

## **What About Matthew 18? [1]** **The Use and Misuse of Jesus' Command**

Jesus, in Matthew 18:15–17, gives you instructions on how to handle serious conflict with a fellow believer. If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. The goal is to win your brother over. Should that fail, take two or three witnesses. If that fails, take it to the church. (In the Orthodox Presbyterian Church [OPC], in which I serve as a pastor, we have a formal judicial process outlined in the [Book of Discipline](#) to help carry that out properly.)

Not every perceived offense ought to trigger the process of Matthew 18. Many offenses can simply be forgiven and passed over in grace. Remember that Jesus did say something about removing the plank from your own eye before searching for the speck in someone else's. But something that is serious between brothers and sisters, something that interferes with fellowship, something that really needs correcting, can and should prompt us to go to the other party.

One of the crucial reasons for going to the other party is to preserve the unity and fellowship of believers with one another. It is difficult to over-emphasize how important that is. John Murray, deals with a similar instruction of Jesus in Matthew 5:23–24, where you are instructed that, even if you are in the act of bringing a gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, you are to go and be reconciled to your brother, *then* come and complete the interrupted worship of the Lord:

Discontinue your act of worship. Why? The reason is that a brother has something against the worshipper. It is the *relationship* to this other person that is weighted with relevance in this case.... This grievance on the part of the brother may be but the rudimentary movement of estrangement. Yet, if it is not remedied, it will fester and will develop into the antithesis of 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' [2]

Matthew 5 and Matthew 18 both promote the harmony that ought to exist in the body of Christ. The process outlined in Matthew 18 is not simply a suggestion for us to take or leave. It is a command of our Savior. We are to follow it. It is not optional. Thus the OPC's [Book of Discipline, Chapter 3](#), as it outlines the procedure for bringing a charge of sin, requires that if the alleged sin is known only to the person bringing the charge, he follow the process set out in Matthew 18.

At the same time, it is crucially important to understand properly what Jesus is commanding, lest we misuse Matthew 18. Jesus is talking about private sins against an individual. There is no indication that the Bible requires the process of Matthew 18 for a public sin. In Galatians 2:14ff., Paul recounts his public rebuke of Peter when the latter's actions harmed the church in Antioch. The text gives no indication that the public rebuke was preceded by a private meeting as indicated in Matthew 18.

D. A. Carson, in an editorial entitled "On Abusing Matthew 18," [3] argues convincingly that Matthew 18 is misused when an author or teacher objects to his view being criticized because the

critic supposedly did not follow Matthew 18. At the same time, both Carson and the OPC Book of Discipline make the point that it is not wrong to reach out to someone, even if Matthew 18 is not *required*. Our goal is not to win an argument, but to win the brother or sister who we believe is in error or has sinned.

The misuse of Matthew 18 is particularly egregious when it becomes a cover to evade responsibility for oppression, a thoroughly biblical term, or abuse (the point of the Facebook post from which the title of this article is taken). Note that Jesus speaks of one's *brother* having sinned against you. This places the Lord's instruction in the context of peers, resolving the sin of one against another. A sin that involves oppression or abuse by someone in a position of authority over the party sinned against is a different situation. To require that the person offended go, one-on-one, to someone in a position of superior authority before talking to anyone else misuses Jesus' instruction.

In Michael J. Kruger's excellent book, *Bully Pulpit*, he suggests that a pastor who is involved in spiritual abuse will often insist that proper process was not followed: "Of all the procedural objections, one is trumpeted louder than any other: *the victims didn't follow Matthew 18.*" [4]

He points out:

While Matthew 18 is an important passage for dealing with sins in a congregation, it isn't exhaustive; it is not meant to address or solve every possible scenario. Unfortunately, sometimes it is treated like a universal cure that can be applied to every situation. (p. 82)

He lists several qualifications: "Matthew 18 applies only *to individuals who have been sinned against*" (p. 82); "even if the accuser should have followed Matthew 18 but failed to do so, that does not mean that the elder board or other governing body should overlook the sins of the abusive pastor" (p. 83); "even if the accuser follows Matthew 18 and the abusive pastor admits some wrongdoing, that does not necessarily mean the behavior should not be reported to the church's leadership" (p. 83); and, "some abuse cases are so severe that making the victim confront the abuse pastor privately would be irresponsible" (p. 84). He summarizes, "If a pastor is accused of abusive behavior, be wary if procedural issues become the biggest concern of all those involved" (p. 84).

