

Discipline within the Royal Family (Mat 18.15-17)

*Step Three: Conversation with the Church*

*WestminsterReformedChurch.org*

*Pastor Ostella*

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Introduction

Because it can be emotionally trying to engage in the process of church discipline, we should study Matthew 18.15-20 in order to gain precise clarity on the basics of our Lord's teaching. For a brief review, here are some of the basics. 1) To begin with, the process is a conversation. Interaction is to take place between members in the same royal family. There is to be a give and take of speaking and listening. 2) Also fundamental is the fact that the process has three steps: conversation in private, conversation with witnesses, and conversation with the church. 3) Moreover, we can cite some elements within the first step. The occasion of this conversation is sin, the dynamic is personal (between you and him), the context is private (between you and him alone), the nature of the conversation is direct (tell him his fault), and the goal is positive (to gain the brother).

4) Finally, some basics that we can accent pertain to the second step. On one hand, "failing to listen to you" is the trigger that moves the process from step one into step two. On the other hand, step two has an immediate purpose, an ultimate purpose, and an ultimate-ultimate purpose. The immediate purpose is to take witnesses along so they can confirm the validity of the charges, witness the responses of the accused, and join in the call to repentance. The ultimate purpose is to gain the brother; the hope is that he will hear the witnesses and turn around in repentance. The ultimate-ultimate purpose is the glory of God.

Today, we will cover the third step. The title is "Discipline within the Royal Family: Step Three, Conversation with the Church." **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 (18.17).** Now, we need to focus on two points: church involvement in the conversation, and church action in the conversation.

1A. Church involvement in the conversation

It seems best to discuss church involvement in the discipline process by asking and answering some important questions.

1) What leads to church involvement?

Step three of the discipline process arises from the obstinacy of the sinning party. If he refuses to listen to the witnesses, to their confirmation of the charges, and to their call to repentance, then the church must become involved. They are to take the matter to the church; they are to tell it to the church.

Again, as we noted in step two, to appreciate the negative of refusing to listen (*not* listening), we need to understand the positive of listening. More is going on here than words hitting eardrums. Listening means to hear, give attention to, empathize with, understand, and walk in the way of obedience and submission. It involves a willingness to converse, to seek reconciliation, to work through possible wrongs, and to forgive when there is exaggeration and misunderstanding. Most of all, it means to admit your wrongdoing and to turn away from it. Then you say, "I am wrong; I am sorry for the wrong; I apologize for the wrong I did." This is childlikeness because it is humbling to admit your wrongs without retaliation, or blame shifting. Confess your sin and leave it at that. Guard your heart from faultfinding in return. A common pitfall here is to try to reverse the charges.

In Matthew 13.14-15, Jesus indicates that when He calls us to "hear with our ears," He is calling us *to perceive, understand, and turn around in repentance*. Of course, turning in repentance involves the primary acknowledgement that you make as a Christian, namely, to admit your spiritual poverty (Mat 5.3, **blessed are the poor in spirit**). Confession of sin is a basic in the Christian life: **If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.** <sup>9</sup> **If we confess our sins, he**

is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup> If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (1 Jn 1.8-10).

In the negative then, the phrase “if he refuses to listen” means that he will not engage the conversation (he will not hear it; he will not give ear to anything you have to say). That involves failure before the basic requirement of Christ in Matthew 5.23-24 of seeking reconciliation when someone has aught against you, **so if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.** It is striking that Jesus puts the spirit of reconciliation in a more important place than worship. As Peter puts it, the church is a royal priesthood and holy people (**But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light,** 1 Pet 2.9). When we gather, we come to offer sacrifices. The writer of Hebrews tells us that these sacrifices include both our relationship with God and also our relationship with others in the church, specifically, others in general, those in need and church leaders: **Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.** <sup>16</sup> **Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.** <sup>17</sup> **Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you (Heb 13.15-17).** Therefore, to work at peace and unity takes priority over pious works of worship.

Breaking the spirit beyond the letter of hearing means that if you are the sinning saint, then you will not hear with empathy trying to find the truth and desiring to clarify and to work things out. Not listening is to fail to pursue reconciliation with an open, willing, and peace-making spirit. Moreover, failure here means to lack acknowledgment of the sin, and in that way to deny it. It involves impenitence or an unwillingness to change. It involves obstinacy (being stubborn and obstinate) in an accelerated way, because the call to repentance comes not only from the innocent saint; it comes also from the joint testimony of witnesses.

Clearly then, an obstinate failure to repent moves the discipline process forward to step three and the involvement of the church.

