

A careful read: Matthew 18:15-20

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by [Deanna Langle](#) in the [August 23, 2005](#) issue

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. The woman in front of me was a woman of integrity, deep faith and sincere commitment to the church. She had been hired to be a pastoral assistant, and in that role she had contributed substantial time and amazing gifts to the congregation. She had asked for a meeting with me only after trying to speak with her supervisor, the administrative pastor.

As she worked with the congregation, her roots in the faith grew, as well as her knowledge and experience. Her voice gained clarity and authority. So when she noticed a problem, in this case the pastor's misuse of power, she confronted the situation and challenged him. The senior pastor tried to silence her and ignore her. Reluctantly, she asked the executive council to hear her concern, but council members refused. The pastor had told them that the discussion must remain between the two of them. He quoted Matthew 18 in support of this decision: "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." By complying with the pastor and his use of a biblical directive, the council members allowed him to protect himself and them from the truth.

Matthew 18:15-20 is one of many scripture texts that have been used to harm others. These six verses are not meant to be a declaration of power, nor do these verses mean that if two or three people agree on something, then they can ignore others and do whatever they want. These six verses are about listening and accountability and about a larger vision of God's kingdom.

If one looks at these verses in the context of chapter 18, one notices the hyperbole Jesus uses in a series of brief teachings. Some of these teachings we choose to take literally, and some we don't. For example, we don't drown others for being "stumbling blocks." And we don't encourage people to pluck out their eyes or cut off body parts because they've sinned. And most shepherds would not abandon 99 sheep to go looking for one sheep. Jesus' exaggerated response to Peter's question about forgiveness in verse 21 shows that he knows we want forgiveness to be a quick and simple answer although it's not.

What is the kernel of truth that is embedded in each of these teachings, especially in verses 15-20? What is Jesus trying to teach the disciples by using such exaggeration?

Chapter 18 begins with the disciples coming to Jesus with the question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" I imagine Jesus being wide-eyed at what he was hearing. Were they seriously asking this of Jesus, whose ministry had always focused on the least?

Yet he doesn't dismiss their self-centered and self-righteous question. He takes them seriously, listens carefully and then responds, not with a direct or literal answer, but with several teachings and with exaggeration. Jesus pushes the disciples to think, to listen and to be accountable to others for the power they hold. The exaggeration allows the disciples the opportunity to learn without being embarrassed and to listen without becoming defensive. Jesus points them back to the "children," the "little ones," "the one that went astray," "the one not listened to" and "the fellow slave." The kingdom of God is not concerned with "who's the greatest," Jesus teaches; the kingdom of God is about using power to care for the least and most vulnerable.

Matthew 18:15-20 can be used to set up a vulnerable person to be even more vulnerable, as in the opening story. By the power of his role and by his misuse of scripture, the pastor disempowered the woman, denied her the process of being heard, protected himself and silenced the truth. Hiding behind their reading of this text, the pastor and the executive council avoided listening, stopped conversation and the possibility of healing, and joined their voices with the disciples in asking, "Who's the greatest?" Is that what Jesus is pointing us to in this text? Or is that what we point to when we think we're the greatest?

We must listen to and read texts like these carefully and honor the questions and tensions they raise for us. If we listen with “new ears” we always will hear something different from what we expect. That’s why Jesus uses hyperbole: to help the disciples hear the gospel of God’s love in different ways, through different experiences, with different language and images. If the Bible is a closed word and merely an answer book, then we’re in trouble. We’ll continue to use scripture to attack others and thus perpetuate violence against one another and justify such harm in God’s name. In this, we will limit God. That’s not an exaggeration.

Jesus could have used his power to tell the disciples exactly what he thought of their question, but he chose to listen, to open up conversation and to teach. The Bible invites us to enter into an ongoing conversation of Christians who struggle with what it means to live faithfully in relationship and to look beyond ourselves.

Jesus’ exaggeration in this text goes beyond what the disciples can comprehend and what we can comprehend: it goes beyond the tokenism of inclusiveness to a radical inclusivity where we take the other seriously, listen to the other, and dare trust that he or she belongs in God’s love as much as we do.