

How Do We Join Our God in What He Is Praying and Doing Right Now?

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Last Sunday, we considered this question: What would it look like if a representation of believers, in connection with Jesus and with others, engaged in persistent, believing prayer, praying according to the authority which the Lord has given to them?

We wondered together if this kind of prayer could change our culture of fear and hatred, replacing it with faith, hope, and love, so that the will of God would be done here as in heaven.

Remember: Jesus could do no mighty works in Nazareth because of the atmosphere of unbelief (Mark 6:1-6).

I believe that the agreeing prayers of the people of God could change the spiritual atmosphere over our cities and nation.

Last week, we considered the subject, "What is our authority in prayer?"

This week, we want to explore some answers to this question: How Do We Join Our God in What He Is Praying and Doing Right Now?

Let's begin with prayer, asking the Lord to help us hear and obey what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Here are some ways to participate in prayer, so that the spiritual atmosphere over our communities, cities, and nations could change.

1. Large corporate prayer emphases.

- a. What did the Lord tell Israel to do in the midst of a national crisis? Let's read about it in Joel 2:12 and following.
- b. *"Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' 13 Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. 14 Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing-- grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God. 15 **Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. 16 Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring***

together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. 17 Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, 'Spare your people, O LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" 18 Then the LORD will be jealous for his land and take pity on his people. 19 The LORD will reply to them... (Joel 2:12-19 NIV).

- c. **When you hear the trumpet blast, it is a call to mobilize and to respond. We respond as we have grace and we pray.**
- i. For example, I shared recently the post on Facebook about how [Loving Houston](#) mobilized prayer for back to school. We blew that trumpet, shared the materials, and encouraged prayer for students, teachers, staff, and parents.
 - ii. [Loving Houston](#) also held a corporate prayer meeting on Zoom on September 3.
 - iii. There are prayer guides and ideas on the [LovingHouston.net](#) website.
- d. **We are blowing the trumpet for prayer in this election season.** There are a number of prayer initiatives over the next 40 days until the elections. **We are joining one of those efforts.** You will receive an email this afternoon about our day of prayer during a called [40 Days of Prayer](#).
- i. The [40 Days of Prayer 2020](#) vision is to call for forty days of non-stop prayer from September 26 to November 4. This 40 Days of Prayer is led by our friend, Gideon Stanley of [Gideon's Army Ministries](#) in concert with several other leaders in Houston. Several prayer ministries have come together to call the nation to a time of intense, non-stop prayer. **They are calling for at least 40 churches to commit to cover one 24-hour period with non-stop prayer. Calvary has chosen 8:00am Monday, September 28, through 8:00am Tuesday, September 29.** You may view the Calvary prayer schedule [here](#).
 - ii. **Calvary, we are blowing the trumpet. We are asking as many of you as possible to choose a one-hour time slot to pray.**
 1. For each hour time period, there are two slots available.
 2. We encourage you to gather together in person, pray over the phone, or use an online platform such as Zoom or FaceTime to agree together in prayer (Matthew 18:19-20).
 3. We hope that we can have at least 2 people praying per hour, in each time slot. However, we do realize this may not be possible, especially at certain times during our

assigned 24-hour time period. That is okay. What is important is that we cover the entire 24 hour period with prayer and that each of pray during the slot(s) we've chosen.

4. If we fill all available time slots within our 24-hour period, we will add more options for each slot.
5. You are welcome to choose more than one time slot. All we ask is that you honor your commitment to pray during those times. An email and text reminder will be sent to you the day before, reminding you of the time(s) you signed up to pray.

iii. **Join in prayer as you can, either in person or virtually.**

- e. **We will also blow the trumpet for prayer as we begin the new year.**
Our current thinking is to kick off the new year with 21-days of fasting and prayer.
- f. A large corporate prayer emphasis is one way to join God in what he is doing and praying right now.

