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Grace-Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
Mt 18.1-20

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

The Church has no Miranda rights.
And Roberts Rules are for good order, but they don't trump mercy.
And there's no sticking it to someone else, according to Hoyle.
Sadly, Matthew 18 is often used as a cliché for getting what you want at the expense of the other.
As long as you follow the proper procedure, you're in the clear.

What does that even mean?
And how is the Church to handle sin among its members?
Of course, the answer is repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

However, the way it gets (mis-)used today is that
we first approach the sinner and tell him what's wrong with him and why we're offended.
Then, if he doesn't apologize to our liking, we take a couple others, and rub his nose in it.
And finally, we let everyone else know what a schmuck he is—and kick him out...
good riddance!

That's how pastors are thrown out of their congregations,
and how delinquent members are removed from the roles:
"We've done our part—followed Matthew 18—there's nothing else needed."

It's sad, really.
And the Church must repent.
That's not what Matthew 18 actually says and certainly isn't what it means.
It's not a checklist or simple procedure—a sort of Miranda Rights¹—
where, if you fail to follow it step-by-step, the whole case is thrown out.²

It's a plea for mercy and forgiveness—first and foremost, within the Church.
You might even call it a commentary on the 5th Petition of the Lord's Prayer:
*"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."*³

And the whole point isn't that we should be out to get someone, or even to seek justice.
That's not the point at all—
the Christian is to turn the other cheek;
and to suffer all, even loss, for the sake of the other.
Give him another tunic if one's been stolen.
Walk two miles if you're forced to go one.
Bless when you're cursed and so on.

It's all forgiveness, the whole chapter.

¹ Benjamin T. G. Mayes, "Does Matthew 18:15-16 Apply to Public Sins? The Steps of Admonition Today and in Lutheran Orthodoxy," *Logia* (1998): 42.

² David Petersen, 71.

³ As much seems to be the case in the Homily by St. John Chrysostom (*NPNF* 10).

Sadly, our English translations of this text offer us little help.
 When you look at it in your Bible, the chapter is broken up into little sub-sections—
 each with a different subtitle, so you'd think it's a string of somewhat unrelated stories.
 It starts with an argument among the 12 as to who's the greatest.
 Then there's the temptations to sin,
 and a parable about a lost sheep,
 and, finally for today, the infamous "*steps of admonition.*"

When the text gets broken down like this, we tend to take the individual texts out of context,
 and by doing so, lose the main point that Matthew's driving home:
 that *all* of this has to do with repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

And when repentance and the forgiveness of sins is lost,
 then Christ has been separated from His Cross,
 the little ones are scandalized,
 the lost sheep is never found,
 and then "Mt 18" is little more than churchly steps you take to stick it to the other.

*"But if your brother sins against you, go and show him between you and him alone.
 If he hears you, you've gained your brother.
 But if he doesn't hear, take with you one or two others,
 so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.
 And if refusing to hear them, tell it to the Church;
 and if he doesn't hear even the church,
 let him be to you just as the Gentile and the tax-collector."* (Mt 18:15-17)

But why do you rebuke your brother?
 Is it because you're upset or hurt? God forbid!
 If you do it for your own sake, you've done nothing at all and lack forgiveness.
 But, if you rebuke out of love *for him*, you do an excellent thing, for without it, he'd be lost.

That is, he'd be like the sheep Jesus describes just before:
*"If some man has a hundred sheep and one of them becomes lost,
 does he not leave the 99 behind on the mountain and go seeking the one being lost?
 And if he has found it, truly I say to you,
 that he rejoices over it more than over the 99 that haven't been lost.
 Therefore it is not the will of your father, who art in heaven,
 that one of these little ones be lost."* (18:12-14)

For you *not* to leave the 99 and go after the one lost sheep puts you under the greater sin.
 For it flows from a lack of love for your brother, and a hardness of heart unwilling to forgive.
 So, when anyone sins against us, let us take great care—
not for ourselves, for it's a wonderful thing to forget sin done against us—
 but for our brother, who's sinning is the greater wound than being sinned against.
 Therefore, rebuke him between you and him *alone*—not, simply, as step one—
 but set on his repentance, and sparing his shame.

For you all know, that when we're ashamed we try to defend our sin and justify ourselves. This leads further away from repentance and makes him even more lost than before.

But Christians, can you humble yourselves so that when you're sinned against your mouth stays shut for your sake, but opens for the sake of the one sinning against you?

For what harm can anyone do against you who are saved even from the hell of fire?

The sin isn't against you, but against the sinner himself.

For *his* sake we open our mouths, and not for our own.

For we also know that we sin much and are in just as great a need of forgiveness as he is. We are just as weak and fall to temptation just as easily.

We're also sheep in need of being found;

and little ones needing to receive from the hand of *our Father, who art in Heaven*.

This is why you must turn and be like one of these little ones.

It's not because the child is innocent or somehow purer in his actions.

It's because the child can only receive.

For him, everything is gift.

He has no strength or pride to lean on, no boasting of being the greatest—

the child is the picture of humility, of admitting his weakness, confessing his sin, and ultimately, receiving the forgiveness that comes from another.

Jesus told His disciples,

"And whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." (18:5)

So receive your brother that sins against you as a child.

That certainly doesn't mean overlook his sin—

for no parent overlooks the errors of the child—

but correct him, gently, between you and him alone;

"for if he hears you, you have gained your brother." (18:15)

For the true scandal here (and, by the way, that's the word used in the Greek, not "causes to sin"), is that the sinner, who needs forgiveness, is too often driven from it.

Our problem is that we have no desire to gain our brother.

Mt 18 gives us the proper steps to look pious on the outside, and yet inwardly to hate.

But may it not be so among us!

It is true, the Lord has given both binding and loosing—casting out and drawing in—

but they aren't two equal and opposite keys that the Church bears.

The goal is always repentance the forgiveness of sins.

Delivering as a gift to the sinner what Christ has won on the cross for him.

This is what the Church is about:

2 or 3 gathered together *in His name*, where He is, for us and for our salvation.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit