

# Reflection for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary time, Cycle A

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The readings for this Sunday can be found at <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/091023.cfm>

## **1st Reading:** *Ezekiel 33:7–9*

Ezekiel was chosen as prophet at the beginning of the Babylonian exile (5 years into an exile that lasted around 70 years) before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. This passage describes the mission God assigned to him among the exiled. The people began to understand that the exile and destruction of the temple was a result of their sinfulness. Ezekiel preached that those who heard the message and reformed would become a new Israel and rebuild the covenant community and Temple. (NABRE intro to the Book of Ezekiel)

## **2nd Reading:** *Romans 13:8–10*

After the selection we had last week about offering your bodies as spiritual sacrifice (Rm 12:1-2), we skip a long section on living the Christian life as opposed to living worldly ways. The skipped section is evidently Paul's thoughts on how to live out our spiritual sacrifice. After this, we have today's selection about how love fulfills the Law and, by implication, fulfills our spiritual sacrifice.

## **Gospel:** *Matthew 18:15–20*

### **If someone in your community sins, tell him privately...**

When I was 14 years old, I went to a Franciscan seminary in Ohio. One of my least favorite memories is of what was called Chapter of Faults. We would stand in a circle and, one-by-one, would take two steps into the center. Then everyone had the chance to tell the one who stepped forward what they had done wrong that week. One fault that I was accused of is emblematic of my experience; I was told that I walked too heavily, made too much noise when I walked.

If anyone ever thought Chapter of Faults implemented today's Gospel, they were wrong! This Gospel is not about trivial personal grievances. It is about caring for the other and trying to win them over from evil and keep them in the community of disciples we call Church.

The fault of the other should be something serious. In 1 Cor 5:11 St. Paul listed a few when he told the Corinthians to not associate with a brother "if he is immoral, greedy, an idolater, a slanderer, a drunkard, or a robber." This is what some Christian traditions call shunning. And remember, this is not about judging. It's about loving the other person enough to try to win them away from the evil they're engaged in.

Dealing with an addicted person is probably a good example of what this Gospel is suggesting. If you have ever had to do it, you know that the first step is confronting them individually and tell them how their drinking or drug use is affecting them, and how it is affecting you. If that doesn't work, and I'm sorry to say it often doesn't, then many people schedule an intervention with others who are affected by this person's addiction. Sometimes that doesn't work either. And we all know that we are supposed to try

not to enable them. That in some ways is similar to the shunning approach but it must be done in a loving manner. Alanon has helped many people in this situation.

Another example that might be appropriate is when dealing with a child who is doing serious wrong. Remember to correct them out of love and in a loving manner. If both parents, or others who have some responsibility in raising the child, work together, it fulfills the requirement for two or three witnesses. If it is serious wrongdoing and your efforts aren't fruitful, you might seek counseling for your child. That might be similar to taking them to the Church, maybe seeking a Christian counselor is best. I don't really want to suggest that you bring the child to the priest although two or three people have don't that with me. I think for at least one of them, I was helpful. I certainly wasn't interested in throwing them out of the faith community.

Another thing this Gospel is telling us is that our concern is to be with one of the "brothers", someone inside our Church community, not someone outside of us. The first Jewish non-Christian hearers of this Gospel would have understood "brothers" to mean someone Jewish, just like in the Hebrew Scriptures. Since Mathew was writing to a Jewish-Christian community, they would have understood he was talking about Christians. When Scripture uses the term "neighbor", by the way, it means someone who shares your nationality. In the Hebrew Scriptures, it included Jewish people as well as non-Jews.

That said, we also have a responsibility to attract others to our community of disciples. That has a whole different set of methods, starting with living lives in a manner that will attract others. This responsibility also requires a non-judgmental attitude of love.

Finally, some people think the section about two or three people praying stands separate from the discussion about winning a sinner back. I think not. I think the connection is the two or three witnesses requirement. And, it certainly makes sense to do something this serious in a prayerful manner, a loving prayerful manner.

Always remember, the goal of this Gospel message about fraternal correction is to tell us that we have the responsibility of trying to win the other back from evil, we need to do it in a lovingly prayerful manner and the responsibility is for us to win back someone in our community, not someone outside of it.

### **Reflection:**

"If your brother sins [against you], go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother."

### **Question:**

What words or phrases grabbed your attention during the Liturgy of the Word on Sunday? What connection do those words or phrases have to your day-to-day life? (Why do you think they grabbed your attention?) What might God be trying to say to you through these words or phrases? What response should you make? What action should you take?

### **Alternative:**

Share about/Reflect upon a time when someone tried to help you amend your ways or when you tried to help someone else. What happened? Why was that the result?

## Verse by Verse:

Mt 18:15-20 is connected to the preceding parable about the Lost Sheep (Mt 18:10-14). It tells us that we have the responsibility of trying to win back the one who strayed and gives us 3 steps in doing that. It points back to Lev 19:17 which requires that we “reprove our brother when necessary.”

Mt: 18:15a “If your brother sins against you...” | Brother here means fellow disciple. It uses the Jewish understanding that a “neighbor” is a fellow countryman, and a “brother” is someone of the same religion. (UBSH)

Matthew and Jesus used the Jewish concept of sin meaning breaking the Law which Jesus explained is based on the Law of Love. Remember that there are 613 commandments (*mitzvot*) in the Hebrew Scriptures, not just 10. But, Jesus didn’t seem to be too concerned with, and maybe was even against some of, the extended law. Breaking some of the laws is more serious than breaking others. In 1 Cor 5:11 Paul lists several sins, of the type this Gospel is probably referring to, when he tells the Corinthians to stay away from a brother “If he is immoral, greedy, an idolater, a slanderer, a drunkard, or a robber.

The words “against you” are not attested in some major manuscripts like Vaticanus and Sainaticus. Scripture scholars disagree as to whether they are original or not. Many translations have a note pointing this out. If they are not original, it is easier to understand that we have the obligation to try to win any sinner back, rather than one who only sins against us. This understanding matches more closely with the parable of the Lost Sheep that precedes this teaching.

Mt 18:15b “...you have won over your brother.” | This doesn’t mean that you have reconciled him to yourself but that you have won him back to the community of disciples.

Mt 18:16 “...take one or two others...” | This points to Dt 19:15 which, for the protection of the accused, requires two or three witnesses to convict someone.

Mt 18:17a “...tell the church...” | Remember that “church”, here, translates *ekklesia which means assembly*. It is speaking of a few members of the local Christian assembly, not necessarily the leadership.

Mt 18:17b “...treat him as you would a Gentile or tax collector.” | This means to expel them from the community. This is what Paul required in 1 Cor 5:1-13 for the person sleeping with his father’s wife. Notice that Paul castigated the community for having allowed this matter to continue.

Mt 18:18 “...whatever you bind on earth...” |The binding and loosing is here applied to the decision of the community not just to Peter as it seems in Mt 16:19.

Mt 18:19-20 “...if two of you agree... about anything for which they are to pray...” | Some scholars think this is misplaced. It seems to me that it goes with the multiple witnesses and community work in bringing a sinner back. It implies to me that the steps we take to bring a sinner back should be prayerful.