

# The Spirit & our Community

So good to see you guys today. If you have a bible, turn with me to Matthew 18. Today we're continuing on in a series that we began a couple weeks back called *Holy Ghost Revival*, which is a series all about the Holy Spirit. And this passage we're going to look at in Matthew 18 is a passage that on its surface, might seem a bit random—like it has *nothing* to do with the Holy Spirit. But what we're going to see eventually is that it actually has *everything* to do with the Spirit. And everything specifically to do with how the Spirit speaks through our community.

Before we get there though, I want to just briefly set up why I think what we're talking about today *matters*. So I told you guys in week 1 of this series that I grew up going to a very Southern Baptist church. And in that church, there were a lot of good things—it was a very *biblical*, very *healthy* church in a lot of ways. But one thing that *wasn't* talked about much at all was the Holy Spirit. It just wasn't our thing. And then when I began to truly follow Jesus in college, I started hanging out with a small group of people from a local ministry on campus who were *really into* the Holy Spirit. And because that was all pretty new to me, I honestly was very *intrigued* by it all. I was intrigued by how they talked to God like he was living and active—they talked to God like they expected him to *talk back*. And he did. In ways that have transformed the way *I* talk to God to this day. It was so very eye-opening and life-giving to me.

But in the midst of all that I was intrigued by in this group of people, there was one thing I became very *bothered* by with them. The leader of this particular ministry—we'll call him Devin—was a little older than the rest of the crew. He had been out of college for about five years or so. And in those five years out of college, as I understood it, he had gotten married, had a kid, and then gotten divorced, and was now dating someone different. And there was always this air of mystery around that whole part of his story. But one particular night as we were meeting, I got to hear more of the details on it. And the story, as he told it, went something like this: he had gotten married almost immediately out of college, and him and his wife had gotten pregnant within the first year of their marriage with a baby girl. Pretty soon after the baby was born, his wife began to experience some somewhat severe post-partum depression. It was difficult for her to get out of bed a lot of days.

And after a year and a half of her struggling with that, to use Devin's *exact words*, “the Spirit revealed to me that my marriage represented a spirit of death and despair, and

God's intention for his people isn't death and despair but rather life and joy." And he believed that in light of that, the Holy Spirit was "releasing him" from his marriage. So he divorced his wife, and within a few months began to date a woman that he had been working with for the past two years. And I remember when he told me that story, just feeling *gross* about it. Like everything about his story just felt *wrong*. Because it **very much felt to me like he was just using "the Holy Spirit" as justification to get out of a marriage he just didn't want to be in.**

And the longer I hung out with these people from this ministry, I began to notice that this approach was a little bit of a pattern with them. **People would often use "the Holy Spirit told me to..." as justification for doing things that were *at best* spiritually *neutral*, and *sometimes* were in direct *contradiction* to things that the Scriptures clearly taught.** It was like they used the Holy Spirit as a trump card—they could do whatever they wanted to do, and as long as they could sufficiently spiritualize and attribute it to the Holy Spirit, no one could call into question what they were doing. I mean, after all, who would *dare* question the work of the Holy Spirit?

But let's be honest for a second this morning: this group of people I came across in college are far from the only ones that do this. The phrases "the Holy Spirit told me to..." or "God told me to..." tend to be perennial favorites among *a lot* of Christians. Anytime we are tired of living in one place, we'll say "God is leading me to move to a new city." Anytime we're tired of one job, we'll say "the Holy Spirit is leading me towards a new job opportunity." Anytime we're tired of one church, we'll say "God leading me away from this church," Anytime we really like someone, we say "God told me to ask them out." Whenever we don't like someone so much anymore, we say "God told me we should break up." Some Christians do this all the time, do they not?

Now listen—as I'm saying that, I have no doubt that God really does tell certain people to do specific things—maybe even some of *those* things. I have no doubt that our God is a speaking God and that he sometimes guides us and leads us in really clear, even *audible* ways. But at the same time, **I can't help but think that at least *sometimes*, when we say "God is telling me" to do something, we're just looking for an easy out. I can't help but think that *sometimes*, when we say "God told me to do this thing," what we really mean is "*I want to do this, and I don't want anyone to challenge or question me on it.*"** Am I preaching yet?

