

The Church of the Servant King
Survey of the Bible Series
The Gospel of Matthew
(Lesson SB-MT18B)

Matthew 18:15-35

Dealing with a Sinning Brother in the “Assembly” of Jewish Believers (18:15-20)

The key to understanding this section of Scripture is the word “church” in verse 17. As we have seen in Matthew 16:18, the word church is the Greek word *ekklesia* and it literally means “assembly.” It has specific reference in context to the assembly of believing Jews who accepted the gospel of the kingdom, recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and who would form the basis of the Messianic kingdom had the nation en masse accepted the offer of the kingdom.

Context, context, context – Jesus’ teaching in verses 15-20 is not directed to the post-Pentecost Church Age believer. He is setting forth principles regarding conduct within the Messianic community of believers, i.e. the kingdom of God on earth. The context is still within the period in which the gospel of the kingdom is being proclaimed. It would be totally out of context for Jesus to have been teaching his disciples regarding the attitude that would characterize the person entering that kingdom (18:1-14) only to jump to a set of governing principles within the post Pentecost Church. His disciples would have had no way of understanding His teaching.

Similarity with C.A. Truth – As in much of Jesus’ teaching regarding kingdom life and conduct, there is similarity to be found with Church Age teaching. For instance, we find similar teaching regarding the treatment of a sinning brother in such passages as Galatians 6:1-5; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15; James 5:19-20 cf. Romans 16:17.

Examination of the Passage – In this passage Jesus gives His disciples a **step by step** approach to dealing with a sinning brother in the “assembly.” **First**, discuss the issue with the brother one on one (v. 15). Jesus assumes that the individual who personally confronts his brother will do so with true humility (see verses 3-4). If it is hard to accept a rebuke, it is harder still to administer one in humility. The background for Jesus’ instruction is found in Leviticus 19:17-18 – “You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

Second, if private confrontation does not work, take two or three witnesses (v 16). The Scriptural background for this instruction is Deuteronomy 19:15 which states in part that “by the mouth of two or three witnesses the truth shall be established.”

Doubtless this Deuteronomic law was designed for what we would call “secular” cases. But the distinction is artificial and should not be pressed for the Israelite nation understood itself to be not a nation like others but a theocratic nation, God’s chosen people. In conformity with his customary interpretation of the Scriptures, Jesus perceives the link joining his messianic community with ancient Israel. (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary – Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 402)

The two or three witnesses were to provide testimony in the event that the case had to be escalated and presented to the entire “assembly.” It is less likely that they were to be present to bring additional testimony about the sin committed by the erring brother. Deuteronomy 19:15 deals with judicial condemnation which is a step taken by only the entire assembly not attempts to convince a brother of his fault.

Third, if he refuses to hear the argument against him after the second confrontation, then the matter was to be presented before the entire assembly (v 17). The remainder of the verse

indicates that Jesus had excommunication in mind. The Jews despised and ostracized “heathens” and “tax collectors,” the latter of whom were considered traitors.

“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven” – is now a statement addressed to all true disciples, not just Peter as in 16:19. The meaning is the same, however.

Verses 19-20 – These two verses should not in this context be understood to be a promise regarding any prayer on which any two or three believers agree. Rather, in context, these two verses refer to a judicial matter in which agreement has been reached by two individuals in the “assembly” and the individuals are gathered in Jesus’ name, then the heavenly Father will allow the judgment to stand and satisfy the righteous principles by which the Messianic kingdom is to be governed.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:21-35)

Seventy times seven (490) is probably not the number of times to which Jesus refers. Rather, the Greek text follows the LXX rendering of the same phrase in Gen 4:24 which is a translation of the Hebrew for seventy-seven (77). Jesus’ point is not that 77 or even 490 is the upper limit. Neither is Jesus’ point that forgiveness should altogether take the place of the discipline and procedural steps just taught in verses 15-20. Rather, Jesus’ point is that all of them have been forgiven far more than they will ever forgive. Those in the Messianic kingdom serve a king who has forgiven far more than they can ever forgive one another.

The value of ten thousand talents (v 24) cannot be exactly measured in today’s dollar; however, 1 Chron 29:4 & 7 notes that David donated three thousand talents of gold and seven thousand talents of silver for the construction of the temple and the princes of Israel donated five thousand talents of gold and ten thousand talents of silver. Some have estimated the value of ten thousand talents to be between \$12 million and \$1 billion depending upon inflation and fluctuating metal prices. Such an amount of indebtedness could not be paid by selling the family into slavery (v 25), a practice which was sanctioned in the Law (Lev 25:39; 2 Ki 4:1). Such slaves had to be freed in the year of Jubilee (every fiftieth year). The top price for a slave was only about one talent.

A hundred denarii (v 28) represented a hundred day’s wages for a foot soldier or a common laborer. Yet, the amount is trivial compared to what he has already been forgiven. Even an inexpensive slave sold for five hundred denarii and it was illegal to sell a man for a sum greater than his debt.

The Point: Because God is such a God of compassion and mercy, He cannot accept those who are devoid of compassion and mercy in His kingdom.