

# Two or Three



Matthew 18:15-20

Year A Proper 18

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## Parts by scene

■ = large part   ▲ = medium sized part   ● = small part

		1	2	3	4
■	<b>Thomas</b> - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts	▲	●	▲	▲
▲	<b>John</b> - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples	▲			
▲	<b>Matthew</b> - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples	▲			
▲	<b>Joanna</b> - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	▲			
▲	<b>Andrew</b> - the younger brother of Peter, one of the youngest disciples		▲		
▲	<b>James</b> - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)		▲		
▲	<b>Phillip</b> - one of the youngest disciples, always well-meaning and honestly curious, sometimes lacking in confidence			▲	
▲	<b>Cleophas</b> - A conscientious disciple whose faith briefly fails him after the death of Jesus			▲	
▲	<b>Mary Magdalene</b> - a 'fallen woman' who became the first female disciple, the humblest member of the group due to her shame about her past			▲	
▲	<b>Jesus</b>				▲

## Scene 1

Joanna , John , Matthew , Thomas

*{Thomas comes upon a few of his fellow disciples bent over a book.}*

**Thomas**      What's that?

**John**        It's Matthew's copy of the Torah.

**Thomas** Wow. How'd you get something like that?

**Matthew** [*proudly*] It was the last purchase I ever made before I gave all my money away and joined the rabbi.

**Thomas** You must have had a lot of money!

**Matthew** Not so much that I couldn't give it up to enter the Kingdom, thank God.

**Joanna** That's all the more reason why I think what he said was disgraceful!

**Thomas** What who said?

**John** Were you at the rabbi's talk to the crowd this morning? It was something he said.

**Matthew** I appreciate your concern, but I was fine with it. Really!

**Joanna** Well, you shouldn't be! Nor should we! Keep looking.

**Thomas** What are you looking for?

**John** The rabbi gave a teaching about how to handle conflict this morning. He said if someone offends you, you should first go to them personally and try to work it out. If they won't listen, then you take a couple of witnesses along. Finally, if that doesn't work, it goes to the assembly.

**Thomas** The assembly?

**Joanna** We think that means the courts, but we're trying to look it up now.

**Matthew** I think he was just repeating the standard procedure already laid out in scripture. So when he talked about "tax collectors", he was just quoting from the law.

**Thomas** Tax collectors?

**John** Sorry. He concluded by saying that if the offender wouldn't listen to the assembly, then we should treat that person as if he were, quote, "a pagan or a tax collector."

**Thomas** Ouch.

**Joanna** And Matthew was right there in the front row!

**Matthew** But I wasn't offended! Tax collectors *are* evil. They *should* be ostracized. That's why I left my old life.

**John** But are pagans automatically evil? The rabbi has always taught us to treat them with respect.

**Joanna** *[to Thomas]* And he treated *you* with respect as well! If he hadn't, you might not be here now.

**Thomas** So what are you trying to look up?

**John** I suspect that when he said that about pagans and tax collectors, he was just continuing to quote from the law.

**Thomas** But how could they have talked about tax collectors back then? I mean, I suppose they probably had them, but they weren't Roman collaborators like they are now.

**Joanna** We're hoping that he was just giving a rough modern equivalent to some archaic term from the text.

**Matthew** Here it is! Deuteronomy, like I thought. And it says...hmmm.

**John** What's wrong?

**Matthew** Well, it does talk about step #2, bringing two or three witnesses, but not about the first step. And it does say the next step is the court, but there's nothing that might be translated as "pagans and tax collectors."

**Thomas** What does it say should be done if step #3 doesn't work?

**Matthew** "Then you shall do to him as he had thought to do to his brother...an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

**John** Oh dear.

**Joanna** You know, I'm reading the text leading up to the two or three witnesses, and it doesn't really sound like the rabbi was quoting from it at all. The text is about some pretty serious stuff - real crimes, even murder! - not small disagreements where the first

step is that you try confronting the person directly.

**Thomas** Then why bring the courts into it?

**Joanna** But he didn't, necessarily. We just assumed that's what he meant by the "assembly".

**Matthew** The assembly is the nation, or the city, whatever the authority is behind the courts. The judges represent all the people.