And it has always seemed a little odd to me that in Christian circles, there never seems to be much pushback to Christians saying and doing those types of things. It seems

weird that people using the Holy Spirit very selfishly and conveniently never gets challenged. And one reason it seems weird to me is that the Scriptures actually paint a very different picture of the Holy Spirit's influence. And Matthew 18 is one of those places. **I think our passage today actually speaks into some of those very types of situations, and gives us a much more helpful picture of the Spirit's influence.**

So for context, in this passage, Jesus is actually helping followers of Jesus know what to do when there is conflict between them and *other followers of Jesus*. He's going to give some very practical instructions to begin with, and then in the second half of the passage he's going to drop a very big, honestly somewhat shocking statement that I think informs how we think about the Spirit's role through our community. But first we'll take a look at the practical instructions to get some context. Okay, take a look with me at Matthew 18, starting in v. 15:

*[15] "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have **gained your brother**. [16] But if he does **not listen**, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. [17] If he refuses to listen to **them**, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, **let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.***

So this is what you should do when "your brother sins against you." These instructions apply to situations where you and I are both followers of Jesus, and one of us wrongs the other one in some significant way. That's the context of *this* passage. But I will say there are also *other* places in the bible, like 1 Corinthians 5 and Galatians 6, that tell us give us similar steps to follow when another believer sins *in general*—not just when they sin against *you*. So you could say this is how we approach a situation where another follower of Jesus is caught in some sort of sin. This is what Jesus says we should do. Does that make sense?

To make sure we grasp what it's saying, let's imagine a scenario where this applies. Let's say hypothetically, you're in my LifeGroup, and over a period of time, living in close relationship with me, you start to notice some sinful tendencies about me (again, this is totally hypothetical: I'm pretty much perfect in every way). But in this *very hypothetical scenario*, you notice some sinful patterns in my life. Let's say you start to pick up on the fact that I'm regularly unkind and impatient towards my wife. You notice that as a pattern, I'm quick to anger, quick to grow frustrated with her, talk down to her—all sorts of things like that. And so because you are in my life and you see it as your responsibility to help

me grow as a follower of Jesus, you come and talk to me about it. And let's say that for whatever reason, I'm just not having it. You talk to me about it and I go "no way, nuh-uh. You're not seeing things accurately. That's not true of me—I'm not a jerk—I reject that notion." What this passage is saying you should do *next* is that you should come and talk to me about it *again*, but this time, you should bring one or two *more* people with you, who have *also* noticed these same sinful tendencies in me. And if I'm *still* not having it, it's saying that you should take it to the Church as a whole, and if I *still* refuse to hear it out, eventually you should treat me like a "Gentile and a tax collector." Meaning, **you should treat me like I'm not a follower of Jesus. Because for all intents and purposes, I don't seem like I am one.** ~~Because followers of Jesus realize that our righteousness, our worth and value, comes not from us being awesome people, but from Jesus' death and resurrection on our behalf. So knowing that, we have no problem admitting when our performance is less than stellar. We have no problem admitting we're wrong and owning up to it. But in this scenario, I am repeatedly refusing to do any of that. So this passage is saying you should treat me in accordance with my actions like I'm not a follower of Jesus.~~

(Now—I know if you're brand new to church, that sounds crazy intense. I understand that. If you have questions about that, feel free to come talk to me afterwards or take our City Church Class where we go into that in more detail. But that's not where we're headed today). Today, I simply want us to see *why* that's what we should do in those scenarios. This is the part I want us to hone in on for today's teaching. Pick it up with me in v. 18 of the passage:

*[18] Truly, I say to you, whatever you **bind** on earth shall be **bound** in heaven, and whatever you **loose** on earth shall be **loosed** in heaven.*

Okay, hang with me for just a second while we wrap our heads around this language of "binding" and "loosing." Basically, these two terms are ways of talking about *authority*. To "bind" something meant *to forbid it by an indisputable authority*. So back then, if a judge in a courtroom said to you "I *bind* you from being at this place," that was a way of him saying "I legally *forbid* you from being at this place." And "loosing" is the reverse: it meant *to allow something by an indisputable authority*. So if a judge said "I loose" you from having to pay for these damages you aren't responsible for, that meant "I legally *liberate* you from having to pay for them." Am I making sense so far? Binding and loosing mean to *forbid* or *allow* by an indisputable authority.

