

Caring for Brothers and Sisters: Matthew 18:15–20

By Ekkehardt Mueller

If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen *to you*, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. 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. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst. (Matt 18:15–20, NASB)

In this famous passage from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus addresses the issue of church discipline in a way not reported in the other Gospels. This article is not so much interested in the precise procedure of how to progress when a church member sins. Instead, it only focuses on the first part of verse 15. However, here we encounter a problem that influences all further discussions on the passage.

The New American Standard Bible (NASB) reads, “If your brother sins, go . . .” and its translation is buttressed by the New International Version and the New English Translation. However, the English Standard Version (ESV) says, “If your brother sins *against you* [singular],¹ go . . .” and is supported by the King James Version, the New King James Version, the New Living Translation, and the New Revised Standard Version.

Three questions must be raised: (1) What is the real difference between “if your brother sins” and “if your brother sins against you?” (2) Why does such a difference exist? (3) Which reading is better aligned with Jesus’ thoughts and intention?

What is the Difference?

In Matthew 18 Jesus addresses His disciples. When He talks to the Twelve, all His followers are included in what He instructs them to do and to avoid. Whether “against you” is included in the text or not, it is generally acknowledged that these instructions have a wider application to the church.

The issue is whether a believer should confront a fellow believer involved in some kind of sin.² The reading “if he sins *against you*” could be understood in the sense that believers should talk to fellow believers, attempting to bring about a change of mind and possibly repentance, only if they are personally affected by the wrongdoing of the other—more precisely, if one believer is directly sinned against by the words and/or actions of another believer. In other words, if he or she is not personally hurt in one way or the other, he or she has no business meddling in the affairs of another believer, even if a third party has been seriously offended or wounded.

The shorter reading, “if your brother sins,” charges believers to get involved if they observe wrongdoing of fellow Christians, no matter against whom it is directed. They cannot just stand, watch, listen, and then look away when things go terribly wrong. It is the task and responsibility of each and every Christian to step in and try to resolve a bad situation, bringing about reconciliation, repentance, and restitution, where necessary, saving the offended and the offender.³

From this perspective the short reading is much more radical and much more demanding. It goes against the grain of individualistic Western societies, telling believers that they carry responsibility for each other and cannot just look away and be indifferent when life goes wrong. The church is indeed a family of brothers and sisters in the Lord, in which it becomes impossible for the individual member to respond as Cain, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9).

Why do Translations Widely Differ?

There is quite a difference in meaning between the two interpretations. This difference needs to be explained. At first glance, we may attribute the difference in wording to the different choices translators have made in rendering a biblical text. However, the matter is not a problem of translation. In this case, one cannot accuse translators of having words added to or omitted from the biblical text. The shorter reading (without the phrase “against you”) and the longer reading (including the phrase “against you”) are both found in biblical manuscripts, which complicates the matter.

The majority of manuscripts have the longer reading, but the shorter version has good early manuscript support. To use the majority of manuscripts as the only criterion to determine the better reading may not be useful. The majority can be right or wrong—even the majority of manuscripts. The majority of manuscripts are late manuscripts that were copied from each other. If copyists made mistakes, these mistakes were copied again and again. So the majority group may not necessarily have a more reliable Greek text than that found in other manuscripts. On the other hand, it cannot be assumed that the most common text is automatically wrong. Therefore, scholars look for not one but a number of criteria to determine which reading is most likely the better one.

But this case is especially tough. A member of the editorial committee of the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament project writes:

It is possible that the words εἰς σέ [“against you”] are an early interpolation into the original text, perhaps derived by copyists from the use of εἰς ἐμὲ [“against me”] in ver. 21. On the other hand, it is also possible to regard their omission as either deliberate (in order to render the passage applicable to sin in general) or accidental.⁴

Another scholar suggests that a mishearing led to the difference in manuscripts.⁵ In any case, the committee of the United Bible Societies decided to leave “against him” (εἰς σέ) in square brackets in the text, indicating that it may or may not belong to the original text. So what is to be done? How do we determine the better option?

