

An Exegesis of Matthew 18:15-17

By Mark S. Grubbs

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15 Ἐὰν δὲ ἀμαρτήσῃ [εἰς σέ] ὁ ἀδελφός σου, ὕπαγε ἔλεγξον αὐτὸν μεταξύ σοῦ καὶ αὐτοῦ μόνου. ἔάν σου ἀκούσῃ, ἐκέρδησας τὸν ἀδελφόν σου· **16** ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἀκούσῃ, παράλαβε μετὰ σοῦ ἓτι ἓνα ἢ δύο, ἵνα ἐπιστόματος δύο μαρτύρων ἢ τριῶν σταθῇ πᾶν ῥῆμα· **17** ἐὰν δὲ παρακούσῃ αὐτῶν, εἰπὲ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ· ἐὰν δὲ καὶ τῆς ἐκκλησίας παρακούσῃ, ἔστω σοι ὡσπερ ὁ ἐθνικὸς καὶ ὁ τελώης.

Preliminary Considerations

No specific title for this paper was suggested by the Essay Committee. However, the committee did indicate that the paper should include this text's "application to pastors dealing with pastors." After the exegesis proper, we want to look at a number of general applications, followed by some which are specific to "pastors dealing with pastors."

Text

There is only one variant listed in the text. The reading they chose for verse 15 reads ἀμαρτήσῃ [εἰς σέ] ὁ ἀδελφός σου... As is indicated εἰς σέ is enclosed in brackets, which denotes "dubious textual validity" in UBS. It is also given a "C" designation, meaning "considerable degree of doubt". My own preference would be to omit the εἰς σέ, primarily because some of the oldest texts (X and B) do not include it. NIV includes it, but adds the footnote "Some manuscripts do not have 'against you.'" Recognizing the strong possibility that the original text did not contain the words εἰς σέ, which could restrict the application of this text to a degree, I will make applications which assume the words were not in the original.

Context

After settling the question of the payment of the temple tax (end of ch. 17), Jesus is confronted with his disciples' question, "Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" In his reply, Jesus emphasizes how precious each soul is to him, and the grave nature of causing "one of these little ones who believe in me to sin." (18: 6) To underscore that point, Jesus then tells the Parable of the Lost Sheep. So great is the shepherd's love that he not only leaves the 99 to seek the one lost sheep but also is happier about finding the lost one than he is about the 99 who did not stray (v.13).

Thus, in the earlier sections of this chapter we see the Lord concerning himself with 2 ideas: the importance of each sinner's soul to him and the importance of not sinning against fellow Christians, especially those he here calls "the little ones." In the text before us, Jesus changes directions, but in a logical manner. Starting in v. 15, he looks at the other side of the coin: Not at sins which we commit impacting others, but at sins which others commit impacting us.

The three verses which follow this text deal with the validity of excommunication. And the remainder of the chapter is devoted to the parable of the Unmerciful Servant, forgiving from the heart, "seventy seven times."

Exegesis

15 15 Ἐὰν δὲ ἀμαρτήσῃ [εἰς σὲ] ὁ ἀδελφός σου, ὕπαγε ἔλεγξον αὐτὸν μεταξὺ σοῦ καὶ αὐτοῦ μόνου. εἰάν σου ἀκούσῃ, ἐκέρδησας τὸν ἀδελφόν σου·

Translation: If your brother sins (against you), go and show him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.

Jesus speaks here of a possible occurrence involving two Christian brothers. The word ἀδελφός is significant here. It indicates that the directions Jesus gives presuppose dealing with a fellow believer. Throughout the process of admonition the brotherly bond is still recognized. And it is only when all admonition has failed to bear fruit that the brother is declared “a pagan or a tax collector.”

ἀμαρτυζῆ is an Aorist Subjunctive form, which we would expect in a conditional sentence. The verb means “to miss the mark” and its use here indicates a genuine sin, something that God himself forbids in his Word, rather than merely an action which someone else has a preference against.

