

# “IF YOUR BROTHER OFFENDS YOU . . .”

## Two perspectives on Matthew 18 discipline

**“If another disciple sins against you,” Jesus continued, “go and have it out, just between the two of you alone. If they listen to you, you’ve won back a brother or sister. But if they won’t listen, you should take with you one or two others, so that ‘everything may be established from the mouth of two or three witnesses.’ If they won’t listen to them, tell it to the assembly. And if they won’t listen to the assembly, you should treat such a person like you would a Gentile or a tax-collector. I’m telling you the truth: whatever you tie up on earth will have been tied up in heaven; and whatever you untie on earth will have been untied in heaven.”**

—Matthew 18:15-18 (NTE)

## PRACTICING MATTHEW 18 WITHOUT A BLUDGEON BRAD JERSAK

### QUESTION

I am part of a Christian group going through some unresolved conflict. One side keeps trying to use Matt 18:15-18 like a sledgehammer against the other. How do we read this passage in context when people try to weaponize it?

### RESPONSE

The analogy of the bludgeon really brings into focus the legalistic ways that even Christ’s

directives can be misused to perpetuate the very spiritual abuse he condemned. The letter kills. Whatever Christ is doing in this passage, he is NOT giving a green light for us to join the “accuser of the brethren” in the ministry of condemnation!

You know you’re interpreting Christ wrong when your practice contradicts Jesus’ other statement two chapters later:

“Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the

rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’”

—Matthew 20:25-28

If someone is using chapter 18 to violate Matthew 20, it’s an

obvious misuse. Note: Christ not only says, *Don't lord it over*, but *"Don't even exercise authority over!"* So, whoever is directing the use of Matthew 18 must do so as a servant of all involved.

That said, I don't want to slither away from the weight of Christ's directions or use Matthew 20 to negate the Matthew 18 process. But I've witnessed the misuse of chapter 18 as both obsessive stalking and ganging up. For Christ-followers, bullying is off the table. Rather,

we need to look first of all for Christ's intention. What is he up to? What's the goal? What is he correcting?

### **IT'S ABOUT RESTORATION**

The verses immediately preceding this paragraph speak of leaving the 99 sheep to find the individual who's wandered off, with the goal of reconciling them to the flock.

The immediate context is restoration. *Christ is all about restoration and reconciliation.*

And that's also the stated goal in the verses you mentioned: winning back our brother or sister. Winning! Bludgeons don't win anyone. As Paul wrote, *"Don't you know that God's kindness is meant to bring you to repentance?"* (Romans 2:4. NTE). For both Christ and Paul, the winsome kindness of God is expressed through the kindness of Christlike disciples.

That tone, rather than a legalistic algorithm for chastisement, needs to come into



the verses we're considering. Religiosity turns "discipline" into punishment rather than practices that nurture flourishing disciples!

## BOTTOM-UP PROCESSES

Christ is advocating for a bottom-up process of servant-love, and he's resisting a top-down imposition of authoritarian control.

The spirit of what Christ is getting at is that we don't need to rush into gossiping about people, telling on people or ganging up on people when we pick up an offense. He's saying start the reconciliation process at the most personal and private layer.

Only if you can't get anywhere privately and can't let it go do you ask for more help. The others you bring aren't about amassing a gang to create heavier pressure but about having others as witnesses who mediate to avoid escalation.

And only when this small group mediation/intervention fails—as in the case of unrepentant and brazen incest in 1 Corinthians 5—the group conscience of one's broader community may be required.

But do you see Jesus' point? *He's not providing a mechanism for escalation. Just the opposite—he's putting the brakes on it.*

## LETTING BE AND LETTING GO

If having witnessed that the offender is unrepentant and hard-hearted (which may also, sneakily enough, turn out to be the offended one!), in the spirit of

Christ, I suspect "treating them as you would a pagan" (NIV) is NOT so much about exclusion or shunning or excommunication. I believe Jesus is teaching us to set healthy and compassionate boundaries in our relationships and releasing us to move on from intractable situations or irreconcilable relationships (rather than obsessing with fixing what we can't repair).

To use the prodigal son as an example, it's not that the Father kicked him out or consigned him to the pigpen. He didn't torment the son from the fence of the pig pen. He saw when it was time to let them go and let him be. And he allowed the son to ripen toward his own readiness for reconciliation. ***He gave him the dignity of finding his own bottom.***

This 'letting be' needs to center on 'letting go' of our expectations of the other through which we came to be offended. I'll repeat that: when we are offended, two problems persist—the other's offense (which may be very real) and our own expectations (which may be utter fantasies).

If I'm the one who's committed the perceived offense, I may wake up to my wrongdoing and own the offense. I've been offered an open door to reconciliation and restoration. I can repent and renew the good relationships that I'd sabotaged.

On the other hand, if I'm accused but suspect that I'm not really the problem, I could say, "According to Matthew 18, you're offended, you've approached me

and your witnesses concur.

I don't see it that way. This feels like religious control and I can't bend on this. Thankfully, Jesus tells us what to do next: we part company until we see a path to reconciliation. Until then, Jesus says let me be. I trust that if I'm wrong, he'll work with me now and I hope you can make space for him to do so. ***That's my boundary and I hope you'll honor it.***

## TRIPLE CONTEXT

As a sidebar, I'd add that we have here two immediate contexts:

Jesus instructs his disciples firsthand on the foundational principles of his kingdom.

But Matthew is also recalling Jesus' words to instruct his own community at least a generation later. He is working with existing faith communities and their new disciples. He wants them to know that when conflict arises, Jesus' words, properly obeyed, will cut off gossip, tattling, end-runs to leadership, perpetual stalking of your offenders and top-down religious control. In just these few verses, we're gifted with a good and orderly process as we seek to de-escalate conflict.

Today, in whatever forms we happen to fellowship, Matthew 18 models for us Christ's personal humility and his call to love one another. *It's not about bringing the muscle—it's about dialing down the energy.* And that means everyone needs to leave the bludgeon at home. □

*Brad Jersak learned to practice Matthew 18 discipline the hard way: through 20 years of pastoral ministry.*