

September 6, Ordinary 23A (Matthew 18:15–20)

Jesus is not handing the church a timeless conflict resolution manual, however much we might long for one.

by [Timothy Adkins-Jones](#) in the [September 2026](#) issue
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Few biblical passages have been reduced to a slogan as often as Matthew 18:15–20 has. In fact, for many Christians, “Matthew 18” is shorthand for “church discipline.” Churches attempt to implement their understanding of this text in a wide variety of ways, with varying efficacy and emphases. But most fail to consider the larger context of the entire chapter. Jesus is not handing the church a timeless conflict resolution manual, however much we might long for one. Instead, Jesus is describing what life looks like in a community committed to protecting the vulnerable, telling the truth, and pursuing reconciliation.

I believe that the overuse, abuse, and misuse of this passage stems from the desire for an easy way to handle the inevitable conflicts that arise in church life. We know what we’re supposed to do, what we’re supposed to say, and how believers are supposed to behave with one another. We can point to the Bible verses that should guide our conduct, the love that Jesus demonstrates for everyone, and the assurance of the Spirit’s role in curtailing actions that lead to discord. But the reality of shared community is that conflict will arise—especially in communities of faith, where the shared beliefs that hold us together are so intimately tied to our understanding of our own identities. And because of that foreseeable conflict, I understand the desire to pigeonhole these few verses as the magic formula that can fix such problems. But Jesus is up to so much more here. Discipline—especially the sort of discipline that is related to punishment—is far from his mind in this passage.

Just before Jesus says a word about what to do about someone sinning against you, he shines the spotlight on the discipleship example of children. Children, who in the ancient Near Eastern world occupied the lowest position in the social order, are offered as the example of how to gain access into the kingdom of heaven (18:3). Then Jesus warns, in no uncertain terms, against causing one of these “little ones” to stumble. This concern for the vulnerable continues in the parable of the lost sheep (18:12–13). Jesus says, with some evident incredulity, that of course a shepherd leaves the 99 to search for the missing one, and then the shepherd rejoices all the more! The least of these, the least of these, *the least of these!* Care for the least of these (25:40).

By the time we get to this week’s passage, Jesus’ underlying thesis of care for the most vulnerable is well established. This passage imagines a church courageous enough to tell the truth and compassionate enough to prioritize reconciliation. Perhaps the movement from private conversation to the inclusion of witnesses and eventually to the larger community is less a rigid checklist and more a call for shared responsibility. No one is left alone, neither the offended nor the offender, as the entire community walks alongside everyone.

Reading the passage this way would protect against many of its damaging implementations. If we drop discipline from our minds as we hear these verses and instead think about reconciliation or relationship, then we see that this formula shouldn’t be weaponized to excuse abuse, discrimination, or exploitation. We wouldn’t instruct survivors to confront those who have harmed them privately before seeking support from others—in effect, protecting offenders from accountability—just because it is step one on a list. We wouldn’t share sensitive information with the whole congregation simply because a disagreement wasn’t resolved in steps one and two. We wouldn’t vote people out of the church after all three steps failed.

No, we would, like Jesus, focus our attention on the vulnerable, the forgotten, and the ones most likely to be overlooked. We'd drop the three steps and search for a process that protects the most vulnerable. In fact, we would treat everyone like Jesus treated the heathen and the tax collectors: We'd pull them close! Jesus' instruction to treat the offender like an outsider should be a rallying cry for care, not permission to push people away. Jesus says it to instruct his disciples to pursue those who seem far away. This does not erase accountability or ignore the need for repentance. Relationships can be fractured. Trust can be broken. Consequences are real. Yet none of those realities cancels the church's obligation to imitate the relentless welcome of Christ. Even those outside the community remain objects of God's pursuing love.

Reclaiming this text in the name of care for the least of these offers an opportunity to enliven a text that has too often been reduced to a policy manual. Matthew 18 is a chapter about forming a particular kind of community, a community where vulnerable people are protected, difficult truths can be spoken, accountability serves healing rather than domination, and no one is beyond the reach of grace. If it is about discipline at all, it is about finding the discipline to remain focused on the least of these in every situation.