υπογγατε what Lenski calls an “auxiliary imperative” meaning that it has no connective but is taken together with the Aorist Imperative ἔλεγξον. The basic meaning of ἔλεγξω (AG) is “to bring to light,” “show”; here it could also be a little stronger, with the sense “convince” or “convict”.

μεταξὺ is really an adverb, but is used here as an improper preposition. At this initial stage, only two people are involved: the one who has sinned and “the one who knows about his brother’s sin. The private nature of this admonition is given even more emphasis by the word μόνου which Jesus adds to his instruction.

The second sentence in this verse is also a conditional. If the brother listens (ἀκούσῃ, aorist subjunctive), then you won him over. ἐκέρδησας is the aorist form of κερδαίνω, which means “to gain” or “to win over”.

16 εἰάν δὲ μὴ ἀκούσῃ, παράλαβε μετὰ σοῦ ἕτι ἓνα ἢ δύο,
ἵνα ἐπιστόματος δύο μαρτύρων ἢ τριῶν σταθῇ πᾶν ῥῆμα·

Translation: But if he will not listen, take along with you one or two more, so that “the whole matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”

παράλαβε is the aorist imperative from παραλαμβάνω. The ἵνα clause gives us the goal for taking additional people along: namely, so that witnesses can attest to the admonition. As the UBS text indicates, the latter part of this verse is a quotation from Deuteronomy 19:15. That verse reads: “One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” When additional witnesses are included at this point, not only will the admonition carry their weight behind it, but they will also be able to give an account of what has been said to the brother involved and the brother’s reaction. πᾶν ῥῆμα literally is “every word,” but is best taken to refer here to “the whole issue, the whole matter.” (See also Lk. 1: 7) Literally we would translate the Old Testament quotation here as “on the mouth” of two or three witnesses.... This is a Hebraic expression meaning simply “on the testimony” or “on the basis of the testimony” of two or three witnesses

σταθῇ is the aorist passive subjunctive form of ἵστημι.

17 εἰάν δὲ παρακούσῃ αὐτῶν, εἰπὲ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ· εἰάν δὲ καὶ τῆς ἐκκλησίας παρακούσῃ, ἔστω σοι ὡσπερ ὁ ἐθνικός καὶ ὁ τελώης.

Translation: But if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

There are two more conditional statements in this verse. In the first we have the aorist subjunctive of παρακούω, followed by the aorist imperative of λέγω. If he refuses, then tell the church. In the second, the aorist subjunctive is followed by the present imperative of εἰμί (ἔστω), with the sense of ongoing action (...keep on treating him as you would...).

After the initial failure of the one-on-one approach and then the failure experienced in taking along one or two others, the brother is to tell it to the church. At this point, of course, the sin becomes general knowledge. But the obvious hope is still that the united admonition of the church will be enough to touch the heart of the brother who has fallen into sin.

Jesus also considers the negative contingency. If the testimony of the church is also unsuccessful, then the person is to be openly recognized as no longer a brother, but rather as ὁ ἐθνικός and ὁ τελώνης, the articles being generic. ἐθνικός (actually an adjective used here as substantive) certainly includes the idea of unbelief, those who were outside the people of God (cf. Mt. 5:47).

According to AG, the τελώνης was a local hired as an agent of someone who held a tax collection contract or warrant from the government. The tax collector was despised by his fellow Jews because he appeared to be a collaborator of sorts with the Roman occupation forces, and likewise because his work made him ceremonially unclean. Since this was a job freely undertaken, holding it suggested an open disregard for both the general hatred of fellow Jews and also for ceremonial uncleanness.

The comparison includes this idea, that those who refuse to hear the church are also willful and determined in the actions which exclude them from the church, just as the tax collectors were willful and determined in the actions which separated them from their fellow Jews. It is also interesting to note that the very negative connotation of “tax collector” is seen from other contexts in which it appears. The combination “tax collector” and “sinner” appears at least 7 times in the Gospels; “tax collectors” along with “prostitutes” appears in Mt. 21:31ff.

