

## Historic Commentary

(14th Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

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### Commentary on Matthew 18:15-20 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 18](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Chrysostom](#): He does not say “accuse him” or “punish him” or “take him to court.” He says “correct him.” For he is possessed, as it were, by some stupor, and drunk in his anger and disgrace. The one who is healthy must go to the one who is sick. You must conduct your judgment of him privately. Make your cure easy to accept. For the words “correct him” mean nothing other than help him see his indiscretion. Tell him what you have suffered from him. What then if he does not listen, if he stubbornly flares up? Call to your side someone else or even two others, so that two witnesses may corroborate all that’s said. For the more shameless and bold-faced he is, so much the more must you be earnest toward his cure, not toward satisfying your anger and hurt feelings. For when a physician sees the sickness unyielding, he does not stand aside or take it hard but then is all the more earnest. That then is what Christ orders us to do. You appeared too weak since you were alone, so become stronger with the help of others. Two are sufficient to reprove the wrongdoer. Do you see how he seeks the interest not of the aggrieved party alone but also that of the one who caused the grief? For the person injured may be the one who is more taken captive by passion. He becomes the one that is diseased and weak and infirm. This effort may occur many times, as he attempts to lead him first alone and then with others. If he persists, then make the effort with the whole congregation. “Tell it,” he says, “to the church.” If he had sought the interest of the aggrieved alone, he would not have told him to approach the sick individual seventy-seven times. He would not have attempted so many times or brought so many treatments to the malady. He might have just let him be if he persisted uncorrected from the first meeting. But instead he shows us how to seek his cure once, twice, and many times: first alone, then with two, then with many more.

Augustine: If someone has done you injury and you have suffered, what should be done? You have heard the answer already in today's Scripture: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." If you fail to do so, you are worse than he is. He has done someone harm, and by doing harm he has stricken himself with a grievous wound. Will you then completely disregard your brother's wound? Will you simply watch him stumble and fall down? Will you disregard his predicament? If so, you are worse in your silence than he in his abuse.

Therefore, when anyone sins against us, let us take great care, but not merely for ourselves. For it is a glorious thing to forget injuries. Just set aside your own injury, but do not neglect your brother's wound. Therefore "go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone," intent upon his amendment but sparing his sense of shame. For it might happen that through defensiveness he will begin to justify his sin, and so you will have inadvertently nudged him still closer toward the very behavior you desire to amend. Therefore "tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother," because he might have been lost, had you not spoken with him.

Jerome: If our brother has sinned against us and damaged us in anything, we have the power of dismissing it, in fact the obligation to do so, since we are commanded to forgive our debtors their debts. But if anyone sins against God, it is not in our control. Divine Scripture says, "If a man has sinned against a man, the priest will pray for him; but if he sins against God, who will speak for him?" But we, on the contrary, are lenient over a sin against God but act out our hatred when we ourselves are insulted. Yet we should immediately reprove our brother, if he has once lost his shame and innocence, so that he does not remain in sin. And if he listens, we profit his soul, and through the salvation of another we too acquire salvation. But if he refuses to listen, we should summon a brother; and if he does not listen to him either, yet a third should be summoned in the hope of either correcting him or meeting him with witnesses. Then if he refuses to listen even to these, the congregation must be told, so that they may curse him. Then the one who could not be saved through shame may be saved through their approbation. But since it is said, "Let him be to you as a heathen and a publican," the person who under the name of faith does an infidel's works is shown to be more cursed than those who openly are heathen. Publicans, figuratively speaking, are those who pursue the profits of the secular world and exact taxes by business, fraud, theft, crimes and false oaths.

Augustine: But “if he does not listen,” that is, if he chooses to justify his sin as if it were a just action, “take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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.” Don’t consider him now in the number of your brothers. But not even so is his salvation to be neglected. For even the heathen, that is, the Gentiles and pagans, we do not consider in the number of our brothers, yet we constantly pray for their salvation.

