

“When Christ Is Among Us”

Matthew 18:15–20

Let us pray: Gracious Father, open our hearts to your Word. Drive out our fleshly thoughts and fill us with your powerful Word that cleanses and purifies our minds. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Today's passage is connected to the whole theme of Matthew 18. It is about what the body of Christ, the church, and ultimately the kingdom of heaven are like. The church is a temporary model of heaven that we get to taste while we live in this world before the kingdom is fully completed. It is the body of Christ that is still being formed. Christ is the head, and through the Spirit, he is present among us.

At the beginning of chapter 18, the disciples ask Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus says that only those who become like little children can enter the kingdom. A child is powerless and cannot live by their own ability. So the kingdom is something we can never enter by our own strength. A child is also in a low position, needing to listen to an adult. In the same way, we are in a position where we must listen to God's word. Since we are all like this, asking who is higher or lower becomes meaningless.

The disciples still did not understand what the kingdom was. The kingdom is ultimately the body of Christ. Jesus alone is the head, and the rest are the body. There cannot be higher or lower parts among the members. Each one is precious and contributes to the life of the body. The blood of Christ flows through the body, and through that blood we receive life. So we care for one another without feeling superior or inferior to others. Of course, there are different roles, but before God we care for one another as one body.

Right before today's passage, we find the parable of the lost sheep. Jesus tells the story of a shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to look for the one that went astray, and he says that it is not the will of your Father in heaven that even one of these little ones should perish. The “little ones” are those who are like children, people who know they cannot enter the kingdom by their own strength. If we acknowledge that, then we are all here as little ones. When we look at one another, we should see each other as little ones. That means we are called to show compassion. So the church, as little ones who have been found, carries the mission of seeking the little ones who are lost, because our Lord, the good shepherd and our head, always has that on his heart.

But the challenge is that Christ is not visible to our eyes, so we often stumble, and all kinds of sin issues can appear even within the church. Even in the Corinthian church, where the work of the Spirit was strong, there were sins like sexual immorality and theft. This is why what we must hold onto through today's passage is the forgiveness and love of Christ.

In verse 15, Jesus begins by saying, “If your brother sins against you.” A brother refers to a fellow believer. And Jesus acknowledges that such a brother can indeed sin. Here, “sin” does not refer

to every sin committed against God but rather to moral offenses between people. It could be something like borrowing money and refusing to pay it back, or committing fraud. When such wrongdoing happens, the first step is to go to that person and speak to them. The purpose of this conversation is not to accuse or condemn but to speak with a loving heart so that the person can recognize their wrongdoing and come to repentance. The goal is reconciliation. You go already having forgiven them in your heart.

If the issue is a boundary violation such as sexual harassment, then meeting one-on-one again would be unsafe, and in that case you should move directly to the second step, involving a mediator. That becomes a matter that must be handled through the responsible leaders of the church.

If we fail to handle these kinds of issues well, the person who has been harmed can end up suffering even more. One of my relatives attended a large church in Korea. She was cheated by another church member and lost money. Since a one-on-one conversation did not work, she asked her district pastor for help. But instead of rebuking the offender and leading him to repentance, the pastor hesitated because that person was a major donor in the church. He did not deal with my relative's request properly. It sounds unbelievable, but things like this really do happen. My relative was so hurt that she had no choice but to leave that church and go elsewhere.

When the first step does not work, Jesus says the second step is to take one or two others along and speak to the person again. If that still does not work, the third step is to tell it to the church. And if the person still refuses to listen, Jesus says to treat him as a Gentile and a tax collector. In the common understanding of Jewish society at the time, Gentiles and tax collectors were people outside the synagogue. Jews did not associate with them. So does this mean we should shun such a person? Does it mean we should only love the people who are easy for us to love?

Would that fit with the will of the Father in heaven, who does not want even one of the little ones to be lost? No. We must understand this teaching within that very will. Jesus himself showed compassion to those who were treated like Gentiles and tax collectors. Matthew, who wrote this Gospel, was one of them, a tax collector. So this teaching means that seeking and restoring someone who has gone astray, a lost sheep, sometimes requires discipline. In the process of awakening someone to their sin, correction is necessary.

In the life of the church, discipline may sometimes include limiting a person's participation in certain aspects of the community for a time. But the purpose is never punishment for its own sake. The goal is repentance and restoration.

