

Matthew 18:15-20 - Restoring a Brother in Sin

We need to deal with a difficult situation in our church this morning. It is a situation concerning someone in perpetual, pervasive unrepentant sin. Unfortunately pastor Andy could not be here this morning, but he is fully supportive of what I am about to say. We have had long discussions together about this matter and he has read over these statements and is in full agreement. I say that because I don't want you to think that what I'm about to say is me acting alone or him just rubber stamping what I've come up with.

Before we get to specifics, I want to spend a fair amount of time explaining why we are doing what we're doing because I want you to understand that what we are doing this morning is not our own invention, it's not something we just made up or are doing out of meanness. What we are doing this morning comes from passages in the Bible that are crystal clear.

Many of you are familiar with Matthew 18 where we have a section given by Jesus on what to do when someone sins in the church. So this will be a refresher for you. Others of you, this might be the first time you've ever heard this and I want you to be convinced that what we're doing is biblical.

When someone sins in the church there is a simple 4 step process that Jesus has laid out for us to follow. By simple I mean that it's very clear and straightforward. However, there is a sense in which it is complicated because any time you're dealing with sin there are usually factors involved that cloud the issue. But let's just read this. **Read 15-20**

So there are 4 steps in this process and then an explanation of the bigger spiritual reality that is being reflected.

In **Vs. 15** is step 1 of church discipline: **Read**

So step 1 is to go to a person between you and them alone. You explain the action that they did that was sinful. You should have clear passages that explain the sin. And you should only address the action, not the heart, because we have no idea at this point what's going on in their heart.

This step happens - or should happen - all the time with all believers. If your husband says something sinfully inappropriate, you should gently go to him alone and tell him his fault. If your friend posts something inappropriate on Facebook, go to them alone. Many times there will be disagreement on what sin is, and how appropriate something is. Also, we know that love covers a multitude of what? Sins. So there is a place in the Christian life where we simply overlook offenses for the good of the body.

Prov. 19:11: Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.

Sometimes we give a proverbial shot-across-the bow and let it go. So we go to them. We go **only** to them, not to our buddies or anyone else and we just tell them what happened. And our goal is to gain our brother. Our goal is their repentance. It might not happen that minute. It might be an hour, or a day, or a week, or a month. The situation varies. We want to be as patient with them as we would want people to be patient with us.

Most of the time the 4 step process ends here. Either because the person repents or the issue is so small it's really not worth pursuing much further. I remember someone telling me they didn't get a permit for a large fire they were doing 6-7 years ago. Am I going to take this before the church and potentially disfellowship them over a non-permitted fire? Probably not. So most things are taken care of here.

But there are situations where we just can't let things go. Where there is a **pattern** of sin, egregious sin, blatant hard-heartedness. Things where if they don't change we could see getting elders involved and taking it to the church.

So we go to the person one on one. If they refuse to repent, step 2 is we get 1 or 2 more people to go with us to this person to work through this. **Read 16**

Now, again. I would say some time has probably elapsed between step 1 and 2. Unless this person is abusive or in some sort of other egregious sin, or we've uncovered a sinful pattern that's been going on for a long time, there should be time for repentance to occur. And then we get 1 or 2 other people to talk frankly about this situation.

The witnesses should be mature. You don't want a baby in the faith to walk through difficult issues. So the more mature the better. And as best possible they should be neutral to the situation - not conflicted based on the outcome. But know that complete neutrality is impossible and sometimes it's helpful to have someone who knows the accused person well be involved. You say, "Yeah, but they're biased." If they are a mature believe they should be biased but open to change and maybe that bias is good because they know other areas where this person is prone to sin.

The witnesses can be elders of a church, but don't have to be. These witnesses establish whether or not the accuser is accurate, and whether or not the accused is repentant. This can take a long time. Months, even years, depending upon the situation, depending upon the response of the accused. Sometimes there is repentance for a short season, or set backs. But what if over the course of time we realize there just really is not repentance? **Read 17**

Why tell it to the church? Because now there is a brother or sister in unrepentant sin, who claims to be a Christian, but is perpetually living in a sinful lifestyle. There may be tears and sadness, they may apologize for the sin, even confess to other sins. All those can be true but there be no true repentance. I've had many people sit in front of me and cry or confess and talk about how sorry they are and there is no change in their life at all.