**John** "Assembly" doesn't seem like the right word for the whole nation, or even for a city. It's more like a smaller group within that city.

**Thomas** It's us! It's this group! He's talking about how we as a group should handle our differences.

**Matthew** We really aren't an assembly. If the word was too small for a city or a nation, then it's too big for a group like ours.

**Joanna** Plus, if it's us, then what he's telling us is that we should treat each other like pagans or tax collectors!

**John** Only as a last resort! If there are insurmountable problems.

**Joanna** But my point is that we're supposed to be treating pagans and tax collectors kindly, and with respect. By his own teaching! So what does it mean when he says we should treat offenders against the group that way?

## Scene 2

Andrew , James , Thomas

*{Thomas wanders over to another group debating something Jesus said.}*

**Andrew** You must have heard him wrong.

**James** Hey, I pay very close attention to every word he speaks. And my memory is excellent!

**Andrew** But it doesn't make sense. Why would he give a bunch of bozos like us the power to bind and set free? We're not just talking about the kingdom; we're talking about Heaven!

**James** Why shouldn't he give us the power? Who else is he going to give it to? We're his followers. We're the ones who are going to rule with him!

**Thomas** What are you guys talking about?

**James** The rabbi's sermon this morning.

**Andrew** I missed it and James was catching me up. But I think he must be getting part of it wrong.

**James** Hey, don't blame me if you can't handle the rabbi's teaching.

**Thomas** Is this about the "pagans and tax collectors"?

**Andrew** What?

**James** No, no, I hadn't even gotten around to that. This is about the rabbi giving us the power to bind or free the souls of men.

**Thomas** What?

**James** I figured *you'd* be skeptical.

**Thomas** No, it's not that. I wasn't there, either. I just want to know what he said.

**James** Okay, here it is again, *[with a glare at Andrew]* *word for word!* "Whoever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven, and whoever you free on earth will be freed in Heaven." Period.

**Thomas** That was it?

**James** Short and sweet.

**Andrew** That can't be it. *[argumentatively to James]* Okay, suppose we all have this power. What happens if I free someone but you bind him?

**James** *[after a pause]* He's bound!

**Andrew** How do you figure that? What about my freeing him?

**James** I outrank you!

**Andrew** *[exasperated]* Okay, then what if Thomas joins me? Is it a democracy? Is the guy now freed?

**James** Thomas doesn't even believe in it, so no, you don't outvote me!

**Andrew** *[with growing frustration]* Suppose it's John! Suppose it's Judas! What then?

**James** *[smugly confident]* There's no way they'd vote with you against me!

**Andrew** Arrrrrgggghhhh!

**Thomas** *[thoughtfully]* You know what puzzles me? Freed "in heaven" or bound "in heaven". In other words, not sent to heaven or hell. What does it mean to be bound in heaven?

**Andrew** Wow, I didn't even think about that. *[after a pause]* You know, I'm suddenly less worried about this if it's not a matter of eternal life or death. I don't mind James having that power, after all!

### Scene 3

Cleophas , Mary , Phillip , Thomas

*{Thomas joins yet another group debating something from the sermon.}*

**Thomas** So, what part of the rabbi's sermon are *you* debating?

**Phillip** How'd you know that's what we were doing?

**Thomas** It seems to be the activity of the day.

**Cleophas** Where you there for the sermon?

**Thomas** No, I've just been hearing about it from others.

**Mary** I wish I had been there!

**Phillip** It seems like hardly anybody was. It was just a short talk to a small group of inquirers.

**Cleophas** But the message was maybe the most significant one he's given us yet!

**Phillip** Maybe. It depends on how you interpret it.

**Mary** Every message is important! I lay awake some nights worrying about the ones we've missed or misunderstood. What if the Kingdom is nothing like what we think it's going to be?

