

Matthew 18:15-20

- Live together in harmony and peace with Christ -

Author: Evert Jan Hempenius

© 2016

www.christianstudylibrary.org

For any questions about this Scripture passage or the notes, please contact us through the Contact Us tab on the website.

Introduction

- ❖ Who doesn't want to live in harmony with his or her brothers and sisters? Is this utopia, fantasyland? Is it a dream? First of all: say thanks to the Lord God when you are a member of a harmonious Christ-following family, community, organisation or church. It is a precious gift. It is grace in action. But:
 - There are so many broken families and relationships, due to sin.
 - There are problems within Christian organisations among its members, due to sin and personal strive to be "the greatest".
 - There are churches who split up, due to leadership, and leaders who want to be "the greatest", "the most admired one".
 - There are people losing their faith in Christ, due to disappointments, frustrations, bitterness.
- ❖ Who doesn't want to live in harmony with his or her brothers and sisters? Within the Christian marriage, family, community, organisation or local church?
- ❖ When Jesus Christ commissioned his disciples "to go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19), He didn't give them a blueprint of a church order nor a set of regulations for organizing the church. Only Matthew 18:15-20 has the character of law: "if this happens, do the following."
 - It is tempting to take the following verses (Mt 18:19,20) out of context and apply them: "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."
 - And: "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."
 - Both verses are intricately connected with the previous ones and illuminating for a sound Christian life in harmony with brothers and sisters and with heaven.

- “The difference between a spiritual and an unspiritual community is not whether a conflict exists, but is rather in our attitude toward it and our approach to handling it. When conflict is seen as an opportunity to draw more fully on spiritual resources, we have the makings of a spiritual community” (Larry Crabb).
- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlap with other sermon outlines taken from the Gospel of Matthew. This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a “stand-alone”. You can also fit this outline into a series of sermons.

Context

- ❖ Matthew 18:15 is part of larger section in which Jesus taught about “the little ones”, “sin”, salvation and forgiveness, being “the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”.
 - A short summary: the greatest is he who humbles himself and takes care of the little ones and who forgives his brother seventy-seven times.
The disciples were discussing the “greatest” according to worldly standards. But if you are “the greatest”, it will be fairly impossible to look after “the little ones.” Instead, Jesus said: “humble yourself.”

Introductory scene / question	
Matthew 18:1-4	<p>“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? ...”</p> <p>“Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”</p>
Protect the little ones	
Matthew 18:5-9	Don’t cause “one of these little ones who believe in me to sin.”
Matthew 18:10-14	<p>Don’t “look down on one of these little ones, ...”</p> <p>“Your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.”</p>
To win your brother over (= not be lost)	
Matthew 18:15-20	<p>“If your brother sins against you...”</p> <p>“If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”</p>
Matthew 18:21-35	<p>“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’</p> <p>Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’”</p>

Form and structure

- ❖ Matthew 18:15-20 is the first and only example of canon (church) law found in the New Testament.¹
 - This type of text, which is also found in the Old Testament, is characterized by “if”-clauses: “If this happens, then you should act like this.”
 - Examples found in the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which is referred to in Matthew 19:3-9; Exodus 21:7-11, which is part of the Book of the Covenant.
- ❖ Jesus made clear that **canon law** is not just a body of laws or a set of regulations, but a law that must be governed by “heaven” (verse 18) and be applied in his presence (verse 19-20).
 - The italic texts below are not found in Scripture but are implied by the context. *If somebody listens, the case will be settled.*

	Canon Law or Church Law
Case (1):	If your brother sins against you,
Resolution (1):	go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.
Settlement (1):	If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.
Case (2):	But if he will not listen,
Resolution (2):	take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses’.
Settlement (2) (implied)	<i>If he listens to them, you have won your brother over.</i>

¹ **Canon law** is the body of laws and regulations made by the leadership of the Church, for the government of a Christian organization or church and its members.

Canon law. (n.d.). Retrieved July 23, 2016, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canon_law

Canon Law. (n.d.). Retrieved July 23, 2016, from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09056a.htm>

<i>Case (3):</i>	if he refuses to listen to them,
<i>Resolution (3):</i>	tell it to the church;
<i>Settlement (3): (implied)</i>	<i>If he listens to them, you have won your brother over.</i>
<i>Case (4):</i>	and if he refuses to listen even to the church,
<i>Resolution (4):</i>	treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.
	In his presence
<i>Governed by heaven:</i>	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.
<i>Guided by prayer:</i>	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. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.

