

## **Matthew 18:15-20<sup>v vi</sup>**

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

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### **<sup>v</sup> About Matthew 18:15-20**

Today’s reading speaks of discipline within the community of disciples, who are the Church. The responsibility of seeking out the erring member, based on Old Testament precedent, was an early part of the Christian community’s behavior. If the member refuses to respond, even to the pleas of the assembled congregation, he is to be treated as “a Gentile and a tax collector” (v. 17), that is, by inviting him to enter the community through faith. Jesus models this treatment in his ministry by eating with tax collectors and “sinners” (9:9-13) and praising the faith of Gentiles.

The authority given to Peter in 16:19 is now given to the whole community of disciples. The words bind and loose are technical terms for the authority of the rabbi over persons and actions—exclusion from or admission to the community, forbidding or permitting a disputed action, or retention or forgiveness of sin.

### **<sup>vi</sup> Reflection and Response**

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Today's readings give us a place to stand when we must confront evil. Matthew's gospel approaches the question of evil within the personal sphere. How should a Christian act when the network of relationships hits a snag? It is inevitable that human connections will sooner or later go haywire. How then should we intervene?

The guidelines of the early Church are noteworthy for their compassion and restraint. Then as now, the Church was not immune from scandal. Excommunication and ostracism have lacerated the Mystical Body in the past, and will probably do so again. Jesus proposes a much more gentle way of dealing with behaviors and attitudes we feel we cannot tolerate.

First, he suggests dealing with the problem directly, before it grows like a cancer. We are often tempted to ignore trouble, which then becomes more difficult to heal. Jesus proposes that the person who feels wronged should initiate the reconciliation. That seems a healthy step for those who might be inclined to wallow in self-pity, yet never take action to end their misery and seek reconciliation.

Second, he recommends keeping the issue private until various channels have been tried and exhausted. In contrast, we often rush to complain publicly before we even have a clear picture of what's wrong. When the gossip spreads, the whole situation worsens.

Finally, he operates from a basis of compassion. The purpose of the process is never to humiliate or to condemn, but always to restore union with the brother or sister. In contrast, we often enter conflict with the self-righteous purpose of emerging as a winner. Jesus upholds the ideal that the person takes priority over our raging opinions and the causes we champion.