

The heavy-handed application of Matthew 18:15-17 leaves a trail of pain, broken relationships and spiritual carnage. Religious authoritarians use Matthew 18 to silence dissenting speech and to label people as troublemakers—sources of contamination in the assembly that must be purged.

Speech is articulated thought. Articulated thought calls to action. Action shapes reality.

TRESPASS-OFFENSE-SCANDAL

In Matthew 18:1-14, Christ has expressed his identification with “little children” and what it will take to inherit eternal life. He talks about “offending” these same little ones. In 18:6, he shifts and talks about interpersonal “trespasses”—offenses—literally: scandals. Petty interpersonal offenses and “hurt feelings” are not included. Neither is disagreeing with your “pastor.”

These are all legal terms. We are dealing in these passages with civil/criminal trespasses in a Mosaic context. You do not go to court/jail for “insensitivities” toward another believer in the community! The context is the disruption of community due to actual, objective loss in a legal sense. In our culture, the closest equivalence would be civil or criminal offenses, not petty local church squabbles.



Script-torturing Matthew 18

Stephen Crosby

Whoever controls speech, controls reality. Misguided leaders use Matthew 18 as a speech/thought-control template. They can manipulate a group of individuals and thus control and shape a community's experiential reality: a reality that too often accrues to the material, social, or psychological benefit of leadership.

This is an unfortunate and illegitimate understanding and application. It betrays the Spirit of Christ, even while professing fidelity to the text. Let's briefly examine this passage paying attention to its culture and context, and try to distill some legitimate application.

He is talking about behaviors of a scandalous nature that would breach the peace of the community.

The cultural backdrop for “trespasses” was the Mosaic Law. How do we know we are dealing with Mosaic law moral/criminal/civil offenses and not minor psychological hurts? Matthew 5 might inform our understanding of this passage as it is almost a mirror version of Matthew 18.

In Matthew 5:22, Jesus refers to being called before the “council” That was the Jewish Sanhedrin, the elders who adjudicated issues of the Mosaic Law. Verse 25 uses the words: *adversary, officer, judge* and *prison*.

TAKE WITNESSES

If a first attempt at peacemaking has been unsuccessful, involve others in the community. This was a very Jewish/Semitic practice. The law said there was to be no “ruling” without the presence of two or three witnesses. It does not mean taking two or three skills with you who are on your side, to beat the other person down until they agree with you.

TWO OR THREE AGREEING

This is not a make-a-wish prayer formula for three people in a circle singing praise songs. Rather, the peace of the

community is so important to Christ that he makes this promise (my paraphrase):

“Wherever two are three of you are concerned about the unity of the community, where you had to ‘make judgment’ in a case, and you are in agreement on it, I will stand behind your judgment.”

“Concerning the maintenance of the unity of the community, just ask, it will be done for you.”

A MANDATORY PROTOCOL?

Some think Matthew 18 is a mandatory protocol that must be followed to adjudicate all local church conflicts. If that is the case, and it is to be rigidly and legalistically applied, Paul apparently “failed Matthew 18” because he received a second-hand report from those of Chloe’s house (1 Corinthians 1:11) concerning the behavior in the congregation in Corinth. Gossip and not following the “steps of Matthew 18,” are grievous sins in many Matthew 18 disciplinary environments. Well, apparently Paul did not understand Matthew 18—at least not the way we commonly interpret it.

Paul did not “go to the source” by talking directly to the offenders and let them give “their side of the story,” and then take witnesses with him for stage two, and then bring it before the whole congregation for stage three of Matthew 18!

He simply believed people talking about other people, and acted on it! He wrote a letter based on the second-hand report which would have been read in public—a clear-cut violation of

Matthew 18 according to typical applications!

TREAT THEM AS UNBELIEVERS

Beyond the technicalities of the text, I think God is a realist when it comes to human beings and their interactions with each other. Brad Jersak has wisely understood the passage as such in this way:

“I suspect ‘treating them as unbelievers’ 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 . . . Matthew 18 models for us Christ’s personal humility and 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.”

I agree with Brad.

For us, “treating like tax collectors and Gentiles” means: have no contact, turn them over to Satan, or worse—condemn them to hell. In their world, the spirit of Matthew 18 was not a ban on all contact, but rather about maintaining social boundary markers regarding Mosaic uncleanness, particularly in table fellowship. Table fellowship was a huge ethical deal in their world that is not so much so in ours. Some rabbis taught that to eat with a Gentile was a crime worse than murder and a capital offense (worthy of a death sentence).

Well, Jesus is our pattern in all things—the same Jesus of Matthew 18.

How did he treat tax collectors and Gentiles? By extending

grace, forgiveness, and table fellowship to them. He ate with them. He didn’t blackball them.

This is one of the accusations against Jesus: “He eats with sinners.” It is critical that we keep this in mind when someone tries to interpret and enforce Matthew 18.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps human reality dictates that close communion with a person is not possible—for whatever legal, spiritual, or interpersonal reason. It is bound to happen. It does not mean we treat people like moral contaminants.

Rather, Matthew 18 presents the extenuating lengths we must go to in order to bring peace and restitution. Peter understood the implications: “Lord, how often do I have to forgive?” (Mt. 18:22). We know the answer.

Matthew 18 is a less-than-ideal necessity to maintain appropriate boundaries to assure the well-being of individuals and peace in the community when all other long-suffering and forgiving attempts have failed because of human weakness. It is not a mandatory judicial protocol for every situation in community life.

One thing is certain: Matthew 18 does not apply to the systemic abuse of people by ecclesial leaders. Systemic abuse and corruption are to be exposed: shouted from the housetops by anyone, at any time. □

Stephen Crosby expands on these themes in his book, The Rescue of Matthew 18.