

On Matthew 18 and the Miranda Warning

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In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen

The Word of the Lord from the 18th chapter of St. Matthew, beginning at the 15th verse:

¹⁵"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶"But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' ¹⁷"And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. ¹⁸"Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

This is the Word of the Lord. The words are simple and straightforward: Sometimes, your brother will sin; when he does, call him to repentance. Gain the brother back by Law and Gospel, confession and absolution. If he will not hear, take a witness or two along that "every word may be established." Still, the foremost purpose is not to build a case for conviction; the goal is to gain the brother back. Likewise, if he will still not listen, tell it to the church so the church can call him to repentance. Why? To gain the brother back—restore him by the forgiveness of his sin.

It may seem a bit strange to offer a devotion on Matthew 18 at a conference regarding "Christ and Culture." However, the challenge to this topic is the tension between the two, and an ever-present danger is the confusion of those two kingdoms. I propose to you that one of the troubles we face is a confusion of a Scriptural doctrine, Matthew 18, with a dogma of our American culture: Namely, the Miranda warning. ("You have the right to remain silent; if you give up that right, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law," etc.)

It seems odd that anyone would confuse the two, for they stand in stark contrast:

- The Miranda warning is based upon law that says the accused is innocent until proven guilty; Matthew 18 stems from law that declares that all are guilty until declared innocent for the sake of Christ.
- Miranda is about rights and due process. Matthew 18 is about repentance and forgiveness.
- Miranda discourages the accused from confessing; Matthew 18 encourages the accused to confess.
- Miranda fits a system of law in which the accusers are trying to bring about condemnation; according to Matthew 18, the accusers are trying to *prevent* condemnation through repentance.
- From way too many reruns of cop shows, we know that if the Miranda warning is not given correctly, the evidence is thrown out and the perp is innocent in the eyes of the law. If Matthew 18 is not followed correctly, however, the sinner is still guilty of his sin before God.

The two seem opposites in so many ways, yet confusion abounds. It appears that Matthew 18 is misunderstood as another Miranda warning, a tenet of law to discourage a call to repentance rather than a bidding to gain the brother back through confession and absolution. To illustrate, I offer two interpretations of Matthew 18 which have recently been proffered:

The first is this: "Matthew 18 requires that you *go* to your brother and show him his fault. You can't write him or call him on the phone. You cannot arrange to meet him at a place halfway between your homes. You must go to him, or else you have violated Matthew 18." The implications of this are quite startling. If one is concerned about the doctrine and practice of another at a distance, he must have the health, ability and financial means to travel before he can call his brother to repentance. We must therefore, for instance, fault St. Paul for chastising the Corinthians via an epistle rather than traveling to see them forthwith.

The second argument is this: "Matthew 18 mandates that you go and confront your brother privately, no matter what the sin. Even if the sin is committed publicly for all the world to see, you must speak one-on-one first." This means, of course, that St. Paul was wrong to confront St. Peter publicly in Galatians 2:14, because he confronted Peter "before them all." It follows that Luther was also wrong when he wrote in the Large Catechism that public sins should be rebuked publicly (LC I:284ff). More significantly, we must also criticize our Lord Jesus Christ, who called Herod a "fox" without first going to the king (Lk. 13:32).

Let us illustrate the problem of these arguments in a well-known case of a ranking clergyman whose public syncretistic activities have garnered a great deal of media attention. I speak, of course, of Rowan Williams, the new Archbishop of Canterbury. Following his nomination and prior to his installation, Dr. Williams chose to undergo a druidic ordination ceremony so that he might be both a druid high priest and Anglican archbishop; more recently, he apologized to the Freemasons for statements that their doctrine was incompatible with Christianity. His support for homosexuality is a matter of public record. It would be quite easy for us to discuss the transgressions of Dr. Williams here, for I don't think any of us are quite ready to admit druid dogma into the canon. However, based upon popular interpretations of Matthew 18 today, you and I are prevented from criticizing the Archbishop. None of us have traveled to Great Britain and confronted him one-on-one; therefore, we cannot publicly warn against his heresy. According to these current arguments, Matthew 18 shields him from criticism! I trust that, if you operate by these arguments, you have never publicly criticized the actions of William Jefferson Clinton or Tariq Aziz, unless you have gone and spoken personally to them first.

