

Matthew 18:15-35

**Six Lessons on
Our Responsibility as Christians
to Care for One Another
through the Pursuit of...**

**Loving Interaction, Biblical Confrontation,
Repentance, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation**

By Matthew Judd

Study #1
Matthew 18.15-20
“Caring for One Another when Self-Discipline Breaks Down”

Introduction: “When we think of discipline, we tend to think of small children. Isn’t it interesting that this is exactly how Jesus describes those who are saved – as little children (Mt. 18:1-ff.)? It is no wonder then that the little children of the kingdom of heaven must be the objects of loving discipline.”

Theme: We must rightly care for each member of Christ’s body when self-discipline breaks down.

I. Through loving confrontation

II. With a clear purpose

I. Through loving confrontation

- A. Seen here in this passage – vv. 15-17. We have both a personal responsibility and a collective responsibility to lovingly confront those who sin in the church. This is the caring and loving thing to do (cf. 18.11-13). But this is not just seen here...
- B. Seen throughout the Bible
1. Gen. 4.9 & Lev. 19.17-18 show that we are our brother’s keeper and that if we are going to love our brother, we must rebuke him for his sin.
 2. Note the specific OT examples of discipline – all requiring loving confrontation (love for the offender & love for the congregation). The context of Leviticus 19:17-18 shows that loving confrontation was to take place when any infractions of the moral or ceremonial law took place by a brother. In addition, serious-capital-sins were to be confronted out of love for, and protection of, the congregation – hence all these were to be especially confronted in God’s people: false worshippers, false prophets, Sabbath breakers, false witnesses, rebellious children, and contumacy towards authority. These are not left nameless and faceless for us – think of the golden calf incident; the rebellion of Korah; the insubordination of Miriam & Aaron; Achan; Eli’s sons Hophni & Phineas; Queen Athaliah. But this is not just an OT concept...
 3. Consider the “one-anothering” passages of the NT – all of these require loving care and loving confrontation in order to carry out our duty. John 13.34-Love one another; Rom. 12.10-be kindly affectionate to one another; Rom. 12.10-in honor give preference to one another; Rom. 12.16-be of the same mind toward one another; Rom. 14.19-edify one another; Rom. 15.5-be likeminded toward one another; Rom. 15.7-receive one another; Rom. 15.14-admonish one another; 1 Cor. 12.25-care for one another; Gal. 5.13-serve one another; Gal. 6.2-bear the burdens of one another; Eph. 4.2-forbear with one another; Eph. 4.32-be kind to one another, tenderhearted toward, forgiving one another; Eph. 5.21-submit to one another; Col. 3.16-admonish one another; 1 Thes. 4.18-comfort one another; Heb. 3.13-exhort one another daily; Heb. 10.24-consider one another to provoke unto good works; Heb. 10.25-exhort one another; James 5.16-confess to one another/pray for one another; 1 Pet. 3.8-have compassion for one another; 1 Pet. 4.9-show hospitality to one another.
 4. Consider also the specific NT passages dealing with discipline (Matt. 18:15-20 – didactic; 1 Cor. 5.1-13 – case study; Rom. 16.17 – note & avoid; 2 Cor. 2.3-11 – restoration; Gal. 6.1-5 – loving confrontation; 2 Thess. 3.6,14-15 – withdraw from for contumacy; 1 Tim. 1.20 – delivered to Satan; 1 Tim. 5.20 – rebuke in the presence of all; 2 Tim. 3.5 – turn away from such; Titus 3.10-11 – reject a divisive man; 2 John 9-11 – don’t receive or greet him).

- C. This is every believer's right and privilege. We must not deprive any member of Christ's church these benefits and privileges. We must not be indifferent in the name of "love"—"I love him too much to confront him." This is to define love by the world rather than by the Scriptures.

II. With a clear purpose (*vide* WCF 30) – having a desire...

- A. To reclaim/restore the offender (Mt. 18.15; 1 Cor. 5.5; Gal. 6.1). Discipline is not vindictive or judgmental, but corrective. There must be no desire to kick people out of the church. Rather, discipline is used to keep them in by calling them to live as is appropriate for redeemed people. Indifference displays our lack of care for their eternal welfare.
- B. To maintain the purity of Christ's church (Titus 2.14; 1 Cor. 5.7-8; Eph. 5.26). Christ has come not only to save us, but to purify us. Discipline prevents hypocrisy and maintains the witness of the church to the world. One bad apple spoils the whole bushel. To tolerate sinful behavior is to condone it. "Peace" may be maintained, but it will be a "peace" that is purchased at the cost of purity. Indifference says that we do not believe Christ's priority of purity to be important.
- C. To deter and warn others from committing the same sin (Deut. 13.11; 17.12-13; 21.21; 1 Tim. 5.20). Here is a warning to the rest of the church that unrepentant sin will not be tolerated. After all, when sin is unchecked, what is the normal response of the flesh? To grow lazy, to wax bold, and to be unconcerned about sin. Indifference reveals an attitude of presuming upon God's grace while underestimating the deceitfulness of our sinful hearts.
- D. To uphold Christ's honor as the King and Judge of His church. Christ is the KING of the church. He rules us by His word & Spirit. He calls us to obey Him. If we are to honor him as King, we must remember His words, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and not do the things I say?" Our disobedience dishonors Christ both in the church and in the world (Rom. 2.23-24). We must remember that He is the JUDGE of the church. We are accountable to Him. He must be honored as such, for judgment begins at the house of God (1 Peter 4.17). Indifference exposes a low view of Christ.
- E. To prevent God's wrath from coming upon the entire church. Sin in the camp brings judgment on the entire camp. This is clearly seen in the OT (e.g. Achan). But this is not just an OT concept. The old leaven truly infects the whole lump (1 Cor. 5.7-8). One bad apple spoils the whole bushel. Christ warns the entire church against tolerating both false teaching and false living in her midst (Rev. 2.5; 2.14-16; 2.20; 3.3; 3.19). Indifference may result in serious consequences.

