

## Prayer

I place to one side all the cares of my soul and place myself in Your hands, O Lord, my Saviour and my God. I rest in You, I take my peace from You, I learn from You, I look forward by Your guidance, and I rejoice in Your presence. Jesus Christ, my Lord, may I always value every moment I place aside from worldly cares to be with You! AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: The Cross

*Pray for those who wear the Cross and yet know little of its true power; some wear it as a 'lucky charm', so pray that the Lord will reveal His true love for all who seek Him.*

### On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for people who do good in our midst
- Pray for those who have lost much because of financial upheavals
- Pray for the leaders of the nations who bear great responsibility

## Meditation

Lord, when there is nothing left and I feel poured out like water;  
I come to You to renew my soul.

Lord, when my bones ache with weariness, stress and toil;  
I come to You to heal my body.

Lord, when I have lost my way and fail to find my directions;  
I come to You for guidance.

Lord, when the repeating nature of my earthly life oppresses me;  
I come to you for restoration.

Lord, when I am troubled by the things I see around me every day;  
I come to You for peace.

Lord, when the people around me fail to see me for who I am;  
I come to You for affirmation.

Lord, when the world has lost its way and I do not know where to go;  
I come to You for salvation.

You never let me down!

## Bible Study - Matthew 18:15-17

<sup>15</sup> "If a member of the church sins, go and point out the fault privately. If the person listens to you, then you have won them over. <sup>16</sup> But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses'. <sup>17</sup> If the church member refuses to listen to them, report this to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

## Review

How do you deal with problems within the church? This passage of scripture describes a sequence of practical actions to be taken against those who sin (vv15-17). It is easy to have a simplistic view of how all this might work out, but the issues are quite complicated. What is suggested here touches on very personal issues and deeply held opinions, and it is wise to look at what Jesus said very carefully because the text says some important things that are not immediately obvious to those of us who read it today.

Matthew 18 as a whole is a substantial series of teaching by Jesus about the nature of the Kingdom of God, but here in this passage, He calls it the 'church', meaning 'those who are gathered'. It is possible that He does this here because matters of discipline require the church to be formal and correct in its behaviour, and the problem of sin within the Christian community should be dealt with carefully and in an authoritative way. Nevertheless, God's people should always reflect the value of each 'saved sinner' within the church and protect against unnecessary legalism and a critical spirit (see 18:10)

**Individual problems** The first thing to point out about this passage is problems should be dealt with by speaking to people individually; the words 'you' in verses 15 to 17 are singular, and refer to someone who has done something wrong in the church. At verse 18, the 'you' becomes a plural, and Jesus gives the general principles that undergird action taken by the church. It is important to point this out, because this passage of scripture was never designed to deal with, for example, splits within the Church where one group of people is set against another, or with leaders who represent differing opinions within the Church. Indeed, it is essential to understand that the whole passage is primarily intended to be pastoral in nature, perhaps an example of the pastoral action required to draw a 'lost sheep' back into the flock.

**How to deal with sin** The problem with sin is that all too often we do not know that we are doing it. There is an unwritten maxim of English law which says that 'ignorance of the law is no excuse', and this was generally regarded as the case for Jewish people in Jesus' day, with respect to the Law of Moses in the Old Testament. However, most ordinary people of those times probably struggled to know the many details of Pharisaic tradition (midrash) by which they were supposed live, just as we might struggle to know the details of tax law in our own country, for example! Jesus, however, was teaching the disciples about their coming task as leaders of the Church, and it is most likely that He had in mind the circumstance in which individuals (especially Gentiles) entered the church and were ignorant of what God's Law said about sin. People needed to be reminded, pastorally and privately, as Jesus recommends here. Incidentally, this fulfils Leviticus 19:17 'you shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin, you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt on yourself.'

**When things don't work out** Such an approach would not be a matter of personal animosity, but of pointing out what the law says about a sin; for example, using the Lord's name for swearing (banned in Exodus 20:7), or doing something that dishonoured parents (Ex 20:12). The assumption here (18:15) is that the sin is clear and evident and not a matter of opinion, and the approach made to the one who sins is an act of charity to draw them back to the norm of God's moral law. Indeed, the quote from Leviticus (above) indicates that each Christian has a duty to take up such issues or they incur guilt on themselves! If such an approach is not fruitful, then verse 16 indicates that witnesses need to be brought to 'confirm' the situation. Again, this fulfils the Law; 'only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established' (Deuteronomy 19:15; see also 2 Cor 13:1 and 1 Tim 5:19). However, this does not appear to be designed to bring about repentance, though it is helpful if it does; but rather to pave the way for the next stage, in which the whole Church passes judgment on the matter (18:17).

**Judgement or pastoral care?** The assessment of the whole church is not to be thought of as a judicial process, but rather as a means of ascertaining the common mind of God's people concerning whether something is a sin or not, and any personal judgement of the individual would follow such a decision.

Some think that when Jesus went on to say of those who refuse to listen to the judgement of the Church 'let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector' (18:17) that He condemned them. However, Jesus had just told a story about the great value of each person to the Kingdom of God, and I doubt if He is here condemning people out of hand. Jesus Himself spent much time ministering to sinners of all sorts, and whilst His primary mission was to God's people, He did not shirk from helping either Gentiles (15:22-28) or tax collectors (9:9-13). What Jesus cannot do and what the church cannot do, is ignore the express will of people to go their own way in contradiction to the will of God and the church, and this is what lies behind the conclusion to verse 17. There is no escaping the consequences of our decisions!

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How does the church today deal with the issue of sin amongst its members?
2. Have you been involved with trying to help someone understand the nature of their sin, so that they can repent? Have scriptural guidelines been kept?
3. Do these guidelines help or hinder God's people today in the difficult task of addressing sin?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*This is a difficult passage of scripture to put into effect. Many deep problems within the church are a result of differences of opinion, but the trouble is that once people find themselves on opposite sides of a debate, they can be tempted to act towards other Christians in ungodly ways, showing envy or jealousy or anger for example. It can be difficult to deal with these sins separately from the deep divisions which separate some Christians, but there is no excuse for ill-mannered and sinful attitudes and deeds.*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Search your own soul about whether there are sins harboured there which need attention. Far better to deal with things first before God than stand accused before others! We can all deal with wrongful attitudes to others if we are willing to confess our sins to the Lord.*
- *Pray with a friend about the issues of discipline within your church, some of which may be a source of some upset and dismay. How can the church journey towards a place where sins can be dealt with properly and well?*

## Final Prayer

You are the One who has brought me to this place, Lord Jesus. Guide me therefore to where You would have me go from here. Show me a sign, a light, a map; any guidance by which Your Word may lead me on, so that I may give glory to You in all I do, from this time on: AMEN