

WHERE TWO AGREE (AN ANSWER FROM THE PREACHER)

YOUR QUESTION

Please explain the meaning of Matthew 18:19.

MY ANSWER

A good, expanded paraphrase of the Greek text of Matthew 18:18-20 (trying to do basically what the old *Amplified Bible* tried to do with the Word) would be, ¹⁸ “Here on earth, when you tell someone he has not been released from his guilt – that he is not forgiven – you may be sure that heaven has already made it so. And here on earth, when you tell someone he has been released from his guilt – that he is forgiven – you may be sure that heaven has already made it so. ¹⁹ “Let me tell you something else: here on earth, if two of you come to agreement about any matter they are pursuing, their decision will be made valid by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ “Because wherever ‘two or three’ have convened under My authority to decide on a matter, their decision carries as much weight as it would if I Myself were present to decide – because through My Spirit, I will be among them.”

MY REASONS

The passage in question reads, (NKJ) ¹⁸ “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. ²⁰ “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

Context

These three verses must be taken as a unit if they are to be understood at all. Beyond that, they must be understood in light of their larger context (Mat 18), which is about living out the ministry of reconciliation in our dealings with new Christians (vv 1-14) and sinning Christians (vv 15-35). If we're going to get the point of vv 18-20, we also need to take note of their immediate context (vv 15-20), which is about reconciliation through church discipline. With no further study at all, even a very basic understanding of the context of verse 19 will show that, when we try to use it as a promise that united group prayer will guarantee a “yes” answer from God, we misunderstand it rather badly. This verse is not even about petitionary prayer; it is about church discipline. What it says about church discipline we shall now consider.

Biblical writers didn't just string together little bits of unrelated thought; they arranged their thoughts in an understandable sequence in order to communicate life-changing truth. So the way this (or any) passage's ideas are structured is something to which we simply must pay attention, if we want to understand God's Word.

The passage breaks down like this:

I. The procedure for reconciliation through church discipline (vv 15-17)

¹⁵ “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ “But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ ¹⁷ “And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.”

II. The authority for reconciliation through church discipline (vv 18-20)

A. The promise of divine sanction upon the church's disciplinary decisions to declare the repentant forgiven and the unrepentant unforgiven

¹⁸ “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

B. The promise of divine sanction upon Christians' mutually-agreed-upon terms of reconciliation when there has been an offense

¹⁹ “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.”

C. The promise of divine sanction in discipline and reconciliation explained in terms of Christ's living presence in the church through His Spirit

²⁰ *"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."*

Broadly stated, vv 18-20 talk about the divine authority which backs up a church when it seeks to reconcile erring or warring members. Now that we understand the context, we need briefly to consider the meanings of the words. But first, a historical note.

Language

When James I of England gathered a group of Bible scholars in the opening years of the 17th century to produce an Anglican translation of the Bible, knowledge of the *Koine* Greek – in which the New Testament was written – was significant. So when the King James Version of the Bible was translated, it represented the best work that had yet been done in translating the ancient documents into a modern language. However, scholarly knowledge of the language was gotten almost exclusively from classical Greek poetry and drama, from the New Testament itself, and from the writings of the Greek Fathers of early eastern Christianity. Two kinds of ancient Greek literature which were virtually unknown in 1611 were business and legal documents. This was unfortunate, since the Greeks and Romans documented just about everything. From such literature, much could have been learned about how everyday language worked in the apostles' day. Yet very little was available, and what was available was mostly ignored. In the last century, however, countless inscriptions and papyri have been studied, opening a treasure chest of new knowledge about how some Greek words should be translated. Several such words are found in the passage before us. Additionally, there have been intensive studies of how Palestinian Jews were living and speaking when Jesus taught and His apostles wrote. From them we have learned much about how numerous passages should be understood. Those issues, too, figure largely in the proper interpretation of Mat 18:18-20. Let's look at those verses one by one.

Verse eighteen

"Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Many scholars in recent years have pointed out that some of the ancient rabbis used the word "bind" to mean "forbid" and the word "loose" to mean "allow." However, in this case the parallel passages in Mat 16:19 and Joh 20:23 leave us strong reason to believe that "bind" refers to binding the guilt of a person's sin to him, and "loose" refers to loosing the guilt of a particular sin from the one who committed it. Any good Catholic would say that Jesus is here giving to the apostles (and thus to the Roman Catholic Church) the power actually to grant or withhold the forgiveness of sin. But we're good Baptists, and hopefully we know better than that; for "who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mar 2:7) No, Jesus did not give us the power to forgive or retain sins. Rather, He gave us both the right and the responsibility to declare sins forgiven when a person repents, and to declare sins unforgiven when a person refuses to repent.