2. **Smaller corporate prayer gatherings.**

- a. Participating in a smaller corporate prayer gathering in another way to join God is what he is doing and praying right now.
- b. For example, we have corporate prayer gatherings in the Prayer Room on Mondays from 5:30-8:30pm or on Thursdays from 6:00-8:00pm.
- c. Another place for corporate prayer is to take time to pray in your team meetings and small group gatherings.
- d. **You can also join or organize small cooperate times of prayer** (1) such as prayer meetings that gather at the pole or in schools, or (2) such as prayer meetings that meet in businesses or neighborhoods.
- e. **Again, these prayer gatherings can be done in person, on the phone, or virtually.**
- f. **Action: I want to invite you to consider participating in or starting a smaller corporate prayer gathering where you spend the bulk of your time.**

3. **Prayer gatherings of 2 or 3.**

- a. Jesus said, *"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:18-20 NIV).*
- i. We get to partner with the Lord in praying according to his will and purposes. The best way to do that is to pray the Scriptures and with the help of the Holy Spirit.

- ii. We get to partner with each other, with the promise of Jesus that the Father hears and answers prayer.
- iii. There is power when we connect with God in our own prayer closets. There is multiplied power and impact when we pray with others.
- iv. The context of prayer is worship, adoration, and acknowledgement of God our Father (Matthew 6:9).
- v. The power of prayer involves taking time to recognize that Jesus is in our midst.
 1. We need to take the time to welcome and honor Jesus who has come to be with us.
 2. Because Jesus is in our midst, we humble ourselves before the Lord.
 3. We worship, bless, and acknowledge the Lord, the One who is with us, the One who has all authority, and the One who gives us his authority (Matthew 18:20; 28:18-20; Luke 9:1-2).
- a. Listen again to what Jesus said. *"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them"* (Matthew 18:20 NIV).
- b. **I want to invite you to consider participating in or starting a prayer gathering of 2 or 3 people.**
- c. **What would happen in Greater Houston if people started praying together regularly in person, on the phone, or virtually?**
- d. What could happen in the spiritual atmosphere of Greater Houston if people started prayer walking together regularly?
- e. **What could happen in the spiritual atmosphere of Greater Houston, if people started getting together all over the region as a family and/ or with friends to pray in homes and in neighborhoods?**

Summary: Here are 3 ways to partner with the Lord and others in prayer, so that the spiritual atmosphere over our communities, cities, and nations could change.

1. Large corporate prayer emphases
2. Smaller corporate prayer gatherings
3. Prayer gatherings of 2 or 3

Let's stop and pray:

Lord, we ask to you to give us a spirit of grace and supplication, that we might join you and others in prayer. I ask you to speak to us, to capture our hearts,

and to help us to get in action around what you are saying to each of us. We pray in the name of Jesus.

Now, we want to visit each passage we highlighted last week for more of the context and background for the context of praying in our authority and for binding and loosing.

1. We have the right to pray and invite the kingdom of God to come and the will of God to be done in our city and nation as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

- a. In Matthew 6, Jesus is teaching his followers how to engage in spiritual practices relationally with God rather than for show, for self-promotion, and for self-aggrandizement.
- b. This passage is divided into three sections on the topics of giving, prayer, and fasting. A pattern is also discernible in each section.
 - i. There is a parallel prohibition and command: when you engage in a certain spiritual practice, do not do so like the hypocrites, with an accompanying explanation of their way of pursuing the activity to be seen and honored by other people. Instead, Jesus exhorts his followers to do the particular activity “in secret” — that is, for God’s eyes only (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18).
 1. This passage does not argue against public giving, prayer, or fasting per se, since Jesus himself prayed publicly (e.g., Matthew 14:19), and public prayer was commonplace in synagogues and the temple.
 2. Instead, Jesus teaches that one should focus attention on God as the audience in these acts of devotion.
 - ii. The promise of reward is given for those who do spiritual practices for the Lord and not for notice and honor before others. The hypocrites “have received their reward in full,” but “your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:2, 4).
- c. In the context of relationship with the Father and worship (Matthew 6:9), Jesus teaches us to pray for God’s kingdom to come and for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).
- d. We have the right to pray and invite the kingdom of God to come and the will of God to be done in our city and nation as it is in heaven.

2. We have the right to bind what is bound in heaven and to release what is released in heaven (Matthew 16:13-20).

- a. *When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” 14 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” 16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of*

the living God." 17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20 Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ (Matthew 16:13-20 NIV).