Study #2
Matthew 18.15-16
“Our Responsibility to Care for One Another via Church Discipline”

Introduction: “We are all familiar with blame-shifting. It is easy to believe that it is always somebody else’s fault or responsibility. But what is our responsibility when it comes to caring for one another and pursuing Biblical discipline, reconciliation, and restoration? We cannot simply say that it is somebody else’s responsibility.”

Theme: Christ calls His entire church to be involved in church discipline. This is seen in:

- I. The objects of church discipline**
- II. The pursuit of church discipline**
- III. The escalation of church discipline**

I. The objects of church discipline – v. 15a

- A. Your brother. This is speaking of the Christian community; it has no reference to the world (1 Cor. 5.12-13). It is the privilege of every member to be cared for – none excepted. All are under the watchful eye, the protective eye, and the concerned eye of the church. There are no special categories here: King vs. beggar; adult vs. child; pastor vs. layperson; rich vs. poor; prominent family vs. newcomer.
- B. Your brother, if he sins. That is, if he misses the mark of God’s law. Now we all sin daily, therefore we are all objects of church discipline. Three clarifications...
 - 1. This is **NOT** saying, if he violates your personal preference, tradition, family idiosyncrasies, or opinion. Ford’s vs. Chevy’s and Yankees vs. Red Sox do not constitute sins. The sin must be definable by God’s word, chapter and verse. If it is not, then you have the problem, not him.
 - 2. This **IS** saying, these are sins that *break fellowship*, not every little sin. After all, we are called to be forbearing towards one another. We are called to practice the scripture, “Love covers a multitude of sins.” We are not to be busybodies and peeping toms! No. These are sins that break fellowship – they cause coolness to ensue in a relationship. They cause one to become embittered or hold a grudge. They cause you to look differently at your brother now that he has done this.
 - 3. These are sins that are either *directly* against you, or *indirectly* against you.
 - a. *Directly* against you – they lie to you, they steal from you, they slander you, they express unrighteous anger towards you, they are mean or rude to you, etc.
 - b. *Indirectly* against you – they hold to a major false doctrine; they sin against the church in breaking their membership or ordination vows; you witness them sinning against another.
 - c. *Categories of sin?* Perhaps it is helpful to see that of the Scriptural passages that specifically refer to admonition, rebuke, correction, separation, and reconciliation, there seem to be four broad categories of sin addressed (Ted Kitchens, “Perimeters of Corrective Church Discipline”, p. 212):
 - (1.) Private & personal offenses that violate Christian love and break fellowship
 - (2.) Divisiveness & factions that destroy Christian unity

(3.) Moral & ethical deviations that break Christian standards (these are sins that call into question the “credibility” of one’s profession of faith if not repented of).

(4.) Teaching false doctrine

II. The pursuit of church discipline – v. 15b

- A. Who pursues? YOU, *not* the pastor or elders or presbytery or general assembly. This is not the job of the professional clergy, it is the job of the committed Christian. There are no conscientious objectors in Christ’s church. The rule boils down to, “the one who knows is the one who goes” (cf. 1 Thess. 5.14-15).
- B. How soon? AS SOON AS YOU ARE AWARE. This prevents misunderstandings, bitterness, stewing, & festering on your part. This prevents hardness of heart, and rationalizing of sin on the offender’s part.
- C. Who else? NO ONE. To involve others at this point is to engage in gossip, tale-bearing, and potential slander. (Just an aside – what if you are told about a matter that has nothing to do with you? You must refuse to hear it and admonish the one who is doing it to address the matter Biblically.)
- D. Do what? REPROVE HIM. The 3-C’s: lovingly Confront, Convince, and Correct with chapter and verse from God’s Word. You are to show him his sin, to point it out, to reason it out calmly and humbly. You must never assume he knows. But note, there is no room for either *cowardice* or *self-righteousness* here.
- E. With what goal? TO GAIN HIM. This can be accomplished by one of the following:
 - 1. Clearing up what was really only a misunderstanding.
 - 2. The offender confessing his sin, declaring his repentance, and asking for forgiveness – AND – the granting of forgiveness by the offended party.

