

Final Prayer

Gracious Lord, we can never fully appreciate all You do for us. When we think we have grasped some great truth, we find that you are leading us further and there is infinitely more for us to learn, many more issues to explore, and much more love to live by faith. We rejoice in Your love and guidance, Lord God; stay forever with us on our way: AMEN

Prayer

Cover us with the protection of Your Spirit, Lord God;
Challenge us today to be people who do Your work willingly;
Speak to us as we pray about everything that happens to us;
Encourage us in the midst of life's adversity to maintain faith;
Energise us with Your supernatural grace, gifts and resources;
And may we do what is good and right in Your sight, Lord God:
AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Cross

Pray that the Cross will be raised high in the midst of the great cities of the world, on churches and other buildings, as a testimony to the Kingdom of God in our midst.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for all who seek to solve the world's troubles in peace*
- *Give thanks to God for people who do good in our midst*
- *Pray for those who have lost much because of financial upheavals*

Meditation

There is joy everlasting in knowing Your love, Lord God,
For it lifts our hearts in wonder, awe and praise.

There is wonderful security in knowing Your peace, Lord God,
For it stills the heart and calms the anxious soul.

There is amazing relief in knowing Your salvation, Lord God,
For it gives the gift of life which lasts for all eternity.

There is incredible release in knowing Your forgiveness, Lord God,
For it restores the broken spirit and heals the past.

There is surprising liberty in knowing Your guidance, Lord God,
For it shows that You know what is best for us; always.

There is great encouragement in knowing Your promises, Lord God,
For they are secure for all time, dependable and sure.

There is no reason why we cannot find our faith in You, Lord Jesus,
For You have nothing to prove, only gifts to give.

Bible Study - Matthew 18:18-20

¹⁸ 'Amen, I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ 'Again, Amen I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three meet in my name, there I am in the midst of them.'

Review

This brief passage contains some of Jesus' direct advice, which underpins the authority by which the church acts. Yesterday, we read about how disputes should be dealt with in the church, and this emphasised the importance of dealing with them at source, by speaking to people individually and identifying sin by discernment and the testimony of witnesses. Today, the two sayings in our text are emphatic, and both begin with Jesus' characteristic and personal words 'Amen, I tell you ...' (18:18,19). These teachings are important, and we must not let them disappear from the church through using worldly principles of governance which abandon the wisdom of scripture.

Matthew 18 is generally about the church, and it extends the teaching Jesus has already given. It also emphasises the importance of humility and selflessness, for the difficulty of dealing with problems in the church is placed in the shadow of Jesus' great act of taking a child and placing it in the midst of the disciples (18:1f.). This great dramatic parable stands in judgement over the competitive spirit of many people, and in the light of this, any 'hard-line' view of our passage today seems somewhat wide of the mark. It looks as if dealing with the problem of sin within the Christian community should be done in a careful and clear manner, reflecting the compassionate revealed truth of God's Word and the value of each 'saved sinner' to the fellowship of the church

Forgiveness In these three verses Jesus explains the authority we have within the church to deal with problems, built firstly on forgiveness. There has been much debate about what Jesus meant by 'binding and loosing' (18:18), but it only makes sense if we regard it as describing the nature and spiritual truth of forgiveness. It tells us that our choices about whether to forgive people (loose them) or not (bind them) have eternal consequences. If this is so, then this is a powerful and incredibly important point. Most know what it is like to hold something against someone else, but not everyone reaps the great personal benefits of 'forgiving' the one who has damaged them.

Those who have perpetrated evil against us will rarely respond to, accept or repent of their spiritual or physical violence against us, yet most feel that they can only be healed when the person who has sinned against them acknowledges that sin and confesses it. The truth of our fallen world is that we can never expect this and should never hope for it. Other people will not behave as we wish; they are free, and have their own 'issues' of which we are unaware. However, we can let God heal our own broken spirits by 'releasing' our antagonists into God's hands and forgiving them. The result of this may well never affect the sinner as we wish, but such 'loosing' is the first step on the road of healing of our souls and spirits. Why should you or I stand uneasy before the Throne of Grace because we hold on to anger or hurt against someone, however justly; and because we have never let it go ('loosed' it) have lived in the anguish, misery, bondage and pain of what others have done to us. Jesus' message is this; we must take our eyes off our problems and our anger at what has been done to us and look to Him, for He forgave all people on the Cross, including us. He has already done what we find so hard; He released and forgave those who held Him bondage; and by His example and help, we too may be set free!

Authority within the Church The interesting thing about Jesus' first comment in verse 18 is that it is exactly the same as the authority given Peter by Jesus at Caesarea Philippi. It was there that Peter confessed Jesus as 'the Messiah, the Son of the Living God ...' (16:16). When Jesus responded to Peter, He gave him this authority as the leader and representative of God's people on earth. At the time, we discussed how later generations have struggled over whether this authority is somehow vested in Peter as an individual and therefore his successors as leaders of the church catholic (meaning, 'universal', not the 'Roman Catholic Church'). This passage gives us some of our answer to this question, The authority given to Peter is now given to all God's people when they act in unity to

discern what is sinful and what is not, in other words, to interpret God's will in the specific circumstances of life.

The last two verses (18:19,20) add importantly to all we have said. Situations of conflict in which people find it hard to forgive are usually deeply personal, but when they are shared, they benefit from the wisdom of others. In addition, the spiritual insights of others will often perceive what we cannot when we are hurt or troubled by some issue. In this light, Jesus' advice is profoundly helpful; 'if two of you agree on earth ... then 'it will be done for you by my Father in Heaven' (18:20). In other words, the collective discernment of a small group is all the Lord requires in order to act in spiritual authority for healing and the resolution of personal problems. Most troubles in the church, however large, are experienced by us as issues that affect us through those with whom we have fellowship; whether it be the great theological debates of the day, or the complex issues of various forms of abuse. We are helped when we sort these things out together with the community of believers in which we are set; for as Jesus says; 'there am I in their midst'.

The only way to sort out problems in the church and to exercise the necessary authority for the organisation of the church, is to do so through Jesus Christ.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How does your church exercise authority? Do you feel it does this in a way that expresses Christ? How may it do this better?
2. What is the significance of Jesus call for 'two or three people' to be willing to agree. How can this be done when difficult things need to be decided?
3. Is forgiveness an important factor in the life of your church, and how is forgiveness practiced?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I have highlighted the issue of forgiveness in this brief commentary, but there is so much more within these few sentences. The lack of forgiveness is a fundamental reason why some churches fade away and die; it is the spiritual reason why some people fall away from grace and leave the church; and it is one of the key instruments used by Satan to keep God's people ineffective at any place or time. Let us not ignore its importance, our personal responsibility to forgive utterly and unconditionally, and our pastoral duty of care towards helping people for whom this appears an insurmountable problem. Lecturing them will not help them forgive; caring for them may help them towards wholeness.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Write down a list of people who have deeply hurt you in your life. Place a tick or a cross against those who you feel in your heart that you have forgiven. You may find yourself unsure about some. Pray and ask the Lord for clarity, and if necessary, ask 'two or three' others to help you discern the truth.*
- *Pray for all who find it impossible to forgive because of the heinous nature of what has been done to them. Pray that the Lord will minister to them with sovereign power and love.*