Which Reading is the Better Option?

This question is not easy to answer. The editors of the Greek Text of the New Testament have left the decision to individual scholars. So there are those who advocate the longer reading,⁶ those who favor the shorter version,⁷ and those who remain neutral or ambiguous.⁸ Because studying Greek manuscripts does not help much in this case, other venues must be explored. These are related to an in-depth study of Matthew 18:15 in its context. We may gain insights from the Old Testament background of the text, the context, the verse itself, and the New Testament as its writers understood the text.

Insight from the Old Testament Background

Jesus’ saying is quite likely based on Leviticus 19:17: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall reason frankly with your neighbor” (ESV). NASB translates, “you may surely reprove your neighbor.” The term *elechnō*, “to bring to light, to reprove, to convict,” of Matthew 18:15 also appears in Leviticus 19:17, in addition to the noun *elegnos*, “rebuke”. So there is a connection between the two texts. However, the Leviticus text does not indicate that a brother sins against a brother. It is general in nature, as seems to be the case with Matthew 18:15.

Insights from the Larger Context

The longer reading suggests a passive attitude. A person only gets involved with a Christian brother if personally offended. The shorter reading, however, expects an active attitude, intervening if one perceives that the spiritual life and eternal life of fellow believers are jeopardized. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus typically stresses an active role for His followers. His disciples are not just peaceful citizens but peacemakers (Matt 5:9). They let their light shine before humans (Matt 5:16). They pray for their persecutors (Matt 5:44). They “seek His kingdom and His righteousness”

(Matt 6:33), and they treat people the same way they would like to be treated (Matt 7:12)—which is more than not treating another as one would not want to be treated. The Golden Rule is about being proactive, not reactive. The Twelve are to go “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:7). They are sent out as sheep among the wolves (Matt 10:16), confessing Jesus (Matt 10:32). Jesus’ stress on active behavior supports the shorter reading. Yes, Christians also do something if they are personally affected. They seek reconciliation as soon as they are aware “that your brother has something against you” (Matt 5:23–24). But, as Jesus’ many other sayings indicate, they do not limit themselves only to personal issues.

Insights from the Immediate Context

A look at the context reveals that in the beginning of chapter 18 the disciples ask the question, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matt 18:1). Jesus’ answer deals with a child as an example for the disciples (Matt 18:2–5); the little ones that may be despised, scandalized, and lost (Matt 18:6–7, 10, 14); the “fight” against sin (Matt 18:8–9);⁹ the joy of finding a lost sheep (Matt 18:12–14); and the sin of a brother (Matt 18:15–20). After His response Peter talks about a person who sins against him and asks Jesus how often he is supposed to forgive that person (Matt 18:21). Jesus replies with a short statement and the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:22–35), making it clear that forgiving is a Christian duty and attitude.

For the longer reading it could be argued that because Jesus talks about the little ones who possibly are offended by believers and because Peter considers it possible to be offended by believers, Matthew 18:15 should also deal with believers offending believers and what to do in such a case.

For the shorter reading it could be argued that Jesus begins with the offense against the little ones, proceeds to the problem of sin in one’s own life, and then reaches a certain climax with the parable of the sheep that went astray and the mission of the shepherd to rescue that sheep.¹⁰ The danger of church members being lost like sheep requires shepherds who save these people. As Jesus seeks the sheep that have been lost, so believers should care about the problem of sin in the life of others, even if wrongdoing does not directly affect them.¹¹ In this case Matthew 18:15–20 is a direct continuation of Matthew 18:12–14, and both passages deal with the general mission of believers to care for and be instrumental in the salvation of fellow believers who have sinned.¹²

So Jesus would then have set up a general and wider principle of care for each other, while Peter would later narrow it down again to believers being offended by believers. One scholar suggests that Matthew 18 has an ABB’A’ structure. “Sections A (18:5–9) and A’ (18:21–35) deal respectively with the issues of not causing another disciple to sin (A) and with forgiving a fellow disciple who sins against you (A’). Sections B (18:10–14) and B’ (18:15–20) treat the matter of the reclamation of straying believers.”¹³ If Matthew 18:15–20 is seen as a direct follow-up to the preceding passage on the lost sheep—and it should—then the longer reading does not make much sense.

