



## **Matthew 18:18–20**

18 “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

## Reflection

Jesus has only 6 months left to live. Imagine knowing the day, the moment and the means by which you are going to die. Imagine being handed that terminal diagnosis with the prospect of suffering terribly at the end and knowing exactly when and how it would take place. Worse still, imagine the people around you, your closest friends, either refusing to believe you or forgetting what you've just told them because they're too busy trying to get ahead. One moment they're filled with grief, the next moment they've moved right along, either too caught up in themselves to spare much of a thought for you, or unable to cope with the prospect of your death and so acting as if you never said anything in the first place. How would you react in a

situation like this? How would you react towards friends like these?

In this exact situation, Jesus spends almost every waking moment that he has left showing his friends how much he loves them, by preparing them so that they can cope when he's gone. Between telling them for the second (Matt 17:22–23) and third time (Matt 20:17–29) about his coming death, Jesus is teaching his disciples about relationships within the church. The church that Jesus has begun to build and that they will continue to build after he is gone.

The biggest risk to relationships amongst a community of believers is of course sin which isn't just destructive to individuals, it can tear whole churches apart. And so

yesterday Jesus gave some very practical instructions to his disciples and to us about dealing with unrepentant and divisive sins within the church. His instructions for church discipline were these:

15 “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. 16 But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ 17 If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

In essence Jesus provides four steps, all motivated by love, to restore a wayward brother or sister back into relationship with God and with the church. These steps culminate in the drastic action of excluding the person from Christian fellowship. Because we're made in God's Trinitarian image and also made for perfect relationship with him, relationship is human kind's greatest need which places social exclusion amongst the most painful things that human beings can do to each other. But this final step of social exclusion is also an act of love as it represents a last and desperate attempt to restore your sinful brother or sister. Because it is far better to be cut off from the church for a time than to be cut off from God forever.

Which is what Jesus goes on to say in our

passage today,

18 “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

What Jesus means here is that church discipline can have eternal consequences and so it should never be taken lightly and never done out of impure motives. Jesus said something similar to Peter (Matt 16:19) whose preaching at Pentecost inaugurated the early church. When Peter preached the church grew by the power of the Holy Spirit from around 120 people to over 3000. Only here Jesus is now speaking these same words to all his disciples which by extension includes us. Church discipline, the process through which we

deal with sin within the church, is serious and can have eternal consequences. Which means we need to act with great wisdom, with much prayer and with careful obedience to Scripture at each step of the way.

But Jesus also gives us a word of assurance amidst these grave decisions.

19 “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

Jesus reassures his disciples that when members of the church gather together, pray and deliberate over the wisest course

of action, when it comes to matters of sin within the church God will answer their prayers and give them the guidance they need. Even more strikingly Jesus assures them of his continual presence amongst those who gather in his name which must have been especially reassuring to his disciples if they had truly registered that he would soon be leaving them. It is also an explicit statement that Jesus is in fact God.

It's a great sadness that many people take verse 19 out of context which is what usually happens with the bible is misused. They take it to imply that when two or three people pray together about anything God promises that he will answer their prayers in the affirmative – this simply isn't true. As the old adage goes 'a text without a



context is a pretext for a proof text' and verse 19 taken out of context is easy to distort. Here Jesus is reassuring us that God will guide the cumulative wisdom of members of his church who are faithful in prayer and obedient to the Scriptures when they bring before him the difficult matter of church discipline.

## **Think**

With what time remains you might like to consider the authority that God is delegating to the church in the area of church discipline and also his partnership with us in this difficult matter through his word and his presence.

You might also consider what Matt 18:15–20 might mean for those who believe that

they can be a Christian but not attend a church. Of course I'm not talking about Christians who have been imprisoned for their faith or Christians who for health reasons are no longer able to attend a Sunday gathering.<sup>1</sup> But I am talking about people who call themselves Christians yet don't believe they need to go to church.

Along these lines it would seem from our passage that nothing is more important to our Heavenly Father or Jesus than the church. And yet many people only attend church three out of five Sundays or sometimes even less. In light of our passage today and the fact that Jesus Christ laid down his life for his church what really could be more important than blocking out time each and every Sunday to meeting together in worship of him? In a moment of

<sup>1</sup> Rightly, the church should come to them in love and support.

honesty you might tally up how often you miss church and consider the reasons. I always like to think that the 'church service' is well named. You see, it's not about us, it's about service, we go there primarily in the service of others, to serve others just as Jesus served us by laying down his life for us. Do you attend church primarily to serve others? Because if this is the case, then when we regularly miss church we aren't only letting Jesus down, we're also letting down our brothers and sisters.

But on the flipside, could there be any other place on planet earth that Christians would rather be than worshipping our Father amidst our extended Christian family each Sunday? Surely life on earth cannot get any better than this when appropriately viewed in the light of Scripture and

experienced in our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit!

## **Pray**

Pray that sin wouldn't distort these truths and that your church would grow increasingly to feel this way, starting with the example that you resolve to set from this morning on. And pray again today for those who have left the church out of unrepentant sin. Pray particularly for people from your past that come to mind. Pray that by God's grace they'd be restored to the church and be bound tightly forever in heaven through your prayer this morning.