

## Pentecost XVI: Matthew 18:15-20: My Obligation Toward My Brother

1. Ylvisaker summarizes this chapter thus: "In this discourse Jesus taught us that they who desire to be His disciples must seek true greatness in self-abasement (1-4), that such persons are for Jesus's sake held in high esteem in heaven (5-14), that we shall for this reason employ all diligence in our effort to reclaim the one who has sinned (15-17), that a Christian church in this respect possesses great power (18-20), that we, as brethren who are united in the strong bonds of brotherly love, shall be ever willing to forgive one another (21-35)." Beck's AAT has these brief captions: Who Is the Greatest? 1-5; Do I Lead Others to Sin? 6-14; Tell Him His Fault 15-20; Forgive! 21-35. Fahling summarizes thus: "The heavenly Father has but one will, the will to save. This includes all, young and old. It also includes those who have fallen into sin, but who by loving patience and hard work might be won back." The parable of the lost sheep (vss. 12-14) shows how valuable the straying sinner is to Jesus.
2. Gal. 6:1-5 is similar but yet dissimilar to Mt. 18:15-20. Our pericope speaks of my obligation toward an erring brother who must be convinced of his sin. Gal. 6:1-5 speaks of my humble obligation toward a penitent sinner who has been overpowered and overcome by sin. In Gal. 6:1-5 the use of Gospel is primary. In Mt. 18:15-20 clearly Law must be used first. If acknowledgment of sin takes place, Gospel must be applied.
3. The 25th ed. of Nestle/Aland makes all of chapter 18 two major paragraphs, with subparagraphs at 7, 8, 10, 12, 15, 18, 19 for the first major paragraph and 23 and 35 for the second major (21-35). But compare the 26th ed. We have majors at 1, 6, 10, 12, 15, 19, 21 and 23. The 26th ed. "chops" the chapter into too many major paragraphs.
4. Vs. 15: Following the reading of the 25th, NASB, JB and NEB omit the words εἰς σὲ. The other seven (from AV to NKJV), follow the reading of the 26th which restores εἰς σὲ, with brackets, into the text. Fahling: "(It is) not necessarily a strictly personal offense, but an evident act against a certain word of God." Ylvisaker: "Not necessarily a personal injury or injustice; if a member of the Church sins before my very eyes, then he has sinned against me, he has violated the honor of God, which is the chief concern of the believer. What is done to a believer in Jesus is performed as against Jesus." Cf. Lev. 19:17 for the same thought in the OT. Note that, though he is in danger, he is still to be treated as brother. σοῦ is genitive of relationship. ἐλεγχοῦν means to rebuke and convict. This shows that it is a sin, unrepented, which endangers his relationship to God. ὕπαγε, you take the initiative. Don't wait til he comes to you, which will likely never happen. The adjective μόνου applies both to σοῦ and αὐτοῦ, "you alone and him alone", only two of you. In the Large Catechism, under the 8th Commandment (Tappert 402.277-283), Luther quotes vss. 15 and 16 as a proper antidote for governing the tongue and thus not gossiping behind our brother's back. Gossiping destroys proper church discipline. Note that in vs. 15 we have two future more vivid conditional sentences. This is the form of condition which pictures something as likely to happen. Don't be surprised if you need approach a fellow Christian for the purpose of pointing out a clear case of unrepented sin in his life. Furthermore, go expecting him to listen to you effectively. In the second conditional sentence the first σοῦ is object of ἀκούω, the second genitive of relationship. ἐκέρδησας is variously translated "gained, won back, won over, won." This word shows that his condition is serious. Read Lk. 5:7 and 10. Heaven reverberates when confession of sin and forgiveness thereof occur.
5. Vs. 16: The δὲ in 15 denotes progression of thought but the three δὲ in 16 and 17 denote failure to bring to repentance. In vss. 15-17 we have five FMV conditions, in fact they pervade the whole pericope. In other words, don't be surprised if this happens. παραλαμβάνω, more frequent in Matthew than in the other Gospels, often denotes close association, here evidently implying careful