Another author gets to the point by stating:

The addition of εἰς σέ, “against you,” at this point . . . changes an altruistic concern about a brother’s spiritual danger into a personal grievance. That personal concern will be appropriate, and is made explicit, in Peter’s question in v. 21 (εἰς ἐμέ), which leads into the discussion of forgiveness for personal wrongs, but to introduce it here, where it is the brother’s welfare, not ‘your’ interest, which is in focus, is premature.¹⁴

Understanding verse 15 as referring “to sin in general” he states, “To speak of ‘grievance’ or of ‘conflict resolution’ here is inappropriate.”¹⁵ Peter’s question addressed to Jesus would then avoid the radicalness of Jesus and revert to the personal level. Instead of taking on the responsibility for church members, Peter is only concerned with people who hurt him personally. This would not be the first or the last time Peter would speak and/or behave counterproductively.¹⁶

Insight from Analysis of the Passage

Although Matthew 18:15 contains various vocabulary, one term may be especially significant for our discussion. The entirety of verse 15 reflects the pastoral concern and tact with which a person must take on the delicate task of addressing sin in a fellow believer’s life. The first, and hopefully last, step in the threefold process of dealing with open sin of believers attempts to keep the problem private and prevent publicity.

The goal is to “win” the brother. The verb *kerdainō*, “to win,” occurs only seventeen times in the New Testament, and only seven times it relates to persons: once to Christ—Paul wants to win Christ (Phil 3:8)—and six times to humans who need to be won. In 1 Corinthians 9:19–22 Paul talks about winning people (five times)—that is, Jews, those under the law, those without law, and the weak. These four groups probably represent Jews and Jewish Christians as well as Gentiles and Gentile Christians. And he concludes, “So that I may by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22). For Paul, winning people has to do with mission and salvation. The only other text apart from Matthew 18:15 that refers to winning humans is 1 Peter 3:1. Peter hopes that through their lifestyle women may win their husbands for Christ. In other words, the word “winning” has to do with salvation of people, whether believers or unbelievers. In Matthew 18:15 believers are in the danger of going astray. “‘Win’ suggests that the person was in danger of being lost, and has now been regained; it reflects the preceding image of the shepherd’s delight in getting his sheep back.”¹⁷

So text and context seem to support the shorter reading.

Insights from Similar Passages in the New Testament

But there is an additional step to take. The question is how the community of believers received and understood Jesus’ statement in Matthew 18:15. Did they understand it as a broad statement that made it necessary for them to get interested and involved in the life of fellow believers, or was it only dealing with grievances among believers?

Although Jesus’ saying in Matthew 18:15–20 and His dialogue with Peter—including His parable (Matt 18:21–35)—are unique, there is a similar saying in Luke 17:3–4: “Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” The two Lukan verses include the concept of the two Matthean passages previously mentioned.¹⁸ Luke 17:3 does not contain the phrase “against you” but verse 4, which reflects Peter’s proposal in Matthew 18:21, does. This echoes well what may be the case in Matthew 18. The care for the sinning brother or sister (Matt 18:15–20) is not limited to the offended church member approaching the offender but deals with brotherly sin in general.

Care for the sinning brother (general)	Forgiving the offender of the brother
Luke 17:3	Luke 17:4
Matthew 18:15–20	Matthew 18:21–35

Jesus’ saying about “church discipline” obviously also influenced Paul. Paul would not tolerate the immoral behavior of a believer in Corinth who had intimate relations with his father’s wife. Paul admonished the Christians in Corinth to do something about sin and the sinner (1 Cor 5:1–5). The issue was not that the man sinned against Paul, but that it was an open and tolerated sin in the Corinthian church.

