

The Real Meaning of Matthew 18:20

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July 11, 2017



When two or three are gathered in My name, there I am in their midst.

To be sure, these are words of reassurance. But don't misapply Matthew 18:20. It isn't a therapeutic passage for Christians who are depressed over a shrinking membership roster. Jesus isn't talking about low attendance numbers or being forced to worship in a hotel room with your family when there isn't a local church with which to worship.

In fact, these two or three were **not gathered to worship**. They were gathered to verify the repentance or impenitence of a Christian guilty of sin.

The context of Matthew 18:15-20 is church discipline. Jesus says, "If you choose to preserve the holiness of My church, I will be with you the whole time - no matter the pushback you receive."

The real meaning is this: During the incredibly difficult time when Christians must deliver an impenitent member of the church to Satan, the church needs to find great comfort

knowing that Jesus is there with them.

Look at what is going on in Matthew 18. A sin has been committed in the church (verse 15). The Christian who is guilty of that sin refuses to repent (verse 16). The whole church knows about this sin (verse 17). When the church agrees to sever its social relationship with the erring Christian, it does so with the authority of heaven (verse 18).

Then Jesus puts His own authority behind this decision in two (2) ways:

1. **Jesus invokes a Jewish courtroom principle from Deuteronomy 19:15-19 that says “two or three witnesses” must agree in order to bring a legally binding charge against someone.** Jesus is putting this part of the Old Law back to work under the New Law. These “two or three” (probably the leaders – usually the elders – who actually make the decision for the whole church to remove someone from their fellowship) are now legally bound – or covenanted – to one another in the law of the Kingdom. Jesus is binding His church together with glue.
2. **Jesus guarantees that agreement with His own presence.** “When you do this for My church, I’m there. You have My seal of approval. You represent Me, just as the temple once represented God’s authority and blessing.”

Make no mistake; it’s nice to know that when even just a handful of two or three Christians gather together to worship, Jesus is with them. **Yet bear in mind, however, that Jesus is with two or three Christians in that sense *just as much as He is with one Christian who may be forced to worship alone.***

In Matthew 18:20, Jesus is giving courage to Christians who are terrified about formally recognizing the lost condition of a Christian who has chosen sin over Jesus. **He is with you when you choose to protect the purity of the church.** He is validating the leaders of the church as they protect the flock in much the same way that Paul said he would be with the Corinthians “in spirit” as they disciplined the man who was sleeping with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5:3-5).

By implication, when we refuse to protect the purity of the Lord’s bride, we are refusing the very presence of Jesus in our midst.