So when Jesus delivers v. 18, what he's doing is delegating some pretty significant *authority* to his followers. Essentially, he's saying *I give you guys authority on some level to say what goes and what doesn't go in the kingdom of God. If several of you are on the same page about something, I'm with you on it.* Which is kind of what he says explicitly next, in verses 19-20. Take a look:

**[19] Again I say to you** [which is Jesus for "I'm about to say the same thing again, but in a slightly different way"], **if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. [20] For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.**"

Now as strange as this passage might be so far, v. 20 probably sounds somewhat familiar to many of us: "*where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them.*" Raise your hand if you've heard that verse before. Yep, good many of us. For a long time, I thought that verse was about worship services and prayer meetings. Anybody else with me on that? Like in my youth group, we had a t-shirt printed to promote our Wednesday night worship service, and on the back was a fantastically cheesy stock photo of a bunch of people with their hands lifted in worship, and over the top was printed "*where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them.*" Mmmm. *Selah.* And we wore the mess out of that shirt. *That's* what a lot of people think this verse, v. 20, is talking about.

But in the greater context of the passage, it doesn't really seem like that's what it's talking about, does it? Seems like Jesus has something other than worship services and prayer meetings in mind. Which if you think about it, we should've realized all along. Because if God is only there when *two or three* people are *together*, what does that mean for when it's just me *alone*? So God *isn't* there if it's just me reading my bible? I guess I need to get my friend Joe to come sit in a room with me while I read the bible so God can be present there. No, that's ridiculous. Because that's not what this verse is talking about.

Here's what this passage *is* talking about. It's saying that **if several followers of Jesus, filled with the Spirit, collectively and independently agree on something God is telling them, there's a good chance they're onto something.** Jesus' point is that **there is power—there is God-ordained authority, even—when multiple, Holy Spirit filled believers are in agreement about something.** In fact, Jesus uses the strongest possible language for it: he says that God himself is among them. Anybody remember from week 1 of the series what God being "among" or "dwelling among" his people

typically refers to? Yeah, that's the language of the *Holy Spirit*. So *there's* our connection to this series (I told you we'd get there eventually): **the Holy Spirit is *with* a group of believers that collectively agree on something God is guiding them to say.**

Okay, full stop. Make sure you hear what this means. This means that **you and I, if we would call ourselves followers of Jesus, that we should treat the wisdom, the correction, and the counsel of *other* followers of Jesus, as if they are the very words and voice of the *Holy Spirit* to us.** I'm going to say that again because some of you don't look nearly bothered enough to have clearly heard what I just said. **This passage just said that if you are a follower of Jesus, you should treat the wisdom, correction, and counsel of other followers of Jesus as if they are the very words of the Holy Spirit to you.** Not simply that we should listen to them, not that we should hear them out and then go "okay, thanks for your input, but I'm going to do what I want to do." But that we should treat it with the seriousness that we would treat the very words of God to us. That's *intense*, is it not?

So let's jump briefly back into our hypothetical scenario. In that situation, if you think I am being overly impatient and harsh towards my wife. And then if there are *other* followers of Jesus that have also witnessed the same thing in me, and you guys all come and say collectively "you are being harsh towards your wife and you need to pursue repentance in this area," that that conversation should serve as a wake-up call to me. Because **here are two or three people who all love Jesus, who are all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they all agree that the *same thing* is off in me.** Jesus is saying in this passage that **faced with that situation, I should at least *consider* that what these people are saying to me are the very words and authority of Jesus for my life.** Because it is far more likely that *they* all see me *accurately* and that *I* see myself *inaccurately*, than it is to be the other way around. It's far more likely that I am *deceived* about something and that they see it clearly, than it is that they are *all* independently deceived about something in precisely the same way.

