

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 18:15-20

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“If another member of the church sins against you,
go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.
If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you,
so that every word may be confirmed
by the evidence of two or three witnesses.
If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church;
and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church,
let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

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.
Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask,
it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.
For where two or three are gathered in my name,
I am there among them.”

This is a story about the tension between the way of forgiveness and the need for justice. Elements of this tension are dealing with conflicts, church discipline, and managing the community in ways that maintain peace. The tension is around how to deal with problem people. Every community has them; sin happens in every community. In this discourse Jesus makes clear recommendations about how to deal with wrong-doing.

The structure of the discourse outlines a process for dealing with an individual who has “done you wrong”: talking with that person one-on-one; talking with that person with one or two others; talking with that person with the congregation. Each stage of the process is described with the same phrases. These verbal threads are: “listens” and “not listened”; “if the member refuses to listen” and “if the offender refuses to listen”; “the evidence of two or three witnesses” and “where two or three are gathered in my name.” These are all helpful in learning the story.

The recommendation of this discourse is to go to the limit in order to be reconciled. Jesus describes a process of conflict resolution that pushes the limits of what most communities will do. It stands in contrast to the way that problems are usually dealt with in communities: rumor and the building up of resentment—people talking to each other about something that has been done and never talking to the offender.

Rather than that process, what Jesus recommends is the simple process of going to the offender, naming the problem, and by implication listening to the response. If one-on-one doesn't work, then try again taking one or two other people along; if that doesn't work, bring it to the congregation/community.

The story has the tone of a legal process. In the process Jesus outlines in this discourse, the goal is reconciliation and resolution of conflict. Each sentence is a description of a method that has failed. Resolution by one person confronting doesn't work; two or three doesn't work; congregation doesn't work.

For a recalcitrant offender who will not listen at any stage of the process, the final consequence is what the Amish call shunning: "...let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Jews were supposed to have nothing to do with Gentiles (non-Jews). And if there was anything that Jews would have even less to do with than a Gentile, it was a tax collector. Tax collectors worked for the Romans and made a lot of money on the poverty of the people who were being taxed. They benefited directly from the system of oppression. The tone of the discourse is tough. This is about hard-headed dealing with cases of immorality and injustice openly and directly, without violence.

No physical or monetary damages or penalties are prescribed as consequence for wrongdoing, even if the wrong-doing is not acknowledged by the offender. The implication of the communities' judgment being ratified in heaven—"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven"—is that whatever punishment is appropriate will happen in heaven rather than on earth. The discourse looks forward to the Last Judgment as the final course of appeals.