III. The escalation of church discipline – v. 16a

- A. When hardness sets in – enlist others to help. Impenitence is the only thing that causes discipline to involve others (*vide* Galatians 6:1 where the brother is “trapped” in his sin).
- B. Taking one or two others – a step meant to give us proper pause and consideration (Am I being petty? Am I making a mountain out of a molehill? Is the problem mine, or is it truly serious enough to warrant the involvement of others?)
- C. Who are these one or two others? These are “brethren,” not the pastor or elders (though these men may be enlisted as “brethren” at this point). The only qualification is that they are “spiritual” – something that every professing Christian should meet.

Study #3
Matthew 18.16-17
“Care for One Another via the Escalation of Church Discipline”

Theme: Christ calls His entire church to be involved in church discipline, EVEN when church discipline escalates.

- I. The escalation of church discipline – step #1
- II. The escalation of church discipline – step #2

I. Escalation of church discipline – step #1 (v. 16 - “One or two others”)

- A. When is it necessary? When there is a hardened refusal to hear the call to confession & repentance by the one-on-one engagement. *Impenitence is the only sin* that escalates the discipline process and widens the circle of involvement by others. But note, Christ does not tell us how many times we should go individually or how long we should wait for fruit before going to the next step. Wisdom & discernment are necessary to discern if there is any visible progress or responsiveness. Perhaps the best rule amounts to exercising the same amount of patience you would desire for yourself (*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you* – but note, there is an assumption and qualification here, namely, that *you* have a righteous desire for *your own purity* and want the church to keep *you* accountable).
- B. What is to be done? Enlist one or two others to help.
- C. Who is to be enlisted? Those who are spiritual and can act impartially in the matter (Gal. 6:1).
- D. What is their responsibility in the matter? They are to act as impartial witnesses – not of the original sin, but of the attempt to reconcile the brother. They are to listen and observe and evaluate the claims of all parties. Therefore, how these ones are enlisted is important. Don’t skew them or unduly prejudice them. Rather enlist them in humility making it clear that you recognize you could be the one in the wrong.
- E. What is the purpose? To gain the brother. This is accomplished by one of the following:
 - 1. An exposing of the “offended” one’s unjust claim – calling him to set aside his grievance and repent of his inappropriate accusations & expectations. I.e. “You just need to drop it, and move on in humility and forbearance.”
 - 2. A confirming of the offender’s sin and impenitence – the accusations are in fact just and the offender is in the wrong and needs to repent. Now if he listens to the 2 or 3 he will confess his sin, declare his repentance, and ask for forgiveness. The one who was offended is then obliged to grant forgiveness to him. The upshot of this step is, “If he won’t listen to one, maybe he will listen to two or three.” But if not...

II. Escalation of church discipline – step #2 (v. 17 - “Tell it to the church”)

- A. When is it necessary? Again, when there is a hardened refusal to hear the call to confession & repentance by the two or three. *Impenitence is the only sin* that escalates the discipline process and widens the circle of involvement by others. But note, Christ does not tell us how many times we should go in this capacity or how long we should wait for fruit before going to the next step. Wisdom & discernment are necessary to discern if there is any visible progress or responsiveness. Perhaps the best rule amounts to exercising the same amount of patience you would desire for yourself (*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you* – but note, there is one assumption and qualification here, namely, that *you* have a righteous desire for *your own purity* and want the church to keep *you* accountable).

- B. What is to be done? You are to tell it to the church. We now move from the informal to the formal aspect of church discipline. The two or three now act formally as witnesses – not to the original sin committed, but to the refusal of the individual to confess & repent (Deut. 19.15).
- C. How is it to be done?
1. “Tell it to the church” – what does this mean? It means tell it to those who are appointed to hear and evaluate such a matter, that is, tell it to those who are in authority in the church and responsible to oversee the lives of God’s people in an official capacity. I.e. tell it to the Session.
 2. What should the Session do with this information? Deuteronomy 13.14; 16.18 with 17.4; & 19.18 would seem to indicate that they are to investigate, inquire, search out, and ask diligently about the matter. They are to take seriously the report of the *two or three witnesses*, but substantiate the matter before informing the whole church. If there appears to be no ground for the charges, the Session should rebuke those who have come. If there appears to be just ground for the charges, the Session is to inform the entire church.
 3. How should the congregation be informed? It should be done formally and clearly. An appropriate process is here envisioned, but not spelled out. But by good and necessary consequence it is evident that the testimony of the *two or three witnesses* becomes key in this matter, and surely the offender would be given opportunity to defend himself. The OPC’s *Book of Discipline* says that a “trial” shall be conducted (*BOD IV*). This “trial” is envisioned as “ordinarily sit[ting] with open doors” except by a super-majority vote of three-fourths of the “trial judicatory” (*BOD IV.A.1.b*). The trial would then be the vehicle by which the congregation is officially informed of the matter on the basis of the two or three witnesses, and where the offender is given ample opportunity to clear his name.
 4. What outcomes from this process can be envisioned?
 - a. Possibility #1: The man’s innocence is declared – note the importance of the church vindicating one in this situation. The collective voice of the church speaks through the appointed eldership to enforce this. Hence, the church “looses the man”. (If this is the outcome, there still remains the question of what should be done with the witnesses – now presumably false (?) witnesses.)
 - b. Possibility #2: The man’s impenitence is confirmed with 2 possible results.
 - (1.) He *hears* the collective voice of the church calling him to repentance through the eldership; his hard heart is softened; he confesses his sin, declares his repentance – AND – the offended party and the church grant forgiveness to him. Just think, if he won’t listen to one; if he won’t listen to two or three; maybe he will listen to the “99”. (The *BOD IV:C.3.b* together with VII:3 requires 10 days to pass after the “trial” is completed before any censure can be carried out. This requirement is explicitly given to allow for one to appeal the verdict. I would add that this 10-day window should be used pastorally, as an earnest call to repentance *before* censure is carried out. Practically, these ten days should be a call to the entire congregation, the “99”, to do everything in its power to gain the brother – prayer, fasting, phone calls, letters, emails etc.)
 - (2.) He *refuses to hear* EVEN the church – being further hardened in his impenitence. The church must then speak through the eldership the sentence of excommunication to “bind the man”. Excommunication means the man is to be treated as a heathen and a tax collector; to be taken away from their midst; to be delivered over to Satan; to be