Turn to 2 Cor. 7:8-11. Here Paul is talking about a severe letter he wrote to the Corinthians who he believes had been in sin. At the very least they were suspected of sin. And so he wrote a severe letter to them to sort things out. And he makes an important distinction between worldly grief - false grief. And true grief, godly grief. **Read**

So worldly grief is, in fact, grief. There are tears and sadness. But there's no repentance. No change. No zeal to pursue godliness. **Vs. 10** says its end is death. Why? Because although all those elements are present, there is no Spirit-powered change. This is the grief of Judas. He was sad, there were tears. And yet he was the son of perdition - the son of hell. Why? It was all worldly.

The other grief is godly grief. Same tears, same sadness, same apology. But you know what the difference is? **Read 9**

They are grieved into repenting. Into true change. Lasting change. It produces an earnestness to make things right. **Read 11**

There is anger and fear and longing. But get this, not for the punishment, but because this person has offended the Lord. Sometimes when I spank my kids what they're really sad about is the spanking. They don't want their bottom to hurt. That's not true repentance. That's sorrow over the consequence. But sometimes when I spank them what they're really sad is that they've disobeyed me, their father. And they are sorrowful that they let me down and they want to go make it right. That's true repentance. The same is true for us as believers when we are confronted with our sin.

This is the grief of Peter after he denied Jesus. Two apostles, two cases of rejecting Jesus, 2 men crying. But Peter changed; he repented.

So **back in Matthew 18**, you go from step 2 - 1 or 2 other people as witnesses - to step 3 when there is no true change. No repentance. And, again, there has been enough time to allow for that repentance to happen.

So step 3 is to tell the church about the person who is in sin. **Read 17**

So Jesus says, tell it to the elders. Is that what he says? No. Tell it to the members. No, he says tell it to the church. The church body. The people who gather on Sundays to worship the Lord. But I think we all have this

instinct that the elders should know and filter out this, don't we? Some people say there should be a step 2b where the witnesses come to the elders and sort the matter out before the whole church knows. Is that legitimate? I would say absolutely. Not based on the the words of Jesus here, but based on Jesus's foundation.

Look at Deut. 19:15-21. Jesus is building his case for church discipline on the OT Law. In the OT you could not condemn a person based on the testimony of just 1 witness. You needed at least 2, preferably 3 witnesses, to establish the charge. Most of us know that. But what we we miss in this passage is that throughout the process, there are judges and priests questioning and interrogating everyone. There are elders of the city interrogating all sides. **Read 15-21**

So in Israel the pattern was an accusation was brought with witnesses. And then the priests and judges - the town elders - would figure the situation out. If the charges were established, the person got just punishment. If they were false charges, the accuser got what the other person would have got. That's sobering.

But underlying all the accused and accuser and witnesses is the oversight of the leaders of the town. I would argue Jesus has this very thing in mind in this situation. This is why we don't have people stand up in the middle of prayer time and say "Hey, the 3 of have determined so and so is in sin and you need to pray for him" without the elders ever knowing. I think almost everyone believes that would be uncalled for without elder oversight. And the reason is because I think elder oversight is assumed.

So all that to say if you're dealing with a situation where you're to the point of getting witnesses or you've already done that, you should probably alert one of the elders so at least we can help direct and guide if things are not resolved.

Let's go back to **Matt. 18.** Why do we tell the church? What's the point there?

The reason is that this situation has become so serious that entire body is now called upon to do what just the 2 or 3 were doing before. There is no repentance, so there is added pressure, if you will, of the whole congregation knowing. The whole congregation is praying for this person. The whole congregation is actively encouraging this person to repent. The whole congregation is holding this person accountable. They are seeking to gain there brother.

We don't tell the congregation for the purpose of slander. It's not to destroy the person's reputation. It's not even for excommunication where they are no longer welcome - at least not yet. At this point they are still to be treated as our brother. Imagine if you hit your thumb with a hammer. The instant reaction is that the rest of your body comes around it to help heal. Your stomach is sick, you feet are heading to the fridge, your other hand is getting ice, you mouth is swallowing Ibuprophen. The whole body is helping this one part. That's what's going on. This is not amputation.

This is care and love and healing as the church calls on this person to repent. So we don't avoid this brother, we circle around them and love them and help them. I mean, just imagine that this is you at some point in life. How much grace and patience and gentleness would you want people to have toward you before telling everyone what you're in to? A lot. How would you want people to care for you? Very well.

This also keeps the church from gossip since now the church knows what many other people probably already know.

But what if that doesn't work? We go to step 4. **Read 17**

So if the whole church calling on this person to repent does not work, then the church is to treat this person as a tax collector or a Gentile. That is, we do not regard them as a Christian. We're not mean to them, we're not antagonistic or disown them. But they are not welcome to us in fellowship. They are not welcome to the Lord's Table. We're not close friends anymore because they are dishonoring the name of our Lord.