Alan D. Strange is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as professor of church history and theological librarian at Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana. He has written a commentary on the OPC's Book of Discipline (BD), published initially on the pages of one of the denomination's magazines, "Ordained Servant." He deals with the requirements of Matthew 18, including how it relates to alleged sin by a superior [5] against an inferior:

Matthew 18 clearly does not have in view a superior to an inferior, because an offended superior can ordinarily require that the inferior recognize the offense and offer amends accordingly. This is not to say that other Scriptures do not directly speak to

superior/inferior relations and how they are scripturally to be conducted, but Matthew 18 has in view, ordinarily, the behavior of equals.

On the other side of the equation, Matthew 18 does not have in view inferiors going to superiors with alleged offenses. Such can perhaps be done in cases in which the superior is truly humble and will give a fair hearing to the inferior and even repent. Often, however, the very behavior that an inferior would be offended by involves an alleged misuse of authority and power on the part of the superior. If a superior is alleged to be abusing his office as a superior, it is unreasonable and irrational to insist that the inferior must approach him under the rubric of Matthew 18, as if they were the equals implied in the text (“if your brother sins against you”). [6]

In the next issue of “Ordained Servant,” Strange argues that Matthew 18 does *not* require someone being abused to go to the abuser directly if that person is a superior, such as a parent or a church officer:

So to sum up all that has been established thus far in BD 3 about Matthew 18: Matthew 18:15–17 has in view, in the first and original instance, a situation in which someone alleges sin against them of another who is their equal; this sin is private, known to them alone, or only a few, and is also personal, both parties acting in their personal capacities as Christians. Matthew 18, to clear up pervasive misunderstandings of it, is not requiring a parishioner who alleges abuse to go alone to the pastor or the elder and “confront” him about it. Nor does Matthew 18 require “private confrontation” of a wife or a child to an allegedly abusive husband or parent. In such cases, a parishioner alleging abuse may come directly to the session and speak to it about the alleged abuse, as the session has direct oversight of all its members acting in their official capacities of pastor, elder, father, husband, and the like, even as a child may go to a receptive father in the case of the alleged abuse of his mother and is not required, under Matthew 18, to go to his mother privately. The idea here finds an analog in the military chain-of-command: a soldier alleging mistreatment by his sergeant does not go to the general but does go to the most immediate superior to the sergeant to report such. [7]

The opinions of Dr. Strange are, of course, his own, and are not definitive for the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He is, however, a respected member of the OPC’s Committee on Appeals and Complaints, and his commentary has been published in a denominational magazine. That ought to carry weight in the circles in which the Presbyterian Advocacy Coalition serves. Should a victim of abuse be asked, “But what about Matthew 18?” she or he has grounds for resisting the expectation of going one-on-one to confront an abuser who holds a position of authority. Use Matthew 18, but never abuse it by using it as an excuse to avoid confronting abuse.

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[1] The title is stolen, with permission, from a post by the Presbyterian Advocacy Coalition on Facebook called, "[Abuser Defender Bingo](#)."

[2] John Murray, *Principles of Conduce: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Willaim B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1957), 164–165.

[3] [Themelios 36.1 \(2011\): 1–3](#).

[4] Michael J. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Zondervan Reflective, Grand Rapids, 2022). 81. Kruger's focus is on abusive pastors. He points out that not everything that is called abuse is actually abuse. And certainly, pastors can be abused by ruling elders and even by a congregation; members of a church can be abused by one another as well as by their leaders. Do not let the qualifications blunt the force of this very helpful book. See this [review](#) of the book by OPC pastor, Shane Lems.

[5] For a discussion of the language of *superior* and *inferior* see my "[The Use and Abuse of 'Superiors, Inferiors, or Equals'](#)"

[6] [Ordained Servant Online, December 2022](#).

[7] [Ordained Servant Online, January, 2023](#).