purged out as old leaven; to be put away as an evil person; to be rejected (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5; 1 Tim. 1:20; Titus 3:10-11). [Just an aside – what should we think of an individual who refuses to meet with the church and her elders? What kind of heart attitude is put on display when someone will not even step forward to clear his own name? Does not Deuteronomy 17:12 (with obvious NT application to excommunication) pertain to such “contumacy”?]

(a.) Note – the elders pronounce the sentence, but the entire congregation must carry out the censure. There seems to be a parallel here to Deut. 17.8-13, 19.16-19, & 21.5. (Note well *BOD VI:A.1*, “Censures shall be pronounced in the name and by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, *as an act of the whole church*, by the moderator on behalf of the trial judicatory.” Emphasis mine.)

(b.) How to carry out? He is to be to you as a heathen (without God & without hope in the world) and a tax collector (a traitor/turncoat). He is cut out of the vine. He is removed from the protection and care of Christ’s kingdom and thrust out into the world, the domain of Satan. He loses all rights and privileges of being a member of Christ’s kingdom and church (1 Cor. 5:9-13). There is to be no fellowship with him, no social intercourse with him. We are not even to eat with such a one (1 Cor. 5:11). Yet there are two exceptions:

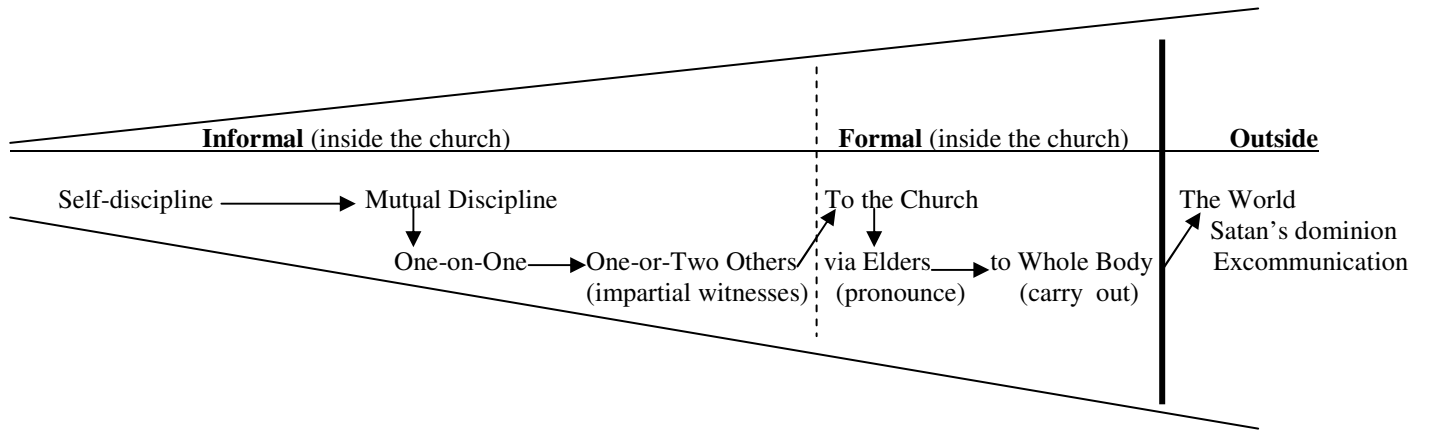
⇒ Interaction may/should be had for the purpose of calling to repentance.
Illustration – a proposed golf outing.

⇒ The elimination of “previous duties” to this person is NOT permitted – such as husband and wife, parents and children, governors and subjects, employers and employees (*vide* John Owen, p. 180).