- b. This passage provides a climactic summary of a number of key story elements that Matthew has introduced thus far.
 - i. First, the request from the Jewish leaders for Jesus to provide a sign (Matthew 16:1–4; see Matthew 12:38) culminates the various controversies that Matthew has narrated between the Jewish leaders and Jesus (e.g., Matthew 9:34; 12:22–24; 15:11–20). Second, the confusion of the disciples over bread (Matthew 16:5–12) highlights the continued struggle of the Twelve to understand and trust in Jesus and his authority (Matthew 16:8). Most importantly, Jesus' identity as the Messiah is confessed in explicit terms for the first time by a person in Matthew's story (Matthew 16:16), providing the climactic moment of Jesus' Galilean ministry (Matthew 4:17–16:20).
 - ii. Matthew highlights themes of revelation (Matthew 16:17; see 11:25; 13:35) and the promise of authority for Peter and for the followers of Jesus (Matthew 16:18–20; see 18:18; 28:18–20).
 - iii. Yet the placement of this confession immediately before Jesus' first passion prediction (Matthew 16:21) and Peter's subsequent rebuke (Matthew 16:22) indicates that Peter and the other disciples do not understand the kind of Messiah Jesus has come to be. In Matthew 16:21–28:20, Matthew will make clear the nature and destiny of Jesus as Israel's Messiah (*Teach the Text Commentary Series – Matthew*).
- c. Let's look more closely at what the disciples shared in answer to Jesus' question, "Who do the people say that I am?"
 - i. Here is how Jesus was understood by people at large. The crowds did not perceive him as... "gentle Jesus, meek and mild. They did not perceive him as the 'cosy, comforting friend of little children'; rather, like one of the wild prophets of recent or of ancient times, who had stood up and spoken God's word fearlessly against wicked and rebellious kings. Jesus was acting as a prophet: not simply 'one who foretells the future,' but one who was God's mouthpiece against injustice and wickedness in high places" (NT Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, Part 2).

- ii. But the Father gave revelation to his disciples that Jesus was much more than... “God's mouthpiece. He was God's Messiah. He was not just speaking God's word against the wicked rulers of the time. He was God's king, who would supplant them. That was indeed the conclusion they had reached, and Peter takes on the role of spokesman: 'You are the Messiah,' he says, 'the son of the living God'” (NT Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, Part 2).
 - d. In the light of who Jesus is, look at the significant revelation and delegated authority which the Lord gives to his followers in Matthew 16:13-20.
 - i. Keys are symbols of authority and ruling power, according to Isaiah 22:22.
 - ii. Because of our confession of and relationship to Jesus, we have the right and authority to pray for the advancement of his will and his church against the gates of death and hell.
 - iii. Because of our confession of and relationship to Jesus, we have the right to bind on earth what is bound in heaven and to release on earth what is released in heaven.
- 3. **We need to take the time to welcome and honor Jesus who has come to be with us.**
 - a. *“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:18-20 NIV).*
 - b. Matthew Chapter 18 is the fourth of five major teaching discourses in Matthew (chaps. 5–7, 10, 13, 18, 24–25) and is often referred to as the Community Discourse.
 - i. The first half of the discourse (18:1–20) focuses on Jesus’ teaching about status in God’s kingdom (18:1–5; cf. 20:20–28), the harmful effects of sin within the faith community (18:6–9), and the importance of restoration of a fellow believer who sins (18:10–20; cf. 7:3–5). The latter emphasis on restoration leads seamlessly into the admonitions to forgive in 18:21–35.
 - ii. This section of chapter 18 concludes with a saying of Jesus promising his presence with his people (Matthew 18:20), connecting this chapter to the affirmations that form bookends in Matthew: Jesus is “God with us” (Matthew 1:23), and he declares “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20) (*Teach the Text Commentary Series – Matthew*).
 - c. Addressing sin in the believing community and with fellow brothers and sisters is always for the goal of restoration. This section of chapter 18

includes the famous “church discipline” passage (18:15–20), which provides guidance for addressing serious sin in a fellow believer. The goal of this passage is restoration.

