

Discipline within the Royal Family (Mat 18.15-20)

Step Two: Conversation with Witnesses

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Introduction

Church discipline is difficult to apply. It is emotionally trying to engage in the discipline process, especially when things escalate and more and more people become involved. Therefore, we should continue to work on this passage (Mat 18.15-20) by concentrating on the basics. Later, we can work through some controversial matters and some problems of application.

One basic is the self-evident fact that the process is a conversation. Also basic is the fact that the process has three steps: conversation in private, conversation with witnesses, and conversation with the church. Concerning the basics within the first step, we can cite the following things. The occasion of this conversation is sin, the dynamic is personal, the nature of the conversation is direct (tell him his fault), the context is private (between you and him alone), and the goal is positive (to gain the brother).

Today, we will cover the second step. The title is “Discipline within the Royal Family: Step Two, Conversation with Witnesses.” **“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses (18.15-16).** Now, we need to focus attention on the basics of step two by covering the trigger and the purpose of this step in the process.

1A. The trigger of step two in the discipline process

Jesus is clear regarding the condition that sets the second step of discipline into motion. If the sinning saint (again, from step one, recall the value but limits of the distinction between the “sinning saint” and the “innocent saint”) fails to listen to you, then the conversation is supposed to escalate to step two. “Failing to listen to you” is the trigger that moves the process to a new level. There are two simple basics to the trigger: *failing to listen* and failing to listen *to you*.

1) First, failing to listen

To appreciate the negative (*not* listening), we need to grasp and hold tightly to the positive of listening. As stated last week, to listen involves much more than having word sounds vibrate your eardrum. 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.” When was the last time you said, “I am wr...?” Did the word come out clearly from your lips? Actually, this is something you should say, perhaps often. This is childlikeness again 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 seeking to fault in return (typical wrong: to reverse the charges).

We should ground this view of listening in Scripture because it has major importance in the discipline process. In other words, it is the failure to hear that triggers step two, which brings other people into the conversation and things escalate; therefore, you have to know what trips the trigger in order to go forward properly.

Some passages that fill out the meaning of hearing and listening put it like this: the sheep who hear the voice of the good shepherd *follow* him (Jn 10.27), people come to the temple to hear preaching, that is, *to attend to* it, and *to focus their attention* on it (Lk 21.38). Hearing God’s word means *receiving it with joy* (Lk 8.13), *keeping* it (Lk. 11.28), and *doing* what it says (Lk

8.21). Probably, the most important passage in this connection is Matthew 13.14-15. Here 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), and thus to confess your sins:

⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ 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 does not 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. 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 (unwillingness to change).

2) The second part of the trigger

The other part of the trigger is the personal dimension again: “if he does not listen” (Mat 18.16) “*to you*” (18.15); we need to keep these verses together. Again, the personal relationship between you and another member of the royal family is on the line. You cannot reduce the personal to personality. Some may wish to minimize the problem by appeal to personality differences, and thus write it off. Instead, you must proceed with full awareness that this sin is personal, whether against God or against others; it is against God by being against others. Here, you must keep the fact in full view that this issue is family-personal.

All parties concerned must recognize the family personal aspect of this process and as difficult as it may be to do it this way, you must be willing to say on one hand, “this is the sin you committed toward me” or on the other hand, “I am sorry for my sin that I committed against you.”

In the end, we enter step two of the conversation when no resolution flows out of step one. If the sinning party will not listen to you by not engaging this conversation, or if he does engage, but does not admit his sin and turn away from it, then we must do what the Lord tells us to do and carry the conversation forward with witnesses.

2A. The purpose of step two of the discipline process

The purpose of the discipline process subdivides into two halves: the immediate purpose and the ultimate purpose.

1B. The immediate purpose

Jesus commands that if step one accomplishes nothing, then **take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses**. Conversation is to continue, but not in the “sacred privacy” of step one. Now, the conversation continues with the immediate goal of establishing every charge by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Some observations about the function of the witnesses will help us understand this immediate purpose.

1) The witnesses hear the charges of the innocent party against the sinning party

...**take one or two others along with you**. They go with you in your going again to the sinning saint to tell him his fault (18.15). They are “with you” at your request because you take them along. They will hear what you have to say to the accused and they will hear what the accused has to say in response. More on this later, but surely the “one or two others” will “witness” the goings on. We should also mention that this is not the time to hear charges from the sinning saint against the innocent saint. If there are legitimate complaints, they must come to expression in

another context. For good order, “back charges” or “reverse charges” have to revert to step one at another time. The tendency to backlash is too great, and caution is important even in the sacred privacy of step one. The sinning saint needs to guard his heart in this regard, and others need to help him do so by keeping good order with the reminder that we tend to backlash.

2) The witnesses help confirm “every matter”

They go along so **that every charge may be established**. The ESV translation has charge for the Greek text that literally refers to a word, saying, or expression. Notably, this is more general than a charge or accusation. What does that mean? It means that the witnesses are present to hear both the statement declaring fault (the accusation of sin or charges), the call to repent (the call to hear and heed), and the responses of the sinning saint or accused.

By seeking to establish every charge, the witnesses protect the accused from false or misguided charges. It is still possible that the sinning party (the accused) is actually innocent. Consider the possibilities that might unfold:

The “sinning saint” may be not guilty

The “innocent saint” may be incorrect

It is possible that the innocent party (the accuser) misjudges things unintentionally. Therefore, the inclusion of witnesses is not to form a gang to overpower an individual. The idea is not that the innocent party gets more people on his side thereby to pressure the lone person into compliance. To the contrary, the presence of the witnesses protects both parties in the dispute. Everything is out in the open and on the table for inspection. Then, the witnesses can determine if the charges are credible or not.