❖ Some commentators state that Matthew 18:15-20 is a collection of separate utterances, without internal cohesion:

- (1) Matthew 18:15-17;
- (2) Matthew 18:18;
- (3) Matthew 18:19-20.

- ❖ But this short summary shows a different pattern:

❖ Matthew 18:15-16: two or three brothers gather to settle a case of sin; (A)	On earth
○ Matthew 18:17: the case has (not) been settled ; (B)	
○ Matthew 18:18: the case has (not) been settled (bind and loose) on earth as it is in heaven; (B)	On earth as it is in heaven
❖ Matthew 18:9-20: promise: where (two or three) are united in prayer, the Father will act and Christ will be in their midst. (A)	

- There is an important development of thought. In verse 15-17, the focus is on earth. But in verse 18-20, the focus is on heaven and earth.
- Heaven and earth are the realms of the Kingdom of God: both are united under the lordship of Jesus Christ:
 - “Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority **in heaven and on earth** has been given to me” (Mt 28:18).

Technical, hermeneutical and historical notes

Verse 15

- ❖ to sin = “**ἁμαρτάνω**”: to commit a wrong, to sin (in the sense ‘transgress’) against divinity, custom, or law.²
- ❖ to show (him his) fault = “**ἐλέγχω**”: **2.** to bring a person to the point of recognizing wrongdoing, convict, convince someone of something; **3.** to express strong disapproval of someone’s action, reprove, correct.³
- ❖ to listen = “**ἀκούω**”: **4. to give careful attention to, listen to, heed someone.**⁴

² Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 49).

³ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 315).

⁴ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 38).

- ❖ to win over = “**κερδαίνω**”: **1.** to acquire by effort or investment, to gain. **b.** someone for the Reign of God.⁵

Verse 16

- ❖ the testimony = “**ῥῆμα**”: **1. that which is said**, word, saying, expression, or statement of any kind.⁶

Verse 17

- ❖ church = “**ἐκκλησία**”: a. of a specific Christian group *assembly, gathering* ordinarily involving worship and discussion of matters of concern to the community.⁷
 - This is the second of the two instances in the gospels where this word is used. The first one is found in Matthew 16:18.
 - Within the immediate context of Matthew 18:17 and 16:18 similar expressions are found:
 - “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**” (Mt 18:18);
 - “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**” (Mt 16:19).
 - This indicates that the word “church” means, “**the legal and authoritative gathering of the people of the covenant.**” Christ gave the Christian gathering the legal (spiritual) authority to settle cases of doctrine and of conduct (sin) between members of his disciples. (See also verse 18.) An example of the leaders of the church exercising their legal authority on behalf of Christ is found in Acts 15:1-21. There, an important decision was taken by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit (= *heaven*) and to us (= *earth*)” (Acts 15:27).
 - The word “**ἐκκλησία**”, here translated with “church”, is a reference to the Old Testament “holy assembly⁸”- the official gathering of the people of the covenant: Deuteronomy 18:16 and many more instances.⁹

⁵ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 541).

⁶ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 905).

⁷ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 303).

⁸ The Greek Old Testament translates “assembly” with “**ἐκκλησία**” (Dt 4.10; 9.10; a.o.)

⁹ For more information: E. Matthew 16:18 and 18:17 (Heb. לְקָהָל Aram. כְּנֻשְׁתָּא, Syr. k̄nuštā, ἐκκλησία). In: Kittel, G., Bromiley, G. W., & Friedrich, G. (Red.). (1964–). *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed., Vol. 3, p. 518). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Verse 18

- ❖ To bind = “δέω”: 3. **to constrain by law and duty, bind.**¹⁰ This binding is illustrated by the parable of the unmerciful servant (Mt 18:23-35): “In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.” The unmerciful servant was literally bound to pay everything back.
- ❖ To loose = “λύω”: 2. **to set free something tied or similarly constrained, set free, loose, untie.**¹¹
 - Both words are also used to denote a legal bond between two persons, such as a marriage, the bond between man and wife: “are you free from a wife, i.e. not bound to a wife?” (Rm 7:2; 1 Cor 7:27). This legal aspect of “to bind” and “to loose” is needed for the right understanding of this passage.