D. What objections might be raised against this?

1. “You’re just making an example of him – this is mean.” But this is the point. The impenitent sinner is to be made an example of so that others would not fall in the same way. Christ uses church discipline not only for the offender, but also for the good of the entire congregation.
2. “What have we gained? It seems as though we have gained nothing through all of this trouble. All we have achieved is pain in the church.” This is a question rooted in unbelief. We have gained Christ’s blessing by being obedient to Him. We have maintained Christ’s honor in the church. We have protected the church from God’s just wrath. We have deterred others from sinning in this way. We have gained the purity of the church. And if this one is eternally elect we have every reason to believe and trust that Christ will use this ordinance of excommunication to restore him at His appointed time.

Matthew 18:15-17: Stages of Discipline Graphically Summarized



Idea for chart taken from page 27 of *Handbook of Church Discipline*, Jay E. Adams (Zondervan, 1986).

Study #4
Matthew 18.18-20
“The Encouragement to Care for One Another via Church Discipline”

Introduction: “What do we need when it comes to difficult and overwhelming tasks? We need encouragement.”

Theme: The Lord Jesus encourages us in our difficult duty of church discipline.

- I. With a promise regarding earth and heaven**
- II. With a promise regarding related prayer**
- III. With a promise regarding His very presence**

I. With a promise regarding earth and heaven – v. 18

- A. A clarification of what this verse is NOT saying – certain Charismatics use this verse to speak of “binding” and “loosing” demons, diseases, and the devil himself. This is to take this verse completely out of context.
- B. The context clears this up – look at verses 15-17 where it is speaking about the process of church discipline. These verses move to a climax – from one-on-one, to one-or-two others, to the church (via the elders –unto the congregation). The climax of verse 17 is that the church through her office bearers has just had to make a determination – an intensely serious, difficult, and painful decision. They have had to determine if the impenitent brother has *heard the church* (resulting in confession & repentance & forgiveness which sets the man free). OR if the impenitent brother has *refused to hear the church* (resulting in him being judged impenitent and having to bear the consequence of excommunication – being treated as a heathen and a tax collector). The church has had to make a determination to either “loose” the man or “bind” the man. Who is sufficient for these things?! That is why Jesus adds verse 18 for us – to encourage us with the actions of heaven. But before unraveling verse 18, we need to remember that this is not the first time that Jesus speaks of binding and loosing in Matthew...
- C. Matthew 16:19 helps us understand this “binding” & “loosing” – here binding and loosing is further defined by the concept/word picture of “keys”.
 - 1. And what do “keys” do? They lock & unlock; they close & open. These keys given to Peter don’t just unlock or lock car doors, though. They are the “keys of the kingdom of heaven.”
 - 2. How do these “keys” function? The kingdom of heaven is open and shut through the preaching of the gospel. We even see this as Peter wields these in Acts 2, 3, & 10. But the gospel of Christ not only opens/unlocks it also shuts/locks as it declares there is only one way to heaven – Christ alone. Indeed the gospel preached is a savor of life and death (2 Cor. 2.15-16). This is the general function of, and wielding of, the keys. But there is a particular application in 18:18...
- D. Matthew 18.18 is then a particular application of the use of the “keys of the kingdom” – not just the ordinary preaching ministry, but now the ministry of church discipline. The keys are given to the church (note the plural here) and are exercised by the officers on behalf of the church (Note again *BOD VI:A.1*, “Censures shall be pronounced in the name and by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, *as an act of the whole church*, by the moderator on behalf of the trial judicatory”). Christ then says that in so far as church discipline is carried out according to His command, as far as His instructions are carefully applied, as far as His word is humbly declared, there is a certain parallel between the church’s actions on earth and God’s action in heaven. If a sinner remains impenitent, he is “bound” by both the church on earth and God in heaven. If a sinner repents, he

is “loosed” by both the church on earth and God in heaven. (*Vide WCF 30.2.* “To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed; by virtue whereof, they have power, respectively, to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel; and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.”) But note the following...

1. This is not papal authority – inhering in the pope and being arbitrarily carried out.
2. This is a *derived* authority that is *declarative* in nature. It is Christ speaking through His church because His church is acting in strict adherence and accord with His Word. Everything must be in strict conformity with Christ’s Word – this is KEY. Matthew Poole reminds us, “The church is not made infallible by this text, nor is the holy God engaged by this text to defend the church’s errors” (p. 86).
3. What an intense encouragement this should be to the church to faithfully carry out our difficult duty of church discipline!

