

A SAMPLE CHAPTER

What Horse?

Common Misconceptions About What the Bible Actually Says

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Where Two or Three Are Gathered

Matthew 18:20

“Don’t be discouraged that turnout was small tonight. Remember what Jesus said: ‘Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.’ Christ is here with us, even in a small group like this one.”

— from a midweek sermon

You have heard it at midweek service when only six people came. You have heard it at the Wednesday night Bible study when most of the regulars were sick. You have heard it at the prayer meeting in the church basement, at the youth group in someone’s home, at the campus fellowship in the dorm lounge. You have probably heard it from a pastor or a small group leader trying gently to reassure a thin crowd that the gathering still counted. *Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.* Matthew 18:20. The verse for any time the room felt half-empty.

The verse is so commonly used in this way that almost no one stops to ask what Jesus was actually talking about when he said it. The setting in our heads is the small Christian gathering, of any kind, with Christ’s presence promised to whoever shows up.

Anyone who has heard the verse deployed this way a hundred times and then sat down and read the paragraph it comes from has felt the gap open up. The verses immediately before it are about something else entirely.

Christ is of course present with his people when they gather, in twos and threes and in thousands, and nothing here disturbs that; it would be a poor chapter that tried. The claim is narrower and, oddly, much larger. Read in its own paragraph, this verse promises something far more specific than general companionship — and the specific promise turns out to be one of the strongest statements in the New Testament about the authority of the Church. The popular reading has sold the verse short.

WHAT WE PICTURE

The popular use of Matthew 18:20 treats the verse as a general promise of Christ’s presence at any Christian gathering.

It is the verse for the prayer meeting where only the pastor's wife and one elderly widow have shown up. It is the verse for the Bible study that had to be rescheduled because the regular host was traveling and only three people came to the substitute location. It is the verse for the kitchen-table devotional with a believing friend, the morning coffee with the prayer partner, the small Christian gathering of any size and any kind.

The reading does not exactly say that two or three are *all* that is needed for a real Christian gathering — though it sometimes drifts that way. It says, more carefully, that *even when* only two or three are present, Christ is among them. This is a comfort and not an argument. It says: do not be discouraged by small numbers; Christ counts a faithful few as worth showing up for.

There is something right in this, and it is worth naming before anything else. Small gatherings of Christians do happen. Pastors who have prepared a midweek service should not be left feeling that the night was wasted because attendance was thin. Christians in remote places, in tiny congregations, in seasons when illness or weather or season of life has reduced the gathered company, do need to know that God has not forgotten them. The instinct to bring a verse to such a moment is exactly the instinct a pastor or a believing friend ought to have.

The mistake is not the impulse. The mistake is in *which promise* the verse turns out to be making.

WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS

The verse is the conclusion of a paragraph — and the paragraph is not about prayer meetings.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

— Matthew 18:15–20

Read the paragraph. The whole passage is about *church discipline*. It is one of the New Testament's clearest pieces of teaching about what to do when a Christian sins against another Christian.

The procedure is graduated. First, go to the brother privately — *between you and him alone*. The matter should stay small if possible. If he listens, the relationship is restored. If he does not listen, take *one or two others* — and now we are at the verse's signature number. The two or three are not a thin crowd at midweek service. The two or three are the witnesses required by Old Testament law for any serious charge. The principle goes back to Deuteronomy 19:15: *every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses*. Jesus is invoking it. The Church's disciplinary action begins by escalating from one to two or three.

If the brother still refuses to listen, the matter goes to the church — the gathered Christian community. And if he still will not listen, he is to be treated as outside the community — *as a Gentile and a tax collector*. The Church has acted. The matter has been formalized.

Then come the verses our verse sits in.

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. This is Jesus's promise that the Church's disciplinary action has heavenly weight. To *bind* is to declare a sin still attached — the impenitent sinner remains separated from the Body. To *loose* is to declare a sin forgiven — the repentant sinner is restored. The Church's act of binding and loosing is ratified in heaven. Christ has given his people real authority.

This is not the first time Jesus has used this language. He said almost the same words to Peter in Matthew 16:19: *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.* And he will use almost the same words again to all the disciples on Easter evening in John 20:23: *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.* The Lutheran tradition has called this the *Office of the Keys* — the authority Christ has given his Church to forgive and to retain sins in his name.

Verse 19 has a misreading of its own, and it is worth naming before we get to verse 20, because the two travel together. Lifted out, *if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven* becomes a general promise about prayer, and a strange one: a promise that God is bound by any two Christians who can be brought to the same opinion. Read that way it turns prayer into a procedure and God

into a mechanism, and it collapses the moment two believers agree in praying for something they do not receive. Read in its paragraph it is not a promise about prayer in general at all. It is a promise about *this* prayer — the prayer of a congregation acting in the matter Jesus has just described.

And then verse 19: *if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.* The popular reading of this verse, like the popular reading of the next one, treats it as a general promise about prayer. The context is specific. Jesus is talking about the Church's disciplinary action. When the disciplinary process has reached two or three witnesses agreeing about the case, and they pray together about what they are doing, the Father in heaven hears them. The agreement is the agreement of the Church carrying out Christ's mandate. The prayer is the prayer of the Church seeking Christ's wisdom in the binding and loosing.