Verse 19-20

- ❖ Agree about = “συμφωνέω”: 3. **to have come to an agreement about something, be of one mind, agree,** with a focus on the specific result of negotiations.¹²
- ❖ Anything = “πράγμα”: 2. **that which is to be done, undertaking, occupation, task;** 4. **a matter of contention, dispute, lawsuit.**¹³

Summary

- ❖ The words “sin”, “to show”, “witness”, “testimony”, “to bind”, and “to loose” all have a legal aspect. This section forms the basis for “canon law” or “church law.”

Exposition

Verse 15

- ❖ “**If your brother¹⁴ sins against you.**” One of the main questions is: when does a brother sin against you? Some clear examples are found in Leviticus 6:2-7. And verse 2 equates “sin” with being “**unfaithful to the LORD.**” This is an important explanation! 1 Corinthians 8:12 is a good illustration of this point.
 - I can become annoyed, irritated, angry, confused by words and deeds of my brother but that doesn’t mean that he has sinned against me.

¹⁰ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p.222).

¹¹ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 606-607).

¹² Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 961).

¹³ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 859).

¹⁴ Some older Bible manuscripts read: “if your brother sins.”

❖ **“go and show him his fault.”**

- “Do not hate your brother in your heart. **Rebuke your neighbour frankly so you will not share in his guilt.** Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD” (Lev 19:17-18).
 - How important it is to live at peace with another within the Christian fellowship and in harmony with heaven, is shown by Matthew 5:23-24: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. **First, go and be reconciled to your brother;** then come and offer your gift.”
- Sometimes it is not obvious to your brother that he has sinned against you. Therefore, it is necessary to show and explain to him what he has said or what he has done, and how he has been **unfaithful to the LORD.**
- There is a discussion among commentators about the question whether Jesus was talking only about “privately committed sins” or of all sins, privately and publicly committed. In the latter case, these are sins committed against and known by the (whole) congregation. The words **“if your brother sins against you”** tend to imply that only “privately committed sins” are meant here. The ensuing passage (Mt 18:21-35) also points in the same direction:
 - “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother **when he sins against me?** Up to seven times?’” (Mt 18:21).
 - “So watch yourselves. ‘If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If **he sins against you** seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.’” (Lk 17:3–4).
- It is not necessary to distinguish between private and public.

❖ **“just between the two of you.”** Nobody else is involved at this moment. It is meant to protect the brother against the judgment of others. And especially in a culture dominated by honour and shame, this approach is wise.

❖ **“you have won your brother over.”** This will acquire effort, time, and patience!

- In the previous passage, Jesus used the image of the lost sheep: “And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep...” (Mt 18:13). The purpose is to restore relationships, reconciliation, repentance, change of behavior, and forgiveness.

Verse 16

❖ **“take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’”**

- This a legal rule based on Deuteronomy 19:15¹⁵: “One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. **A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.**”
- This should be undertaken with great care and sincerity because: “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor” (Ex 20:16).

Verse 17

❖ **“If he refuses (...), treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”**

- There are four steps to be taken:
 1. Brother >< brother;
 2. Brother >< brother and witness(es);
 3. Brother >< brother, witness(es) and the church;
 4. (Brother) – the church

In the first three steps, there is the possibility of reconciliation and forgiveness. But if the brother does not listen, **“treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”**

- This final instruction needs to be taken with care. What does it mean:
 - The brother is not any longer a member of the congregation. By his own behavior and his refusal to listen, to repent, to reconcile and to restore the unity in Christ, he has placed himself outside the congregation. His behavior is like the behavior of the unrepentant “pagan” or “tax collector.”
- This brother cannot have any responsibility within the congregation. He cannot partake in the Lord’s Supper, instituted by the Lord himself, as a meal of forgiveness and reconciliation with the crucified and resurrected Lord and the brothers and sisters. He is still welcome to visit the worship services and to listen to the Gospel of repentance and reconciliation.
- It does not mean that the members of the congregation should avoid all contact. If possible, they must approach him or her with the gospel of grace and the offer of reconciliation and peace with God.

