

## **MATTHEW 18 WHERE TWO OR MORE ARE GATHERED**

Matthew 18:15 "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

16 But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.'

17 And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

18 Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

19 Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.

20 For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

The procedure Jesus speaks of in verses 15-17 is one that is often misapplied if it is applied at all. The process centers on one who sins. If you are aware of his sin, go to him alone and tell him. If he does not listen to you, bring one or two with you. If he does not listen then, bring him before the assembly of the church. If he will not listen to the church, let him be marked.

Jesus then follows by quoting what He had earlier in Matthew said to Peter, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Stated this way, we might think that whatever Peter and the one to whom Jesus speaks here want to do on earth will determine the will of heaven. This is corrected by what I understand is a more accurate rendering of the Greek, (WEB) "Most certainly I tell you, whatever things you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever things you release on earth will have been released in heaven." The difference should be readily visible. God has already set the limits of our authority. We have no right to go beyond those limits; therefore, what we bind or loose must have already been bound or loosed in heaven. The implication of verse 18 is that in following the previous procedure, you will be doing the will of God.

Verse 19 builds on this statement. If two agree on earth, concerning anything they ask, must God do it? Is that in anything they might ask, any subject, any need? Is Jesus saying that we have the authority to demand of God anything we can agree on and that He must respond? Again, the context is important. Notice that Jesus says "two" agree. How does that tie in to the context?

Now we come to verse 20.

I have heard many people quote this verse by itself; and in every case, their reason for doing so was the same, to show that Jesus was spiritually present with them in a particular situation or circumstance. So they say, “Where two or three are gathered together in Jesus’ name, so He is here.” Since this verse is used by itself, apart from any context, we must think about the ramifications of it by itself, apart from context.

Taken on its face, the verse seems to be a reassurance that where people are together by His authority and for His purposes Jesus is with them. I don’t doubt that is a truism. But what does that say about the one who is alone? Jesus is not with him? Only when we are with another person is Jesus there? Obviously, this cannot be true.

Some people say, “Where two or more are gathered, that is the church.” They use this verse to mean that the church is not a building, which is correct, but also that anywhere two or more Christians are together they constitute the church (not the church universal but a part of the church.) I once heard someone say this to justify that we strangers to each other who believed in Jesus and had been brought together for no apparent reason could offer a prayer together. Do we need this verse as justification? Can we use it as justification?

Are these views correct? Is the verse teaching that Jesus is with random “believers” who gather together, or are those gatherings somehow churches? The short answer is no. The reason the answer is no is because the verse has been yanked from its context; and we know three of the most important rules of interpretation are context, context, context.

So, what is the context of verse 20 in Matthew 18? What we might call “church discipline.”

In verse 20, Jesus alludes to “two or three” gathered together. Can we think that this and the “two” of verse 19 have no relation to each other and to the rest of the context? Certainly not. In verse 16, when Jesus speaks of bringing one or two more, you who bring them become two or three. He then expresses the principle that “by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established” which is expressed in the law, Deuteronomy 19:15, Deuteronomy 17:6, and the new covenant, John 8:17, 2 Corinthians 13:1, 1 Timothy 5:19, and Hebrews 10:28. These uses of two or three here all relate to the principle of witnesses.

Verse 20 means that in a situation in which another has sinned, one has tried to talk to the guilty party alone but been unsuccessful, he has brought with him one or two more in order to make two or three witnesses but been unsuccessful, he has

had to bring it before the church/assembly/congregation. If this procedure has been carried out correctly, the matter has already been established by the two or three witnesses. It then falls under the authority of Jesus in verse 18 and the “in my name” of verse 20. If the two or three have acted in His name, by His authority, and take the matter to God, Jesus is with them. This means that if they have to discipline the offender, they have the authority and support of the Lord.

The objection to this idea asks the question, “What if there are only two or three in the congregation who agree to this discipline? What if the rest of the congregation does not agree? Are we saying that these two or three have the authority to override the will of the congregation? I believe this thinking ignores the previous context. Jesus has already outlined a process. If the process is followed correctly, then it is with authority. If the witnesses have established the matter and been forced to bring it before the congregation, what is there to object to? The point of verse 20 is that Jesus supports the witnesses. The congregation may choose to violate the will of Jesus, but they are not right in doing so.