## 2) What is the nature of church involvement?

The nature of church involvement comes out in two phrases: “tell it” and “to the church.”

a) Context indicates that the innocent saint and the witnesses are first to tell the church that the sinning saint refuses to repent (that is *telling it* to the church). The sin that occurred is almost not in the picture. It definitely has a place on the back burner. Of course, the charge is part of the report to the church because it summarizes the sin from which the sinner is to repent. By implication, the sin and fault that the Lord mentions in verse 15 carries through in every call to repentance in all three steps of the process. Nevertheless, there is emphasis on the matter of refusing to hear. In other words, what matters most is the spirit of repentance and reconciliation as indicated by the accent placed on hearing or refusing to hear. Therefore, the nature of church involvement is to hear the accusation of the innocent saint, to hear the testimony of the witnesses regarding the response of the sinning saint, especially, his refusal to hear.

b) The telling is also *to the church*. What does this mean? Does it mean that the specifics of the sin, the details of the goings on, and the ins and outs of the sinner’s stubbornness are now to become common property of every member of the church? Does it mean that every man, woman, and child is to receive the testimony of the witnesses regarding the sin and the obstinacy of the sinning member of the family? To ask this question in this way suggests its own answer. Common sense, charity, discretion, and wisdom all argue that such things should not become public property in this way.

However, Jesus simply says, tell it to the church. How can we take Him to mean anything other than a congregational gathering of all the saints? Pointedly, our intuition of common sense finds confirmation in the pattern of church government that emerges after the death and resurrection of Christ. It is important to apply the principle of the mustard seed that becomes a large plant to the gospel. Jesus gives the gospel in seed form and that the apostles give us as a mature plant. It is the same gospel regarding the church, but the Lord gives us the gospel in the

NT in stages, just as He gave it in the OT in stages. It pleases the Lord to work out His purposes in stages in history and to reveal His interpretation of His work in stages as well. Therefore, the NT doctrine of the church has its sure roots in the teaching of Christ. Then through His appointed apostles, those roots develop into the pattern of sound words that guide the church until the end of the age.

The pattern of church government that emerges in the NT is the simple structure of representative rule by elders. Elders simply spring up, we might say, in the NT church. Without explanation and elaboration, elders are present in the church as the representatives of the brothers in Judea to whom the church at Antioch sent relief (Acts 11.30). In the course of time, and without elaboration, the apostles appointed elders in every church (Acts 14.23).

We must understand their function in the NT is parallel with their function in the old Israel as rulers of the people (cf. Acts 4.5, 8). In the OT, they sometimes functioned as prophets; this fact indicates that they were teachers of the word and will of God (Num 11.25). They had the duty of prayer on behalf of the people of God as well (Deut 21.1-9). They served as judges who weighed evidence and administered punishments such as the death penalty and flogging (Deut 22.13-21). In the time of Christ, elders exercised their office in the synagogue, the center of Bible study and worship. The synagogue became more and more important because it was more accessible to all the people than worship at the temple in Jerusalem. NT churches follow the pattern of synagogue worship and not temple worship because the people of God now make up the temple of God. Jesus says, **“Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them”** (Mat 18.20). Similarly, Paul identifies the people of God as God’s dwelling place: **we are the temple of the living God; as God said, I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people** (2 Cor 6.16). Thus, elders ruled the people of God by the word of God and prayer; and the context of their rule was the local assembly of the synagogue. By the word and prayer is the NT pattern as well (Acts 6.4). Included in their responsibilities was the function of judging and ruling (cf. there is such a thing as just judging both on a private/individual level and on a public/corporate level).

Obviously, the carry over from the old wineskin to the new wineskin removes the death penalty and flogging from the church and places these things in the hands of the state. Granted, some Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay Colony did not appreciate the new wineskin in this regard; they had people flogged for breaking the Sabbath. However, Paul tells us that the state has the power of the sword (Rom 13.4), and this fact balances with the teaching of Jesus before Pilate that He does not advance His kingdom by the sword (Jn 18.10, 11, 36, **my kingdom is not of this world**).

Nonetheless, elders emerge in the life of the NT church and they are to exercise rule (1 Tim 5.17-18) without lording over the people of God (1 Pet 5.2-3). In other words, we can now add to our definition of the church that we drew from Matthew 16 and 18 that the church is an assembly of disciple-sinners in need of correction, self-discipline, and church discipline. Now we can add that this assembly of disciple-sinners receives its training, correction, and an orderly process of discipline under the rule of an eldership.

Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that before the resurrection when Jesus says, “tell it to the church” He is referring to the post-resurrection church composed of elders and members. Accordingly, if the process of church discipline escalates beyond the levels of steps one and two, then the innocent saint and witnesses are to take the matter to the eldership in its capacity of ruling and judging. At this stage of the process, the eldership hears the complaint, the responses of the accused, and the testimony of the witnesses regarding the refusal to hear them. In what we may call a new wineskin form of judging, the eldership or spiritual leaders of the church function as judges, and in that capacity they represent the church and exercise their rule over it.

The process of discipline expands in widening circles from the private to the corporate realms, and the corporate begins representatively in the context of the eldership.

2A. Church action in the conversation

Jesus teaches that the church is to act in a twofold way.

#### 1B. Call to repentance

The main thing that Jesus emphasizes is the duty of the elders to extend a third call to repentance (they function by representation and rule or *as the church in representative rule*). This duty surfaces in the conditional, **if he refuses to listen even to the church**. To what, we should ask, does he refuse to listen? Since listening involves repenting, then the refusal in view must be the refusal to hear the church's call to repent; again, the spiritual leaders are the church representatively.