Verse 18

- ❖ **“I tell you the truth.”** The authority of Jesus is a godly authority (Mt 7:28-29).
- ❖ **“whatever.”** This refers to the **cases of sin**, the unfaithfulness to the Lord God.
- ❖ **“you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”**
 - This “to bind” and “to loose” is a based on the testimony of the witnesses and of the church.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy is an important Old Testament book for the study of the backgrounds of the gospel of Matthew.

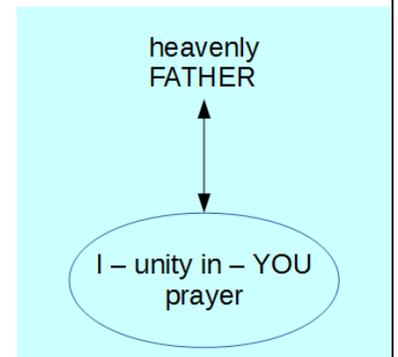
- To bind: **the case** has not been settled, neither between the two brothers, nor in the presence of the witnesses, nor in front of the church (as a witness). The brothers haven't been reconciled. There was no repentance and forgiveness.
- To loose: **the case** has been settled. There was repentance, reconciliation, and forgiveness. Peace and harmony have been restored, between two brothers and in the community of the church.
- Compare Matthew 18:18 with 6:14,15:

Matthew 18:18	Matthew 6:14,15
“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.”	“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.”
“Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”	“But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

- To “bind” is related to “not forgive.” And to “loose” is related to “forgive.”
- The church can only come to a conclusion to bind, or to loose a case of sin after sincere prayer (see verse 19).

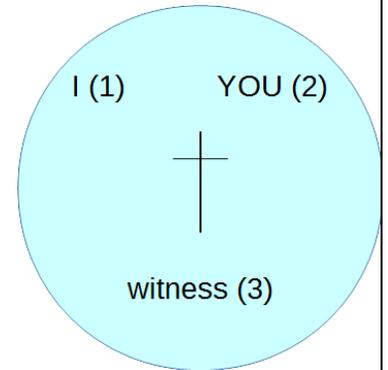
Verse 19-20

- ❖ **“Again, I tell you that”**: this underscores the importance of the previous section; Jesus is assuring his audience.
- ❖ **“if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for”**: these are the two mentioned in verse 15. A brother has sinned against another brother. This brother is summoned to show the first one his fault. Jesus stressed the point that they should embed their meeting in prayer.
 - It is a promise that problems between two Christians will be solved when they unite in prayer and ask for: “wisdom”, “mutual love”, “patience”, “peace”, “goodness”, “gentleness”, “self-control”, the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23).
- ❖ **“Anything”** doesn't mean “everything”. The extent of **“anything”** is determined by the context, which speaks of “sin”, “listen”, “forgiveness”, “reconciliation” and also “the glory of God”, “his righteousness.”
 - Asking is to be done in a harmonious way.¹⁶



¹⁶ Hendriksen, W. (1973, p. 702).

- ❖ **“it will be done for you by my Father in heaven”**: because of the glory of Christ and the glory of the Father, when unity of the church will be preserved and a sinner saved. There will be joy in heaven (Mt 18:10-14; Lk 15:10).
 - The Father will give peace, goodness, mutual love through his Holy Spirit.
- ❖ **“For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”**
 - These are the **“two”** from verse 15 and the **“three”** from verse 16. When the two come together in their own name, the lure of self-righteousness is apparent.
 - Where Christ is in the midst of two or three, heaven and earth are united!
 - He has promised his disciples and his church: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:20).
- ❖ **“In my Name”** is another way of saying **“under my rule.”**¹⁷ Christ rules. Matthew 18:18, 19 must be read in the light of these final verses of this Gospel and applied by the disciples while acknowledging the authority of Christ.



