” (**The Interpretation of Matthew**, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943, p. 707). Christ is saying, therefore: “Whenever two or three are gathered together, to do that which I have authorized (specifically in the matter of discipline), I will stand by you.”

Conclusion

The outline above sketches the fair import of this sacred instruction from the Son of God. By no stretch of the imagination was the Savior suggesting that should several church members

decide to forsake the Lord's day assembly, and, instead, "gather themselves together" on the golf course, he would be in their midst, blessing them stroke by stroke!

Such attempts to manipulate the Holy Scriptures for frivolous purposes are shameful travesties that bring no credit to those who so employ them.