Each level accents the seriousness of the sin and the stubbornness if there is no repentance.

The goal is to reclaim and bring about restoration. We know this is the case from the contrast between listening (v. 15) with refusing to listen (v. 17). If the brother listens at any stage of the process, that is, if he hears, heeds, and repents, then we gain the brother like a shepherd gains a lost sheep. However, if the sinning party refuses to listen to the church then the church must take the decisive action of excommunicating the obstinate member.

#### 2B. Excommunication

**If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (v. 17b).**

There are some things to stress in this connection.

1) First, refusing to listen to the church means that the sinning party does not heed the call to repentance that the eldership gives to him.

2) Second, the church as a whole is to act on the judgment of her representatives. When Jesus says, "let him be to you," He is speaking to the innocent saint, the witnesses, the eldership, and all the disciples of the church. Therefore, the whole church is to act on the fact that the sinning "saint" (now in quotes) has refused to submit to the judgment of the spiritual leaders and their consequent summons to repentance.

3) Third, the church as a whole (innocent saint, witnesses, eldership, and all disciples) is to treat the obstinate and impenitent sinner "**as a Gentile and a tax collector.**" Every step of the discipline process affords an opportunity for repentance. If the person persists in stubborn refusal to reconcile and repent, then there is nothing else left to do but consider him a pagan. As Ridderbos puts it, "He can no longer be considered an heir of the kingdom, and he therefore cannot be counted as a member of the church" (*Matthew 339*). This, of course, does not mean that we treat him badly; the command to love includes those outside the church. It means that he cannot partake of communion; it means that the greeting "good morning, brother; good morning, brother in Christ" must become, "good morning."

#### Concluding remarks

1) In many ways, this is a hard teaching.

It is difficult to look a professing brother or sister in the eye and call for repentance from sin, to do so with witnesses where necessary, and to do so in the presence of the spiritual leaders of the church. It is difficult because all in the royal family are sinner-disciples who do not deserve to be in the family in the first place. Therefore, we may ask, "who are we to put others out of the church?" If that final step arrives in the discipline process, then we arrive at a very heavy duty and we may feel that we cannot bear the weight of it.

2) Again, we must stress the importance that Jesus places on the purity of the church.

It may have its difficulties but discipline preserves purity. Without church discipline, the church takes the easy road without the "mess" of confrontation with those who sin. However, the easy way is not the healthy way for the people of God. Without discipline, we spoil children in the home; sparing the spiritual rod spoils the children of the church, and allows bad apples to spoil the barrel. Discipline at all levels is for the good of the Lord's people. It is for the up building and edification of the royal family.

3) Throughout the process, one major lesson should come home to our hearts to an unusual extent. This is a lesson for all of us. I refer to the radical importance of a submissive spirit.

Jesus puts listening on the top shelf above all else in the discipline process: step one, **if he listens**, step two, **if he refuses to listen**, and step three, **if he refuses to listen**. All that Jesus said about those who have ears to hear receives maximal emphasis in His teaching about church discipline. The willingness to receive correction is critical in the Christian life. Having a reconciling spirit is crucial to a healthy Christian life and a healthy Christian church. Taking the posture of yieldedness is a great grace.

Do you see how this fits the flow of the chapter on relationship within the royal family? What do the willingness to receive correction, the reconciling spirit, and the posture of yieldedness underscore? They flesh out the radical importance of child-likeness and humble faith as attributes that bring a person into the kingdom and that give true greatness in it!

Childlike humble faith applies if you are the one hurt by someone's sin; it applies if that sin is real or merely perceived. Thus, if someone sinned against you, you have the responsibility to go to the person; if someone believes that you sinned against him (and you learn of it), you have the responsibility to go to the person. Good relationships within the royal family are so important that no matter what side of the fence you are on, you have the duty to promote the good of the family. Jesus teaches that you cannot fold your hands in silence. He heals the mute, so, those He saves cannot remain mute. Instead, you and I have the responsibility to converse, even on sticky matters of sin.

4) All these steps, the attitudes we have in carrying them out, the order we follow, and the goals we seek are all matters of obedience to Christ. This is His arrangement for His fellowship of sinner-disciples who are under pastoral care and who need correction, self-discipline, and church discipline. Bottom line: you obey the Lord Jesus when you display a childlike, submissive, and conciliatory spirit.

5) Finally, the entire process has in front of it the supreme goal of glorifying God because the family is a royal family that prays for God's will to be done on earth and for deliverance from evil for the honor of God's name (cf. the bond of petitions one and six in the Lord's Prayer, which is *the Lord's family prayer*).

**May we fall down before the majesty of our God in humble acknowledgment of our sins;  
May we humble ourselves in relation to each other in the family of God for deliverance from  
evil for the glory of God's name and the honor of Jesus Christ our risen Lord. To Him be all  
glory, now and forevermore, amen.**