

*The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 9 February 2025. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.*

## **Where Two or Three Are Gathered**

### **Matthew 18:15-20**

Many of you have heard the name **Charles Spurgeon**; but for those who haven't heard of him, Spurgeon was the pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London in the late 1800's. The Metropolitan Tabernacle was attended by thousands of people; yet, the majority of the attendees were not members of the church, but rather "seekers," who had come to hear Spurgeon's powerful preaching. (Many of these "seekers" ended up placing their faith in Christ, and becoming members.) People from all over England, and even from foreign countries, flocked to the Metropolitan Tabernacle every week. Yet, Spurgeon himself knew, and admitted, that his church was *not* perfect. In fact, Spurgeon was once approached by a man who was looking for "the perfect church"; but Spurgeon gave him some surprising advice. He told the man that there were, indeed, "many saintly people in his congregation"; yet, he knew that there might be a "Judas" among them—just as Christ Himself had a Judas in *His* church. Furthermore, he admitted that there might be members of his church who were not walking in obedience to the Lord—just as there were in the churches in the Apostles' day. And so, since this man was looking for "the perfect church," Spurgeon concluded that "My church is *not* the one you're looking for...But if you should happen to find such a church, I beg you *not* to join it, for you would spoil the whole thing."<sup>1</sup> On another occasion, as Spurgeon was preaching, he said something similar. He said, "You that are members of the church have not found it perfect; and I hope that you feel almost glad that you have not. If I had never joined a Church till I had found one that was perfect, I should never have joined one at all! And the moment I did join it...I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect Church after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us."<sup>2</sup>

Spurgeon lived in a very different day; yet, in a way, things haven't changed much. Just as it was in Spurgeon's day, many Christians today are hesitant to join a church, because they can't find the "perfect one." Many Christians won't join a church that they consider to be "too small," or that doesn't have all the programs that they think it should have, or that doesn't have loads of exciting activities and outings. Many Christians judge a church by how it makes them "feel"; and oftentimes, this means that they are uncomfortable with a church where the preaching and teaching convicts them of sin, and challenges them about worldly ways that they need to forsake. Many say that they won't join a church because they don't want to be around "hypocritical" and "judgmental" Christians (never considering that *they* might have some hypocrisy and judgmentalism that needs to be uprooted from their lives). Some have even bought into the idea that they don't need church, because a church is an "institution": and "institutionalized" Christianity is "bad," because of all its "rules."

Such is the thinking of many modern Christians (especially in the Western world): and it is completely contrary to the Scriptures! As we will see this morning, a biblical church is *not* perfect; yet, it is precious to Christ, because it belongs to Him. We will also see that a biblical church *does* have “rules of order,” and expectations of conduct, to which its members are held accountable. These “rules” are not “man-made traditions”: rather, they were established by the Head of the church, the Lord Jesus Christ. The members of a local church are bound by love for Christ, and love for each other, to order Christ’s church in the way that He has commanded. The title of this message is ***Where Two or Three Are Gathered.***

## **Matthew 18:15-20**

### **I. The procedures for church purity (vv. 15-19)**

As we’ve studied through the first eighteen verses of this chapter in the last couple weeks, we’ve seen how seriously God takes it when someone causes one of his **“little ones”** to doubt His Word, and stumble into sin. Christ said that it would be better to hang a millstone around that person’s neck, and to cast him into the sea, than that he should **“offend”** (or “cause to stumble”) one of His **“little ones”** who believe on Him. Jesus also illustrated just how valuable His **“little ones”** are to Him, by comparing them to sheep, and Himself to a Shepherd. Christ cares so much for even *one* sheep that is lost in the wilderness of this world, that He is willing to leave ninety-nine sheep who are already in the fold, and to go out and seek that one lost sheep. In fact, Jesus laid down His *life* for the sheep! The fact that the Son of God had to become a man, and *lay down His life* for us, reveals how serious our sin problem is. Christ had to *die* an awful, brutal death on the cross in order to save us!