- i. It is also instructive that guidance on “church discipline” is surrounded by Jesus’ teachings about restoration and forgiveness. The parable of the wandering sheep teaches that God rejoices over a single wandering or erring believer who is restored (18:10–14). In fact, the parable encourages believers to go in search of those who have wandered or strayed.
 - ii. In Matthew 18:21–35, Jesus teaches that unlimited forgiveness should characterize the church, just as extravagant forgiveness defines God and God’s reign. This contextual frame should caution us to avoid any kind of casual application of this passage within our communities. Instead, a prayerful and sober attitude should lead the way to assess whether a situation calls for direct (and private) intervention and whether we have rightly assessed if serious sin is present (versus conflict or difference, for instance).
 - iii. Let’s be clear. The goal of pointing out sin is restoration of relationship and not to cause harm (*Teach the Text Commentary Series – Matthew*).
 - iv. So, we have authority to seek forgiveness and reconciliation, and to call people live in right relationships in the church community.
- d. Yes, we learn from the context that a primary application for Matthew 18:18-20 (binding and loosing) is for forgiveness and reconciliation.
- i. And, the principle applies more broadly, as Matthew 6:10 and Matthew 16:19 show us.
- e. Once again, I want us to look at an important theme in the passages we have considered. Jesus says our prayers count because prayer is about relationship with God (Matthew 6:9, 18:20). Jesus is God with us (Matthew 1:23). And he is with us always (Matthew 28:20).
- i. The context of prayer is worship, adoration, and acknowledgement of God our Father (Matthew 6:9).
 - ii. The power of prayer involves taking time to recognize that Jesus is in our midst (Matthew 18:20).
 1. Because Jesus is in our midst, we humble ourselves before the Lord.
 2. We worship, bless, and acknowledge the Lord, the One who is with us, the One who has all authority, and the One who gives us his authority (Matthew 18:20; 28:18-20; Luke 9:1-2).

- iii. So, when you come together with others for prayer, start your prayer time with worship, adoration, humility, and acknowledgement, because the Living God is with you.

In closing, I want to share some thoughts which Pastor Steve shared with our team. His words are encouraging for our prayers and prayer life.

Thoughts on Prayer, Pastor Steve Meeks

1. The Enemy dreads prayer because that's how the redeemed partner with the Redeemer.
2. "Satan dreads nothing but prayer.... The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from prayer.... He laughs at our toil, mocks our wisdom, but trembles when we pray." (Samuel Chadwick, *A Treasury of Prayer*, by Ravenhill.)
3. Prayer is a form of conversation and communion with God, but it's also a weapon of incredible force.
4. Your private prayers are powerful, but Scripture reminds us of a different kind of authority that comes from praying together.
 - a. *"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:18-20 NIV).*
5. Our prayers, in agreement with other believers, travel beyond us; they are part of the body of Christ and multiply in strength through unity in Jesus.
6. We gain strength, encouragement, and momentum when we agree and pray together.
7. God is a creative God, and we are wise to listen for His prompts about how we are to pray against the Coronavirus [or about our current cultural issues and crises].

Closing:

Imagine with me what it would look like if a representation of believers connected with Jesus and with others in persistent prayer, praying according to the authority which the Lord has given to us. I believe this kind of prayer could change our culture so that the will of God would be done here as in heaven. I believe that the agreeing prayers of the remnant church could change the spiritual atmosphere over our cities and nation.

How many praying people will it take to change the atmosphere of our cities and nation?

I don't know. But, I want to step up. And, I want to invite us to step up.

Let's step up and give it our shot.

Ministry Time:

Addendum: More about the context of Matthew 16:13-20

Many Jews of Jesus' day believed (and many Jews today still believe this) that God would send an anointed king who would be the spearhead of the movement that would free Israel from oppression and bring justice and peace to the world at last. Nobody knew when or where this anointed king would be born, though many believed he would be a true descendant of King David. God had made wonderful promises about his future family. Some would have pointed to the prophecy of Micah 5:1-3 (which Matthew quotes in chapter 2) as indicating that the coming king should be born in Bethlehem. And the word for 'anointed king' in the Jewish languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, was the word we normally pronounce as 'Messiah'.

