

Focus on Matthew 18:15–20

WHAT is important to know?

—From “Exegetical Perspective” by Mitchell G. Reddish

Matthew 18:15–20 has parallels with 16:13–20. Both passages use the word “church” (*ekklēsia*)—the only two places the term appears in the Gospels—and both passages speak of binding and loosing. Even though this passage is primarily concerned with matters of church discipline, its focus is on reconciliation, not punishment. The ultimate goal is to “regain the brother” (v. 15). Familial language is used. The final saying in verse 20 is a reminder to the community that the risen Christ is present in and with the church, even when the church must deal with disciplinary issues. This reminder serves as a word of assurance and as a precaution.

WHERE is God in these words?

—From “Theological Perspective” by Charles Hambrick-Stowe

Jesus speaks here not of honest differences of opinion but of a fellow Christian who “sins against you.” Such sin would include the offenses summarized in the Ten Commandments, but one might extrapolate it to mean any self-serving behavior that breaks the unity of fellowship in Christ. When church members injure one another, it is not merely an individual personal offense: it is a theological matter, harming the body of Christ. Each step outlined by Jesus is to be undertaken in the hope of healing and restoration. Jesus could mean this: if we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it?

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

—From “Pastoral Perspective” by Jin S. Kim

The ministry of reconciliation must be at the heart of any Christian community’s mission. The church has not been given the power to “bind” and to “loose” (v. 18) because it is always right, but because its primary language is one of confession, restoration, and reconciliation when offenses and divisions occur. This requires leadership that confesses in real time before the community, seeking collective accountability and correction as it returns the favor to the church body. There will be conflict, but it is precisely through conflict that we model for the world how to bind and loose one another appropriately.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

—From “Homiletical Perspective” by

Dale P. Andrews

Care and responsibility to forgive, to seek out reconciliation with the offender, are sustained in the authority given to the church. Power to bind and loose belongs not simply to the church leader or to the universal church (as demonstrated through Peter in Matt. 16:13–20), but also to the local church (18:18–20). This discipline teaches a theology of care by illumining the manner of care. The authority to interpret how to apply the rules of care, even the law, is given to the church. We seek to care for one another even when injured or offended, which requires discipline in binding and loosing ourselves to repent and to forgive, all sustained in Christ.

Digging Deeper



Part 1 Setting the Context for Matthew 18:15–20

This passage comes in the middle of a larger section in which Matthew has Jesus dealing with matters related to ecclesiology and life in the church. Prominent leaders (who might be considered “greatest in the kingdom of heaven”) are to have the humble status of a child and serve among the lowly (Matthew 18:1–5); disciples must eschew behavior that “put[s] a stumbling block” in the path of fellow believers (18:6–7), becoming radically scrupulous about personal morality (18:8–9); believers must care diligently for one another so that not one will be lost (18:10–14); and fellowship in Christ requires constant and boundless forbearance, forgiving one another “seventy times seven” if necessary (18:21–35). In this context Jesus addresses the question of what to do when “a brother” (i.e., “another member of the church”) “sins against you” (v. 15).

—Excerpted from Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 44.

Part 2 Cutting Loose—Or Hanging On

The rest of the world writes people off when things reach a certain point. Jesus’ saying, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (v. 18), is susceptible to multiple interpretations. In light of his teaching on life in the church as the locus of God’s mission in the world, and this verse’s echo of the Lord’s Prayer (God’s will being done “on earth as it is in heaven”), Jesus could mean this: If we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it? . . . Jesus commands us never to give up on them, never to stop reaching out in love to them, always to yearn for grace to restore what has been broken.

—Excerpted from Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 48.