Application

First some preliminary remarks:

- ❖ Remark (1)
 - The church is the body of Christ and is part of the Kingdom of heaven. The apostle Paul wrote about the church and the glory of God:
 - “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, **to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus** throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen” (Eph 3:20-21).
- ❖ Remark (2)
 - Before applying these words within the context of a Christian family, friendship, community, organisation or church, one should ask oneself if it is a case of sin. The disciples asked the question about “the greatest.” This is not the right attitude with which to evaluate the behaviour of a brother. Someone with the attitude “being the greatest” is at risk of manipulating and abusing of power. Sadly, this has occurred quite often in churches.
 - **The main question is: was my brother/sister unfaithful to the LORD** (Lev 6:2)? See below.

¹⁷ Hagner, D. A. (1995, p. 533).

❖ Remark (3)

- It is often overlooked that sins committed within the context of the Christian family can be approached according to this law of Christ. It is wise to apply these words with wisdom within all contexts where Christians live (and work) together – and stress the importance of prayer and gathering in the name of Jesus.

❖ Remark (4)

- Matthew 18:19-20 is not a promise regarding some kind of miracle prayer. The whole context is about saving a sinner and about forgiveness!

❖ Remark (5)

- Distinctions between privately and publicly committed sins are not always easy to make. Often more than two people are involved, while their sins are not publicly known. How to cope with these situations?
Casuistic law, characterized by the “if”-clauses, is not meant to apply strictly according to the rules, but should be applied with wisdom (Ps 1:2) in all kinds of situations where the brother (or sister) committed a sin against another member of the church.

❖ Remark (6)

- If problems are not solved, they can become like ulcers, eventually causing the whole body (of the church) to become sick.

Verse 15-17

- ❖ Jesus Christ did not give us this law to follow the rules strictly, but to use it in sincerity, wisdom and love.

- ❖ Rebuking a brother must be done with an attitude of humbleness (Mt 18:1-4) and in the spirit of:

- “love, (joy), peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22–23). “Joy” has been placed between brackets, because showing a brother his fault is not a joyful occasion. But when he is won over, there will be joy!
- “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (Col 3:12-14).
- And James wrote: “Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. (...) My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: **Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins**” (James 5:16–20).

- ❖ Rebuking a brother and showing him his fault must be done in a spirit of sincerity:
 - Jesus taught the following in his sermon on the mount: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.
“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Mt 7:1-5).
- ❖ If there is no sign of remorse, repentance and reconciliation, the brother cannot take any responsibility in the congregation. He cannot partake in the Lord’s Supper, instituted by the Lord himself, as a meal of forgiveness and reconciliation with the crucified and resurrected Jesus and the brothers and sisters.
 - He is still welcome to visit the worship services and to listen to the Gospel of repentance and reconciliation.

Verse 18-20

- ❖ As is shown above, these verses are the counterpart of verse 15-17. What we do on earth must be in accordance with heaven. Seek therefore first the unity in the Lord, while gathering in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ under his rule!
 - The Lord’s prayer is the guide that Jesus gave to his church:

Matthew 6:9-12	Matthew 18:18-20
“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name”	“my Father in heaven” (19)
“your kingdom come, “	“come together in my name, there am I with them” (20)
“your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”	“whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (18)

- Especially “your will be done” needs to be meditated upon with regard to “to bind” and “to loose” when the church takes a final decision.

- ❖ But what happens when the brother, the witnesses or the church are mistaken and come to a far-reaching decision, which is unjust and not according to the will of the heavenly Father? He will still be the ultimate Judge who knows hearts and thoughts. He will do justice!

Quotes

- ❖ “The difference between spiritual and unspiritual community is not whether a conflict exists, but is rather in our attitude toward it and our approach to handling it. When conflict is seen as an opportunity to draw more fully on spiritual resources, we have the makings of spiritual community.” (Larry Crabb)¹⁸

Bibliography

Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hagner, D. A. (1995). *Matthew*. (WBC 33.B) Dallas: Word Books.

Hendriksen, W. (1984). *Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

Kittel, G., Bromiley, G. W., & Friedrich, G. (Red.). (1964–). *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed., Vol. 3). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Wallace, D. B. (1996). *Greek grammar beyond the basics: An exegetical syntax of the New Testament with scripture, subject, and Greek word indexes*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

¹⁸ Crabb, L. (2007). *Becoming a true spiritual community: A profound vision of what the church can be*. Nashville: T. Nelson.