

**Principles of Discipline in Matthew 18:15-17  
Part II: An Exegetical Study**

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*"Church discipline!" Mention those two words in the company of fellow Christians and watch their reactions. You will be confronted with either disgust, fear, or confusion. In most Christian circles the matter is distasteful.*

*Of all the responsibilities of the pastor that which is surely the most painful is the leading of the church in disciplinary action. Though a Biblical imperative, the necessity of discipline never lessens the pain to those who must participate in its administration.*

*The issue of church discipline is often complicated because of widespread confusion about what the Bible says on the subject. This study was undertaken for the purpose of answering the question, "What does the Bible say on the subject of church discipline?"*

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Matthew 18:15-17 is considered by many as the classic passage on the subject of church discipline. It cannot be coincidental that the classic passage on corrective church discipline in the NT directly follows the parable of the man who left his ninety-nine sheep to search for one sheep that was lost. This parable sets the stage for what follows, reminding us of the centrality of reconciliation to the discipline process. For what is the parable about? The parable shows the tremendous value of one straying sheep and the lengths to which the shepherd is willing to go in order to retrieve it. This

being so, one should not take lightly the sins of any brother. How should one go about reestablishing the desired fellowship? Jesus gives instructions in Matthew 15:17-18. It is time to take a concentrated look at it in a systematic, exegetical fashion.

15--Now if your brother should sin against you, go and convince him between you and him alone. If he hears you you have gained (the fellowship of) your brother.

16--But if he does not listen take along with you the next time one or two, in order that by mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established.

17--But if he ignores them, report to the church. But if he even ignores the church, he shall be with reference to you precisely like the heathen and the tax collector.

### **Instructions Contained in Matthew 18:15**

Jesus has just spoken to His disciples to warn them not to cause one of these "little ones" to stumble (18:10-14). Instead of becoming the cause of someone else's stumbling every follower of the Lord should make it his business to find the sheep that has gone astray and to bring it back to the fold. Now the thought shifts. "Suppose I myself am not the sinner, the one who causes others to become ensnared in sin, but instead the one sinned against, what then?"<sup>1</sup> In answering this question Jesus looks at offenses from the opposite perspective of that previously discussed -- He now looks from the viewpoint of the brother against whom the sin is committed. Jesus now tells the disciples how to handle the situation when a brother sins.<sup>2</sup> It must be kept in mind that Jesus is dealing with the relationship between fellow-believers. "Brother" might mean any man, but here means a brother Christian, as shown by the reference to the church in verse 17,<sup>3</sup> although it could mean a physical brother who was also in Christ. According to John Gill, "This is spoken not to the apostles as such, but as believers in Christ; and concerns every one that stands in the relation of a brother, or church member to each other."<sup>4</sup> Lenski points out:

Here for the first time in this chapter Jesus uses "thy brother" in the sense of thy fellow-believer and thus thy fellow-church member. And, as the sequel shows, a case arises in which the continuance

of this relation is jeopardized. Yet until the clear denial of brotherhood is established, I must treat the offender as a brother in Christ and in no other way.<sup>5</sup>

The offense committed by a brother is to be dealt with privately, if it be at all possible. There are two third-class conditions in this verse -- "if he should sin against you . . . if he should hear you . . ." Some doubt is expressed in each case. It is a future contingency.<sup>6</sup> The brother may not sin against you, and if he did and you want to see him about it, he might or might not listen to you. The word "sin" ("Now if your brother should sin against you") does not necessarily refer to a personal affront, though it could include an insult. In *hamartano*<sup>7</sup> we have the regular verb for "to sin," literally "to miss the mark," which is set by divine law.<sup>8</sup> It is a very general term that could apply to every sin without any limitations whatsoever.<sup>9</sup> However, the phrase "against you" (*eis se*) indicates what sins are considered here: the sin is specified as being committed against a brother.

It is necessary, however, to note that only a real sin is referred to, one that is apparent as such when one or two other brethren are called in on the case and when the whole congregation considers the matter. This excludes what a sensitive brother may deem a sin without due warrant that it is such . . . Sins of this kind often involve more than the offense against one brother; they may wrong several brethren . . . Or the sin may be altogether public . . . Jesus takes up the least serious case, leaving it to us from it to draw the proper procedure to be followed in the graver ones.<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted that much debate has centered around the words "against you." Did Matthew actually write this? Did Jesus actually say this? Some of the oldest manuscripts omit the phrase *eis se*.<sup>11</sup> Should the words be omitted or retained? Would not the admonition to have a private conference with the erring brother somewhat favor the assumption that the sin referred to was also of a private character? It would seem the context would favor the retention of the phrase "against you," whether expressed or implied.<sup>12</sup> The preposition *eis* (against), occurring with the accusative *se* implies hostility, setting the stage for an unreconciled state between brethren.