Now, when Christ said that it is better to hang a millstone around the neck of those who offend His little ones, He was talking about *lost people* who have offended His children. But now, in **verses 15-19**, Christ turns His attention to the matter of an offending *brother*. In **verse 15**, He says, **“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee.”** Clearly, Jesus is talking about an offence that has been committed by a fellow *believer*. Not only that, but He is talking about a fellow believer who is a member of your *church*. Look again at **verse 17. (Read verse 17.)**

Here in **verse 17**, Christ used the word **“church”** twice. The word “church” does not refer to some universal, mystical, invisible body of believers all over the world: it refers to a *local, visible congregation* of believers, who assemble together in a specific location. This word **“church”** is translated from the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means “a called-out assembly”; and it was a common word in the first century. An *ecclesia* was a secular or religious guild or society, in which the

members banded together in the pursuit of some mutual interest. It was called an *ecclesia* (or “called out assembly”) because the members of that society were “called out” from the general population in order to meet together. In the Roman world, there were *ecclesias* of all types. There were *ecclesias* of tradesmen, actors, athletes, cult worshippers of pagan deities, and of all kinds of other mutual interests; but the thing that made an *ecclesia* an “*ecclesia*” was that the members assembled at a specific place and time, for a specific purpose. They also had membership roles, and *rules* and *obligations* for their assemblies; and those who wished to be members of the assembly had to follow the code of conduct.

Well, guess what? *Christ* has His own “assembly”; and in our English language, we often refer to this assembly as a “church,” because the word “church” (from the Greek word *kuriakon*) literally means “belonging to the Lord.” Just like the “assemblies” of the Roman world, *Christ’s* assembly is local and visible. (That’s why it is called an “assembly.” An “assembly” must, by definition, be local and visible, because it meets in one location!) In *Christ’s* assembly, the members meet together on the day of the week when *Christ* arose from the grave (the first day of the week), as well as on any other day that they determine to meet; and they meet together for a mutual purpose. That purpose is to preach the Gospel to a lost world, and thereby lead people to saving faith in *Christ*; to baptize new converts into the membership of the church; to teach and preach God’s Word, and thus equip the members to serve *Christ*; to worship *Christ* together in songs, hymns, and spiritual songs; to take the Lord’s Supper together; to love, comfort, and strengthen each other in the Lord; to grow together into spiritual maturity; and to observe everything that *Christ* has commanded.

Now, in a few moments, we will delve into this matter of what to do when a brother in the church commits an offence against you. First, though, we need to be clear about *how* a person becomes a member of a church in the first place. Do you become a member simply by attending services for a while? No, attending church doesn’t make you a member of a church. (And it certainly doesn’t make you saved!) But what about if you *have* placed your faith in *Christ*, and you *are* a true believer? Doesn’t that automatically make you a member? No, not even that makes you a member. Here at Redemption Baptist Church, we *rejoice* to have fellow believers join us in our services, and learn from God’s Word; but according to Scripture, there are specific requirements to become a member. First of all, you must have a genuine testimony of salvation by faith in Jesus *Christ*, which the members of the church have heard, and have accepted as genuine, because they see the evidence of true repentance in your life. But that’s not all. You must also receive *biblical baptism* after you are saved. Of course, baptism doesn’t save you: it is *faith in Christ* by which you are saved. However, baptism *is* a public declaration that you are trusting in the death, burial, and resurrection of *Christ*. (The plunging under the water, and coming back up, is a picture of *Christ’s* death, burial, and resurrection.) Baptism is also the way that a new believer *joins himself* to a church. When a believer submits

to baptism, he is committing himself to partake of all the privileges and responsibilities of being a member of Christ's body. Let's look at a few Scriptures about this.

### **Acts 2:41-47 / 8:34-38**

In **Acts 2:41**, we are told that the 3,000 people who heard Peter's preaching "**gladly received the word.**" (In other words, they believed the Gospel, and were saved.) Then, *after* receiving the Word, they were "**baptized.**" It was the same way with the Ethiopian eunuch in **Acts 8**: he first had to *believe on Christ*; and *then* receive baptism. (That is why we don't baptize infants. Baptism is *only* for those who have consciously believed the Gospel.) But what came next? Luke says that after being baptized, those 3,000 souls were "**added unto them.**" In other words, they were added to the membership of the Jerusalem church. (In **verse 47**, Luke specifically says that the new converts were "**added to the church.**") It was by *faith in Christ* that they were saved, and brought into the family of God; but it was by *public, water baptism* that they became members of the Jerusalem church. And what did they do next? They partook of the privileges and responsibilities of the church. They received the Apostles' doctrine, by attending church faithfully, and listening to the preaching. They fellowshiped together; they broke the bread of the Lord's Supper together; and they prayed together. They functioned like *members* of a human body, as they worked together, in unison, to serve Christ. That's exactly how Paul described the church in many of his letters. Let's look at an example.

