

## **RECONCILIATION (PART 6)**

### ***“WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE ASSEMBLED IN MY NAME”***

#### **MATTHEW 18:15-20**

#### **(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)**

*15 “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault when the two of you are alone. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother.*

*16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others with you, so that at the testimony of two or three witnesses every matter may be established.*

*17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. If he refuses to listen to the church, treat him like a Gentile or a tax collector.*

*18 “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.*

*19 Again, I tell you the truth, if two of you on earth agree about whatever you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you.*

*20 For where two or three are assembled in my name, I am there among them.”*

In previous Lessons we have stated that in **Matthew 18:15-20**, the reconciliation of believers is dealt with under the theme of church discipline. In verses **15-17**, the Lord Jesus outlines **five** steps that are to be taken as it relates to the disciplining and reconciling of a professing believer. The steps are outlined hereunder:

#### **1 A Private Meeting**

**2 A Private Conference** (with witnesses)

**3 A Public Announcement** (to the church)

**4 Public Exclusion** (from the church)

**5 Public Restoration**

At every stage of the process the overriding purpose is to regain the offending brother or sister.

Last week we said that **John MacArthur** expressed the view that a local assembly has the authority to administer church discipline for **two** reasons. **Firstly, MacArthur** says that as it relates to the disciplining and reconciling of professing believers, **the Father acts with the local assembly** when it faithfully follows the five steps outlined in **Matthew 18:15-17**, because in exercising **biblically appropriate** discipline, the church is fulfilling the will of God on the earth. Verse **19** gives us the assurance that when this process is followed, God Himself is at work in it: *“Again, I tell you the truth, if two of you on earth agree about whatever you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you.”*

We explained that the terms *“bind”* and *“release”* in these verses do not mean that the local assembly ever usurps the lordship of Jesus Christ over His saints as far as their eternal destiny is concerned. What these terms indicate is that the Word of the Lord gives the local assembly the authority to discipline, and if necessary, excommunicate disobedient church members, and to also restore them to fellowship if and when they repent. The church is not able to change God’s mind, in the sense that whatever we decide on earth will necessarily be duplicated in heaven. Rather, the terms *“bind”* and *“release”* mean that when the church diligently pursues a biblical agenda, it is fulfilling God’s agenda. When the apostles “bound” something, or forbade it on earth, they were carrying out the will of God in the matter. When they “loosed” something, or allowed it on earth, they were likewise carrying out the will of God.

Unfortunately, there are many persons who misuse these verses, as well others like **Matthew 16:19** and **John 20:21-23** to teach that believers have the authority to “bind” and “loose” sickness, disease, financial and other “blessings” and even death. But when these verses are read **in context**, it is clear that such teaching is erroneous.

As we have shown, the context of **Matthew 18:18** has nothing to do with the binding and loosing of sickness, disease, financial and other “blessings” or death. The verse is dealing with the authority of the local church to pass judgment on unrepentant sinners and to also restore them to fellowship if and when they repent.

As far as **Matthew 16:19** is concerned, the context again does not support any idea that is even remotely connected with the binding and loosing of sickness, disease, financial and other “blessings” or death. The phrase, “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” represent the apostolic authority of the disciples to admit people into the Kingdom of Heaven. The terms “bind” and “release” are used as references to the authority of the first-century apostles to declare whether or not someone had been forgiven, and on what basis that forgiveness had been granted or withheld. This declaration was not to be made on the basis of their own personal notions or preferences. It was to be made on the basis of the gospel message entrusted to them as messengers and witnesses of Jesus Christ and His resurrection.

**John 20:21-23** is to be interpreted in the same way, based on its context.

We will now consider the **second** reason stated by **John MacArthur** as to why it is that a local assembly has the authority to administer church discipline. The second reason is found in verses **19** and **20** of our text:

*19 “Again, I tell you the truth, if two of you on earth agree about whatever you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you.*

*20 For where two or three are assembled in my name, I am there among them.”*

In verse **18** our Lord assured His disciples that when a local assembly faithfully follows the five steps outlined in **Matthew 18:15-17**, relative to the disciplining and reconciling of an offending brother or sister, He is acting with the assembly, because it is fulfilling the will of God on the earth. He says, *“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.”*

Verse **19** is basically a repetition of verse **18**: *“Again, I tell you the truth, if two of you on earth agree about whatever you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you.”* Notice that verse **19** begins with, **“Again.”** The Lord is restating the point He made in verse **18**! He is saying in effect to the disciples, “I know it is difficult for you to believe that the Father in heaven will ratify the decisions you take on the earth, so let me say it again in another way:” *“if two of you on earth agree about whatever you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you.”*

To what is our Lord referring when He says, *“Whatever you ask?”* The context indicates that He is still talking about church discipline. He is saying again that heaven ratifies what is done on earth when the church follows the process outlined in verses **15-17**. It is another way of saying, *“whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.”*

What is the significance of the *“two or three?”* The two or three represent the lowest number of persons who have God’s authority to deal with the disciplining and reconciling of an offending brother or sister. The *“two or three”* here are probably a reference to the person who initiated the process with a **Private Meeting**, as well as the two witnesses who became involved at the **second** step of the process.