What is to be done if such a case arises? Two imperatives follow -- *hupage* and *elegxon* -- "go, convince him." The first imperative, *hupage* (to go forth) tells the offended brother that he is not to wait until his brother comes to him, he is commanded to go; the responsibility is on the brother sinned against. Gill writes:

Do not wait for his coming to thee as being the aggressor, to acknowledge his fault, testify his repentance, express his sorrow for his sin, and ask pardon: but go to him, and freely and faithfully lay his sin before him; but do not aggravate it, and reproach him with it, and bear hard on him for it, but gently rebuke and reprove him.<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that "and" after "go" is omitted in the Greek text; there is no connective between the two commands.<sup>14</sup> The second imperative, *elegxon* (to bring to light, to expose, to reprove, to convince, to rebuke by convincing of wrongdoing, cf John 8:46; 16:8; James 2:9) probably suggests "convict" the brother, not by passing judgment upon him, but by convicting him of his sin.<sup>15</sup>

The aorist implies what is to be done, not bungled or merely attempted; the use of the aorist imperative is a command for specific action.<sup>16</sup> Hendriksen writes:

Jesus means that the offended brother should in the spirit of brotherly love go and show the sinner his fault, and this not . . . for the purpose of receiving satisfaction for a personal grievance, but rather in the interest of the offender, that he may repent, and may seek and find forgiveness. Whether the offended brother should make only one personal visit or should go more than once is not stated, and may depend on circumstances.<sup>17</sup>

It must be noted that this conversation is secret -- *metaxu sou kai autou monou* -- "between you and him alone." *Monou* (alone) emphasizes the thought of privacy. The directions given by the Lord enjoin strict privacy and forbid blurting out the matter in public or spreading it in secret, or bringing the matter before any church authorities. "Let this be done in the most private manner; let none be present, nor any know of it, even the most intimate friend and acquaintance."<sup>18</sup> This direction intends to spare the honor of the brother who has sinned and make it as easy as possible for him to confess the sin and ask for pardon.<sup>19</sup>

If Jesus' formula is followed to the letter it is possible, even probable, that the brother will listen and repent. "If he hears you" is a third-class condition and expresses a condition of potentiality.<sup>20</sup> "Hear" (*akouse*) as used here means to hear so as to yield under the conviction and thus to confess and in sorrow to ask pardon. "The aorist expresses conclusive hearing that requires no further rebuke."<sup>21</sup>

At this point a happy conclusion may be reached -- *ekerdesas ton adelphon sou* -- "you have gained your brother." "Have gained" (*ekerdesas*; to win, to gain, cf I Corinthians 9:19-22: I Peter 3:1) contrasts with the distinctive "be lost" in verse 14.<sup>22</sup> But how is he gained: gained as a friend, i.e., personal reconciliation; gained as a fellow-member of the kingdom of God, i.e., winning back to the church a professing disciple; or gained as a man, i.e., saved him from moral ruin? All three alternatives appear as possibilities. However, since "your brother" echoes verse 15a it is most likely that the thought is you have gained your brother (a fellow-believer, fellow church member); he is your friend, restored to your fellowship and the fellowship of the Lord. To gain or win the brother is the original purpose of the procedure. The church need never know about it. Gill writes that you have "recovered him from the error of his ways, restored him to his duty, and secured his friendship and interest in his favors." He further writes no "mention be made of this ever after, either to him, or any other, or to the church."<sup>23</sup> What begins as a private and personal matter becomes more widely known only if the erring brother rejects the first overture of admonition.