### **1 Corinthians 12:12-27**

In this passage, Paul described the church of Corinth as a "**body,**" with many "**members.**" The church of Corinth wasn't *part* of some larger, universal body: it was the "body of Christ" in its locale; and each saved, baptized person in their church was a "**member in particular.**" As members of the church of Corinth, they were bound to love and care for each other; to pray with each other; to grieve and rejoice with each other; and to carry out their respective roles and responsibilities faithfully, and without envying each other. But how did they become members of the body in the first place? In **verse 13**, Paul says that they were all "**baptized,**" through unity of the Holy Spirit, into "**one body**" (in other words, their local church); and, having been baptized, they were now made to "**drink into one Spirit.**" (In other words, they now drank the cup of the Lord's Supper together, in unity of the Holy Spirit.) They **believed** on Christ first, and were saved; then they **were baptized** by immersion; and then, as baptized church members, they **partook** of the Lord's Supper, and **served** God together.

Being a member of Christ's church is a wonderful privilege: yet, it is also a great responsibility. We who are members of this church are accountable to Christ, and to each other. This means that if we *offend* another member (in other words, *sin against him*, and thereby possibly cause *him* to stumble into sin, too), it is a very serious thing. As members of Christ's church, we cannot do whatever pleases us. We cannot just shoot off our mouths, and say whatever our fleshly heart wants to say. Nor should we allow ourselves to *think* begrudging or bitter thoughts in the first place — because sooner or later, what is in our hearts will come out. Christ calls us to live godly lives, and to speak words of kindness, and to support and build up our brethren. We are all tightly knit together; and when you hurt a brother (whether it be by defrauding him, or by gossiping about him, or saying or doing some other bitter or spiteful thing to him), you are inflicting a wound which can quickly spread throughout the whole body, and cause great hurt and spiritual harm to *all* the members. (It's like when you have a kidney stone. The stone is small, and confined to the kidney; but it sends pain throughout the body!) That is why Christ has very strict instructions as to how to deal with offences that arise. Let's read it again. **(Read Matthew 18:15-19.)**

In these verses, Christ is clearly teaching that there *are* situations when a person should be removed from the membership of a church. Now, there are at least four different kinds of situations in which church discipline is needed. One situation is when a member is going around **teaching heretical doctrine**. In **Titus 3**, Paul wrote to Titus, and said, ***“A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.”*** In other words, should someone be teaching false doctrine, he should be confronted about it by the pastor (and other godly men), and given proper instruction, and space to repent; but if, after a couple confrontations, he still will not forsake the false doctrine, and stop spreading it to others, he must be removed. (That is why, as a church, we have a statement of faith, so that anyone wishing to join the church knows where we stand, and whether he can submit to the teaching of this church, or not.)

Another reason for removing a member is that he refuses to work (or even to *try* to find work), but is lazy and idle, and sticking his nose where it doesn't belong. Paul addresses this situation in **2 Thessalonians 3:10-15**. In this passage, Paul said, ***“If any would not work, neither should he eat.”*** In other words, if a man be completely able-bodied, yet refuses to work, he should not be allowed to eat at church fellowships, nor in the homes of other members, until he gets serious about finding work. Paul didn't say to *remove* someone in such a case; but he did say to have “tough love,” by not enabling him to be lazy.

Another occasion for church discipline is when someone is committing immorality— such as fornication, adultery, or some other sexual sin; some form of theft or extortion; idol worship, or other occult practices; railing and verbal abuse; or

drunkenness. (This, of course, means that *no* drinking of alcohol should be permitted, since intoxication begins at the instant alcohol hits the brain!) Egregious sins such as these should result in immediate removal of a member, until he (or she) repents and forsakes the sin, and seeks restoration.

### 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

In the situation that Paul is addressing, there was a member of the church that was living in incest with his stepmother. *Everyone* knew about this; yet, no one had the stomach to do anything about it. Paul commanded the members of the church of Corinth to remove this man from the assembly immediately, and not even to allow him into their homes. The lost world needed to see that wickedness is *not* allowed in Christ's church; and that man needed to be made ashamed. Yet, Paul made it clear that their goal was not to destroy this brother, but to restore him. As it turned out, this punishment (though painful) had the desired effect. In **2 Corinthians 2**, we find that the man genuinely repented; and after he repented, Paul commanded the church to receive him back to fellowship, and confirm their love toward him.