**Thomas** Which message from this morning are you debating?

**Cleophas** The rabbi said that if any two or three of us agreed on something to pray for, it would be granted.

**Thomas** Wow. Was that really it? Are you sure you heard it right?

**Phillip** Cleophas and I were both there, and that's exactly how we both remember it.

**Thomas** I don't know what to make of it.

**Cleophas** It seems pretty clear to me.

**Phillip** But how can it be true? *Any* two or three of us? And we can ask for *anything*? Suppose we four were to ask right now for the Romans to destroy Jerusalem? Would it happen?

**Thomas** *[light-heartedly]* In the first place, I don't think you could get anybody to join you in that wish!

**Cleophas** You'd have better luck asking for the Roman's to be vanquished! But that's already going to happen, of course.

**Mary** That's it! That's what he wants us to ask!

**Phillip** What, to wipe out the Romans?

**Mary** To free ourselves from them! For the Kingdom to come!

**Thomas** Don't you believe that's going to happen anyway?

**Mary** Yes, but only after terrible suffering. Men will die, Israeli and Roman. The rabbi - *[in a suddenly lowered tone]* the rabbi will suffer. *[brightening again]* But that doesn't need to happen now! No one need die! We can ask for it, the four of us, right now!

**Phillip** But see? That just shows that he can't have meant that. It's ridiculous! How can it be that we can just pray for anything and it'll happen?

**Mary** Cleophas, how about you? We only need two! Pray with me for the deliverance of Israel!

**Cleophas** *[reluctantly]* I don't know, Mary. I'd like to. I already pray for Israel and the coming of the Kingdom every day. But to pray for it in *this* way, like I have the power to force God's hand and make it happen right now? I don't know.

**Mary** *[on the verge of tears]* Please! The Kingdom could come right now, if we would only believe the rabbi's words!

**Thomas** Mary? I'll join you.

**Mary** Thank you, Thomas, but I can't ask you to do that. I know you don't really believe.

**Thomas** What's belief besides a willingness to join someone you care about in something that's important to them?

**Mary** I think it has to be more.

**Phillip** It's not that we don't believe, Mary. It's just that we're still not sure what the rabbi meant.

**Cleophas** Let's ask him about it tonight, and if that's really what he meant, we'll do it.

**Mary** *[deflated]* No you won't. This is how it can be true but not "ridiculous". No one's ever going to try it.

#### Scene 4

Jesus , Thomas

*{Thomas speaks with Jesus at the end of the day.}*

**Jesus** "A willingness to join someone you care about in something that's important to them"?

**Thomas** Yeah.

**Jesus** And your question is...?

**Thomas** Is that faith? Or at least an adequate substitute?



**Jesus** *[casually, after a pause]* I was sorry not to see you at my talk this morning.

**Thomas** I was sorry to miss it! But I've heard all about it from the others.

**Jesus** I thought mostly of you as I was giving it.

**Thomas** Me? Really? I would have thought I'd be the last person you'd think of. Especially for that particular talk.

**Jesus** What aspect of it did you find most engaging? What part spoke to you most strongly?

**Thomas** Hmm...most of it was just beyond me. So I suppose the parts that meant most to me were the bits about people working together. The "two or three" who help resolve conflicts, or who pray for things together. The "assembly" that is the last resort.

**Jesus** You see? I was right to think of you, because those were the most important parts of the talk.

**Thomas** Really? Then what exactly is the assembly? It sounded too small to be the courts or the ruling council or anything official like that, and too big to be our little group.

**Jesus** What do you think it might be? In the best possible future you can imagine for yourself and this group and the world, is there anything that might be called the "assembly"?

**Thomas** *[a little abashed, but growing in emotion as he goes along]* Oh, I don't know...I don't often fantasize about the future, at least not the best possible future. To be honest, I don't feel nearly as strongly about the Romans or the Kingdom as the others do. It's nothing against them - or you. These things are just too lofty for me. I'd be content if the group could just go on - or grow: not necessarily bigger but more widespread, so everyone could have a group to give themselves to, people to care about and to work alongside, kind of like a family except that families can be insular, while these groups would be connected in spirit to all the others. *[snapping out of it]* Well, it's just a fantasy. Ridiculous!

**Jesus** Truly I tell you: you are not far from the Kingdom! You should gather with two or three of your companions and pray for this.

**Thomas** *[coyly]* And then it will be sure to happen?

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at  
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