What would the Messiah be like? How would people tell he had arrived? Nobody knew exactly, but there were many theories. Many saw him as a warrior king who would defeat the pagan hordes and establish Israel's freedom. Many saw him as one who would purge the Temple and establish true worship. Everybody who believed in such a coming king knew that he would fulfil Israel's scriptures, and bring God's kingdom into being at last, on earth as it was in heaven. But nobody had a very clear idea of what all this would look like on the ground. In the first century there were several would-be Messiahs who came and went, attracting followers who were quickly dispersed when their leader was caught by the authorities. One thing was certain. To be known as a would-be Messiah was to attract attention from the authorities, and almost certainly hostility.

So when Jesus wanted to put the question to his followers he took them well away from their normal sphere of activity. Caesarea Philippi is in the far north of the land of Israel, well outside the territory of Herod Antipas, a good two days' walk from the sea of Galilee. Even the form of his question, here in Matthew's gospel at least, is oblique: 'Who do people say the son of man is?', that is, 'Who do people say that this person here, in other words (but without saying it) I myself, am?' Jesus must have known the answer he would get, but he wanted the disciples to say it out loud.

The disciples report the general reaction—which tells us a good deal about the way Jesus was perceived by the people at large. Not 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'; not the cozy, comforting friend of little children; rather, like one of the wild prophets of recent or of ancient times, who had stood up and spoken God's word fearlessly against wicked and rebellious kings. Jesus was acting as a prophet: not simply 'one who foretells the future', but one who was God's mouthpiece against injustice and wickedness in high places.

But within that prophetic ministry there lay hidden another dimension, and Jesus believed—otherwise he would scarcely have asked the question—that his followers had

grasped this secret. He was not just God's mouthpiece. He was God's Messiah. He was not just speaking God's word against the wicked rulers of the time. He was God's king, who would supplant them. That was indeed the conclusion they had reached, and Peter takes on the role of spokesman: 'You are the Messiah,' he says, 'the son of the living God.'

It's important to be clear that at this stage the phrase 'son of God' did not mean 'the second person of the Trinity'. There was no thought yet that the coming king would himself be divine—though some of the things Jesus was doing and saying must already have made the disciples very puzzled, with a perplexity that would only be resolved when, after his resurrection, they came to believe that he had all along been even more intimately associated with Israel's one God than they had ever imagined. No: the phrase 'son of God' was a biblical phrase, indicating that the king stood in a particular relation to God, adopted to be his special representative (see, for instance, 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7).

Very soon after Jesus' resurrection, his followers came to believe that the same phrase had a whole other layer of meaning that nobody had hitherto imagined. But it's important, if we are to understand the present passage, that we don't read into it more than is there. What Peter and the others were saying was: you are the true king. You're the one Israel has been waiting for. You are God's adopted son, the one of whom the Psalms and prophets had spoken.

They knew it was risky. With this, they were not only signing on to be part of a prophetic movement that challenged existing authorities in God's name; they were signing on for a royal challenge. Jesus was the true king! That meant that Herod—and even faraway Caesar—had better look out. And as for the Temple authorities...

To begin with it looked as though Jesus was simply endorsing their dreams. If Peter had declared that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus had a word for Peter as well. The name 'Peter', or, in his native Aramaic, 'Cephas', means 'rock' or 'stone'. If Peter was prepared to say that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus was prepared to say that, with this allegiance, Peter would himself be the foundation for his new building. Just as God gave Abram the name Abraham, indicating that he would be the father of many nations (Genesis 17:5), so now Jesus gives Simon the new name Peter, the Rock.

Furthermore, just as in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus told a story about a wise man building a house on the rock (7:24), so now Jesus himself declares that he's going to do just that. Here, as there, we are meant to imagine in the background the great city, Jerusalem, built on the rocky heights of Mount Zion. In some Jewish traditions, the Temple in Jerusalem was the place where heaven and earth met, and where the gates of

the underworld as well were to be found. Jesus is declaring that he is reconstructing this centerpiece of God's world.