False teaching, refusal to work, and immorality, are all reasons for church discipline. However, here in **Matthew 18**, Jesus isn't talking about any of these things: He is talking about a *personal wrong* that one member has done to another. By the way, we're not talking about someone's saying something a little insensitive, that rubbed you the wrong way. (We all have faults and little "quirks" that can irritate other people; and we all need to be gracious and longsuffering with each other.) We're talking about a serious wrong—something that causes a divide in a relationship. This cannot be allowed to continue, because it will quickly destroy the harmony of the whole body.

Yet, you'll notice that the responsibility lies not just at the door of the one who did the wrong: *the one who was wronged* also has a responsibility. Christ says that if the one who wronged you won't repent of his wrong, then *you* must go to *him*, and seek to get things right. *You* have the duty to go to that person (without spreading gossip about it, or telling anyone else), and let him know that you were hurt, but that you want to get things right. If *Christ* came down from Heaven to seek after *you* when *you* were in rebellion against him, shouldn't you do all in *your* power to seek out a brother who has offended you, and get things right? Saying nothing about it, and letting it eat you up inside, is *not* the right way, because by doing so, *you* are now sinning. Anger and bitterness in the heart is an abomination to God. It always has been, and always will be. In **Leviticus 19:17**, the LORD said, ***"Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him."*** Confronting a brother about a sin, *in love*, is the right thing to do. ("***In love***" is the key!) You'd also better make sure that *your* heart

is right with God before you confront someone else about a fault—whether it be a *personal* fault against you, or not.

## Galatians 6:1

## Matthew 7:1-5

The verse in **Matthew 7** which so many Christians misunderstand is **verse 5**. (**Read Matthew 7:5 again.**) Look closely at what Jesus said. Did He say, “Do *not* pull the mote out of your brother’s eye”? No, He said, “*First* pull the beam out of your *own* eye, and *then* you will see clearly to pull the mote out of your brother’s eye.” In other words, you *do* need to make discernments (or judgments) about sin. You *do* need to recognise that that sin in your brother’s life is causing him harm (and *you* harm), and that it needs to be removed. However, you must make sure that your *own* heart is right with the Lord before you dare to confront him about *his* sin. Throughout the New Testament, Christians are *commanded* to make judgments about sin in the church, and to *confront* the offender in love. However, the goal is not to “give that brother who hurt me a piece of my mind”: the goal is to *restore* the relationship: and that requires a spirit of *meekness* and *humility* on your part, and a readiness to forgive (even if you don’t think the other person *wants* your forgiveness). It also requires being willing to swallow your pride, and ask whether *you* might have contributed to the problem in any way. More than likely, if *you* have that kind of humble spirit, the other person will be convicted about it, and get it right; and the relationship will be restored.

By the way, the Greek word for “**restore**” in **Galatians 6:1** has the idea of putting a displaced bone back in joint. Now, that’s a fitting description, isn’t it? Remember, Paul said that the church is like a “body”; and each church member is like a *body part*, working together with the rest of the body. So, when a “bone” in the body of Christ is out of joint (in other words, when that member is caught up in a grievous sin), what happens? It causes pain to the whole body; and that pain will continue until the bone is restored to its right place. That’s why we, as Christians, have a responsibility to let a brother know when he is grieving the Lord with his sin, so that he might get right with the Lord.

Yet, what if the brother refuse to acknowledge his wrong, and get things right? In that case, the next step is to bring two or three witnesses, and to attempt, once again, to set things right. The purpose of the witnesses is not to accuse, or “gang up” on the offender; the purpose is to establish every word that is said on both sides, so that no one can misrepresent the other. (This principle of “two or three witnesses” is found throughout the Bible.) These witnesses must be impartial and trusted

brothers (or sisters), who can keep a matter quiet; and they (like yourself) must make sure that their own hearts are right with God, so that *they* won't stumble in pride or anger. Yet, what if the brother *still* won't listen, and refuses to get things right? The next step is to bring the matter before the whole church body. Now, is this really necessary? Isn't this over the top? Isn't it unloving to take it to such an extreme? No, it's not! It is actually unloving to allow a wound to fester and spread, and destroy others. *Everyone* in the body must try to set things right. Yet, if the person still refuses to repent, then he must be removed from the body, and from fellowship, until he confesses his fault, and seeks restoration.