3) The witnesses join in the call to repentance

Two things in the text indicate this function of calling to repentance. One is the implication of **hear them** (18.17a), and the other is the fact that they give testimony (18.16, **by the testimony of two or three witnesses**). We should comment on each fact.

a) Notice the fact that the accused has the obligation to hear the witnesses (18,17a)

Again, we have to pour all of what it means to hear into each step of the process (step one, v. 15; step two, v. 16; and step three, v. 17). In a word, “to hear,” means to perceive, understand, follow, repent, and heed. The witnesses (that Jesus has in mind) speak in such a way that the sinning saint is duty bound to hear what they say. What does he hear from them? He hears their agreement with the innocent saint. He hears their call to repentance and reconciliation. They hear the charges to see that they “make the case” and show where true fault lies. Then, they join with the innocent saint in extending another call to repent.

Therefore, these witnesses have a distinct function from the witnessing Jesus cites in the OT. In the Deuteronomy passages (17.6; 19.15), the witnesses give evidence regarding what they saw or heard. They are eyewitnesses to the crime. Thus, a person cannot receive the death penalty for murder without multiple eyewitness testimony. Thinking the OT scenario through, we can see that Jesus is drawing from OT civil law and applying it in a new way as church law. For example, in the OT, the witnesses did not call the murderer to repentance and if he repented, this did not lead to the gaining and pardon of the brother. The witnesses confirmed guilt that opened the door to capital punishment. The accused received either exoneration or the death penalty. In church law, the sinning saint may repent, or he may receive censure from the church. Flatly stated, in the OT, if there is guilt, then there is death. In the NT, if there is guilt there may be repentance and restoration, or impenitence and excommunication.

Clearly, the witnesses join in the call to repentance. The accused has the obligation to hear them and heed what they say by acknowledging his sin and turning away from it.

b) Notice the other fact that points to the witnessing task as a call to repentance

I refer to the phrase, **“by the evidence of two or three witnesses”** (18.16). “Evidence” refers literally to “sounds from a person’s voice box,” speech, word, expression, or saying. The point of importance is that it is not the job of the witnesses to give eyewitness evidence regarding guilt.

The translation, “evidence of” suggests that misunderstanding, but such a thought is misleading. They are not witnesses of the original infraction. Instead, what they do is testify to what they hear and see when they go along with the innocent saint. They protect the accused from injustice by confirming the charges of the innocent saint, they hear the responses of the sinning saint, and they join in the call to repentance.

2B. The ultimate purpose

The hope is that the sinning party will engage the conversation in the right spirit (seeking reconciliation, Mat 5.23-24), and upon the confirmation of the wrongdoing, the hope is that the sinning party will acknowledge his sin and turn away from it in repentance.

If this does not occur, then the next and final step of the process comes into play, which is to take the matter to the church.

3B. The ultimate-ultimate purpose

The end beyond all ends and to which all goals are subordinate is the glory of God. This is a great beacon of light in the dark times of life. It guides our way in all the confusion that surrounds our path through life. Here we have the reference point to keep us on track. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Concluding remarks

1) Discipline involves the responsibility of preserving the purity of the church over against sinful activity of its members. It is in keeping with the love of Christ for His church, **that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and with blemish** (Eph 5.27).

2) However, it is often easy to take “the easy way out” by compromising the purity of the church instead of confronting sin. Sometimes sin in the church takes us by surprise; it is unexpected and we are then unsure as to how to handle it. Commonly, we hesitate because of our own sins wondering how I can throw stones when I live in a glass house. Difficult as it may be, you must take these steps of discipline within the royal family. When necessary, you must do so out of obedience to Christ and out of love for your brothers and sisters in the household of faith.

Of course, you must not become the judge of everyone in the church as if God appointed you the police officer of the royal palace and family. This is a serious and sober duty. You must be willing to take it up, but you must take it up with great patience, forbearing, self-judgment, love, and wisdom.

3) Furthermore, even if there is misunderstanding, when you know that someone has aught against you, you have the obligation to Christ to seek reconciliation. Say, someone comes to you telling you about your sin. You initially think there is misunderstanding. Nonetheless, the obligation still applies. Again, this means that you submit to this process willingly, with a humble child-like posture, in obedience to Christ.

4) Finally, therefore, all along, the goal is helping one another in the battle with sin.

When we have relapses, we need help and should welcome it. No matter what side of the fence you may be on (sinning saint or innocent saint) the duty of discipline applies. You need this process and, if you name the name of Christ, you must welcome it for reasons that transcend your own personal feelings. This kind of mindset should guide us in our relationships as sons and daughters of the great king, our Lord Jesus Christ.

May we fall down before the majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ whom God raised from the dead and seated at His right hand above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but in the age to come. May we worship Him because God gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all, amen.

Addendum

1) A text on reconciliation and love

Leviticus 19:16-18: You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD. ¹⁷ "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

2) A rough and ready comparison of Deuteronomy with Matthew revealing some “new wine” in the shift from Israel to the church, from old Israel to the new Israel

Deuteronomy (17.6; 19.15-21)

Civil court

Sins as crimes (and moral wrongs)

Priests, judges, and elders

Witnesses of the original crime

Matthew (18.15-20)

Church court

Sins as moral wrongs (but not crimes)

Church

Witnesses of the discipline process