And if you think about it, this approach makes a lot of practical sense. So just take it out of church world for just a second: I remember back in elementary school, when my class would go on field trips and we would load up the bus—our teachers would obviously want to make very sure that we didn't leave anybody behind. And in order to make sure of that, we would have not *one*, not two—but *three different teachers* walk up and down the bus to count everybody. And before we left, they had to all get the same number when they counted. Now, why did they do that? Because **the assumption is that it's easy for one person to make a counting mistake, but it's a lot harder for *three different***

**people to make the exact same counting mistake.** In a way, that's what this passage is pushing for in regards to hearing from God. It would be easy for *one person* to be deceived. But it's a lot harder for *two* or *three* people to all be deceived in precisely the same way. So **it's saying that we should use other followers of Jesus as a test to help us discern if we truly are hearing accurately from the Holy Spirit.** Does that make sense?

Now before we go any further, let me go ahead and say that I know that might raise all sorts of hesitations and pushbacks in us. And we're going to spend some time before we're done addressing those. But before we do that, let me just make sure we all see why this is so *practically helpful*. Because this should sound like *good news* to us. If the people around us can help serve as one avenue for God to speak into our lives, that's immensely helpful. For example...

This means that the next time you're faced with a decision of any sort, and you *think* you know what's best but you're not *sure*, what you can do is bring that decision to other Holy Spirit-filled believers that know you and share life with you and say "here's the decision I'm facing, here are all the details, here's what I'm leaning towards—what is the Holy Spirit telling *you guys* I should do?" That's *helpful*.

This means that next time you're leaning towards dating someone but you're not sure if it's a good idea, you can get that person around other followers of Jesus that know you and do life with you, let them get to know that person, and then you can ask your community, "okay, what do you guys think? What is the Spirit telling you guys? Good idea? Bad idea? Horrible idea? What's he telling you?"

This means that the next time you're having conflict with your spouse, and you honestly don't know if you're wrong, or they're wrong, or you're both wrong—you don't have to just stay *stuck* in that. You can take the situation to your community and say "here's the conflict we're having, here are the details—what do you guys think? What is the Holy Spirit telling you guys? Do *I* need to repent and change? Does *my spouse* need to repent and change?" And if they're smart, most of the time, they're going to say "yes. You *both* need to repent and change."

*And*, this means that the next time you are stressing out over a decision, and you're agonizing even more because you've prayed through it tons, you've sought the wisdom of the Scriptures a ton, and you *still* don't know what you should do, you don't have to feel defeated *in* that. Because you can come to other followers of Jesus and go "here are

all the details—I need help—what should I do?” Do you see why knowing this can be so helpful practically? And we can do all of this because Jesus has delegated tremendous authority to the voice of other Spirit-filled followers of Jesus he has put around us.

Now, let me be *crystal clear* on one thing here: I’m *not saying* that community should *replace* you *individually* seeking out the voice of God for decisions and things in our lives. It shouldn’t. In fact, there might be some of you in the room who have precisely that tendency: *you* tend to *neglect* talking to God or seeking out the wisdom of the bible on things *on your own*, because you just immediately ask other people and do whatever they say. ~~To be honest with you guys, that’s where I tend to err sometimes. If I’m not careful, I will only rely on what other followers of Jesus tell me to do and sometimes I’ll neglect to pray through things and seek the voice of the Spirit on my own. So sometimes when I’m making a decision, I have a personal rule that I have to pray and seek wisdom from God on my own for at least 24 hours before I talk to other people about it. Maybe you have a similar struggle and should put something like that in place.~~

So I’m not saying we should *replace* seeking out the voice of God individually with seeking out the voice of God through other believers. You need *both*. I’m simply saying that **hearing from the Spirit through other people can often serve as a good test of what we think the Spirit is saying to us. God wants us to honor the voice of the Spirit-filled people around us, speaking directly into our lives.** And not just them speaking *into* our lives, but *trusting* the things they are saying to us, at times *far more* than we trust ourselves.