### Instructions Contained in Matthew 18:16

The adversative *de* (but) introduces the possibility, contrary to the assumption of verse 15, that the erring brother will not be disposed to listen<sup>24</sup> when confronted. Here another third-class condition occurs with the imperative in the apodosis. If he does not hear, then take<sup>25</sup> one or two others, thus to provide corroborative testimony, in the event that the third step (verse 17) becomes necessary. The Lord leaves the number of witnesses to the brother concerned.<sup>26</sup>

The main point of the passage is the great importance to be attached to the wandering sheep and hence the intensity of the effort to be expended to retrieve him. One is not to be discouraged

by failure in the first attempt. The second attempt is made, but with gathering belief that the man may be obdurate. If so, further steps will become necessary, in which case, witnesses<sup>27</sup> will be needed when the church hears and adjudicates the matter. It appears there may be two possible reasons why others are called into the case. The supposition is that the offending brother may yield when one or two additional brethren appeal to him; perhaps the brother will heed their importunities, even though he did not listen to the first restorer. If one could not prevail, perhaps two or three might. Gundry argues for this position. He writes:

Matthew leaves no indication that the one or two others shall have witnessed the sin committed against the one who takes them along. Therefore their going does not have the purpose of establishing the original charge (the truth of which is taken for granted) or of enabling them to act as witnesses before the church in case of a second refusal, but of strengthening the reproof with a view toward restoration. The purpose of strengthening the reproof is confirmed by the first clause in v. 17, "But if he refuses to listen to them."<sup>28</sup>

The other reason for the participation of the witnesses is that they may be needed when the brother is brought before the church body for disciplinary purposes. It is not at first clear whether the function of the witnesses is to support the one who confronts his erring brother by bringing additional testimony about the sin committed or to provide witness of the confrontation.

Jesus' instruction on this point appears to draw upon Deuteronomy 19:15 (cf. also John 8:17; II Corinthians 13:1; I Timothy 5:19), "that everything may stand (may be established) on the mouth (word or testimony, Hebraic) of two witnesses or of three." On this point Allen writes that the witnesses "are to witness not to the offense, but to the unwillingness of the offender to be reconciled, and to the efforts made by the offended party to bring about reconciliation."<sup>29</sup>

Because Jesus drew upon Deuteronomy 19:15, which deals with judicial condemnation,<sup>30</sup> and because He began verse 17 with a clause that seems to indicate a united endeavor to gain the erring brother, it is the view of this writer that the witnesses have a two-fold function. The witnesses are to assist in the restoration of the brother while simultaneously providing witness to the efforts being

made by the offended party -- they are witnesses of *pan hrema* (every thing)<sup>37</sup> that transpires.

### Instructions Contained in Matthew 18:17

Two more third-class conditions are presented. The errant brother may ignore<sup>32</sup> (refuse to hear; turn the advice aside; reject the plea of) his friends on the occasion of their second remonstrance, and, following that, he may even (ascensive *kai*) ignore the counsel of the church.<sup>33</sup> Jesus is not saying that he will reject good advice. But "if" he does (and there is potential that he will; i.e., third-class condition) then the Lord's directive is clear. The imperative is found in both of the conclusion clauses. In the former case the third step of the process is to be taken -- "tell (report)<sup>34</sup> to the church." At this time the entire church is to use its united endeavors to gain the brother.<sup>35</sup> A conference is to be held at which time a full report is to be given. In the latter case, should the plea of the church that he repent and forsake his sin be rejected, the church is to take the same attitude toward him (insofar as local church fellowship is concerned) that would be taken if he were a heathen or a tax-collector -- which is Jesus' way of saying "unregenerate." Jesus does not say that the brother is unsaved; He is only saying that he is to be removed<sup>36</sup> from his membership status in the church precisely as (*hosper*) he would have been had he been unsaved.

The sinner is now (not until now) to be regarded and treated as "the Gentile or the publican," the articles with these singulars make them representative of their respective class. Every Gentile as such was outside the commonwealth of Israel, none of its spiritual blessings belonged to him; and every publican (9:10) was . . . in the same category, as one who had separated himself from Israel. By his sin the sinner thus makes himself "one who is not a sheep, nor wants to be sought, but intends to be completely lost," . . . Yet even the very severity of this action of the church is intended to bring the offender to his senses, if this be still possible.<sup>37</sup>

Many commentators challenge the latter portion of this verse claiming it is not in keeping with the Lord's sympathy and compassion as seen elsewhere in the gospels.<sup>38</sup> But Carson writes,

"It is poor exegesis to turn to 8:1-11; 9:9-13; 15:21-28 and say that such people should be treated compassionately. This argument and the New Testament parallels (Romans 16:17; II Thessalonians 3:14) show that Jesus has excommunication in mind."<sup>39</sup> However, one should not regard Jesus' words as an expression of contempt.