When Luther discussed this verse, he returned to the imagery used in the Parable of the Lost Sheep. Concerning the individual who refuses to heed all admonition, including the united voice of the church, Luther says that he has become “one who is not a sheep, nor wants to be sought, but intends to be completely lost” (Lenski, p. 703).

It is also worth noting that Jesus considered both tax collectors and pagans objects of his love and forgiveness, and thus mission prospects—those to whom both the Law and the Gospel might still be proclaimed. Although the solemn action of the church described here and generally called “excommunication” is a declaration that the sinner involved is no longer a brother and is outside the church due to stubbornly refusing to repent, that does not mean that the Law and Gospel can never again be presented to him, or that he would be unwelcome to attend public worship, etc.

A clear understanding of the word as ἐκκλησία as it is used here is important. The only other instance where Jesus himself uses the word is in Mt. 16:18, where it clearly means the church universal, the *una sancta*. At other times throughout the New Testament, the meaning is often close to our usage when we use it interchangeably with “congregation” (cf. Acts.8:1 ; 1 Cor. 1:2, etc.). But we need to note that when Jesus spoke the words of our text, there were no congregations as yet established.

Thus, the emphasis here is not on the particular form of the church, but rather on the function of the group, i.e., its use of the keys, its proclamation of God’s message. Since neither the word itself nor the immediate context limit the word to a specific form of the church, we also need to leave the size, locale, etc., of the group unspecified. This way of looking at the term ἐκκλησία is in disagreement with a great number of theologians, including many in the LCMS, who taught that only the local congregation was divinely established as “church” with the right to use the keys. (Check out Pieper’s statements in *Christian Dogmatics*.) More will be said about this point in the application portion of the paper.

Applications

Since my assignment included the idea of application in regard to one pastor's dealings with another pastor, I will address that directly. But I want to make some more general applications first.

1.) We need to approach these verses in such a way that we emphasize the positive (gaining of a brother) rather than the negative (declaring someone outside the church, excommunicated). Jesus' clear intent here is to show us his way of winning back a brother who has fallen into sin. The Lord outlines a loving, heart-touching approach surely intended to be successful. Notice that the idea of "purification" of the church is not even mentioned here specifically (as it is in I Cor. 5: "A man has his father's wife...."). Rather the emphasis is clearly on winning over the erring.

I am taking time to include this idea here because it seems that whenever church discipline (excommunication) is spoken of, there is so much confusion. To a lot of people, I am sure that discipline has nothing but negative connotations. In confirmation classes we may teach the positive, loving nature of Jesus' words in our text, but still the negative connotations seem to come forth. Think of how many consider church discipline a matter of "kicking out." Do we not hear mistaken statements such as "He/she was excommunicated for getting a divorce," with no reference at all to the sin of impenitence?

I think it is in place for us to ask what impression is given in the congregation when someone is under discipline. If people look upon it as the church's rejection of the individual based upon the relative seriousness of some sin as compared to another, or primarily as a cleansing of the church, or as a hateful (and probably also hopelessly anachronistic) pronouncement, then we must help them return to the Word to see what the Lord actually teaches here. Although this is a strong proclamation of the Law, it is nevertheless undertaken as a last resort, with the loving intention of awakening the brother's realization of his standing before God. When the church excommunicates, it proclaims the Lord's own message to the sinner who repeatedly refuses to repent. The church thus speaks in the stead of God, passing on God's own message.

2.) In these verses Jesus sets up an approach to reaching a brother who has fallen into sin. He does not give a rigid formula that must be followed in a legalistic way. Notice, for instance, that absolutely no time frame is specified in any of what Jesus says. The choice of the "additional one or two" in v. 16 is left to the discretion of the person seeking to reach his erring brother. Nor is the exact nature or extent of the original sin specified. Rather than being an exhaustively complete and rigid formula, the Lord presents us here with a structure which begins with only 2 people involved, then involves one or two more, and only then, when no progress is made, involves the church as a whole.

