

RIVER *Flow*

Seven Days of Devotional Practice
September 6 – 12, 2026

Escalating Love

A Note Before You Sit

This past Sabbath we sat with a passage most of us have heard through the memory of a business meeting rather than through the parable that comes right before it. Matthew 18:15–20 has been read to us as procedure. Jesus gave it as a search party.

So this week we are not going to rehearse the steps. We are going to sit with the person the steps are handed to — the one who was wronged, sent out after the one who did the wronging, without leverage, and asked to want him back. That is a harder thing than any committee ever asked of anyone, and it is the thing this chapter asks of you.

Read slowly, a few unhurried minutes each morning. One passage a day. Some of these mornings will be uncomfortable, and that is not a sign you have taken a wrong turn. Come to Sabbath ready to hear the rest of the chapter, which is where Jesus finally tells us what all of this was resting on.

— *Pastor Mel Baga, D.Min.*
Lead Pastor, Auburn SDA Church

Daily Devotional Guide

SUNDAY, September 6 — Sent After the One Who Bit You

“If your brother or sister sins against you, go” — Matthew 18:15

Read: Matthew 18:12–15

Reflect: There is no transition. Jesus finishes the parable of the shepherd who leaves ninety-nine on the mountainside to go after one, and in the same breath he says go. Verse fifteen is not a new subject. It is the parable, applied. It is what the search party looks like when the search is yours to run.

And notice who is sent. Not the elders, not a committee. The one who was sinned against. We have always cast ourselves as the shepherd in a comfortable way — the member who drifted, the family that stopped coming — and that is good work, and it is not hard, because that sheep never did anything to us. This is different. This sheep left teeth marks on the way out, and Jesus hands you the staff anyway.

Notice: Name the one person you have quietly excused yourself from going after. Do not do anything about it yet. Just let yourself notice that you have been counting yourself off the search party.

Pray: Father, I did not think this one was mine to go after. Show me why you disagree. Amen.

Stay: For twenty minutes, twice a day if you can manage it, find a place where you can be alone and quiet. Close your eyes and pray without words. Thoughts will come. So will feelings, and the itch on your nose. Resist no thought. Retain no thought. React to no thought. Return, ever so gently, to the breath — to here, to now. Then let that go too, and begin again.

MONDAY, September 7 — Out of the Shadows

“go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone” —

Matthew 18:15

Read: Matthew 18:15

Reflect: The Greek verb is *élencho* — not to inform, but to expose something with a view to setting it right. And it happens *between you and him alone*. That phrasing protects the other person’s name. It also strips you of three things you have been quietly living on.

It costs your vagueness, because a grievance survives on atmosphere and cannot survive one specific sentence spoken to one specific face. It costs your audience, because alone means nobody nods while you tell it, and if sympathy was what you actually wanted you will find that out fast. And it costs your certainty, because alone means he gets to answer, and you may learn you were holding one half of a story.

Notice: Ask yourself the honest question before you go anywhere: what do I want out of this conversation? If the answer is that he be diminished, you are not ready.

Pray: Father, I have been safe in the shadows. Make me willing to be seen. Amen.

Stay: The same sitting as Sunday. Twenty minutes, and the return to the breath.

TUESDAY, September 8 — Absorbing Is Not Forgiving

“first take the log out of your own eye” — Matthew 7:5

Read: Matthew 7:1–5

Reflect: Jesus put the log and the speck eleven chapters before he put the search party, and the order matters. It does not disqualify your grievance. Your grievance may be entirely sound. But the man who walks over to remove a speck walks the whole

way with something in his own eye, and the walking is what makes him feel it.

There is a quieter failure this guards against. We tell ourselves that mature Christians absorb an injury and say nothing — love covers a multitude of sins, love keeps no record of wrongs. There is real truth in all of it, which is exactly what makes it such a good hiding place. Absorbing is not always forgiving. Sometimes it is avoidance with a verse taped to the front of it, and the wound does not leave, it only goes underground and comes back later as coldness.

Notice: Where have you called something forgiveness that was actually avoidance? You will know it by the temperature.

Pray: Father, do not let me use your words to hide from the person you have given me. Amen.

Stay: As on Sunday. Nothing to examine and nothing to settle here. Only the sitting.

WEDNESDAY, September 9 — The Witnesses Are Not Your Allies

“at the mouth of two or three witnesses shall a matter be established” — Deuteronomy 19:15

Read: Deuteronomy 19:15–21

Reflect: Israel ran an accusatorial system in which the one bringing the charge was also the main witness to it, and that is structurally dangerous — one determined person with a grudge can destroy a neighbor. So a single witness establishes nothing, and not only in capital cases. For any charge, large or small.

