

DEALING WITH SIN IN THE CHURCH  
June 4/2000

INTRO: In the last message we tackled a topic I personally believe to be a very misunderstood area and it is that of judging. We concluded that not only may we judge in the church but in some cases we must judge. We concluded that the Scriptures do not forbid all judgement, as a matter of fact it calls for us to make judgement. It is hypocritical judgement that is forbidden.

Then we began looking at the first case in which church discipline is to be exercised by the church. The topic was that of sin between two believers. We read the passage, Matthew 18:15-20, considered the problem and then began looking at the three step procedure given so clearly one could hardly mistake the meaning (Read Matt. 18:15-17).

Our thoughts this morning will be taken from verses 17-20. We will be looking at the prescription for an unrepentant sinner and then at the promises to the church.

#### 4. The Prescription

There are two points of interpretation that are important here. First, what is meant by, "...let *him be to you* like a heathen and a tax collector." The pronoun *you* is in the singular, not plural. The question is, does only the individual who has the issue with this unrepentant man treat him like a heathen and a tax collector or does the whole church get involved in this treatment?

It is my conclusion that the whole church treats this person like a heathen and a tax collector. The passage begins as an instruction to the individual believer, "...if your brother sins against you..." Then the three steps are given and the concluding instruction is that if this person is unrepentant after the church takes up the matter, then the individual believer is to treat him like a heathen and a tax collector.

Verse 18 then states, "Assuredly I say to you (pl.), whatever you (pl.) bind on earth will be bound in heaven..." The individual person does not do the binding and loosing, it is done by the church. And if they have bound someone, then it would naturally follow that the whole church would treat this person as a heathen and a tax collector. Lange's commentary says that though this is addressed to a singular person, the one

who was sinned against, "The accord of the church in this step is implied." That is my conclusion as well.

Now it is interesting that excommunication is not clearly spoken of in this passage. It simply says that if the one who has done the wrong is unrepentant after the church takes the matter in hand, then he is to be treated like a heathen and a tax collector. But the excommunication is implied to have taken place in verse 18, which we will consider later. No doubt, what is in view here is an action we call excommunication.

The second point of interpretation raises this question: What is meant by, "...let him be to you like a *heathen and a tax collector*." Today, when I ask this question the most common answer I get is that it means that we are to treat him like an unbeliever in that we make every effort to reach him with the Gospel again. We are to evangelize the heathen and the tax collectors, so we are to seek to win this person back to the Lord. I have been amazed at the present view on this. In my understanding, that is exactly what it does not mean. Nor can I find commentary support for that view. When someone stands in excommunication are we to make every effort to win them back? The Bible does not say so.

Now our question is, "How did the Jews treat heathen and tax collectors?" Well they did everything they could to avoid them. I ask you, how do we treat tax auditors? Anybody here invite them to check out your books so you can witness to them? The corruption in the taxation system under Rome struck fear into every person who owned anything. And how did they treat Gentiles? Well, the Samaritans were half Gentile half Jew and the Jew would walk a long way to bypass Samaria. Full blooded Gentiles were treated almost like lepers. The Jew was defiled when he came in contact with the Gentile.

There is a good illustration of this for us in Acts. The Lord was making preparation for the Gentiles to enter the salvation provided by the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He would use Peter, a full blooded Jew. And the Gospel would first go to Cornielius, a man hungry for the Gospel. And while the Lord had Cornielius send servants to get Peter, God prepared Peter to receive Gentiles. First He allowed a great hunger to overcome him. Then He let down this container

with all kinds of creepy crawlies inside and said, "Peter, rise, slay and eat." And Peter said, "Not so Lord, for I have never eaten anything common or unclean." One has to understand the Jewish culture to appreciate this scene. And the Lord said, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." Well, Peter could not get himself to do what he had always been taught not to do and so God did this three times. Well, just as soon as the Lord withdrew the container into heaven the Gentiles were standing at his gate. Here we have a picture at the revulsion the Jews felt for the Gentiles. And Jesus said an excommunicated man was to be treated like a Gentile or a tax collector.

It is from such Scriptures that the Mennonites got the term to *shun*. Shunning is an unpopular business today but it is clearly taught here. As a matter of fact, this part is the same in every circumstance of church discipline.

So what is the prescription given in this passage for a Christian who sins against another and remains unrepentant after the three step procedure? He is to be excommunicated and treated like a heathen and a tax collector by the rest of the church. I realize this may come as a shock to some because this is so foreign to our modern culture which cries, "Toleration!" so I encourage you to take it to the Lord and prayerfully consider the meaning of this passage of Scripture.

## 5. The Promises

### a. Re: binding and loosing

The first promise is that whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed. That this is meant to be a wonderful promise is obvious but what it means is wonderfully difficult. Three passages of Scripture must be viewed together (Matt. 18:18; Matt. 16:19 and John 20:22-23).

Matthew 16:19 mentions keys. Matthew 16:19 and 18:18 speak of binding and loosing. Now keys are used to lock and unlock. This seems to be what is meant by binding and loosing. John 20:23 seems to interpret that as forgiving or not forgiving.

We are now in passages that are strongholds for the Roman Catholic view that the priest can forgive sins or retain them. Let me say in no uncertain terms that these passages do not mean that God has entrusted to ministers the power to forgive sins.