Another key issue in this verse is the tense of the verbs *εσται δεδεμενα* (*estai dedemena*) and *εσται λελυμενα* (*estai lelumena*). They are translated "will be bound" and "will be loosed," as though they were simply promises of what will happen in the future. However, the actual tense of both verbs is future perfect, which means they would be most accurately translated "will have been bound" and "will have been loosed." Since that's such klunky English, most versions stay away from it. Yet the distinction is important. These are not simply promises of what will happen in the future when we declare sins forgiven or retained; instead, they are promises of what will have already happened when we make that declaration in keeping with the guidelines laid down in God's Word. That's why I paraphrase v 18 as *"Here on earth, when you tell someone he has not been released from his guilt – that he is not forgiven – you may be sure that heaven has already made it so. And here on earth, when you tell someone he has been released from his guilt – that he is forgiven – you may be sure that heaven has already made it so."*

Verse nineteen

"Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven." "Again I say to you" is important here, because by using *παλιν* (*palin*, "again") Jesus is letting His hearers know one of two things: either (a) that He is about to say more or less the same thing in a slightly different way ("let me repeat myself"), or (b) that He is about to envision the exact opposite scenario ("on the other hand, consider the following"). That's crucial! It tells us that v 19 is either going to mean much the same thing as v 18, or else show the other side of the coin from v 18. I believe *palin* here has the latter meaning, but for the present that's not even the issue. The issue is, how can v 19 mean that two people who are "really on the same wavelength" in prayer are basically guaranteed a favorable reply from

God? The whole idea is completely foreign to the context of the verse! It's also completely foreign to the meanings of the words, as we are about to see.

For example, "agree" translates συμφωνεω (*symphōneō*), which means something like "come to agreement." It doesn't describe the kind of agreement you would find between two people who both think it would be great if Aunt Ruthie could be cured of her cancer; who would need to "come to agreement" about that? Rather, it describes the kind of agreement that people come to after they have thoroughly worked through a matter about which they may have initially disagreed. Take the following for example: "Now when he had agreed (*symphōneō*) with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard." (Mat 20:2). *Symphōneō* perfectly describes the kind of agreement to which two Christians need to come, when each person feels the other has sinned against him – especially if personal or financial reparations are called for.

"Anything they ask" requires notice, as well. Literally, it should be translated, "every matter whatever they are demanding." Of course, that makes next to no sense in English, so we have to work with it a bit in order to understand it. First of all, "anything" translates παντος πραγματος (*pantos pragmatos*). *Pragma* refers to something that has been, or is being, done or worked on or worked out. In particular, it was used as a legal term much as we use the words "case" or "issue" or "matter" in English. You find that meaning in 1Co 6:1, which is actually a parallel passage to the one before us: "Dare any of you, having a matter (*pragma*) against another, go to law (i.e., go to court, prosecute a lawsuit) before the unrighteous, and not before the saints?" So you see that "anything" is really an unfortunate translation of *pantos pragmatos*. "Anything" implies that any and every object or state of affairs imaginable is being considered. But that's just not what the word refers to. In this context, it refers to any matter of disagreement, of ill feeling, when someone has sinned against someone else. It is not necessarily a matter of official church judgment (as in 1Co 6), although it could be. The important thing is that two formerly antagonistic brethren have come to a mutually acceptable understanding on the issue.

Or think about "ask," (αιτεω, *aiteō*). The word can be used in regard to asking something in prayer, but it usually has a stronger meaning than just "request," especially in legal contexts. Consider the mob before Pilate's judgment seat: "But they were insistent, demanding (*aiteō*) with loud voices that He be crucified." (Luk 23:23). The word, in fact, is used in secular Greek to refer to "pursuing" a case before a civil magistrate. Of course, we talk the same way today: we "seek damages," we "petition the court," and so on. That we can hear some of this language in our own courts is not surprising, considering our judicial system is based on the Romans', and theirs in turn derived from earlier Greek, Hebrew, Hittite, and Mesopotamian practices. This use of "asking" language to refer to pursuing a matter for arbitration or adjudication is ancient indeed.

What about "it will be done for them by My Father in heaven"? What does that mean? The second half of the sentence we understand: that's God, our Heavenly Father. But what about the first half? "It will be done for them" translates γενησεται αυτοις (*genēsetai autois*). The *autois* is just the "for them," so we'll concentrate on *genēsetai*. It is a form of the word γινομαι (*ginomai*), which means "begin" or "become" or about a million other things. Nearly always its meaning must be determined from its context. We have already seen that here, the context is that of conflict resolution, and reconciliation through dealing with sin biblically. Jesus is talking about an accord reached by two Christians previously at odds, and He's saying that God will *genēsetai* that agreement. So what does the word mean here? One meaning it can have is to "make something so," in the sense of making something valid or effective. And that fits in perfectly with the context. When God *genēsetai*'s the agreement, He makes it so, He makes it effective, He ratifies it, He validates it.