3.) As I have already noted, the word "church" cannot simply be restricted to mean "congregation" in the way we have congregations today. So, theoretically, a group other than a local congregation could function as "church" as v. 17 says (circuit; synod, etc.). And, yet, under most circumstances, it is the local congregation which would normally be called upon to act. Carl Lawrenz wrote extensively on this point in a conference paper that I would like to quote from:

Since believers ordinarily live at some local place, the Holy Spirit through their common faith then first of all gathers them together locally around Word and Sacrament so that their faith may be nourished and replenished through regular use of the Means of Grace. In other words, the local congregation generally becomes the primary grouping of believers, the primary form of the church. Hence the God-enjoined considerations of Christian love and order (I Cor. 14:33,40; I Cor. 16:14) will cause us to turn to it first of all when an occasion arises for us to carry out the Savior's bidding: "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the *church*." Christian love and order would never let us turn to some secondary grouping of believers in such a way that

thereby the functioning of the local congregation as the primary form would be hampered and ignored. Yet we need to note that the priority status of the local congregation in Christian discipline does arise out of the considerations, divinely enjoined, of Christian love and order. (Lawrenz Essay, p. 8)

4.) Jesus could not make it clearer that privacy is to be maintained in the initial stages of the process he describes. Applications of this point could be made in many directions. Very little imagination is needed to envision what can happen when Jesus' direction is ignored: Possible results include the start and spread of rumors, the engendering of suspicion, the destruction of another person's good name and standing in the Christian community, and all the convoluted, confused, exaggerated, tangled and destructive fallout that we all have seen before. So very often this would all be avoided if we heeded what the Lord says here about privacy.

This need for privacy applies whenever any Christian deals with any other Christian. If, for instance, a member comes to his pastor bearing a tale, the pastor needs to direct that person to the brother involved. At that point it is not in place to discuss the sin since it has not yet been pointed out to the offender. Very correctly, *Shepherd Under Christ* (p. 166) comments: "Fellow Christians who want to tell another of a brother's sin are themselves to be admonished because they are sinning against the eighth commandment and must be encouraged to show their repentance by themselves speaking to the sinner."

5.) The comments made above also apply to the relationship of one pastor to another. Our sinful human nature being what it is, it can be tempting to listen to a eyebrow-raising story, or perhaps some titillating rumor, that involves one of the pastoral brethren. And once we have listened, how easy it can be to pass that information on to someone else. Often a tangled web is woven before anybody has gone privately to the person initially involved, as Jesus directs. On occasion, it seems easier to speak with nearly anybody rather than to be brave enough - and, indeed, loving enough - to follow Jesus' advice. Still, from Jesus' own word, it is abundantly clear that before a brother is privately confronted, one-on-one, *nobody* else is to be involved.

6.) But are there not times when an official (perhaps the District President; circuit pastor) should be notified? Clearly, as already noted, not before the initial, private encounter. But while we are thinking along these lines, let's consider the role of both District President and circuit pastors, as these offices are delineated in our *District Constitution*.

Although I do not want to over-simplify the duties of district or circuit officials, I also don't want to go into any great detail either. For our purposes, suffice it to say that the *District Constitution*, Article VI, says: "The president shall be responsible for the supervision of doctrine and practice within the district." Regarding circuit pastors, Article VIII of the same document states: "The district shall exercise supervision over its members in matters of doctrine and practice through circuit pastors elected by the circuits of the district for two-year terms." In applying for membership in the district, then, pastors, male teachers and congregations agree to place themselves under the supervision of the district president and local circuit pastor. The duties of office, mentioned above, describe part of the responsibility of these officers. Note, however, that the *Constitution* certainly does not in any way conflict with what Jesus says in Matthew 18. Like all other Christians, district officials and circuit officials are to carry out their duties in such a way that they do not conflict with the privacy enjoined in Jesus' instructions. This is certainly the intended approach enjoined by the *District Constitution*. In reference to circuit pastors, for instance, the *Handbook for Circuit Pastors* (1988 Edition, p. 14) states:

It will happen that congregations or individuals bring complaints to the circuit pastor concerning their pastor. When such a complaint is received, the first thing to do is to ask if the problem has been discussed in a loving manner with the pastor. Only after the circuit pastor has assured himself that this has been done in an orderly manner should he listen to the complaint. One

should not dismiss such a complaint out of hand. Let him listen carefully to the problem and use good judgment according to the Eighth Commandment.

