

Church Discipline Run Amuck!

The Two Matthew 18 Formulas In Light of the Love Commandments

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Jesus in Matthew 18:

*15-18 "If your brother sins against you, go and **show him his fault**, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16* But if he will not listen, **take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.** 17* If he refuses to listen to them, **tell it to the church**; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, **treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.** 18* "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (NIV)*

Matthew 18:15-18 has a proper use and an improper use. Those that use it properly use it for the purpose of restoring a brother who has caused a perceived hurt against them personally or who have done an actual harm to them or the Lord. **Those that misuse generally have a manipulative or destructive purpose in mind.**

False Approaches

The false way to approach this issue and these Scriptures is to think that they give you the right to be "thin skinned" and go after others for anything you deem as an affront to your sensibilities or self. We are supposed to die to self by picking up our cross daily. If we are encouraged to think that we now have a duty to be on the alert for personal hurts and grievances then we have the mechanism for all kinds of strife and evil confrontation.

A despotic leader may wish to keep everyone finding fault with each other in order to keep them from criticizing the leadership.

This was employed in Communist and fascist (Nazi) countries with people asked to be on a constant search or spy mission for their neighbor's faults. This served to keep the people off balance by being preoccupied with each other's faults and never able to organize any opposition to leaders. Satan, who inspired these parties, is not stupid about human nature and their collective polity when involved in any combined human endeavor either worldly or ecclesiastical.

Matthew 18 can be wrongly used to shun or “put out of the church” those that disagree with leadership. The leader can find someone who is a willing accomplice (if the person is a wealthy “mover and shaker” all the better) to accuse the leaders’ enemy and then bring them before others who are allied with the leaders to vote the person out of the church. This is naked aggression and VERY dishonoring to Christ. The cults have long practiced this shunning business and there are those in their ranks who tow the line long after they were convinced the group is a cult simply because they fear being put out of the cult. This should NEVER be done in a true Christian Church!! **The only time that shunning or putting out of the church occurred was the case in 1 Corinthians and then it was for flagrant sin.** The man that was shunned was guilty of having a sexual relationship with his father's wife!

The Apostles Paul and James speak to favoritism in the Church in the following Scriptures:

“And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you. But from those who seemed to be something--whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man--for those who seemed to be something added nothing to me.”
Paul in Galatians 2:4-6

“My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? . . . But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” —James 2:1-4,9

The True Use of Matthew 18

Proverbs 10:12 “Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all transgressions.”

If someone steals something from you, or bears false witness against you, this scripture should be used to confront your brother for either of these are sins against God and not just a slight against you. They truly are “sins” in the theological sense. There are petty slights and insults that we are asked to bear willingly and without complaint and should not even notice. This goes against our fallen nature.

This principle is found in the following verses of Scripture: *“But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right **cheek**, turn the other to him also. —Jesus in Matthew 5:39*

*“Whoever hits you on the **cheek**, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either.”—
Jesus in Luke 6:29*

“Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, **for Christ's sake**; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:10

“Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be **defrauded?**” 1Cor 6:7.

I was once told by a Hindu fellow that I had an airtight lawsuit case against a Christian brother who had caused an injury resulting in 10% of my cerebellum dying. I informed the Hindu that Christians don't sue Christians. I saw by the look on his face that it had a direct impact on him. Christians need to be able to obey this in light of what Christ gave them on the cross. Christians should not be quick to confront each other!

This is not to say that if you know yourself to be the one who has offended your brother (or sister) that you should not proactively go to him and admit that you have hurt him. This is if your sin was objective and could be heard or seen by others, in addition to incidents where, under conviction of the Holy Spirit, you know that you have hurt or offended someone. However, if you have sinned in your heart against your brother and he knows nothing about it, you should think twice about telling the person who may be unaware that you harbored any animosity. This confession of yours may cause him to stumble in holding animosity toward you if he is immature in the Lord. It may be better that you confess it to the Lord alone. The following command of the Lord illustrates this principle in action:

"Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." (Matthew 5: 23-24)

The Two or Three Witnesses Principle: Witnesses Are Needed In A Fallen World!

"A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of **two or three witnesses** a matter shall be confirmed." —Deuteronomy 19:15

"But if he does not listen *to you*, take one or two more with you, so that **BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED.**" — Matthew 18:16

“This is the third time I am coming to you. EVERY FACT IS TO BE CONFIRMED BY THE TESTIMONY OF **TWO OR THREE WITNESSES.**”
—2Corinthians 13:1

“Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of **two or three witnesses.**”— 1Timothy 5:19

We are living in a fallen world where even the elect can be guilty of not being consistent (see Romans chapter 7). It is because of this that the need to have objective testimony, outside of subjective perceptions, must be employed. There needs to be at least TWO or THREE witnesses that agree that there has been a transgression of God’s law by an individual, especially an elder, BEFORE it can even be received as valid requiring action.

Notice in the Matthew 18 formula you have two or three witnesses going with you to see what transpires when you meet the person you are going to see. This should mean that when there is factionalism (where a disagreement has occurred and there are people on two sides of it) involved, two or three witnesses from EACH SIDE should be there to bear witness to how the transaction occurs. In the age of tape recorders it may be advisable to have one of these on in order to keep everyone honest. This is especially true when there is suspected to be a political or personal agenda afoot.

Cults have taken over churches when these common sense applications are not understood by the people involved or are forbidden under some false pietistic guise such as leaders who ask, “How can you possibly distrust me? This is dishonoring to me and an insult!” This might be done in order to maintain ‘damage control’ if what is said in the proceedings doesn’t suit those in control. The idea that some leader is beyond being questioned is biblically wrong as the Bereans were called more “noble minded” than the Thessalonians because they held the Apostle Paul’s feet to

the fire, searching the Scriptures daily to see if what PAUL said was true!

Peter addressed the church leaders saying: *“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.”* —1 Peter 5:1-3

Improper Presumptuous Judgment

If Matthew 18 is focused on to the exclusion of other biblical principles, we may think we are invited to judge a brother or sister’s heart! Is judging your brother’s motives the first thing we are supposed to be doing? Certainly, this is not so! The Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 4:5 commands us: “Therefore, do not go on passing judgment before the time, *but wait* until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of *men’s* hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God.”

*“But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the **outward appearance**, but the LORD looks at the heart.”* —1 Samuel 16:7.

These Scriptures teach that man is not qualified to judge another man’s motives that are locked inside the heart.

Judgment as Discernment Is a Commandment!

However, this does NOT mean that all judgment in the church is wrong! Are people in the church never to use their Biblically informed theological understanding to surmise if what someone is doing or saying is a correct and true representation of God’s word? Of course, we must serve the Lord by THINKING in a discerning way. After all Jesus commanded us in *John 7:24*: *“Do not judge according to appearance, but **judge with righteous judgment**.”* This is

so because the Bible predicts that there will be those in our midst who will introduce false teaching.

*Jude 1:4 For certain persons have **crept in** unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.*

*2Pe 2:1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers **among you**, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.*

Because of the phenomenon of false teachers, that these scriptures warn us about, we must exercise discernment.

“But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one.” 1Corinthians 2:15.

A Call To Christian Love and Integrity In True Humility and Forgiveness i.e. —The Other Matthew 18 Formula!

When Matthew 18:15-18 is lauded to be the only panacea for all Christian relationships then we are forgetting another Scriptural formula for dealing with hurts inflicted by others. The other less famous Matthew 18 formula is found in Matthew 18:21-22: “Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times? Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” If someone committed the same sin against you seventy times you are to forgive them that many times for the sake of Christ. In context of this teaching and directly following this passage, Jesus gave the parable of the man who was forgiven a large sum of money he owed a King and then promptly demanded a pittance that was owed him from someone else. The King dealt harshly with such a lack of generosity and compassionate forgiveness.

People are ultimately forgiven on the basis of the fact that we ALL deserve God's harshest judgment for what we have done to Him, but that God has graciously bestowed undeserved forgiveness on us! If He forgives us for offenses that deserve the punishment of Hell, how much more should we be forgiving of our brothers who have sinned against us personally. Remember Paul said he was "well content" with "insults and persecutions."

King David, it could be argued, "sinned" against many people. He "sinned" against: Bathsheba by issuing a royal summons for an illicit sexual purpose, against her extended family, certainly against Uriah in killing him, against Joab by asking him to be an accomplice to murder, and indeed against the entire nation of Israel by compromising the nation's king. Still, when David penned Psalm 51 he told God, "Against Thee and Thee only have I sinned." This is an acknowledgment that all sin is ultimately against God.

A Call Away From Pettiness And Subjectivism

Jesus told us to "major in the majors and minor in the minors" when he said that the Pharisees "strained at gnats and swallowed camels" and that "tithing mint dill and cumin" was not as weighty as matters of the law and justice. This means we are not to be petty and self-serving in what we perceive as an affront to our persons.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others." — Matthew 23:23

The Apostle Paul said that we should not allow other people's conscience to be our judge

"I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience?" —The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:29

When someone has committed a real sin as opposed to a “perceived sin” it should be one that can be clearly shown to be a sin according to Scripture. Just because someone was perceived by you to be rude to you doesn’t automatically give you a “hunting permit” to judge him and go after him. It may be that you misperceived the supposed insult! You may actually be wrong in not being obedient to Jesus in John 13:34: *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one” another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.*” And the Apostle Peter in 1Peter 4:8: *“Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.”* 1Corinthians 16:14 *Let all that you do be done in love.*” Love is defined in 1 Corinthians 13:5 this way: *“Love does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered . . . ”*

Does not take into account a wrong suffered? WOW! If everyone was obedient to this commandment to love, what a wonderful world this would be. How many perceived insults and “putdowns” that torment people and foster grudges and foment bitterness would be avoided! Self-inflicted hurt that leads to hurting others would be rare. The children of God should be known as big hearted people *not* a small narrow and petty people!

In this area, as in all areas of life, the Bible should be our sole rule of faith and practice. And rather than cherry-picking verses in a cynical effort to advance our arguments, we need to follow the WHOLE counsel of God, obeying the biblical command to “rightly divide the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15).