II. With a promise regarding related prayer – v. 19

- A. A clarification of what this verse is NOT saying – certain “Christians” use this verse to argue that if I can get somebody else to agree to ask God for the same thing as I do, then God is somehow bound to answer – whether it be for the new house, the new car, the new wife, etc. Again this is a ripping of this verse out of its context...
- B. Once again, the context clears this up – when it says “concerning anything that they ask”, this is speaking about “anything” related to the discipline process Jesus is speaking about.
- C. But who are the “two” that Jesus speaks of?
 1. It could be referring to the office bearers – ministers and elders. That is, the number of officers will be small in relation to the total number in the church. Since these are the ones who hold the keys on behalf of the church, these are the ones who will be earnestly praying about a specific discipline case, and as they agree before the throne of grace, there is the promise that the Father will do for them what they ask. I am not entirely convinced of this interpretation, and therefore lean toward the following explanation...
 2. It is probably referring to the “two or three witnesses” mentioned in v. 16 – that is, as these two witnesses proceed in the escalation of church discipline, it is assumed they are doing so before the throne of grace. They are only “pressing the issue” after very careful prayer and self-examination. As then there is agreement between the two in their praying on earth, God promises to answer from heaven. What encouragement this should be once again.

III. With a promise regarding His very presence – v. 20

- A. A clarification of what this verse is NOT saying – it is not referring to the small group Bible study, or the small prayer meeting, or the shrinking church. While there may be some extended application to these things, this is most certainly not the primary intent of this verse.
- B. Once again, the context clears this up – see above.
- C. But why does Jesus speak of “two or three gathered together in my name”?
 1. It could be the office bearers again (I find this doubtful).

2. It could be an encouragement that “no matter how small the church is...” (I find this doubtful).
3. It is probably referring to the “two or three witnesses” again – as they gather officially to *testify* in the midst of the church – the place where Christ has chosen to set His name. They gather there under the banner of His name, under the protection of His name, in the authority of His name, and for the glory of His name.

D. What does it mean that Jesus is “in the midst of them”?

1. Christ is in the camp demanding PURITY – see Numbers 5.2-3. It is not then the two or three witness who are testifying in the final analysis, it is Christ testifying in and through them! He is the one that demands purity in His abode. He is the one who brings charges against unrepentant sin in His church (see Revelation 2-3).
2. Christ is in the camp wielding His AUTHORITY – the Father has answered the prayer (v. 19) and now the Son executes the decree in His church. This is seen clearly and forcefully in 1 Corinthians 5.4,5. To reject the carrying out of Biblical church discipline is not then to reject the ministers and elders; it is not to reject the collective voice of the congregation; it is to reject Christ. How this should spur us on in our difficult duty and encourage us that Christ will both enable and bless the carrying out of discipline in His church.
3. In light of this, we must always remember two very real DANGERS...
 - a. The danger to abuse church power and authority – Walter Chantry writes, “Authority is placed in the hands of the church officers, not as a weapon of self defense, but as an instrument to be used lovingly for the well-being of the flock.... While God will not stand idly by when sheep abuse their leaders, neither will he overlook the abuse of the sheep by their leaders.... Tyranny must never be used as a corrective to a libertine spirit. Excesses in the use of authority will simply drive the people [away from Christ].”
 - b. The danger to neglect and countenance sin in the church – this seems to be the greater temptation for the church in America today. But here we must be careful to hear what Jesus says by implication in verse 20. Not only does he positively say, “Where church discipline is faithfully carried out I am present in the midst of that church.” He also says by implication, “Where church discipline is NOT faithfully carried out, I am NOT PRESENT in the midst of that church.”

Study #5
Matthew 18.21-22
“Forgiveness Asked For, Forgiveness Given –
A Commitment to Pursue Forgiveness Even When I’m the One Hurt”

Introduction: “What characterizes you as a Christian? Faith? Love? Hope? Holiness? Humility? All of these things should. But in this text...”

Theme: Jesus calls us to be characterized by a commitment to forgive.

- I. The occasion of this teaching**
- II. The practical outworking of this teaching**
- III. The powerful motive behind this teaching**

I. The occasion of this teaching – Peter’s question in v. 21

A. Understanding Peter’s question in light of the context – specifically 18.15

1. Note how Peter has picked up on the language of 18.15, “If your brother sins against you” compared with, “How often shall my brother sin against me.” It is clear that Peter is seeking to clarify Jesus’ instruction that He has just given in 18.15.
2. But what is Peter asking? Is he asking a very narrow question about the *act* of forgiveness, or is he asking something broader? The context demands that he is asking something broader. Peter is basically asking, “How many times do I have to go through the process of forgiveness? How many times do I need to *initiate and follow through the process you have just outlined* in verses 15-17? And what I really want to know is how many times do I need to do this if I have already done it, and my brother comes and commits the same sin against me again? After all, he is the one who has sinned. Why should I have to go through all this hard work of lovingly confronting him? Just how many times do I have to do this? When can I be done with my responsibility and leave it up to him to make the first move?”

B. Understanding Peter’s generous proposal in light of the Rabbis – While the rabbis of Peter’s day said that you would forgive up to three times, Peter offers doing this up to seven times. A seemingly generous proposal!

C. Understanding HOW Peter’s emphasis misses the mark – Jesus answers Peter in verse 22, “Not up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” The question is not about how many times. The question is about consistency. The question is about one’s heart’s desire, one’s commitment to pursue forgiveness *no matter what the cost to self*. To count to seven indicates that you are keeping track of wrongs done to you. But nobody is going to count to seventy-seven or four hundred and ninety. Indeed, *the number of times is irrelevant*.