Paul also teaches that when serious sin is found in the church, it must not be ignored. In 1 Corinthians 5:5, he says to "deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his

spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." Even here, Paul's ultimate hope is that the person will turn back and be restored.

We must have compassion toward a brother who does not repent, just as Jesus did. We should not give up on him but hold him in prayer so that he may turn back. We will look at this next week, but Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus answers that it should be seventy times seven. That means forgiveness without limit. In other words, it is impossible for us. We struggle even to forgive once. And when we do forgive by our own strength, it often becomes a forgiveness that still keeps score.

But Jesus, hanging on the cross, prayed for those who were crucifying him, asking the Father to forgive them because they did not know what they were doing. For us to forgive someone, we must be on the cross in Christ, meaning our old self must die. We can forgive only from the place where we ourselves have received Jesus' unconditional love and forgiveness. Even if that brother refuses to turn back and walks away, loving him all the way to the cross is what the church and the kingdom of heaven look like.

Verse 18 is the same teaching we saw in 16:19: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." The ideas of binding and loosing can be understood from several angles. The origin of this expression comes from the communal regulations of the rabbis. Binding meant placing someone under discipline, and loosing meant releasing them from it. If binding is discipline, then loosing is bringing the person back into the fellowship of the church.

Another way to understand this is that when a sinning brother listens to correction and returns, the fellowship between him and the community is restored. But if he refuses to listen, that fellowship remains broken. Either way, the point is that the church, as the body of Christ, has authority to train disciples and guide them in the life of the kingdom.

Verse 19 is a well-known passage often quoted about answered prayer. It says, "if two of you agree together." The Greek word for "agree" is *symphoneo*, and our English word "symphony" comes from it. It means a harmony of hearts. Why does this teaching suddenly appear in this context? What kind of agreement is Jesus talking about? If we take it out of context, we might think it means we can ask for anything at all. But within the theme of Matthew 18, the two people represent a relationship where full reconciliation has taken place. As "little ones," they have forgiven each other and received forgiveness, and they now stand in a relationship of love. Because they have become one in Christ, they will ask according to his will, and his will is carried out through their prayers. The fruit of Christlike love appears in the world through his disciples.

Who are the closest brothers and sisters to you within the church? For those who are married, it is your husband or wife. In 1 Peter 3:7, we see that when husbands fight with wives, their prayers are hindered. If hearts are not in harmony and there is conflict, what good is passionate prayer?

When conflict remains unresolved, it does not affect only the two people involved. It can wound the whole family, including the children. That is why reconciliation and forgiveness matter so deeply.

When reconciliation and forgiveness take place, hearts come into harmony, and that harmony aligns with the heart of Christ. When that happens, the family begins to experience something of the kingdom of heaven. Heaven is loosed in that place. And the same is true for the family of the church.

In verse 20, the Lord says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." The Lord is present everywhere, yet why does he say that at least two people must gather? It is so that we may learn the mystery of the body of Christ. It is the mystery of dying to ourselves and living in Christ. True discipleship always happens through the church. Biblical discipleship is not a solitary spiritual practice. If we remain as a single grain, we bear no fruit. We must come together, be ground, and become bread, and in that way we become the body of Christ.

How can we become a church that fulfills God's will through forgiveness, love, and harmony of heart? We are little ones who cannot forgive or love by our own strength. When two people gather, there are at least two opinions. How can two different people ever find unity of heart? It is possible only when Christ is in their midst, when each person looks to Christ, humbles themselves, listens to his voice, and receives his heart. That is what it means for the church to gather in the name of Jesus Christ. And when Christ is truly in our midst, he is not simply present; he is at work among us.

Hebrews 1:3 says that Jesus is "the radiance of the glory of God... and he upholds the universe by the word of his power" and that he "made purification for sins." When Jesus is among us, his glory comes. What does he do? He upholds all things, including us, by the word of his power. And by purifying sins, he frees us from every sin we cannot forgive, allowing us to experience the kingdom of heaven.

There can be many different opinions and disagreements about nonessential matters. But regarding what is essential, the word of God, may we hold a united heart, devote ourselves to learning together, forgive and love one another in the Christ of the cross, and enjoy the blessings of the kingdom of heaven. Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious God, thank you for your love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Help us to forgive one another, seek reconciliation, and live together as the body of Christ. May your kingdom be made known among us and through us as we walk in love and unity. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.