As a whole, the expression carries the meaning of ostracism. Even ostracism aims at restoration: the ostracized brother may miss Christian fellowship and make things right . . . The involvement of the church in the final plea and the switch to the second person plural in v. 18 show, however, that all the disciples are to join in the ostracism.<sup>40</sup>

It should be pointed out that in the phrase, "he shall be with reference to you," the "you" in the Greek is singular. This appears to suggest that each member of the church is to abide by the corporate judgment and reminds the reader of the individual responsibility each believer has toward others, already presupposed by the singular "your brother" in v. 15.<sup>41</sup>

It is important to note that the church (congregation) is the final court of appeal: there are no further steps of discipline or higher authorities in Jesus' teaching.<sup>42</sup> In the words of Augustus Strong, ". . . there is no authority on earth above that of the local church."<sup>43</sup>

In a difficult case the local congregation may seek counsel or advice, but the final jurisdiction in regard to a sinning member belongs to the congregation alone, and no one ought either by direct or indirect means to nullify that jurisdiction.<sup>44</sup>

## Summary

In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus is explaining to His disciples that if certain conditions occur, then certain results must follow. This is seen by the occurrence of five third-class conditions: two in verse 15; one in verse 16; and two in verse 17. Four of these conditions (verse 15, verse 16, verse 17a, and verse 17b) follow a parallel structure: *ean* plus the subjunctive in the protasis, followed by the imperative in the apodosis. These four parallel-structured conditions seem to provide the formula (steps) of discipline in dealing with an erring brother. Thus, in Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus

outlines four basic steps to correction: (1) private reproof (verse 15a); (2) private conference (verse 16); (3) public announcement (verse 17a), and (4) public exclusion (verse 17b).

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*Editor's Note: Part III: A Practical Study in which the author discusses the principles and practices of church discipline in Matthew 18:15-17 will follow in the Fall 1989 issue.*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 697

<sup>2</sup> D A Carson, *Matthew Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 402

<sup>3</sup> John A Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1886) 387

<sup>4</sup> John Gill, *Matthew-Acts: Exposition of the Bible* (Feltham, Middlesex, Eng: W H Collingridge, 1952) 166

<sup>5</sup> R C H Lenski, *The Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943) 698

<sup>6</sup> In explaining third-class conditions, James L Boyer, "Third (and Fourth) Class Conditions," *GTJ* 3, no 2 (Fall, 1982), 163-172 writes: "Third class conditional sentences, . . . are identified and characterized by their use of the subjunctive mood in the protasis. The subjunctive indicates potentiality, contingency, or simple futurity. It is the condition which points to a future eventuality. The common notion that it indicates a degree of probability is . . . concluded to be totally incorrect. . . . All third class conditions are essentially future contingencies. . . it seems to me that the use of the subjunctive points essentially to the condition expressed by the protasis as being doubtful, uncertain, undetermined (because it has not yet been determined). The term potential is accurate. It is 'not yet.' . . . Perhaps the term contingent would be even clearer. It depends on any number of factors. In any case, the common denominator is futurity. . . What term can be used to express the essential meaning of the third class condition? Such terms as 'probable,' 'likely,' 'expectancy,' 'anticipatory' are all misleading and not suitable. 'Potential' or 'contingent' are neutral terms which express well the meaning if properly understood. . . . We come back to the term 'Future Condition,' which in my judgment is to be preferred."

<sup>7</sup> The verb here is *hamartese* (3rd per sing aor act subj of *hamartano*, third class condition). From a privative and *meiro* "to have a share in" -- hence, not to have a share, thus to miss the mark; to sin; to offend; to fail to live up to a standard. *Hamartia* the common word for sin, was used in Greek with the meaning of "shortcoming," "fault," or "mistake." To the Greeks, "falling short" meant to "fail to live up to the ideal because of defects in character." In the Septuagint the word expressed the idea of coming short of God's command. In Judaism it expressed failure to live up to the law. In the New Testament two new ideas are added: (1) the "coming short" is deliberate on the part of man due to rebellion against God rather than to inherent weakness; and (2) "falling short" is inexcusable in the light of the completed revelation of God in Christ (cf F Fisher, *How to Interpret the New Testament*, 104).

<sup>8</sup> Lenski, *Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel*, 698

<sup>9</sup> H A W Meyer, ed, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1877) 328

<sup>10</sup> Lenski, *Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel*, 698-699

<sup>11</sup> The words "against you" (*eis se*) are omitted by Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus and a few other manuscripts. The AV, basing its translation on the Textus Receptus, retains the phrase. The Greek NT (A-B-MW) retains the words, though placing them in brackets and giving them a "considerable doubt" rating. It may not be wise to decide the matter on the basis of external textual criticism only. Lenski writes that the phrase is "textually very strongly assured." (op cit 698). Tasker states that the words "rightly interpret the text." (*Matthew*, 177).