The issue is, Do you have a heart to pursue forgiveness? If you do, you will never be content to just grow distant from your brother or sister in the Lord. That would be unacceptable because you would want forgiveness & reconciliation *at any cost to you*. After all, you see the guilt your brother bears because of his sin; you know the danger his soul is in, and you want to grant forgiveness, to lift his burden, to pronounce absolution; and you want him to receive it.

II. The practical outworking of this teaching

A. A proper Biblical distinction must be understood, maintained, and practiced

1. We must always have a *FORGIVING SPIRIT*

- a. This is unconditional – it is not contingent upon anything in the offender. It matters not if he will listen to you. It matters not if he slams the door in your face. You must maintain a commitment to a forgiving spirit...
- b. This is the mandatory responsibility of the Christian – that we are committed to put away malice, bitterness, unrighteous anger, revenge, seething, self pity, gossip, outbursts of wrath, and grudges. We must commit our cause to Him who judges righteously and be rid of all of these.
- c. This is not inconsistent with pursuing church discipline – in fact it is entirely consistent with it (if the sin committed breaks fellowship with you). The forgiving spirit mourns over the predicament *that the offender has placed himself in. The forgiving spirit is more concerned for the welfare of the offended than for self. Therefore the forgiving spirit will pursue the brother out of love and lovingly confront him in his sin – for HIS GOOD, NOT to be right or gloat or say I told you so.*

2. We must *GRANT FORGIVENESS* when certain conditions are met

- a. This granting of forgiveness is conditional – See Luke 17:3-4, “...if he repents, forgive him.” This is exactly what Matthew 18:15 taught, “If he hears you, you have gained your brother.” The granting of forgiveness assumes that there has been a coming together, a confession of sin, and a declared repentance from sin. Now *remember the context* – we are talking about sins that break fellowship with one another. We are *not* talking about every peccadillo that is committed against us – God instructs us to have a love that covers a multitude of sins when it comes to these small infractions. But when there is a breakdown and an undermining of our relationship with another brother, then we must pursue it according to this pattern – that is – we must be committed to pursue *the process unto forgiveness* outlined in 18:15-17. We don’t wait for the offender to initiate, we must initiate.
- b. Now what if Biblical conditions are met when the process is pursued?
 - (1.) Forgiveness must be properly understood – after all just what is forgiveness? Is it a feeling? No, forgiveness at its root is a PROMISE. Think of God’s forgiveness – He promises to not hold our debt of guilt against us. (Literally – the word most often translated “forgive” in our English Bibles means “to release.” To forgive then is to release someone from the debt and obligation to pay.) He takes it away, covers it, blots it out, casts it into the deep and promises to remember it against us no more. For God to say, “I forgive you,” is for Him to promise that He will not hold our sin against us and will not bring it up anymore. Well, when someone confesses their sin and declares their intention to repent, we must forgive in the same way that God does...
 - (2.) Forgiveness must be granted – We must declare, “I forgive you.” In doing so we make a promise to the one who has sinned against us. We say, “I will not bring this matter up to you again. I will not bring this matter up to anyone else. I will not bring this matter up to myself.” We promise not to hold the debt of guilt against them. The granting of forgiveness is then the powerful word of absolution to one who is guilty.

They can count on their debt/guilt being buried and never having the bones exhumed to hit them over the head with.

B. An intended outcome must be sought

1. The granting of forgiveness is *unto reconciliation & restoration* – again this is what is envisioned in Matthew 18.15. Jesus is instructing Peter on the commitment to the *entire process of forgiveness*.
2. At times this involves proper restitution – that is, if someone stole your lawnmower, you confront them, they confess & declare that they repent, then they have to give your lawnmower back. This is not punishment. This is part of reconciliation. After all, we are not allowed to enjoy the fruit of our sin. Giving the lawnmower back removes all future stumbling blocks to the relationship. Genuine repentance itself leads to restitution apart from others requiring it (assuming that the Christian is mature enough to realize this).

III. The powerful motive behind this teaching

- A. Seen in 18:3 & 4 – we have been made members of the kingdom and been brought into relation with our fellow Christians. This has been through nothing that we have done – this utterly humbles us and enables us to pursue *the process of forgiveness* with our brothers.
- B. Seen in 18:11 & 14 – Christ has initiated the pursuit of our forgiveness and the Father maintains the ongoing commitment to maintain reconciliation. If God does to us, how can we not to each other – even up to 490 times!

Lesson #6
Matthew 18.23-35
“An Inseparable Connection as You Consider Your Debt”

Introduction: “Here we have the privilege of listening to a good story – a parable – an earthly story that teaches us a vital heavenly truth.”

Theme: There is an inseparable connection between Christ’s kingdom and a commitment to forgiveness. We see this in the parable as...