"On earth" is also important. So often we hear this verse used to try to prove that we can have "anything on earth" if we can just "agree in prayer" about it. But look at the verse! It's not the "anything" that's on earth; it's the agreement. The contrast in v 19 is the same as it was in v 18: between what we do on earth and what God does in heaven. Having hashed it all through on earth, we decide. The Heavenly Father says, "Let it be so" to our decision, raising it from the level of a mere "gentlemen's agreement" to that of "God's resolution to our conflict."

From here on out, to renege on the agreement is to renege on God.

For all these reasons, I have to paraphrase v 19 as "*Let me tell you something else: here on earth, if two of you come to agreement about any matter they are pursuing, their decision will be made valid by My Father in heaven.*"

Verse twenty

"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." This verse is easier than the first two, but still far from obvious. There are a number of questions we must answer about it before we can interpret it rightly.

First, who are the “two or three”? In answer, they might be the two who came to agreement in v 19, or those two plus a third party who acted as an informal arbitrator, or “two or three” church-appointed arbitrators (as in 1Co 6), or “two or three” pastors and/or deacons leading the church to exclude a persistently unrepentant member (as in v 17), or the witnesses of v 16. Any group of church members doing Christ’s will in accordance with His Word could be the “two or three.” The phrase itself goes all the way back to the days of Moses and beyond. Jews had always believed that witnesses at a trial, or informal arbitrators, or official judges, should number at least “two or three” – never one alone. They still believed it when Jesus uttered these teachings, so the number would have made good sense to the apostles.

Then, why are they gathered? To pray? To worship? Why? It may help us to realize that the word used here is συνηγμενοι (*sunēgmenoi*), which is actually a good bit stronger than just “gathered.” It denotes a group of people who have been gathered for a definite purpose; a better translation than “gathered” would be “convened.” Now, there is no doubt that we convene for a definite and holy purpose when we gather to pray or worship. So of course this verse is properly applied to such gatherings. Yet primarily it is about a group convened to settle a dispute; the context leaves us no question about that.

Third, what does it mean to be convened “in Christ’s name”? Few misconceptions are as mischievous as the notion that the words “in Jesus’ name” constitute some kind of magic incantation, able to effect significant changes in things just by being spoken. If you doubt that people think that, just listen to Christian television for an afternoon. You’ll hear all sorts of “Christianized” magic spells being uttered. Think about it: when the movie cops holler, “Open in the name of the law!” they’re not expecting the magic words to blow the hinges off the door, are they? No, they’re expecting the person behind the door to be appropriately impressed by the authority of the law of the land, and therefore to open the door. In the same way, we gather in Jesus’ name when we assemble under His authority. It’s not whether we say the words “in Jesus’ name” enough times during the meeting that makes the difference. It’s whether we come together filled with a solemn, awe-stricken awareness that the Master we say we’re serving, the Lord Jesus Christ, spoke the worlds into existence, upholds all things by the word of His power, purchased us from the slave-blocks of sin at the price of His own blood, and is coming soon to judge the quick and the dead. That awareness would make galaxies of difference in our worship services, our prayer meetings, our gatherings to settle disputes, and our lives across the board!

Finally, what is the significance of “there I am in the midst of them”? Of course, we know what Jesus means: He is present in His church through His Holy Spirit. But what import does that have in the present context? Simply this: when the judge enters the courtroom, everybody stands; when he takes his seat, the court is in session. His presence is the court. That’s another holdover from the Greco-Roman justice system. You might take a look at 1Co 5:3 to see this “presence of the judge” idea in action in the early church; there, it is the apostle Paul who is the judge. So what is the point? Whether we have convened to disfellowship a member who has utterly refused reconciliation, or convened to take part in reconciling two believers to each other, either way, if we render our decisions according to the teachings of His Word and under the guidance of His Spirit and with a profoundly reverent awareness of His absolute authority, we may be sure that His presence is there among us. The Judge Himself is there, backing up our verdicts.

That’s why I paraphrase v 20 as *“Because wherever ‘two or three’ have convened under My authority to decide on a matter, their decision carries as much weight as it would if I Myself were present to decide – because through My Spirit, I will be among them.”*

Conclusion

Here again is my “amplified” paraphrase. I truly believe it faithfully captures the essence of what Matthew was trying to say to us as he recounted to us the teaching of the Lord.

¹⁸ *“Here on earth, when you tell someone he has not been released from his guilt – that he is not forgiven – you may be sure that heaven has already made it so. And here on earth, when you tell someone he has been released from his guilt – that he is forgiven – you may be sure that heaven has already made it so.*

¹⁹ *“Let me tell you something else: here on earth, if two of you come to agreement about any matter they are pursuing, their decision will be made valid by my Father in heaven.*

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