Augustine: This then is what we have heard the Lord advising, and with such great particularity that he himself adds, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” So the very moment you begin to hold your brother as an outsider to the covenant community, “you bind him on earth.” But see to it that you bind him justly. For unjust bonds will by justice soon be burst apart.... When you have admonished him and have been “reconciled to your brother,” you have thereby “loosed him on earth.” And when “you shall have loosed him on earth, he shall be loosed in heaven” also. So this is a weighty matter. You do this not for yourself but for him. For the harm he has done is not primarily to you but to himself.

Chrysostom: He did not say to the leader of the church, “bind him” but “if you bind him,” leaving the whole entire decision to the one aggrieved. Only after a due process do the bonds remain unbreakable, and so he will suffer the worst fate. It is not the one who has called for accountability that is to blame but the one who had not been willing to be persuaded. Do you see how Christ has bound him with a twofold constraint, both by the chastisement here and by the punishment hereafter? He threatens the one punishment to prevent the other from happening. Thus, by fearing both rejection from the church and the threat of being bound in heaven, he may become better behaved. And knowing these things, if not at the beginning, at any rate through so many judgments he will put off his anger. For this reason, Jesus set up a first and a second and a third judging. He does not immediately cut him down, so that if he does not obey the first, he may still yield to the second. But if he rejects that too, he may still respect the third. But if he takes no account of this third danger, let him be terrified of future punishment, of God’s sentence and vengeance.

Chromatius: How important a place the unanimity and harmony of brothers hold with God! We can know from this very fact that the Lord has clearly said that when two or three pray in unanimity, the Father grants everything from heaven. For with God nothing is more pleasing than brotherly peace, nothing better than unanimity and harmony, according to what is written: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. And again: "There is great peace among those who love your name, and there is no stumbling block for them." And in another place: "The God who makes us live in harmony in the house." So Isaiah also testified: "Lord," he said, "our God, give us peace. For you have given us everything." That this harmony of brothers is pleasing to God, the Holy Spirit declared through Solomon, saying, "There are three things which are pleasing to God and men: harmony of brothers, love of one's neighbors and the union of man and woman." So quite rightly the Lord in this passage testifies that when two or three come together on earth, whatever they ask for, all is granted by the Father.

Cyril of Alexandria: Christ gives to those who are allotted the duty of teaching the power to loose and to bind. So when those who have once fallen do not convert to the pursuit of virtue, they must fear the voices of the saints, even if they are not many who make the petition to bind or loose. For Christ has assured us of this, saying that there will be strength in the prayers of many, but that even if only two in number harmoniously and deliberately define their requests, they will come to their goal. "For I will be with you," he says, "and will support you if only two are gathered, because of me." For it is not the number of those gathered but the strength of their piety and their love of God that is effective.

Peter Chrysologus: There are those who presume that the congregation of the church can be disregarded. They assert that private prayers should be preferred to those of an honorable assembly. But if Jesus denies nothing to so small a group as two or three, will he refuse those who ask for it in the assemblies and congregation of the church? This is what the prophet believed and what he exults over having obtained when he states, "I will confess to you, O Lord, with my whole heart, in the council and congregation of the righteous." A man "confesses with his whole heart" when in the council of the saints he hears that everything which he has asked will be granted him.

Some, however, endeavor to excuse under an appearance of faith the idleness that prompts their contempt for assemblies. They omit participation in the fervor of the assembled congregation and pretend that they have devoted to prayer the time they have expended upon their household cares. While they give themselves up to their own desires, they scorn and despise the divine service. These are the people who destroy the body of Christ. They scatter its members. They do not permit the full form of its Christ-like appearance to develop to its abundant beauty—that form which the prophet saw and then sang about: “You are beautiful in form above the sons of men.”

Individual members do indeed have their own duty of personal prayer, but they will not be able to fulfill it if they come to the beauty of that perfect body wrapped up in themselves. There is this difference between the glorious fullness of the congregation and the vanity of separation that springs out of ignorance or negligence: in salvation and honor the beauty of the whole body is found in the unity of the members. But from the separation of the viscera there is a foul, fatal and fearful aroma.

Matthew 18:15. But if thy brother shall sin against thee.

