

## **“Blest Be the Ties That Bind**

Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 18:15-20 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, bring us close to your Christ,  
that we might know his presence and live his teachings. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

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Our scripture readings today offer us a study in contrasts. They are obviously pointing in the same direction, namely, that the call of the gospel is to love our neighbors, well and honestly. But one of those arrows is a much straighter line than the other. The verses we heard from Romans are what we might call a “bird’s eye view” – that is, Paul is summarizing, and as he says, all the details of the law add up to one thing: Love.

But these verses I just read from Matthew are more what I might call a “bug’s eye view” because they are In The Weeds! They are taking that command to love and applying it to a particular situation, the scenario of conflict within the community, and boy, does it get complicated fast! So I invite you to pull those Bibles back out and turn back to page 20 in the New Testament, so you can follow along while we take a look at some of the notable complexities of these verses.

First of all, let’s just recognize that this entire section has the tone of something that was distilled into gospel as the Christian community evolved and put into Jesus’ mouth here by the writer of Matthew. It’s taking for granted structures of church that simply didn’t exist yet during Jesus’ early ministry. So we should read these verses

with that grain of salt, even as we honor them as reflecting Jesus' call into accountability, honesty, vulnerability and integrity within our communal life. If something feels off, we don't need to contort our logic finding a way to make it fit.

That said, there are important principles and guidance here for how to live in community. But this guidance may be even more layered and nuanced than we expected. We generally think of this passage as offering us direction in situations of interpersonal conflict. Right there at the outset, it sets up the situation: "If another member of the church sins against you." But look at that little text note after the word "you," the tiny italicized *m*. What does it tell us? When we look at the notes, we learn that "other ancient authorities lack *against you*." So this first clause is either "if another member of the church sins against you" or "if another member of the church sins."

Those two things feel pretty different to me. Somehow, when we are the target of someone else's bad behavior, we feel entitled to be the one calling them out. But what if they've sinned in general? What if the target is someone else? Or what if there is no clear target? Suddenly, we may begin to assume this is None of Our Business. We may prefer to avoid confrontation, even if the damage done is wide-ranging and deep.

This is where it's helpful to me to remember that the word "responsibility" is made up of the words "response" and "ability." It seems to me that these verses are reminding us that sometimes we may be the only one equipped to speak out when

harm is happening within our communities. The victim may not have the ability to respond. If there's no clear victim, the damage could continue unabated if no one exercises their ability to respond. In our courts of law, those bringing suits against others have to prove that they have "standing" to sue. But within the Christian community, the standard is Love, in every direction, whether we are the direct target of damage or not. Understanding that this passage can be about both sorts of situations, personal or communal, can shift our perspective on it.

The second thing we need to notice in this passage is the underlying assumption about who sinned. The way the sentences are written, there is a presumption that one party did all the sinning, and the other is innocent. But we've met humans; we are humans, so why would we assume that is ever the case? What comes immediately into my mind is Jesus' instruction to those gathered around the woman caught in adultery: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone."

So keeping that in mind, we are now pushed to consider this passage as being read from the perspective of both parties. There is a hidden level of mutuality here – shared error, shared responsibility, shared accountability, shared need for reconciliation. It is no longer a group of church leaders ganging up on the one trouble-maker, but more likely, two groups in conflict with one another, each fonder of one party than the others, with perspectives clouded by those biases. This is starting to feel uncomfortably familiar, isn't it? This is where it's vital to notice that

there is one word used more often than most others in these verses. That word is “listen.” This may be the most important word in the whole passage. Listening is the only reason this process works. Without listening, it is an exercise in angry futility. And if we remember that the listening required is mutual, so that both parties feel heard and both parties are obliged to hear the other deeply, we begin to understand the power this process can have to transform conflict.

But what if the listening fails? That brings us to one of the trickiest parts of this passage. “If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” There is an obvious meaning here: Gentiles and tax collectors were considered outside the boundaries of the community; there was no obligations to treat them with respect, and indeed, even an expectation that you would go out of your way to avoid them. Except, that’s not what Jesus did, is it? The trajectory of the gospels is one that constantly pushes on the boundaries of who is considered in and who is out, making the circle wider and wider till everyone could plainly see that no one is outside of God’s love. When we read “let that one be to you as a tax collector,” we do well to remember that we’re reading a gospel purportedly written by a man who was a tax collector when Jesus called him to become a disciple. And so we’re back to the bird’s eye view from Romans: treating someone like a tax collector... means loving them! Is that what the person who put this section into the gospel meant by these words? Possibly not. But now that they’re coming out of the mouth of Jesus, I don’t see how the command to love can be avoided.

I believe this interpretation is strengthened by the very next verse. This bit about eternal authority to forgive or not forgive has been used by structures such as the Roman Catholic Church to justify the authority of priests to serve as intermediaries of God's mercy or even to excommunicate people from the community of the church altogether. The way it is written seems to me another clue that these were words written much later, put into Jesus' mouth so they would have more weight. It may sound attractive at first, to be given the power to determine whether someone receives forgiveness or not. When you've been really and truly done wrong, withholding forgiveness may be all you have to cling to. But looking past that, what an enormous pressure this idea puts on our feeble human capacity for mercy! Is not our own salvation enough to worry about, without having to decide the fates of others? I do not believe that there is any human grudge that cannot be overcome by the mercy of God. And thank God for that!

I would argue that this threat of eternal authority is intended to be absurd precisely so that we are reminded that we are called to forgive, even as we have been forgiven. If we are to love even the tax collectors, surely we're not being given veto-power over God's mercy? No, if anything, we're being reminded that the grudges and resentments we cling to will be nothing but dead weight when we're trying to ascend into the kingdom of heaven. They won't be binding others; they will be binding us.

Given all of these complications, it seems the bug's eye view of love can be really hard. That's why that last verse is so important. We figure this out together,

and we do it in the light of the gospel and in the name of Jesus, and as we do it, we continually remind ourselves that Jesus is present with us. That's what makes it possible to engage in processes of vulnerable accountability and deep listening. That's what makes it possible to speak up for those whose voices have been silenced. That's what makes it possible to love our neighbors and our enemies. Jesus is present with us. Surely if we believe that God's mercy can transform the tax collectors, we can trust it to receive and reconcile our own transgressions. When we gather as church, we do not have to sweep anything under the rug; we must not. We must be willing to trust in the presence of Jesus to bring healing to the conflicts and sins we have enacted on one another, through a process of deep listening and mutual accountability. When we gather in Jesus' name, love is our law; gentleness is our highest aim; mercy is our bottom line; honesty is our way of being. This is what it means to be church. This is what it means to follow Jesus, as a community of disciples. May it be so. Hallelujah and Amen.