First to be noted is that these passages refer to the church as a group of people. I believe that in Matthew 16:19 Peter stands as a representative of the Church. Then in 18:18 the pronouns *you* are in the plural. I believe the *you* refers to the church, not the minister. You see, church discipline is a church decision, not a priest or pastor decision only. We will see this later in verses 19-20.

Second, it must be noted that the church must make decisions in accordance with those made in heaven. This is taught in the tenses of the verbs in Matthew 16 and 18. The tenses are the perfect tense in the Greek NT. Let me give you a translation which reflects those tenses, "...whatever you bind on earth will already have been bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will already have been loosed in heaven."

The picture is this. When a person falls into the kind of sin we have just mentioned and there is no repentance, then the Lord does not cover or forgive that sin. No matter how much that person prays to God about it, it is retained. It must be repented of, and that before the person who has been wronged before it is forgiven. And when the church excommunicates this person, they are only doing what God has already done in heaven. And when the person repents, that very moment God releases them from their sin. That is called loosing, and is actually forgiveness. And when the news comes to the church of the repentance of this person, they too are to forgive or loose. And when they do they are only doing what has already been done in heaven.

In these passages, the church is given the authority by God to remove from church fellowship, a person who sins against another and refuses to repent. The church has not been authorized by God to remove and accept whomever they wish. Anyone who is truly a

believer and the life shows it needs to be accepted by the church. The church has no authority from God to withhold fellowship. Nor does the church have authority to remove anyone from their fellowship except in those instances sanctioned in Scripture. And when a church fails to exercise church discipline in a case such as we are studying here, then they are denying God the right to work in the life of that person through church discipline. That is a church crime. They are helping the sinner along by their disobedience to His Word on this matter.

At this point we must go back to our first message to the point on understanding the purpose of church discipline. The purpose is to bring the person to repentance. Let us say a person has sinned against another and there is no repentance. That person's ultimate eternal destiny is in jeopardy because their sin is unforgiven. 1 Corinthians 5:5 says that such a person is to be delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, *that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus*. The implication is this: If a person like this is not disciplined by the church he may well continue in sin and thus ultimately forfeit eternal life. God has already made decision against such a person and denied forgiveness until this person repents before the one whom he wronged. For the church to fail to exercise discipline might well result in this person suffering hell fire because of the church's failure to discipline. It is like the parent who fails to discipline the child and through this failure the child is ruined.

Let me add as well, that no church on earth has power to retain or forgive sins except it be in accordance with what heaven has already decided. I have heard of cases where a church fears to exercise discipline because if they do so and that person does not repent then they will be lost. That is a terrible misunderstanding of these verses. The fact is that if they do not do what God has already done, they are helping that person to destruction.

Let me expand Matthew 18:18, stressing the Greek tenses of the crucial verbs, "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will already have been bound in heaven because this

person has sinned against another and has not repented and his sin cannot be forgiven until it is repented of, and whatever you loose on earth, will already have been loosed in heaven, because the person has repented and I forgave him the moment he repented."

In excommunication the church is simply working in harmony with God. When the church fails to exercise church discipline when it is necessary, it is not in harmony with heaven. Consequently we have many members in churches whom God has bound under their sin and they are not free, while the church does not even acknowledge the failure. That is a tragedy.

b. Re: the Lord's presence

Verses 19-20 seem to go beyond only the matter of church discipline but they are given in the context of church discipline. But let us look at them only in light of what they mean to the matter at hand. We find here first that if a church is very small, even so small that only two people are available to make such a decision, this is sufficient. The important thing is not how many or how few are involved; the important thing is that they be agreed.

In verse 20 we have a promise that is often quoted but is seldom considered in its context. The context of the promise that where two or three are gathered together is the context of excommunication. I believe that we are also given some instruction on how excommunication is to be exercised. It should take place when the church is gathered together. In 1 Corinthians 5 we have a more serious case of church discipline. In verse 4 Paul says, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together..."

Consider also the wonder of the closing words of this promise. When a church is gathered together, even though there be but two or three and though it be for the purpose of excommunication "...I am there in the midst of them." When the church exercises discipline, the Lord Jesus Himself is right there in the midst of them. This indicates full agreement on His behalf. It indicates the full support of the Lord in this matter. Listen again to 1 Corinthians 5:4, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together,

along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ..." The Lord Jesus is right there in full agreement with an action that has already taken place in heaven.

CONCL: In conclusion, what is the prescription given by God Almighty Himself when a believer sins against another and after the three step procedure fails to comply? It is to excommunicate the person from church fellowship. Communication with a person like this is no longer on a good level. He is to be treated like the Jews treated the Gentiles and tax collectors.

The church is to hold this person bound, unforgiven, until such a time as repentance takes place. The indication of this passage is that God will hold this matter against the person and will not release this person until repentance takes place. The church is to do the same. Then when the person repents, he or she is to be released or forgiven and restored to fellowship. We will find this in another passage.

When we cover a topic like this everything seems so negative but in actual fact, the need for this is a most rare occurrence. And all any person has to do to avoid this kind of situation is simply live in obedience to their profession as a Christian. If that were done, this kind of discipline would never need to take place. Let us keep this in perspective.