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Is Jesus literally here with us right now?

Matthew 18:20

“For where two or three are gathered together in my name,
there am I in the midst of them.”

From the desk of Kenneth Lent, 2022
Faith of the Covenant Fellowship

The Scriptures surely record that God’s Holy Spirit presence is with every believer. On that we can trust. But as students of God’s Word we should always be aware that context of the Scriptures *always* supersedes attempts to formulate doctrine by quoting a single verse. Matthew 18:20 is a prime example. This verse has been used to teach several ideas that don’t actually have a thing to do with what Jesus said here. One such teaching is that if two or three Christians are gathered, then Jesus is literally but invisibly present among them. Some teachings go further to say that Matthew 18:20 “proves” that Jesus has already returned long ago, that He’s here now, that all prophecy has been fulfilled, and that the Kingdom of the Messiah is presently in its fullness among us, but the full Kingdom won’t arrived until we “make it happen”. That is to say, “The fullness of the Kingdom is here now, but the fullness of the Kingdom isn’t really here yet”. What has happened is that perilous times have become so desperate that concerned Christians are willing to listen to anything, even attempt to rationalize a complete contradiction, in order to perpetuate a false belief to lessen the the pain of current events. The fullness of the Kingdom will certainly come, but all in God’s time. That being the case, if we remember to stay in the Word, and remember that *context rules* when trying to arrive at the truth, God’s *total* message to us on any Bible subject reveals the matter. What is the Scriptural meaning of Matthew 18:20? What is the deeper subject matter upon which Christ was commenting? We’ll get to that shortly, but first let’s lay a basic foundation as to Jesus’ whereabouts. Does Matthew 18:20 tell us that Jesus has already returned but is walking the Earth invisibly at the present time? No, the Scriptures do not teach this.

As He did on so many occasions Christ is speaking symbolically when He tells us that He would still be with us after He ascended to the Father. But the *literal* reality is that Christ *had to leave*, and for a very good reason ---- the commission of the Holy Spirit to be with each individual believer necessitated that the Messiah’s walk on the Earth had ended (at least for the several concurrent centuries until His return). “Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.” (John 16:7) 1

Does the reader believe that the Holy Spirit is with him/her at this moment? Then it means that Jesus Christ has departed in order that His being in communion with the Holy Spirit means that God can, in a greater sense, be with us all. But Jesus is not individually here in the person of His “second coming”, since He is presently our High Priest in heavenly places before the Father making intercession for us. (Rom.8:34; Heb.7:22-26)

The disciples themselves had some trouble with this divine concept. Could Jesus be with us symbolically but not literally? Certainly. In Matthew chapter 25 Jesus remarks about His return and judgment upon the Earth. In the discourse He tells His sheep (faithful followers) to enter the Kingdom because they cared for Him in several ways during their life time. But they were perplexed and asked when they had done these things. Jesus replied that they didn’t actually and literally perform these charities upon Him because he wasn’t really with them. But read below to see how “Jesus was there” receiving help from His disciples:

34 “Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

35 For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

36 Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

37 Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Master, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

38 When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

39 Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

Thus, even though Jesus wasn’t literally among His followers to receive their help, in a spiritual sense He counted it as if He was there since the followers helped the “least of the brethren” in so many important ways. Likewise, in Matthew 18:20 we absolutely must consult the Scriptures to see precisely how Jesus is now among “two or three gathered together”.

Most Christians have been taught in church that Matthew 18:20 refers to prayer, and therefore if two or three are gathered together in prayer they will receive whatever they are praying about. But this verse is not about prayer. One person can certainly pray alone and have his prayers both heard and answered. Matthew 18:20 is about law. God’s law. We know that Jesus never “did away with all of God’s laws”, but only the sacrificial laws of animal or grain offerings. (John 5:17-19; Rom.3:31; Heb.10:1-16)

If we read six verses together (the context) then we can grasp what Matthew 18:20 is about. Starting in verse 15 Jesus is incorporating the Mosaic law into the orderly procedure of the New Testament assembly with respect on how to deal with unruly members. The people of the Judean assembly were already familiar with the method by which someone is convicted in a judicial matter. They would know it from the Old Testament Scriptures for we read, “by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established” (Deut. 17:6 & 19:15) God’s laws for the family and nation were never done away with, and Jesus advises the assembly to look to the law for the correct method of bringing disciplinary charges against an individual who has committed a wrongdoing within the body of believing brethren. We read the words of Jesus below:

V 15 “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.
16 But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.
17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.
18 Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.
19 Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.
20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

In expanding the Mosaic law spiritually, Jesus teaches that in such a case (as above) the witnesses don’t necessarily have to be witnesses to the offense but to the integrity of the one bringing charges, since the primary purpose is to forgive the wrong doer and bring him back into the family. Notice that this instruction comes right after verses 12-14 where Jesus teaches about how joyful it is to find a lost sheep and restore him to the fold. Plus “it is not the Father’s will that one of these little ones should perish” (v14) When the correct disciplinary action is taken to give an unruly assembly member plenty of opportunity to repent and gain him back as a friend, Jesus tells us that He is in agreement with the gathering of His saints. He will be “with them” in purpose and obedience to Father’s will. Father will guide the assembly through the process, and when gathered in Jesus’ name and following Jesus’ instructions, Father looks on it as if His son is there among the brethren. God sees us individually, but more than that when He looks upon us He sees the believers as the finished work of His son through whom we are made righteous. John 15:7,8 “If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.” (*that is: Christ’s words in us are the same as abiding with Him*) Matthew 18:20 is not about prayer with Jesus invisibly standing in the middle of us. It is specific instructions from our King on how to apply the divine law concerning matters of discipline within the assembly.