<sup>12</sup> Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 698

<sup>13</sup> Gill, *Matthew-Acts*, 166

<sup>14</sup> The literary device used here is asyndeton (the omission of conjunctions from constructions in which they would normally be used) for emphasis. Friedrich W Blass and A de Brunner, *Greek Grammar of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* translated and revised by Robert W Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) 241

<sup>15</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, 402. Lenski says, "while *epitimo* means simply 'to rebuke' (cf Luke 17:3), *elegko* means 'to rebuke so as to bring conviction'" *Matthew*, 699.

<sup>16</sup> Lenski, *Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel*, 699

<sup>17</sup> Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 698

<sup>18</sup> Gill, *Matthew-Acts*, 166

<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note a parallel of Jesus' teaching in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarches* Gad 6:3: "If a man sin against thee, speak peaceably to him, and in thy soul hold no guile; and if he repent and confess, forgive him." Cf also Leviticus 19:17.

<sup>20</sup> Boyer, "Third (and Fourth) Class Conditions," 166

<sup>21</sup> Lenski, *Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel*, 700

<sup>22</sup> Robert H Gundry, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 367

<sup>23</sup> Gill, *Matthew-Acts*, 166

<sup>24</sup> *akouse* (3rd per sing aor act subj of *akouo*, to hear, to listen to (third class condition)). Lenski writes, "The aorist 'does not hear' is definite refusal to hear and to be convicted." *Matthew*, 700

<sup>25</sup> "You take" -- *paralabe* (2nd per sing aor act impv of *paralambao*, to take, to take with).

<sup>26</sup> Lenski, *Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel*, 70

- <sup>27</sup> "Witnesses" -- *marturon* (gen pl masc of *martos*, a witness, one who can testify on the basis of experience (cf Matthew 26:65; Mark 14:63; Acts 6:13; 7:58; II Corinthians 13:1; I Timothy 5:19; Hebrews 10:28; Revelation 1:5; 3:14; 11:3)).
- <sup>28</sup> Gundry, *Matthew*, 368
- <sup>29</sup> W C Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, reprint 1985) 198
- <sup>30</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, 403
- <sup>31</sup> Though the meaning of *hrama* is basically "spoken word," "saying" (Matthew 27:36; 27:14), along with its Hebrew equivalent it acquires the secondary meaning "thing," "matter," "event." Ref Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 700
- <sup>32</sup> *parakouō* (3rd per sing aor act subj of *parakouō* to ignore, to refuse to hear (that is, a combination of *para* and *akouō* to hear aside; that is, to allow what one hears to pass without due regard or assent or compliance.) This follows the pattern of verse 16a except for the replacement of *me* with *para* -- (thus giving the sense of refusal). Ref Gundry, *Matthew*, 368
- <sup>33</sup> "Church" (*ekklesia*, that is, the called out ones, the assembly, church) must here be taken in the sense of "the locally organized fellowship of believers." See also McNeile, *Matthew*, 266. This is the second and last occurrence of the word "church" (*ekklesia*) in the gospels (cf Matthew 16:18). Though *ekklesia* was used in extrabiblical Greek literature to speak of a town meeting or any group of assembled people, the use of "church" by Jesus in this text anticipates the program that was born by the baptism of the Spirit in Acts 2. Here it speaks of the local assembly, a body of believers gathered together as a fellowship. Clearly the Lord was looking ahead to a new age. In verse 20 He states, "where two or three have gathered together in My name, there am I in their midst." This implies a time when He will be absent from them, a time in which the church would exist. Ref Toussaint, *Matthew*, 218
- <sup>34</sup> "You tell, report" -- *eipe* (2nd per sing aor act impv of *eipō*, to tell).
- <sup>35</sup> Lenski, *Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel*, 701
- <sup>36</sup> *esto* -- "he shall be with reference to you" -- (3rd per sing pres impv of *eimi*, to be); *soi*, (dat sing masc of *su*, (reference).
- <sup>37</sup> Lenski, *Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel*, 702-703
- <sup>38</sup> Ref McNeile, *Matthew*, 267. For a most expressive comment in this regard, see Wm Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2:206-207
- <sup>39</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, 403
- <sup>40</sup> Gundry, *Matthew*, 368
- <sup>41</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, 403
- <sup>42</sup> Robert L Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972) 115
- <sup>43</sup> Augustus H Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1954) 927
- <sup>44</sup> Lenski, *Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel*, 703