If you're family, it's tough because they're still family. We're not called to disown people. But we might need to make some adjustments in how we interact. But for the rest, we don't have tight fellowship. We treat them as someone who is under God's judgment the same as an unbeliever.

Turn to 1 Cor. 5. This is a situation that is at step 4. There is a man in the congregation sleeping with his step mom and the whole church knows and is rejoicing in it. "Way to exercise your liberty in Christ!" No, this is disgusting. Here's how it should be dealt with. **Read 1-5**

So this person is to be removed from among the church. They are no longer welcome in the fellowship. They are no longer welcome to just show up and sing songs and listen to the sermon like it's no big deal. They are removed from the fellowship. That's what it means in Vs. 5 that they are delivered over to Satan. They are disfellowshipped. There's no longer any spiritual protection for them so Satan can basically have his way with them. Here's an analogy. **Read 6-8**

So before Passover the Jews would clean out all the leaven in their house. Leaven became a euphemism for sin. Clear out all the sin. Paul says, you need to clear this person out of fellowship just like they used to clear out leaven before Passover because Jesus is our Passover. If you don't the leaven will spread. Sin will infect the congregation. **Read 9-13**

Notice he makes it clear that he's not referring to unbelievers who are sinning. That's what unbelievers do. If we avoided unbelievers in sin we'd all be monks! No, he's talking about anyone who names the name brother. Anyone who calls themselves Christian. He says it in various ways.

Vs. 9: Do not associate. Another passage translates it "have nothing to do with them."

Vs. 13: says to purge them. The word means "to exclude or remove someone from a group, *remove, drive away.* (BDAG)

This is actually OT language. In the OT, to purge from your midst meant you put them to death (**Deut. 13:5; 17:7, 12; 21:21; 22:21, 22, 24; Judg. 20:13**). Usually it meant to stone them but it could be other means. The Jews who heard Paul's words here would not have missed the connection. The man in unrepentant sin is absolutely cut off from us. Obviously in the NC we don't kill people who are in unrepentant sin but we should understand the gravity of what's happening.

So removed, not associate, nothing to do with them, purge. That's step 4. Is there a chance that they would repent later on? Absolutely. And you guys, we still hope for that even after step 4. Look at why we would do that. **Read 5**

We remove them, Satan has his way with them so that maybe, just maybe, their soul might be saved. All that we do is geared for their repentance. Sounds mean, doesn't it? Sounds harsh. Not if it's done in love and gentleness.

Now, turn back to Matt. 18 again, because there's an important component here. **Read 17-20**

What does that mean? Binding and loosing? What Jesus means is that if we go through this process faithfully, all we're doing is confirming what God has already done. If we determine a brother or sister is bound in sin, it's already been bound in heaven. If we determine that someone is truly repentant - that they've been loosed from sin - it is already been loosed in heaven. In fact, that's actually the Greek: whatever you bind, it shall have been bound...whatever you loose it shall have been loosed." The idea is what we're doing is already established in heaven.

Going through this 4 step process is just a way for us to determine what God has already done. We're just confirming it here on earth by the slow work of the witnesses. In fact, if things have been done well and carefully, we have the promise that when we hear from the 2 or 3 witnesses we might as well have Jesus standing right here telling us the very same thing. It's that air tight. And that's our goal as elders: to bring a

matter that we are so confident that we could honestly say: this is exactly what Jesus would say. Not that we're perfect, but that we're convinced that our judgment is precisely God's judgment.

So we want to be very very slow and methodical and cautious. We want to give a lot of room for people to repent and change. I want you to understand that if you're struggle with sin and battling it down, this does not apply to you. We're not stalking people to remove them from the church. Jesus is talking about people who refuse to change, refuse to battle their sin. Either they have committed some sin so egregious or been in so long it has to come to this point.

And maybe you know of people who are in unrepentant sin and you're wondering "Why don't they deal with that person?" Can I be frank with you: You need to deal with that person. You need to go 1 on 1, then get 1 or 2 more. Then bring it to me or Andy if nothing is changing. This whole section is built on the pattern in Deuteronomy where the elders oversee this process but witnesses can act independently. But steps 1 and 2 are the responsibility of every Christian.

Frankly, we don't know about every situation. Sometimes I'm the first to know things, sometimes I'm the last. But when I know, I have a responsibility to act to follow the Lord's command here in faithfulness to bring about their repentance.