

Intro:

Today we are going to resume our series on prayer. We have been working through the incidents in Jesus' ministry where he is either seen praying or where he teaches us something about prayer.

Our passage today is very interesting. It refers to a specialized prayer, not something we would expect in a series like this.

Read Mt 18.19-20

You are no doubt very familiar with these words. You probably have a hazy idea in your mind what they mean. Shall we test that understanding?

- Does this passage mean that there is a special presence of Christ in any gathering of two or more Christians? (Is the Lord any less present when you are off by yourself? ... see Heb 13.5)
- Does this passage mean that if two Christians want a prayer definitely answered, all they need to do is agree together on the request, pray in Christ's name, and SHAZAM, you get what you ask for?

Well, you probably don't think that last one ... at least not without a lot of qualifiers about what it means to pray in the Lord's name and so on.

I want you to understand, however, that our general hazy understanding of this passage is generally wrong. It's wrong because we habitually hear it out of context. So let's read the context:

Read Mt 18.15.22

The context is *offenses* against you, and what to do about it. So I have entitled this message:

Prayers of Discipline

Prayers of discipline? Whatever are they?

Proposition: The prayers of deliberate judgement against unrepentant sin in the church are authorized by heaven's decree.

I. A more full understanding of the context

A. The object of disciplinary action

1. Disciplinary action is taken over matters of serious sin

- a. There is some question whether the words 'against thee' are original – not in all manuscripts [possibly attracted by v. 21] – so may be just sin in general, not a sin against me personally

- b. In any case, the sin is a failure to achieve God's standard – the mark has been missed, the bar has not been reached, the brother has sinned
 - c. Paul speaks of some disputes between brethren in 1 Co 6 where the Corinthians were taking brethren to secular court
 - 1) He counsels them to settle it in the church
 - 2) He offers an option, 'why do you not rather suffer the wrong' – *i.e.*, some sins are not *necessarily* worth pursuing to the fullest extent of the law
2. Disciplinary action is taken over unrepentant sin
- a. There is an existing breach between the brethren
 - b. Verses 21-22 teach us that forgiveness should be given whenever repentance is made (healing the breach)
 - c. The parable of the unjust steward following underscores the importance of forgiveness
 - d. The object of personal private confrontation is restoration 'thou hast gained thy brother'

At every stage of the way, the goal of spiritual discipline is restoration.

B. The process of disciplinary action

- 1. A three stage process
 - a. Private confrontation (15)
 - b. Witnessed confrontation (16)
 - c. Public confrontation (17)
- 2. A principle of due process
 - a. 'Due process' is a legal term
 - b. The idea is that there should be no rush to judgement
 - c. Every opportunity for repentance must be sought
- 3. A guide not a law
 - a. The process isn't a 1-2-3 "You're Out" recipe
 - b. The process is more an outline of general principles rather than a strict guide

For example, there may be situations where sin is egregious, public, and where the offense is not against any one person in the church. The passage isn't insisting that you must have one individual go first, then more than one. You may start with two or three *in some circumstances*.

- C. The authority of disciplinary action (18)
1. A very complicated passage; compare 16.17-19
 2. First: the matter seems to be related to regulating membership in the local church
 - a. The process can't happen in a wider context
 - b. Groups have tried to create denominational structures with denominational courts, but the results have been unsatisfactory
 3. Second: the matter is about the authority of the church (and possibly initially Peter in some way) to regulate membership [addition or subtraction]
 4. Key question: what does 'shall be bound in heaven' or 'shall be loosed in heaven' mean?
 - a. Lit. 'shall have been bound ... shall have been loosed'
 - b. Something has been settled in heaven ahead of time [future perfect, complicated idea, but essentially means God has ordered something in the past that continues into the future]
 - c. Basic Meaning: God has given the church *authority* to make these decisions

II. The council of two (19)

- A. The agreement about anything
1. In the context, this is in connection with disciplinary proceedings
 2. The agreement must relate to the disposition of the disciplinary matter
- B. The two must thus be leading the congregation in some way
1. In the synagogue, the 'rulers of the synagogue' had "charge of the conduct of public worship, as well as of the government and

discipline”¹

2. The rulers of any synagogue were considered a local ‘sanhedrin’
3. A local synagogue so small as to have only three members in its ruling council could refer them as ‘elohim’ (See Ps 82.6)

Note: in Mt 18, we are talking about the church, which, while modeled somewhat after the synagogue is not identical with the synagogue.

4. In the church, there are also to be designated leaders for the administration of affairs, including discipline – who share the authority granted
 - a. Granted to Peter in opening the church to Jews and Gentiles
 - b. Granted to churches in general (v. 18)
 - c. Granted here to the two leaders (“it shall be done for them by My Father”)

III. The prayer of discipline

- A. The decision of discipline is congregational: the whole body admonishes the sinner (17)
- B. The role of the leaders here is to “ask” – to make the matter a matter of solemn prayer (19)
 1. Prayer would be offered whichever way the decision is made
 2. Prayer would be offered whichever way the sinner responded

The church acting in its leaders are especially authorized in this prayer.

- C. The role of Christ in the whole proceeding: I am with you (20)
 1. Discipline a very solemn disturbing process
 2. The presence and interest of Christ gives assurance
 3. The prayer of discipline has singular authority

The passage doesn't preclude humans from making human mistakes.

¹ Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2003). 281.

- It authorizes disciplinary action.
- It grant's the church divine authority
- It promises divine interest and participation
- It calls for great care and sobriety in the process

Conclusion:

This is altogether an amazing process. We could deal with it in even more detail, but the important thing we are looking at in this particular passage is the teaching about prayer.

The Lord provides for his people even in the most difficult circumstances a local assembly can endure.

May God help us to be faithful in every aspect of our Christian lives, including administering discipline if needed.