In Galatians 6:1 Paul wrote, “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” In 1 Thessalonians 5:14–15 he maintained, “We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.” Hebrews 10:24–25 urges, “And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

James, who loved to dwell on Jesus’ sayings, remarked in James 5:19–20: “My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

And John wrote, “If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not *leading* to death, he shall ask and *God* will for him give life to those who commit sin not *leading* to death” (1 John 5:16).¹⁹

These are some samples of New Testament texts about caring for each other. Interestingly, none of them limit approaching brothers and sisters to personal grievances, misunderstandings, or offenses. Obviously, Jesus’ disciples

did not understand Him to mean that approaching fellow believers is to be limited only to cases where one brother or sister sinned against another, or that the believer is to take the initiative to restore a relationship only when he or she is personally offended, grieved, or injured. While this is good and should be done, the New Testament teaches that Christian responsibility for each other is much broader than this singular case.

Conclusion

This article dealt with the difficult question of whether Matthew 18:15 should include the phrase “against you.” While the manuscript evidence is mixed, the Old Testament background, the larger context, the immediate context and structure of Matthew 18 and verse 15 itself, the Lukan parallel, and the reception of Jesus’ sayings in the New Testament seem to indicate that Matthew 18:15 should not be understood primarily as a grievance of one church member by another church member, but rather as a general statement indicating that church members carry responsibility for each other because they are members of the family of God. While personal grievance is also included in the shorter reading, the text goes far beyond personal offenses and assaults.

Whether—against the suggested evidence—one would like to retain the reading “if your brother sins *against you*,” or prefers the shorter version “if your brother sins”—as proposed—the text cannot be used to circumvent personal care for erring brothers and sisters in Christ. If the sinner’s salvation is at stake, action on the part of those who observe the problem is required.

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¹ The English pronoun “you” is ambiguous. It can refer to one person (singular) or to more than one person or a group of persons. In Greek the text is not ambiguous, and the “you” in verse 15 is singular. Therefore, “you” must be understood by an English speaking audience as a singular pronoun.

² Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary 33B (Dallas, TX: Word, 1995), 531, notes: “Presumably . . . given the procedure that follows, the type of sin being considered is of a substantial rather than trivial or merely personal nature . . .” While all sin is unrighteousness, cf. 1 John 5:16–17 where sin (*hamartia*) can either be sin that does not lead to death or sin that leads to death.

³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 690, notes that “it is the concerned individual, not an appointed leader or group, who is expected to act in the first instance; the wider community is involved only when that individual initiative proves inadequate, and then only to back up the individual’s concern.”

⁴ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 36.

⁵ France, 689.

⁶ E.g., David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 444; possibly Hagner, 531. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 451, speaks about church members offended by church members but adds, “Yet the ‘sin’ that one member of the church has committed against another is not a private matter about which the church is not concerned. It is a biblical, Jewish, and early Christian conviction that every sin affects the entire church.”

⁷ E.g., France, 689–693; David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 275; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 745–746; Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew*, Paideia Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 219–221.

⁸ E.g., Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 466–467; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010),

⁹ In Matthew 18:8–9 Jesus talks about symbolic self-mutilation. Cutting of a hand and plucking out an eye in order to prevent being led astray is found almost identically in Matthew 5:29–30 with only the cutting off of a foot being added. Since these verses in Matthew 5 are found in the context of adultery and fornication, the respective parallel verses in Matthew 18 may also include sexual sins.

¹⁰ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Vol. 2, VIII–XVIII*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 777, speak about “refraining from offending others,” “serious self-control,” and “loving concern for all fellow believers.”

¹¹ Cf. Walter Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament 1 (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1975), 418; Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006), 163.

¹² Cf. France, 690.

¹³ Talbert, 219.

¹⁴ France, 689.

¹⁵ Ibid, 692.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Matt 16:22–23; 17:24; 26:40, 73–74.

¹⁷ France, 693.

¹⁸ See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 1382.

¹⁹ See Talbert, 220–221.

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