Jesus isn't going to build an actual city, or an actual Temple. He is going to build a community, consisting of all those who give allegiance to him as God's anointed king. And this movement, this community, starts then and there, at Caesarea Philippi, with Peter's declaration.

For the moment this must remain deadly secret. If it were to leak out it could be deadly indeed. But to those who agree with Peter that Jesus of Nazareth really is God's Messiah, this promise is made: that, through this allegiance, they will become the people through whom the living God will put the world to rights, bringing heaven and earth into their new state of justice and peace. Peter, with this declaration of faith, will be the starting point of this community. Peter has much to learn, and many failures to overcome—including one in the very next passage. But even this is part of the process. Jesus' new community, after all, will consist simply of forgiven sinners (NT Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2*).

Addendum: More about the context of Matthew 18:18-20

Many Christians have taken the 'pretend that there isn't a problem' approach, believing that this is what 'forgiveness' means—pretending that everything is all right, that the other person hasn't really done anything wrong. That simply won't do. If someone else—another Christian in particular!—has been offensive, aggressive, bullying, dishonest, or immoral, nothing whatever is gained by trying to create 'reconciliation' without confronting the real evil that's been done. Forgiveness doesn't mean saying 'it didn't really happen' or 'it didn't really matter'. In either of those cases, you don't need forgiveness, you just need to clear up a misunderstanding. Forgiveness is when it did happen, and it did matter, and you're going to deal with it and end up loving and accepting one another again anyway.

That's why the sequence recommended here is vital.

First go and see the person, one on one. That needs courage; it also needs prayer and humility. The other person may well respond with a counter-accusation, and there may be truth in it which you need to recognize—though it certainly isn't always the case that both sides are equally to blame.

If that works—and I have known the joy of it on more than one occasion, sometimes when I've been rightly accused of something and sometimes when I've had to confront someone else—then it's wonderful. 'You've gained a brother or sister,' says Jesus, and that really is what it feels like. Reconciliation often creates a closer bond than you had in the first place.

But if it doesn't work, and if after thought and prayer you are still convinced there is a wrong to be settled, take one or two others with you. This, of course, is a reality check on your own judgment; you should choose people who are prepared to tell you some uncomfortable truths if that's what's needed. And, if you are in the right but the person refuses to see it, they are your witnesses that you're not just making it up (the quotation about needing 'two or three' comes from the Old Testament law about evidence).

The final act is to inform the local Christian assembly. The word for 'assembly' is the word that later gets translated 'church', but in Jesus' day, and for some while afterwards, Jesus' followers continued to meet in their local synagogues, for which the same word could be used. But Jesus himself probably envisaged little groups or cells of his followers meeting together, praying the special prayer he gave them, reminding one another of his teaching and trying to live it out (particularly his emphasis on forgiveness and remission of debt), and acting as small-scale, localized assemblies of God's renewed people. That would then be the group that should be told about any confrontation that had remained unresolved.

Now comes the hardest part. If someone still refuses to yield and be reconciled, they must be treated as an outcast. (Paul wrestles with the same problem in 1 Corinthians 5.) We don't like the sound of this, but we need to ask what the alternatives are. If there is real evil involved, refusal to face it means a necessary break of fellowship. Reconciliation can only come after the problem has been faced.

Together with this hard and high challenge, there go dramatic promises. We aren't left on our own as we struggle to become the sort of communities, families and churches that Jesus is describing. God's presence is with us; our actions on earth have an extra, hidden dimension, the heavenly counterpart of what we do here. And, when we pray together in Christian fellowship, we are therefore assured of being heard and answered. Because, in a promise that remains central to everything that Christians ever do together, 'where two or three' (or two hundred or three hundred, for that matter, but it's often the small groups that need this encouragement most) 'gather in Jesus' name, he is there in the midst of them'. That's not just a promise that we will sense his presence. It's a promise—and a warning!—that he will see and know the innermost truth of everyone's heart. If we take that seriously, engaging in reconciliation will still be costly. But it will always be done in real hope, with joy waiting round the corner for those who persevere (NT Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2*).