Then Deuteronomy does something we rarely mention. It puts the accuser under the same jeopardy as the accused. If the witness is found false, do to him what he intended to do to his brother. Both parties stand before the LORD. When Jesus reaches back and picks up this verse, he is not handing you a tool

for applying pressure. He is handing you the oldest protection in the book, and most of that protection is pointed at you.

Notice: If you brought two people into this, would you choose people who agree with you, or people who would tell you if you were wrong? Your answer is the diagnosis.

Pray: Father, I have wanted allies. Give me witnesses instead. Amen.

Stay: The same twenty minutes as Sunday. Bring nothing in with you.

THURSDAY, September 10 — The Lawsuit That Wants You Back

“Hear what the LORD says: Arise, plead your case before the mountains” — Micah 6:1

Read: Micah 6:1–8

Reflect: God convenes a courtroom. The mountains and the enduring foundations of the earth are summoned as witnesses, and the charge is specific — injustice, corruption, worship emptied of obedience. This is the *rîb*, the covenant lawsuit, and it has every feature of a prosecution.

But watch where it lands. Not in sentencing. In *what does the LORD require of you* — do justice, love mercy, walk humbly. The whole apparatus of accusation exists to recall a people to covenant. God assembles witnesses in order to get his people back. That is the shape of the thing Jesus hands you in Matthew 18: an escalation whose entire machinery is aimed at recovery, run by someone who has been on the receiving end of exactly this kind of pursuit.

Notice: Where has God confronted you in a way that turned out to be pursuit? Sit with that before you go confront anyone.

Pray: Father, you have prosecuted me only to keep me. Teach me to want that for someone else. Amen.

Stay: As on Sunday. However many times you find yourself gone, that is however many chances you were given.

FRIDAY, September 11 — The Table You Do Not Clear

“let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector” — Matthew 18:17

Read: Matthew 9:9–13

Reflect: We hear a door slam. Out of the mouth of nearly any other teacher of that century, that is exactly what it would mean. But this is Matthew, who tells you in chapter nine about a man at a tax booth and Jesus walking up and saying *follow me* — and the man is Matthew. He is telling you his own story. Then he seats Jesus at his table in a room full of tax collectors.

Something has genuinely changed, and it does no one any good to soften it. The person is outside the ordinary fellowship of the body. But in this Gospel, gentiles and tax collectors are not the people you stop loving. They are the people Jesus goes and eats with. What changes is the posture, not the love. You stop conducting a process he has declined to be in. You stop building the case. You do not stop setting a place.

Notice: Is there someone you have written off as finished? Ask what it would mean to stop making the case and still leave the door where they can see it.

Pray: Father, keep me from calling my resignation a boundary. Amen.

Stay: The same sitting as Sunday. No agenda and no argument. Only the breath, and back.

SABBATH, September 12 — Fellow Servant

“should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” — Matthew 18:33

Read: Matthew 18:21–35

Reflect: Peter asks the question we have all been circling: how many times? Seven, perhaps — a generous, complete number. Jesus answers with seventy times seven, reaching back to Lamech in Genesis 4, a man counting his revenge, and turning the arithmetic inside out. Then the parable. Ten thousand talents against a hundred denarii, a gap so vast the second debt is a rounding error against the first.

The word for what the master does is *aphiemi* — the debt is not deferred, it is erased. And the word for the two men is *syndoulos*, fellow servant, the same footing, the same master. That is what the whole procedure has been standing on all week. The search party only works when it is run by someone who knows what he has been forgiven. Everything in chapter eighteen — the child in the middle, the shepherd on the mountainside, the going, the witnesses, the assembly — is the behavior of people who have had an impossible debt erased and cannot now hold a small one.

Notice: Look back over the week and the person you have been carrying. Then look at what has been forgiven you, and set the two side by side.

Pray: Father, you erased what I could never repay. Do not let me hold what I am owed. Amen.

Stay: As on Sunday. Keep the time you have kept all week, and come out of it slowly.

Group Discussion Questions

1. The escalation from one person, to three, to the whole assembly is usually heard as escalating pressure. What changes if what is increasing at each stage is not penalty but the number of people who know and care? Does that reading hold up against what you have actually watched happen?
2. When has someone come to you and named something you did? What did they do that made it possible for you to hear it — or what made it impossible?
3. Deuteronomy puts the accuser under the same jeopardy as the accused, and the private conversation exists partly so the accused can finally answer. But Matthew 18 still assumes the accuser is telling the truth. Where does this process break down, and have you seen it break down?
4. The week ended with the parable of the unforgiving servant rather than with the procedure. What difference does it make to your own situation that discipline in this chapter is framed by forgiveness on both sides of it?