choosing.  $\text{ἵνα}$  introduces a purpose clause. The principle here enunciated (taken from LXX Deut. 19:15) is found also at Jn. 8:17; II Cor. 13:1 and I Tim. 5:19. Bengel says: "This passage is one of those which prove that the principles and rules of the forensic law of Moses are not entirely excluded from the polity of the Church of Christ." In vs. 15 we had only one to one, which is most conducive to restoration, assuming pliability on the part of the erring brother. But in 16 we have "one or two more" assuming a certain amount of rigidity on the part of the erring brother. One or two more will the more easily break through this rigidity. Furthermore, there may be necessity later to call the one or two more as witnesses, in the event of failure. For the word  $\rho\eta\mu\alpha$  we have a variety of translations: "word, accusation, matter, charge, fact." Perhaps AAT is simplest and neatest: "So that you have two or three witnesses for everything," for everything said and done. Sometimes the way in which something is handled is just as important as what is said.

6. Vs. 17:  $\text{παρακούω}$  is literally "to past-hear" which means "to close the ears to." Six of our translations, from RSV to NKJV have "refuses". Like  $\alpha\kappa\omicron\upsilon\omega$ ,  $\text{παρακούω}$  takes genitive of the person as direct object. The antecedent of  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omega\upsilon\omicron\upsilon$  is both the original person (vs. 15) and the witness(es). This implies that the two or three have spoken. By the way, we failed to mention that  $\epsilon\kappa\epsilon\rho\delta\eta\sigma\alpha\varsigma$  in vs. 15 is simply future perfect. Back to vs. 17: "Tell it to the congregation." That is plainly the meaning here. Christian congregations had not yet been established, but the omniscient Jesus looks ahead. It is obviously clearly implied that the original person and the witness(es) are members of the same congregations as is the accused. Does the  $\kappa\alpha\iota$  mean "refuses to listen even to the church" (RSV, NIV, NASB) or "won't even listen to the church" (AAT)? We think the former is preferable. The local congregation is the highest spiritual authority on earth, no matter how small. If the accused refuses to listen even to the congregation, there is no higher authority on earth. Cf. the specific case at I Cor. 5:1-13 and II Cor. 2:3ff. If the accused refuses to acknowledge his sin "let him be to you just as the Gentile and the publican."  $\sigma\omicron\iota$  denotes first the accuser of vs. 15, but surely includes all members of the congregation. The Gentile was not under the covenant of grace. The publican was considered as one who had rejected the covenant of grace. The meaning is clear: "Don't consider the impenitent sinner under the covenant of grace so long as he rejects it by his impenitence." We think of Jn. 3:36b; Hebr. 3:12-19. This is the major NT passage on excommunication. There is nothing in the whole wide world so truthful as is Christianity. It does not blink unrepented sin. It rescues the repentant sinner from hell and everlasting condemnation. It hardly need be said that the steps in church discipline proceed from love of restoring the lost sheep (vss. 12-14).
7. Vs. 18: Cf. the parallel passages at Mt. 16:19 and Jn. 20:23. Cf. what was said of vs. 19 in the pericope for Pentecost XIV. We quote several passages from the *Book of Concord*: "The keys do not belong to the person or one particular individual but to the whole church, as is shown by many clear and powerful arguments, for after speaking of the keys in Mt. 18:19, Christ said 'If two or three of you agree on earth' etc. Therefore, he bestows the keys especially and immediately on the church, and for the same reason the church especially possesses the right of vocation." Tappert 324.24. "Christ is talking about the remission of sins when he speaks Mt. 18:18. This remission removes eternal death and brings eternal life." Tappert 203.138. "The keys are a function and power given to the church by Christ (Mt. 16:19; 18:18) to bind and loose sins, not only the gross and manifest sins but also those which are subtle and secret and which God alone perceives. So it is written 'Who can discern his errors?' (Ps. 19:12). And Paul himself complains (Rom. 7:23) that in his flesh he was a captive to 'the law of sin'. It is not in our power but in God's alone to judge which, how great, and many our sins are." Tappert 311.1. By the way, two translations are here rejected: TEV "prohibit--permit" and NEB "forbid--allow." The Christian congregation should never relinquish this power, given to it by Christ, to an individual or council. Synod is not a church in the sense that the local congregation is. Formerly we were known as "The Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and other States."