Well-intended or not, these arguments obstruct the intent of Matthew 18. Criticism turns upon the one who cared enough to confront for failing to "follow the rules", and concern for the one who sinned in the first place is lost. All of this is precisely *not* what the Lord had in mind. He spoke those words in Matthew 18 not to shield the one who has sinned, but to admonish us to confront the erring brother. Matthew 18 is not the Miranda warning to help sinners avoid repentance on legal technicalities.

Perhaps it bears repeating: Matthew 18 is not the Miranda warning to help sinners avoid repentance on legal technicalities. Even if they are found innocent in the eyes of man, they are still guilty in the eyes of God. Jesus speaks Matthew 18 so that, before God, the guilt might be removed.

Recognizing the volatility within our synod—and perhaps among the brothers gathered here, I hasten to add the following: If anything I say here is contrary to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, I am most open to correction and repentance—and pray that in brotherly

love you will not leave me in my error. I read this devotion from a typed manuscript so that the words I speak are established. And that said, I offer the following Law and Gospel.

First, the Law: Sin is a serious matter, and can only be remitted by the forgiveness won by Christ. For one thing, this means that the permission of a human superior does not prevent guilt or bestow absolution. For another, this means that the one who has been sinned against must confront his brother for the purpose of repentance and restoration; this is putting the best construction on the matter. Even when confronting a brother for all the right reasons, there is always the temptation to thoughts of malice and ill will; such thoughts, on the part of any party, are sins which condemn. The one who is confronted should put the best construction on his brother's concern and give a straight answer for his offense: He should either explain its orthodoxy clearly on the basis of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions; or, if he cannot do so, repent and confess his sin. This is how brothers are to treat each other. To respond by counter-accusing, deflecting, or refusing to give a straightforward answer is also a violation of God's Law. Where the sin is public, other brothers may need to speak to the issue for the sake of the flock. They also are constrained to put the best construction on matters. They should carefully investigate the matter, examining the facts before speaking out. They are to speak out based upon Scripture—not poll numbers, publicized pressure, or emotional reaction. They should treat all parties with equal charity. They should warn the sheep of the nature of the sin that would endanger their faith. To fail in any of these respects is a sinful failure in need of forgiveness.

Where any, and all, of us are guilty of these sins, let us repent and trust in the mercies of Christ.

Now, the Gospel: Knowing all hearts and knowing all sin, the Lord Jesus Christ went to the cross and endured God's judgment for the sins of the world. He went to the cross to gain you back. In His mercy, He sends brothers to preach His Law to you only to gain you back by exposing your sin. He calls you to repentance so that He might flood you with forgiveness for all of your sins. He intends the best for you, that you be His beloved child and heir of eternal life. Rather than judge you by popular opinion, He knows your heart; and He declares His certain Word that you are redeemed. Rather than seek to prop up your sin in a good light, He kills it and raises you up anew with life forever. Christ calls you His brother and actively works for your restoration. He, who comes to you and shows you your fault by His Word, has already gone to the cross that you might be forgiven and faultless before Him. This is not a right that you have earned nor are entitled to; it is a gift to you, purchased by Christ with His holy, innocent blood and His bitter suffering and death.

We give thanks to our Lord for His precious words in Matthew 18, as He teaches us how to gain a brother back through repentance and forgiveness. God grant that we not misuse His Word to justify our sinful desires, but always with penitent hearts rejoice that Christ has gained us back by His death and resurrection.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen

We pray: Merciful God, we beseech Thee to cast the bright beams of Thy light upon Thy Church that, being instructed by the doctrine of the blessed Apostles, it may so walk in the light of Thy truth that it may at length attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen (TLH Collect #11)

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