Okay, that being said, I know this idea likely raises some pushbacks in us. Thinking about it this way just may generate some hesitancies for some of us. So what I want to do for the next little bit is try to address some of those pushbacks. First up...

### **Pushback #1: Couldn’t this principle be misused?**

Most importantly, some of you might be processing this whole “where two or more are gathered” principle, and thinking that this sounds like it’s just making room for people to be spiritually manipulated. Maybe it sounds to you like it just makes room for a spiritual version of “groupthink,” where a group of people believe they’re right about something simply because they all think similar things *about* it. Or that this even makes room for spiritual *abuse* or spiritual *bullying*—where people could use the power of numbers to try and *control* someone. Maybe to you it just seems to you like this principle could be



misused in really destructive ways. And the truth is that you're absolutely right—it *could* be misused.

[So let me clarify, this isn't giving people permission to go round up a mob against you. It's not saying that people who don't like me get to go to a third party and say, "Kent's a real jerk, don't you agree? Let's go get him!" Not at all. It's actually saying that the person with the concern should use *other followers of Jesus* as a *test* as to whether what they see in you is truly worth addressing or not." If one person thinks you're a horrible human being and the other people don't see that in you at all, that should be a prompt for the first person to reconsider their opinion of you.]

Another way to guard against misuse of this principle is to have *filters* to run it all through. If another follower of Jesus is speaking into your life in a way that might be from God, here are three questions you can ask to identify if it truly *is* from God or not. Three great questions to ask:

- **Does this person's counsel jive with the bible?** ~~If a person's counsel contradicts or runs in the opposite direction of things the bible clearly teaches, that's a crystal clear sign it's not from God.~~
- **Is this person's character marked by a love for Jesus?** ~~For a person to claim to speak for God into your life, their own life should show some obvious fruit of the Spirit.~~
- **Has this person shown a pattern of love and care towards you?** ~~If this person only ever talks to you when they want to correct you or call you out on something, that's a good sign they may not be truly speaking on God's behalf. Because God does correct us and confront us, but he also encourages us, strengthens us, and empowers us. Your community should seek to do all of these.~~

So right there are three ways to discern if a person's counsel is for your good, or isn't. So the goal in all this isn't to check your brain and discernment at the door anytime someone speaks into your life. There are very clear, very important filters to run it through. But if the answer to all three of those questions is "yes"—if this person's counsel *does* align with Scripture, if their character *is* marked by a love for Jesus, and if they *have* shown a pattern of love and care for you—in that scenario, you'd do well to consider hearing them out, even if you don't particularly *like* what they're saying. Make sense? So this principle certainly could be misused, and there are some ways to discern if that's happening.

But lastly, on this pushback, I do just feel compelled to say this. Like we said, this principle can absolutely be misused. But *that* being said, for every *one* time I've seen it misused, I've seen probably *a hundred* times where a person just doesn't want to have to listen to other people speaking into their life. So **sure, it is possible for a group of people to all be wrong about something they're telling you. But it's far more likely that you are wrong about it, than that they're all wrong in precisely the same way.** So let's be on guard against this being misused, for sure—but let's also be on guard against our own pride that wants to fight *against* having to listen to the voice of the Spirit through other followers of Jesus. Fair? Which leads us to pushback #2...

## **Pushback #2: I know myself better than anybody else does.**

Another pushback we often have to letting other people speak into our lives is that **deep down, we think we know ourselves better than anybody else does.** Now, on one level, *of course this is true*: nobody spends more time with you than you do—that's just reality. So of course on some level, yes: you have more data about yourself to go on than other people do. But—and this is very, very important—that doesn't mean you see and *interpret all the data* about yourself *accurately*. Here's the way Proverbs 12:15 puts it:

*The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.*

So the nature of sin is that it *deceives* us. It deceives us about a lot of things, but especially about *ourselves*. We look at ourselves and think our *intentions* are mostly good. But we are often blind to the selfishness and self-centeredness at work in us. So **while we may know more about ourselves than anyone else, that certainly doesn't mean our assessment of ourselves is always accurate.** It often isn't. You and I are prone to *blindness* when it comes to how we see ourselves. We are prone to think of ourselves more favorably than we should. And God in his kindness towards us has put other Spirit-filled people into our lives to make sure we don't *operate* regularly *out of* that blindness.

