

# Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

## 18:15-20

by J.C. Ryle

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### Transcript

These words of the Lord Jesus contain an expression which has often been misapplied. The command to "hear the church" has been so interpreted as to contradict other passages of God's Word. It has been falsely applied to the authority of the whole visible church in matters of doctrine, and so been made an excuse for the exercise of much ecclesiastical tyranny. But the abuse of Scripture truths must not tempt us to neglect the use of them. We must not turn away altogether from any text, because some have perverted it and made it poison. Let us notice in the first place how admirable are the rules laid down by our Lord for the healing of differences among brethren. If we have unhappily received any injury from a fellow-member of Christ's church, the first step to be taken is to "visit him alone and tell him his fault." He may have injured us unintentionally, as Abimelech did Abraham (Genesis 21:26); his conduct may admit of explanation, like that of the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh, when they built an altar as they returned to their own land (Joshua 22:24). At any rate, this friendly, faithful, straightforward way of dealing is the most likely course to win a brother, if he is to be won. "A soft tongue breaketh the bone" (Proverbs 25:15). Who can tell but he may say at once, "I was wrong," and make ample reparation? If, however, this course of proceeding fails to produce any good effect, a second step is to be taken. We are to "take with us one or two companions" and tell our brother of his fault in their presence and hearing. Who can tell but his conscience may be stricken when he finds his misconduct made known, and he may be ashamed and repent? If not, we shall at all events have the testimony of witnesses that we did it all we could to bring our brother to a right mind, and that he deliberately refused, when appealed to, to make amends. Finally, if this second course of proceeding proves useless, we are to refer the whole matter to the Christian congregation of which we are members: we are to "tell it to the church." Who can tell but the heart which has been unmoved by private remonstrances may be moved by the fear of public exposure? If not, there remains but one view to take of our brother's case: we must sorrowfully regard him as one who has shaken off all Christian principles, and will be guided by no higher motives than "a heathen man and a publican." The passage is a beautiful instance of the mingled wisdom and tender consideration of our Lord's teaching. What a knowledge it shows of human nature! Nothing does so much harm to the cause of religion as the quarrels of Christians: no stone should be left unturned, no trouble spared, in order to prevent their being dragged before the public. What a delicate thoughtfulness it shows for the sensitivity of poor human nature! Many a scandalous breach would be prevented if we were more ready to practice the rule of "between thee and him alone." Happy would it be for the church and the world if this portion of our Lord's teaching was more carefully studied and obeyed! Differences and divisions there will be, so long as the world stands; but many of them

would be extinguished at once, if the course recommended in these verses was tried. In the second place let us observe what a clear argument we have in these verses for the exercise of discipline in a Christian congregation. Our Lord commands disagreements between Christians, which cannot be otherwise settled, to be referred to the decision of the church or Christian assembly to which they belong. "Tell it," he says, "to the church." It is evident from this that he intends every congregation of professing Christians to take cognizance of the moral conduct of its members, either by the action of the whole body collectively, or of heads and elders to whom its authority may be delegated. It is evident also that he intends every congregation to have the power of excluding disobedient and refractory members from participation in its ordinances. "If he refuse," he says, "to hear the church," let him be to thee as a heathen man and a publican. He says not a word about temporal punishment and civil disabilities. Spiritual penalties are the only penalty he permits the church to inflict; and when rightly inflicted, they are not to be lightly regarded. "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven." Such appears to be the substance of our Lord's teaching about ecclesiastical discipline. It is vain to deny that the whole subject is surrounded with difficulties. On no point has the influence of the world weighed so heavily on the action of churches: on no point have churches made so many mistakes. Sometimes on the side of sleepy remissness, sometimes on the side of blind severity. No doubt the power of excommunication has been fearfully abused and perverted, and, as Quesnel says, "we ought to be more afraid of our sins than of all the excommunications in the world." Still it is impossible to deny, with such a passage of this before us, that church discipline is according to the mind of Christ, and, when wisely exercised, is calculated to promote a church's health and well-being. It can never be right that all sorts of people, however wicked and ungodly, should be allowed to come to the Table of the Lord. No man letting or forbidding: It is the bounden duty of every Christian to use his influence to prevent such a state of things. A perfect communion can never be attained in this world, but purity should be the mark at which we aim. An increasingly high standard of qualification for full church membership will always be found one of the best evidences of a prosperous church. Let us observe in the last place, what gracious encouragement Christ holds out to those who meet together in his name. He says, "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." That saying is a striking proof of our Lord's divinity. God alone can be in more places than one at the same time. There is comfort in these words for all who love to meet together for religious purposes. At every assembly for public worship, at every gathering for prayer and praise, at every missionary meeting, at every Bible reading, the King of kings is present, Christ himself attends. We may be often disheartened by the small number who are present on such occasions, compared with the number of those who meet for worldly ends; we may sometimes find it hard to bear the taunts and ridicule of an ill-natured world, which cries like the enemy of old, "What do these feeble people?" (Nehemiah 4:2). But we have no reason for despondency: we may boldly fall back on these words of Jesus. At all such meetings we have the company of Christ himself. There is solemn rebuke in these words for all who neglect the public worship of God and never attend meetings for any religious purpose. They turn their backs on the society of the Lord of lords; they miss the opportunity of meeting Christ himself. It avails nothing to say that the proceedings of religious meetings are marked by weakness and infirmity, or that as much good is got by staying at home as going to church: the words of our Lord should silence such arguments at once. Surely men are not wise when they speak contemptuously of any gathering where Christ is present. May we all ponder these things! If we have met together with God's people for spiritual purposes in times past, let us persevere, and not be ashamed. If we have hitherto despised such meetings, let us consider our ways, and learn wisdom.

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