As he had discoursed about bearing the infirmities of brethren, he now shows more clearly in what manner, and for what purpose, and to what extent, we ought to bear with them. For otherwise it would have been easy to reply, that there is no other way of avoiding offenses, than by every man winking at the faults of others, and thus what is evil would be encouraged by forbearance. Christ therefore prescribes a middle course, which does not give too great offense to the weak, and yet is adapted to cure their diseases; for that severity which is employed as a medicine is profitable and worthy of praise. In short, Christ enjoins his disciples to forgive one another, but to do so in such a manner as to endeavor to correct their faults. It is necessary that this be wisely observed; for nothing is more difficult than to exercise forbearance towards men, and, at the same time, not to neglect the freedom necessary in reproofing them. Almost all lean to the one side or to the other, either to deceive themselves mutually by deadly flatteries, or to pursue with excessive bitterness those whom they ought to cure. But Christ recommends to his disciples a mutual love, which is widely distant from flattery; only he enjoins them to season their admonitions with moderation, lest, by excessive severity and harshness, they discourage the weak.

Now he distinctly lays down three steps of brotherly correction. The first is, to give a private advice to the person who has offended. The second is, if he shall give any sign of obstinacy, to advise him again in presence of witnesses. The third is, if no advantage shall be obtained in that way, to deliver him up to the public decision of the Church. The design of this, as I have said, is, to hinder charity from being violated under the pretence of fervent zeal. As the greater part of men are driven by ambition to publish with excessive eagerness the faults of their brethren, Christ seasonably meets this fault by enjoining us to cover the faults of brethren, as far as lies in our power; for those who take pleasure in the disgrace and infamy of brethren are unquestionably carried away by hatred and malice, since, if they were under the influence of charity, they would endeavor to prevent the shame of their brethren.

If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. Christ confirms his doctrine by its usefulness and advantage; for it is no small matter to gain to God a soul which had been the slave of Satan. And how comes it that those who have fallen do not often repent, but because they are regarded with hatred, and treated as enemies, and thus acquire a character of hardened obstinacy? Nothing, therefore, is more appropriate than meekness, which reconciles to God those who had departed from him. On the other hand, he who inconsiderately indulges in foolish flattery willingly places in jeopardy the salvation of a brother, which he had in his hand.

Certainly he did not intend to enjoin them to avoid the society of heathens, of whom the Church was afterwards composed; nor is there any reason at the present day why believers should shrink from associating with publicans. But in order that he might be more easily understood by the ignorant, Christ borrowed a mode of expression from what was then customary among his nation; and the meaning is, that we ought to have no intercourse with the despisers of the Church till they repent.

18. What things soever you shall bind. He now repeats the same words which he had formerly used, (Matthew 16:19,) but in a different sense; for there he intended to maintain their authority in doctrine, but here he appoints discipline, which is an appendage to doctrine. There Christ declared that the preaching of the Gospel would not be without effect, but that the odor of it would either be life-giving or deadly, (2 Corinthians 2:15,16:) here he affirms that, though wicked men ridicule the judgment of the Church, it will not be ineffectual. We must attend to this distinction, that there our Lord's discourse relates to the preached word, but here to public censures and discipline.

Let the reader go to that passage for the import of the metaphor, binding and loosing.

The substance of it is this: Whoever, after committing a crime, humbly confesses his fault, and entreats the Church to forgive him, is absolved not only by men, but by God himself; and, on the other hand, whoever treats with ridicule the reproofs and threatenings of the Church, if he is condemned by her, the decision which men have given will be ratified in heaven. If it be objected, that in this way God is made a sort of petty judge, who concurs in the sentence of mortal men, the reply is at hand. For when Christ maintains the authority of his Church, he does not diminish his own power or that of his Father, but, on the contrary, supports the majesty of his word. As in the former case (Matthew 16:19) he did not intend to confirm indiscriminately every kind of doctrine, but only that which had proceeded out of his mouth, so neither does he say in this place that every kind of decision will be approved and ratified, but only that in which he presides, and that too not only by his Spirit, but by his word. Hence it follows, that men do no injury to the authority of God, when they pronounce nothing but what comes from his mouth, and only endeavor faithfully to execute what he has commanded. For, though Christ alone is the Judge of the world, yet he chooses to have ministers to proclaim his word. Besides, he wishes that his own decision should be pronounced by the Church; and thus he takes nothing from his own authority by employing the ministry of men, but it is Himself alone that looses and binds.