While we are looking at this application, I want to point out the connection between what Jesus says in Matthew 18 and what the Eighth Commandment says. These two portions of Scripture complement one another. Think of Luther's explanation to the Commandment: "Defend...speak well of ... put the best construction on everything." We speak of those things as the positive aspects of the meaning of the commandment. Matthew 18 certainly is in accord. The Commandment forbids listening to rumors and also passing them on because such actions are unloving. Also unloving is circumventing the direct, private confrontation with a brother that Jesus speaks of in Matthew. No one is served or helped when those who should not be involved become involved, or when the person who needs to be confronted is bypassed. It is conceivable that an erring brother is, in all honesty, unaware of his sin, and that he desperately needs to have it brought to his attention.

7.) In my own mind, I had a question as to how what Jesus says here relates to the concept of severing church fellowship. In Matthew 18, Jesus is talking about excommunication—the recognition that an individual is no longer a believing brother, i.e., is outside the communion of saints. In contrast, the Word speaks in other places of situations in which we might be called upon to not exercise fellowship with someone who holds to an error, even though we would not be justified in saying that person was no longer a believer. Since this issue is somewhat peripheral to the thrust of the text before us, let me just briefly quote a passage from *Shepherd Under Christ* (p. 173):

Where admonition has taken place because of doctrinal deviation, only those are to be excommunicated who persistently adhere to an error which subverts the foundation of faith (denial of the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, salvation by grace, vicarious atonement, resurrection). In other cases, separation is called for (Tit. 3:10), i.e., the declaration that the persistent errorist is no longer a confessional brother, but not that he is regarded as a heathen man and publican.

Romans 16:17 ff. would also come into play here.

8.) It is clear that excommunication is an extremely serious pronouncement. It is nothing less than declaring that a one-time brother is no longer a believer. When this determination is made by the church, it rightly speaks forth God's own judgment upon the unbelieving individual. The excommunication is valid because it is in accord with God's judgment as revealed in his Word. Thus, it would be wrong for one pastor or congregation to ignore the excommunication of a congregation in some other place. At the very least that kind of action would both confuse the person under discipline and also cause offense to the body which determined the excommunication.

In the event that there is some reason to believe some sort of mistake or error was made in regard to disciplining someone, there is an orderly manner for the actions of the individual and church involved to be reviewed (see *District Constitution*).

It is fair to say that a great deal of confusion has occurred when an orderly approach was not taken to such problems in the past. I remember how confused I was a couple years ago when I (and maybe many others) got a letter that dealt with discipline and the actions of a person I knew absolutely nothing about. I still don't know what that was about. Church history (including our Synodical history) also shows how confused issues of discipline can become. Koehler in *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* speaks at length about some actual occurrences (see sections on "The Cincinnati Case", the early history of Trinity in St. Paul, etc.).

Conclusion

Jesus' advice in Matthew 18:15-17 is given with a view toward reclaiming a brother who has fallen into sin. Even the final stage of what Jesus speaks of, excommunication, is ultimately intended to serve the loving purpose of bringing a person to see the seriousness of his own sin. The applications of this text are primarily of a general nature, although they can also be applied specifically to pastor/pastor relationships. When such pastor/pastor applications are made, they need to be in agreement with the basic thrust of the text. That is, the individual who has sinned is still a Christian brother; he is to be confronted initially in a totally private manner, and thereafter, if necessary, dealt with according to the basic structure Jesus teaches in these verses.

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