For several reasons it was changed to "The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod". We must remember that here the word "church" is synonymous with the word "synod", a federation of local congregations, not a "church" which usurps the office of the keys. Ylvisaker says at this point: "The Saviour has now cited the steps of admonition which applies in church discipline even today. There are instances in Holy Writ where the two first steps in order are omitted (I Tim. 5:20). Paul disregarded both in the case of Peter (Gal. 2:11). But Scripture does not state that they must be ignored in such cases and that the matter forthwith must be placed before the church. Charity, which is the supreme law, may argue that we observe the regular rule, even in instances when the sin is apparent to all."

8. Vs. 19: On πάλιν (again) Bengel says: "The same thing is repeated in somewhat different language." This is followed by JB which translates "I tell you solemnly once again." But Lenski says "'Again' is like 'furthermore'. It adds something that is necessary as a separate point." This is followed by TEV which translates "And I tell you more." The second is preferable. There are similarities: a) The antithesis of "on the earth" and "in heaven" repeated from vs. 18; b) The assurance that joint actions by Christians are effective in heaven. But there is the added element of the two (vs. 16) talking things over (συμφωνήσωσιν) and praying (αἰτήσωσιν). Furthermore, this vs. might apply to vs. 15 in the event that the erring brother has acknowledged his sin and been forgiven. Luther says in the *Smalcald Articles* (Tappert 310) "The Gospel offers counsel and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in his grace: First, through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin (the peculiar function of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world; second, through Baptism; third through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren, Mt. 18:20." "Concerning every matter which they shall ask." To what does this refer? The context speaks of forgiving sins or withholding forgiveness in the event of impenitence. To these there are no exceptions: "It shall be to them from My Father in heaven." But it should be obvious that this vs. does not cover personal requests in an unqualified way. Such requests must be made with the added thought "if it by Thy will."
  
9. Vs. 20: This vs. gives us the reason on which the truth of vs. 19 is based. Here οὗ means "where". (In vs. 19 it is a relative pronoun attracted into the case of the antecedent.) εἰσιν συνηγμένοι is best treated as a periphrastic construction "have been and still are gathered together." "Two or three" denotes a small number. This does not mean that every time two or three gather, there you have a Christian congregation. But, it surely does indicate that a Christian congregation, though very small in number, has the same power of the keys as does a large congregation. Most translations (eight of them) translate "in my name". LB has "because they are mine". AAT reads "to be with Me". Bengel suggests that it read "unto my name" meaning "with the object of worshipping it". The question is whether εἰς is static (in) or denotes purpose. In any case it denotes the faith relationship between believer and Savior. οὗ and ἐκεῖ are correlatives: "where--there." Jesus speaks not only of a place, but also of a relationship. The last part of vs. 20 reminds one of Mt. 28:20. What they have in common is the promise not just of the omnipresence of the exalted Christ, but rather His gracious presence. He sits right with us in church. He goes with Christian husband and wife. The whole point is the assurance of His gracious presence.
  
10. Vss. 21-35, which follow our pericope, are devoted to the necessity of constant forgiveness. Therefore, as Luther points out (in the reference to the *Smalcald Articles* quoted above), vss. 19-20 speak of Christians consoling each other mutually with the Gospel. If only husbands and wives, parents and children, and Christians in general, would use the many opportunities to console each other with the Gospel! We owe it to each other to unburden guilty consciences, to quiet fears caused by the guilt of sin. The Father in heaven forgives when Christians forgive. The Lord Jesus is in the midst of Christians who exercise the Office of the Keys. He heartily approves of what they say and

do. Christians' greatest need is the Gospel. If only we would remember that! Nothing binds Christians so closely together as does constant and mutual assurance of the forgiveness of sins. The preacher ought press this point in his sermon.