- I. Christ gives us an initial picture – Scene 1**
- II. Christ prompts us to a reasonable expectation – Backstage**
- III. Christ shocks us with an unexpected twist – Scene 2**
- IV. Christ declares to us a breath-taking warning – Scene 3**

I. Christ gives us an initial picture – Scene 1 (18.23-27)

A. A certain debtor is called to account – vv. 23-25

- 1. The king initiates this action
- 2. The king lays out the charges – 10,000 talents owed
 - a. 1 talent = 6,000 denarii (1 denarius = the daily wage of an ordinary day laborer or foot soldier)
 - b. If one worked 300 days/year it would take 20 years to earn ONE talent.
 - c. How long to earn 10,000 talents? 200,000 YEARS!!! Even if this servant made ten times as much as the ordinary day laborer, it would take him 20,000 years to just earn 10,000 talents.
 - d. Note, we are not told how this debt was incurred. We can speculate all we want, but Jesus doesn’t tell us. This is because this is not His point. His point is to show the enormity of the debt and get us to see that the servant has NOTHING to pay – an utterly bleak scenario!
- 3. The king pronounces the sentence – sell him and all that he has into abject slavery, destitution, and misery.

B. The servant responds – v. 26

- 1. He acknowledges his debt and does not try to evade it, or make excuses for it, or explain it away.
- 2. He exhibits a certain sorrow and outward reverence – falling down, he “worshipped” him (v. 26)
- 3. He declares a certain repentance – be longsuffering upon me and I will repay you all.

C. The king responds

- 1. He is moved with pity and sympathy

2. He releases the servant from being sold
3. He forgives the servant his debt (releasing him from the obligation to pay) – lifting this enormous weight off of his servant

D. Parallels to the Kingdom of Heaven

1. Our debt – in terms of weight => 1 lb./sin x 10sins/day x 10 years of life = 36,500 lbs. (11 heavy duty pickup trucks)
2. God’s initiative – He comes to us with the Law & Gospel, calling us to account
3. Our response – God be merciful to me, a sinner
4. God’s forgiveness – “Be of good cheer, your sins be forgiven you.” (I release you from the debt and obligation to pay what you owe.)

II. Christ prompts us to a reasonable expectation – Backstage (the context of chapter 18)

- A. Remember what Jesus is illustrating – His answer to Peter’s question (18.21,22)
- B. Think back over the entire chapter – what would we expect this kind of pity, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness would produce?
 1. 18.1-4 – utter humility, seeing myself for who I am in relation to the Lord
 2. 18.5-9 – sensitivity toward and compassion upon my fellow “little ones”
 3. 18.10-14 – a making sure not to despise any brother, lest I end up despising the Lord
 4. 18.15-20 + Peter’s question – a deep seated, heart commitment to pursue forgiveness and the opportunity to grant it to all those who have sinned against me.

III. Christ shocks us with an unexpected twist – Scene 2 (18.28-30)

- A. 18.28a – if we stopped here all sounds good...he is doing exactly what Christ commanded in v. 15.
- B. But verse 28 goes on...
 1. He doesn’t just go and find
 2. He seizes, he *continually* chokes, he *continually* demands
 3. Even when confronted with language that should have cut him to the quick – language that is reminiscent of his very own words to the king...
 4. All it produces is a repeated unwillingness to forgive and show mercy, an unwillingness to release his fellows servant from the obligation to pay.
- C. This is exactly the opposite of what we would expect – after all, I thought Jesus was illustrating what the kingdom of heaven is like.
 1. Instead of humility – there is pride, arrogance, and a demanding of rights.

2. Instead of a sensitivity in how he treats his brother – there is a lording it over him.
3. Instead of a carefulness that goes out of its way to not despise his brother – there is a despising of the brother and of Christ Himself.
4. Instead of a commitment to pursue forgiveness – there is the cruel exacting of payment and a hardening of the heart against showing mercy.

IV. Christ declares to us a breath-taking warning – Scene 3 (18.31-35)

- A. The report to the king – v. 31
- B. The requirement – vv. 32, 33: It was **absolutely necessary** for you to show mercy since you were shown mercy.
- C. The payment – v. 34: The unforgiving servant is sent to the torturers who will extract everything possible from him. He will not be released until he has paid everything – that is, he will never be released. (Here is a graphic picture of the torments of hell.)
- D. The teaching – v. 35: **The kingdom of heaven excludes all who are not committed to pursue forgiveness out of a changed and transformed heart. This exclusion will take place...**
 1. **Regardless of one’s professed position** – it matters not if we *say* that we have been forgiven if we do not forgive our brother.
 2. **Because of one’s inconsistent action** – failing to forgive invalidates the reality of having received God’s forgiveness.
 3. **Unto one’s eternal damnation** – this brings the chapter full circle. Verses 1-4 began with a question about entrance into the kingdom, and verse 35 ends with a declaration about exclusion from the kingdom of heaven.
 4. **Yet for you who have truly been impacted** – humbled to see yourself for who you are; prostrated to see who God is; sensitized to see who your brethren are; energized to pursue forgiveness with those who sin against you – you have both God’s word of absolution, “You’re sins are forgiven you,” and God’s word of promise to you, that He will empower you to pursue forgiveness *no matter what the cost may be to you*. It is you alone who can pray without choking, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”