And then verse 20: *for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.* Read in its place, the verse is not about the size of the prayer meeting. It is the assurance Christ gives to the Church carrying out his disciplinary mandate. When even two or three Christians act in his name, in the binding and loosing he has authorized, Christ himself is in their midst. The promise is of his authoritative presence in his Church's official action — not of a vague companionship at any Christian gathering.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Jesus says this sentence in the middle of instructions about confronting a sinning brother, and about what the church is to do when he will not listen. We say it when the sanctuary looks empty on a Wednesday night. There is nothing wrong with wanting Christ present at the midweek service. There is something wrong with getting him there by cutting a sentence out of a paragraph about the Office of the Keys.

Consider what the lifted verse leaves behind.

We have read the verse out of its paragraph. The verses immediately before it are about church discipline. To take verse 20 by itself and apply it to any small gathering is to lift it out of the conversation it was part of. The verse no longer says what it said when it was attached to its sentences.

We have made the verse smaller than it is. The popular reading promises Christ's vague presence at any gathering of two or three. This is comforting, but it is also a relatively small promise — Christ is always present with his people, in every way, whether we are gathered as two or as two thousand. The actual promise is much larger: Christ has authorized his Church to forgive sins and to retain sins in his name, and he himself

is present and bound by the action when his Church does so. This is one of the most consequential promises Jesus ever made. The popular reading has traded it for sentimental comfort. The trade is bad for the Church.

We have lost the doctrine of the Office of the Keys. The Lutheran tradition has, from the Reformation forward, named Christ's authorization of his Church to forgive and retain sins as the *Office of the Keys*. When the pastor stands at the front of the chancel and says, *I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*, he is not speaking his own opinion. He is exercising the authority Christ gave to his Church in Matthew 16, Matthew 18, and John 20. The forgiveness is real, and Christ himself is in the speaking of it. The penitent who receives the absolution receives what Christ promised. The popular reading of Matthew 18:20 has obscured this. The verse that ought to ground the doctrine has been redirected to small-attendance sentiment.

We have lost the Church's authority to discipline. The verses our verse sits in describe a procedure for confronting sin in the Christian community. The procedure ends in either restoration (the brother listens and is gained) or formal separation (he is treated as a Gentile and a tax collector). The Church has real authority here. The disciplinary action carries real weight in heaven. The modern Christian, raised on the small-gathering reading of verse 20, often has no framework for thinking about church discipline at all — or assumes it must be either authoritarian (a misuse) or unloving (a misunderstanding). The text gives it both Christ's mandate and his presence. The Church that uses this authority well does what Christ told it to do.

And we have lost the comfort that the actual text provides. The Christian under discipline — the one who has been confronted, who is being called to repent — does not need a vague reassurance that Christ is with him in a small group. He needs to know that the Church's hard word has Christ's authority behind it, that the call to repentance is Christ's own call, and that the absolution offered if he repents is Christ's own absolution. The text gives him all of this. The popular reading has given him a coffee mug.

Christ's company is a fine thing to promise a thin Wednesday crowd. His authority, standing behind the Church's word of forgiveness, is a better thing — and it is the thing he actually promised.

WHAT WE CONFESS

The Small Catechism, on the Office of the Keys:

What is the Office of the Keys? It is the peculiar church power which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of penitent sinners, but to retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent.

What do you believe according to these words? I believe that, when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.

The Lutheran position is precise. The forgiveness pronounced by the called minister, when he acts by Christ's divine command, *is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.* This is what Matthew 18:20 was promising. Christ's authoritative presence in the Church's action of binding and loosing — the same authority and certainty as if Christ himself were standing in the pastor's place.

This is much bigger than a verse for thin midweek attendance. This is the heart of the Lutheran doctrine of absolution. The catechism teaches the Lutheran child to believe what Matthew 18:20 promised — that Christ's word, spoken by his called minister to the penitent, is Christ's own.

FOR THE CLASS

- Where have you heard Matthew 18:20 quoted — at small gatherings, in sermons, in prayer meetings? What was the verse being made to promise? What kind of comfort was it offering?
- Read Matthew 18:15–20 slowly, as one passage. What is the whole paragraph about? Where does verse 20 sit in relation to verses 15–17?
- The chapter argues that the *two or three* of verse 20 echoes the *two or three witnesses* of verse 16 — and that the promise is Christ's presence in the Church's disciplinary action, not in any small gathering. How does this change the way the verse reads?
- The Small Catechism teaches that when the pastor absolves the penitent, this is *just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.* What does this confess about what is happening in the absolution at your Sunday service?

- The chapter argues that the popular reading is *smaller* than the actual verse — that it has traded a great promise for a sentimental one. Where else in your Bible reading have you seen this happen? What is the cost when the big promise gets traded for the small comfort?

CLOSING

*Built on the Rock the Church doth stand,
Even when steeples are falling;
Crumbled have spires in every land,
Bells still are chiming and calling,
Calling the young and old to rest,
But above all the soul distressed,
Longing for rest everlasting.*

— Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig, 1837

This is where the sample ends. The rest of What Horse? is the invitation it opens onto.

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