But here a question arises. Since the Church endures many hypocrites, and likewise absolves (or looses) many whose professions of repentance are hypocritical, does it follow that such persons will be absolved (or loosed) in heaven? I reply, the discourse is addressed to those only who are truly and sincerely reconciled to the Church. For Christ, wishing to administer comfort to trembling consciences, and to relieve them from fear, declares that any who may have offended are freed from guilt in the sight of God, provided that they be reconciled to the Church. For he has appointed this as the pledge of heavenly grace, which has no reference to hypocrites, who pervert the proper use of reconciliation, but awakens in the godly no ordinary confidence, when they hear that their sins are blotted out before God and angels, as soon as they have obtained forgiveness from the Church. In the other clause, Christ's meaning is not at all ambiguous; for, since obstinate and haughty men are strongly inclined to despise the decision of the Church on this pretense, that they refuse to be subject to men — as wicked profligates often make bold appeals to the heavenly tribunal — Christ, in order to subdue this obstinacy by terror, threatens that the condemnation, which is now despised by them, will be ratified in

heaven. He encourages his followers, at the same time, to maintain proper severity, and not to yield to the wicked obstinacy of those who reject or shake off discipline.

Vs 19. Again I say to you.

He confirms the former statement; for not only will God bestow the spirit of wisdom and prudence on those who ask it, but he will also provide that not one thing which they shall do according to his word shall want its power and effect. By uniting agreement with prayer, he reminds us with what moderation and humility believers ought to conduct themselves in all religious acts. The offender must be admonished, and, if he does not receive correction, he must be excommunicated. Here it is not only necessary to ask counsel at the sacred mouth of God, so that nothing may be determined but by his word, but it is proper at the same time to begin with prayer. Hence appears more clearly what I have formerly stated, that men are not allowed the liberty of doing whatever they please, but that God is declared to have the sole claim to the government of the Church, so that he approves and ratifies the decisions of which he is himself the Author. Meanwhile, when believers assemble, they are taught to unite their prayers and to pray in common, not only to testify the unity of faith, but that God may listen to the agreement of them all. So then, as God frequently promises in other passages that he will graciously listen to the private requests of each individual, so here Christ makes a remarkable promise to public prayers, in order to invite us more earnestly to the practice of them.

Vs 20. For where two or three are assembled in my name.

This promise is more extensive than the former; for the Lord declares that he will be present, wherever two or three are met together in his name, to guide them by his counsel, (Psalm 73:24,) and to conduct to a prosperous result whatever they shall undertake. There is therefore no reason to doubt that those who give themselves up to his direction will derive most desirable advantage from his presence. And since it is an invaluable blessing to have Christ for our director in all our affairs, to bless our deliberations and their results; and since, on the other hand, nothing can be more miserable than to be deprived of his grace, this promise ought to add no small excitement to us to unite with each other in piety and holiness. For whoever either disregards the holy assemblies, or separates himself from brethren, and takes little interest in the cultivation of unity, by this alone makes it evident that he sets no value on the presence of Christ.

But we must take care, first of all, that those who are desirous to have Christ present with them shall assemble in his name; and we must likewise understand what is the meaning of this expression; for we perceive how ungodly men falsely and impudently, as well as wickedly, cover their conspiracies with his sacred name. If therefore we do not wish to expose Christ to their ridicule, and at the same time to overturn what he has here promised, we must know first of all what is meant by this phrase. It means that those who are assembled together, laying aside everything that hinders them from approaching to Christ, shall sincerely raise their desires to him, shall yield obedience to his word, and allow themselves to be governed by the Spirit. Where this simplicity prevails, there is no reason to fear that Christ will not make it manifest that it was not in vain for the assembly to meet in his name