

Context Matters – Lesson 4 – Matthew 18:20

Matt 18:20 “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

This verse is typically used to encourage believers at prayer meetings and Bible studies with low attendance. Attendance doesn't matter, it's okay, Jesus is here. Or worse – this verse is used to excuse people who say they don't need to attend regular church services or be a member at a local church. But is that the context? Big Idea: This passage is about the necessity of God's children acting like – and being treated like – His children. I don't mean that in a bad way, we can't take it like that. To be a child is to be loved far beyond what you can understand. To be a child is to be unquestioningly protected and provided for. If we belong to Christ, through belief in His atoning work on the cross and the repenting of our own sin and human works to save ourselves, then we are God's children. That carries with it tremendous blessing but also tremendous responsibility.

Note this passage: Jesus preaches it with a living illustration. A living, breathing illustration, granted, but he puts a child “in the midst of them,” perhaps on his lap, so that the people can ponder and feel the reality of Jesus' words. Let's read the passage together, and keep that child in mind:

Matthew 18: *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them³ and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

⁵ *“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.*

⁷ *“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!⁸ And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.*

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¹⁰ “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. ¹² What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

I. The Context: The Childlikeness of the Believer.

- This whole passage is about the childlikeness of the believer. We come into God’s Kingdom – and here and now reality – as children. We come in humbly, dependent, with child-like faith that accepts without great skepticism, without accomplishment or achievements. And as part of God’s Kingdom we continue to be protected, loved, and cared for, as a Father does His children.
- We see God’s wrath against those who would cause us to sin in verse 6. So many people say they can’t understand why a loving God would visit wrath and hell upon other people – I say, that shouldn’t shock you when you remember the way we would feel about people who would hurt our children!
 - i. How much more should God avenge those He has adopted into His family!
 - ii. We are not all God’s children but only those who believe, and for those who would hurt God’s children, “It would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the

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depth of the sea.” Or as the writer of Hebrews puts it, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Our God is a consuming fire.”

- And we need to be respected as His children. The angels that watch over us report directly to the face of God. God has not only sent His messengers and His warriors to us, but He Himself has gone like the shepherd in search of the lost sheep – God goes to great lengths to find His straying child.

- So when we read that we are to be cared for, protected, respected as children – it can’t be a surprise to us that we read, “We are to be disciplined like children.”

- i. What, we like the good stuff but not the hard stuff? Shall we be like my children at the buffet who want to grab up the good stuff, the pizza and the fruit and the hamburgers and the ice cream and skip their vegetables? God is a loving Father. I’m not going to let my kids skip the vegetables and throw their food and kick the shins of passersby and play with the sharp knives without addressing this behavior.

- ii. God has said already in this passage how He feels about sin. “If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.”

- iii. God has also expressed His will: that none of his “little ones” should perish. This is the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints – that God will keep those who belong to Him, though they stray. We cannot lose our salvation, but are kept secure in the hand of God. Part of that perseverance process though is discipline when we stray, so that we may turn back. And at times that may involve mounting a rescue. God intends to use fellow believers at times, to be a part of that rescue.

II. The Issue: Sin Amongst the Children

- So what to do when a believer goes sideways? Jesus lays out the process. Keep in mind the two principles involved: 1) God does not intend to lose any of His children. 3) Being a child means being disciplined. The

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goal, then, is restoration for the wayward believer. Let's read the process God has established to restore that person:

o Verse 15: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

o This part is about something called church discipline: It outlines the steps that we are to take with our brothers who are sinning. ▪ Our first instruction is against to gossip: to keep the matter between you and the other person. The key word is "alone" here.

- Not to split it in as an exciting tidbit of news to your friend. Not to vent to another sister.
- But to lovingly confront, you and the only person. "Tell him his fault."
- Don't be vague to make your own feelings the issue. The issue is sin, and the way God feels about it.
 - "If he listens to you, you have gained your brother." Do you know what this implies? That this believer in sin has been lost. You can't gain what hasn't been lost, can you? Remember: God's will is not to lose any of His children. If discipline is successful at this point, then that believer has been gained!
- Greek word: "κερδαίνω": to acquire by effort or investment. This is a word for profit, a Wall Street word. You have added to the riches of the Church and of Heaven through a soul that had wandered into sin.
- So the issue is not chasing people away by confronting sin. The issue is gaining for yourself in a relationship, and gaining for the Church, for Christ, what has been momentarily lost. Your opportunity to

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be Christ-like in the way Christ speaks of being the good Shepherd who leaves the 99 and searches for the 1 stray sheep. What happens when he finds it? Rejoicing.

o Luke 15:17 “I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” Heaven rejoices for what you facilitated on earth. That’s what we’re here to do, folks.

o I don’t want you to misunderstand – as I stressed before I stress again – we cannot lose our salvation. But the church can sure lose a member, who was in danger of getting removed from the body.