Or maybe for some of you, it's more that you don't feel like you *have* people in your life that know you well enough to speak into it. Maybe you're thinking, "yeah I'd love to have those types of people to speak into my life, but I don't." If that's true, we would love to invite you to join one of our LifeGroups. LifeGroups are the primary vehicle for all this happening at City Church and we'd love to get you into one. If you *are* in a LifeGroup and you still feel that way, it might be worth asking why that's true: are there ways that

you can be more transparent or more open in those relationships, so that those people can know you well enough to speak into your life? Because the goal is to know people who can *help us know ourselves* more.

But hopefully that helps to address some of the pushbacks we might be experiencing in regards to all this.

But let me just land the plane here. For those of us that are still hesitant to give other followers of Jesus this type of weight and authority in our lives, I think there's actually something deeper going on than just not wanting to listen to our community. I think if we could see all the way to the bottom of our hesitations with this, we would actually find something else going on beneath the surface. I think deep down, we don't want all this to be true because we have bought in—some of us, *entirely*—to the lie of individualism and self-sufficiency. Our society convinces us—no, *disciples us*—to believe that “all I need is me”: “I don't need other people, I don't need other people's wisdom, I don't need other people's input—I don't need any of that because I'm gonna do me. And if I invite other people to speak into my life, they're just gonna interfere with what I want and what I think is best.” That mentality right there, at the end of the day, is why we justify things with phrases like “God told me to.” That, at the end of the day, is why we resist other people speaking into and even confronting things in our life. We're like that because otherwise we'd have to admit that we aren't actually all that self-sufficient. That we need others. And ultimately, that we need God himself.

You see, we tend to forget that **the very act of becoming a Christian involves renouncing our self-sufficiency. If you say “I'm a Christian,” what you are saying there is that “God did for me something that I had no ability to do for myself.** I was weak, powerless, and *dead* in the depths of my sin. And into that helpless, dependent state, Jesus came to offer up his life and death on my behalf, to make me his. I *needed* Jesus to intervene on my behalf.” So following Jesus is to say, “I am the very opposite of self-sufficient and independent—I am entirely *dependent* on Jesus.” And if you *don't* believe that, then the problem is much bigger than just not listening to people in your life. It's actually that you don't understand who you *are* before God. But if you *do* believe that—that you needed Jesus to do *that* for you—then of course it would make sense that you would *continue* to need his help and wisdom and guidance *ongoingly*, and sometimes that's going to come to you through other followers of Jesus.

You see, **the very good news of the gospel itself comes to us first in the form of loving confrontation.** *Confrontation*, in that it states plainly “you need God to do

something for you that you absolutely cannot do.” That’s a difficult pill to swallow for *any* self-sufficient person. But the gospel is *loving* confrontation, in that Jesus offers all of himself on our behalf, to accomplish what we could not. *Loving*, in that it is given to us as a gift, as a free offering to us entirely irregardless of how ill-deserving we are of it. *Loving*, in that Jesus was glad to give up his own life to do what we couldn’t. And he doesn’t withhold his affection for us until we are worthy of it. He comes to us in our helpless state and says “here is my blood and my body, shed for you, whether you think you need it right now or not.”

And once you’ve accepted that reality about yourself, it only makes sense that you would periodically and regularly need other Holy Spirit-filled people to speak into your life. *Of course* we all need that, just like we were in need of Jesus in the beginning. And other followers of Jesus is just one part of his grace towards us. Though we have now been given a relationship with God *individually* through the Spirit, we are all prone to deception now and again, we’re all prone to blindness now and again, and part of God’s grace is that he has given us other followers of Jesus to help us fight against those tendencies. All of that is his grace to us. The question is, *will we receive it?*

Let’s pray.