With this in mind, let's read **verses 18 and 19** again. **(Read Matthew 18:18-19.)** In these verses, Christ emphasises the *authority* of the local church, in a powerful way. Think of this! Christ has given every local church the authority to "bind" and "loose"! Now, you'll remember, from when we were studying **Matthew 16**, that Christ gave Peter the **"keys of the kingdom"** (the authority to bind and loose); yet, *here* we see that this authority belongs not just to Peter, but to *all* members of a local church. When a brother must be removed because of a grievous wrong, and the church has made this decision in accordance with God's will, God *ratifies* that decision in Heaven. The church of Corinth, for example, "bound" the incestuous man's sin upon him, by removing him from the church; but they also "loosed" him by receiving him back into the church, after he had repented. This doesn't mean that a church has the power to forgive sins, as God does; it simply means that a church *recognises* that God's chastisement is upon this person, because no *repentance* has been forthcoming; or, they recognise that God has now forgiven that person, because that person *has* repented; and therefore, they receive him back into fellowship. It doesn't matter if a church has a membership role of only two or three people: if they have made a decision to "bind" or "loose," and have done it in the biblical way, God recognizes that decision in Heaven! Folks, do you see how important the local church is? The church is *Christ's* assembly: and He has given it the authority to carry out all that He has commanded until He returns.

Now, before we close, there is one more truth about the church that we need to look at.

## II. The promise of Christ's presence (v. 20)

**(Read Matthew 18:20.)** There is a story about a church building that was built in the sixteenth century, somewhere in southern Europe. It was called "The House of Many Lamps"; and the reason it was called by this name is that it was lit entirely by *lanterns*. (There were no windows to admit natural light.) Every seat in the building had a little receptacle right next to it, in which a lantern could fit; and when the people gathered on Sunday evening, each member would place his lantern in the



bracket by his seat. Obviously, the more people that were absent, the darker the building was; but the more people that were present, the brighter it was! The architect's message was clear: If you want your church to shine brightly for the Lord, then don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together!<sup>3</sup>

Now, I don't know how authentic this story is, because little seems to be known about it; but it does beautifully illustrate what a true church is. A church is simply an assembly of saved and biblically baptized believers, who have joined together as one body, and who are committed to carrying out the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ. Every true believer in a local church is indwelt by Christ; and therefore, when the church meets together, Christ is in their midst. Because Christ is in each believer *individually*, He is also in their midst when they meet *collectively*. He is the Head, and Chief Cornerstone, Bridegroom, and Saviour of the body; and the purpose of the church that He has established is to glorify *Him*.

### 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 / 1 Corinthians 3:16

**Conclusion:** As we close this morning, I would first address **those who might not be saved**. We've talked a lot about the church today; but you must understand that a church, important though it is, *cannot save you*. Being baptized into the membership of this church cannot save your soul; *only Christ* can save your soul! To be saved, you must personally repent of your sin, and place your trust in Christ. If you have never done this, I urge you to do so today! If you are **saved already, but need to be biblically baptized**, I urge you to take that important step, and join yourself to this church body, so that you can serve God together with us. As Charles Spurgeon put it, "The Church is faulty; but that is no excuse for your not joining it, if you are the Lord's. Nor need your own faults keep you back, for the Church is not an institution for perfect people, but a sanctuary for sinners saved by Grace."<sup>4</sup> If you are **saved, and are already a member of this church**, it is my prayer that you have been reminded today of how sacred a privilege and responsibility it is to be a member of Christ's body. *Be* in Christ's house; *serve* Christ in His house; and *love* your brothers and sisters in Christ's house. As Paul put it, "**And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.**"

<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Morgan, *Preacher's Sourcebook of Creative Sermon Illustrations* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2007), p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.logos.com/grow/the-prince-of-preachers-has-something-to-say-to-church-shoppers/>

<sup>3</sup> Morgan, *Preacher's Sourcebook of Creative Sermon Illustrations*, p. 127.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.logos.com/grow/the-prince-of-preachers-has-something-to-say-to-church-shoppers/>