▪ But what if the issue has to escalate? Verse 16: “But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”

• Purely from the historical standpoint, the Law of Moses was an incredible achievement. While other civilizations struggled even to codify (write down) their laws, there was all kinds of unfairness written into them. God established the fairness of having crimes need not just one person’s hearsay, but two or three witnesses to establish an event. We see God Himself follow this principle at the Mount of Transfiguration, where James and John stand to witness for the disciples and Moses and Elijah are brought in as witnesses for Heaven.

• Jesus declares in this passage that the Mosaic principle is one that is to continue for the Church.

o When one brother could not sway the sinner, the issue escalates, and evidence is being built to bring a case.

o Now the case may settle at this point – perhaps the offending brother or sister will see the escalation his conscience will be pricked to the point of repentance. That is the hope, because the goal of this kind of discipline is always repentance. o Some people have the idea that church discipline is about kicking people out – on the contrary, it’s about keeping people in!

▪ The third and final escalation is to take the case to the church. Verse 17: “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax

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collector.” • It doesn’t mean let slip all the juicy tidbits of gossip. But it means stating the case, what the issue is, what has been done, and now what the church must do.

o [Example at Berea]

o The result is clear: separation. “Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

o To the Jewish audience Jesus was speaking to, they would have understood the reference: To be a Gentile was to be an outcast, outside of the people of God.

To be a tax collector was a Jew who had turned traitor to his country, had purchased from the occupying Roman government the right to collect taxes in the name of heathen, polytheistic Rome and to pocket part of those taxes to enrich his own back account. This is how Jesus asks the church to view those who have been put out of it through this kind of discipline. o But also note that Jesus gives us the example we see in the Gospels, that tax collectors were objects of His ministry!

- The disciple Matthew was a tax collector (Matt 9:9)
- Jesus famously calls the chief tax collector Zacchaeus in Luke 19 to repentance and salvation.
- Jesus was criticized by the Pharisees in Mark 2:16 for frequently eating with “sinners and tax collectors.” ▪ To call the person put out of the church a Gentile and tax collector is to deal with them a certain way, yes, but it also to mark them as in need to the Gospel and a continued call for repentance and salvation.
- But if I could emphasize one thing here in light of our series on “Context Matters,” it’s this: this verse can’t possibly be used to justify skipping out on church! The whole passage demands and assume not just regular church attendance but an active, participating community working together to keep everyone together.

III. The Church

- Did you know that this verse is only the second time Jesus uses the word “church?” in the New Testament?

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➤ The first time is Matt 16:18 “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

▪ Remember what I said about parallelism on Sunday? When a speaker or an author talks about two things as if they’re the same thing? Goodness, we have the first two usages of the church and it’s talking about binding and loosing. We’re going to need to understand what that means. Jesus is laying down some foundational truths for the church here! What are those foundational truths that Jesus intends for his church?

➤ The first is belief – this “rock” that Jesus refers to we Protestants hold is a rock of Peter’s statement of faith “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

➤ The second is the ministry of the church to reflect heavenly realities.

- What this passage points out is that we confront a sinner who will not repent, we can say he is bound in his sin.

- When they repent, they are loosed from that sin. And heaven has already made that judgement.

- o We as a church are only reflecting that heavenly judgement and reality when the church gets together and says, in love, to one of its members, “You are bound up in sin and God wills for you to repent.”

- o And can receive that member in great joy and love when the person does repent, we can say, “God forgives you, we forgive you, and rejoice that you have been loosed from this sin and unrepentance.”

- Growing up I was never a part of any churches that practiced this – it wasn’t until I was 27 that I saw this ever happen. But it makes sense. Can we say God takes sin seriously (millstone, amputations...) but not take it seriously in His Church? How is the world going to believe we’re serious about it, what we’re reading and what we’re preaching? ➤ We are not to ignore sin. Eph 5:11 “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.”

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- We are not to make peace with sin. (cut off your limbs or put out your eye)
- We are not to ignore God’s instructions.
 - And this isn’t the last thing Jesus instructs His church to do out of a long list of things – this is his first instruction.
 - Out of all the “context” verses I’d say this one is the most shocking reversal of what other people think of the verse.
- So often it’s taught that “two or more” meant that when attendance is low at the service or prayer meeting, it’s okay, take heart, Jesus is with you. Well Jesus is with us when only one person shows up, or one person prays. We can see now that it’s not about that.
- So often it’s used as an excuse to skip church. “If I go fishing or hunting with a believer on Sunday it’s the same thing.”
- But we see, in context, that this verse is anything but an encouragement that you don’t need to go to church. That you can have coffee together with a fellow believer and call that “not forsaking the assembly.” This passage presupposes that a believer is part of a local church family, and more than that – a family that is acting like God’s children and taking holiness seriously, together.