Jesus starts with the lowest possible number. He says, *“If two of you on earth agree.”* The word *“agree”* is a translation of the Greek word **sumphónéó**: (**soom-fo-neh’-o**), from which we get the word our English word “symphony.” The word means, “to sound together, be in accord, to harmonize, to agree together.” When the *“two or three”* who are

confronting the offending brother or sister in a loving manner, agree that his or her sin has not been acknowledged and repented of and decide to carry the process further, their Father in heaven comes into agreement with them. If they agree that the offending party has in fact repented of his or her sin and therefore decide not to take the matter any further, their Father in heaven will likewise support their decision. In other words, He will be harmonizing with them. What a beautiful thought!

In verse **20** our Lord says, *“For where two or three are assembled in my name, I am there among them.”* This is the **second** reason why a local assembly has the authority to exercise church discipline. **The Lord Jesus Christ acts with the local assembly.** When a local assembly faithfully follows the five steps outlined in **Matthew 18:15-17**, not only does the Father in heaven act with them, but the Son who is present among them also acts with them. This is a dual divine authority!

Brothers and sisters, this dual divine authority should give us great assurance that when we exercise biblically appropriate discipline, we have the backing of both the Father and the Son!

This reminds us of the dual assurance that our Saviour gives to believers regarding their eternal security in **John 10:27-30**:

*27 “My sheep listen to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*

*28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; no one will snatch them from my hand.*

*29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them from my Father’s hand.*

*30 The Father and I are one.”*

Both the Father and the Son act in perfect harmony to safeguard the security of the believer’s position in Christ!

**Matthew 18:19-20** is very often used to give legitimacy to a poorly attended church service or a small prayer meeting. At some point in the proceedings, the pastor or the moderator will say something like “Well brothers and sisters, there are just a few of us here this evening, but thank God, we do not need to have a lot of persons present in order for the Lord to show up, for He has promised that, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst to bless and do good.”

Church leaders often use statements like this to refuge our embarrassment at the small turn out, and to encourage the few who are present not to be discouraged. Or we may be trying to convey the idea that if two believers can “agree” on just about anything, then God is mandated to act. There are times when believers will say to one another, “agree with me” (sometimes they will add, “in the Spirit”), and they expect that whatever they “agree” on will be sanctioned by God. But is this interpretation of Jesus’s words, faithful to the context?

What if there are not two or three persons praying and agreeing? What if there is only one person who is praying in isolation? Does that mean that Jesus is not there? What does **Matthew 18:19-20** really mean?

When we look at these two verses **contextually**, we see that they must be understood within the wider context of verses **15-20**. The very clear context of this passage is the disciplining and reconciling of offending brothers and sisters. The “*two or three*” of verses **19** and **20** are inextricably connected with the “*two or three*” of verse **16**. In verse **16**, the principle has been invoked of needing “*two or three witnesses*” in making an accusation. The mention of in verses **19-20** is simply a confirmation of what was said in verse **16**!

In verse **16** Jesus quoted **Deuteronomy 19:15** which stated that an accusation from a single individual was insufficient to bring action in a criminal case under the Old Covenant. However, two or three witnesses who agreed were sufficient to establish a matter. The law in

**Deuteronomy** regulated a **human** court. Our Lord applies this law to the “**heavenly** court.”

When the offending brother or sister in the church is confronted by two or three witnesses, if he or she refuses to repent, these witnesses bring the matter before the church. Jesus assures us that, when this happens, it is not just the witnesses who are bringing action against the wrongdoer, but He is acting with them. Church discipline is sanctioned by both the Father and the Son. It is very important that we understand this because we live in an age when it is not fashionable to confront or “judge” anyone’s attitude or lifestyle. Those who do step forward to call out sin in the church can take heart in the fact that they are not acting alone; Christ is with them in the endeavour.

The **second** step in the process of church discipline calls for “*two or three,*” and this seems to be the best application for this verse. The “two or three” who gather in Jesus’ name are not coming together in a worship service or a prayer meeting, but in a matter of church discipline. The two or three witnesses have confronted the offender in a spirit of humility and he or she has not repented. So, the two or three take the matter to the Lord in prayer and then confidently move forward with the process outlined in Scripture, knowing that God endorses their action.

We will conclude this study with a quote from **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**, the German pastor, and anti Nazi dissident who was hanged on 9 April 1945 as the Nazi regime was collapsing. The quote which speaks to the tremendous benefits of believers confessing their sins to each other, is taken from chapter 5 of his book, “*Life Together.*” Interestingly, the title of the chapter is “*Confession and Communion:*”

“He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do

not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we **are** sinners!

But it is the grace of the Gospel, which is so hard for the pious to understand, that it confronts us with the truth and says: You are a sinner, a great, desperate sinner; now come, as the sinner that you are, to God who loves you...He does not want anything from you, a sacrifice, a work; He wants you alone...God has come to you to save **the sinner**. Be glad! This message is liberation through truth. You can hide nothing from God. The mask you wear before men will do you no good before Him. He wants to see you as you are, He wants to be gracious to you. You do not have to go on lying to yourself and your brothers, as if you were without sin; you can dare to be a sinner. Thank God for that; He loves the sinner but He hates sin...

**In confession the break-through to community takes place.** Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. **The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown.** It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community. **In confession the light of the Gospel breaks into darkness and seclusion of the heart.** The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged. All that is secret and hidden is made manifest. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted. But God breaks the gates of brass and bars of iron (**Psalm 107:16**).



**Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders; he gives up all his evil. He gives his heart to God, and he finds the forgiveness of all his sin in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother.**

**The expressed, acknowledged sin has lost all its power."**