

“Love Your Brother into the Light”

Matthew 18:15-20

September 13, 2020

[Matthew 18:12-20]

The most dangerous place for you to be regarding your vulnerability to sin’s enslaving power, is by yourself. I’m not talking here about just being physically alone. I’m talking about the kind of isolation that takes place when you hide your sin and refuse to bring it into the light. If you keep this up long enough, you become a person who on the outside may appear friendly and may even go to church and engage in small talk, but there is no depth of relationships, a lack of vulnerability, and your greatest fear is the thought of transparency with another believer. You live inside a prison of guilt, but it seems safer to stay in the prison of guilt where you can hide your shame rather than to bring your sin into the light and confess it to a brother or sister who can help you, pray with you, and be a source of accountability that offers a layer of protection against the predator of sin (Gen 4:7).

You have even found reasons to justify your sin. You blame it on someone else or on your circumstances. Or you justify why you must keep it hidden—it would be a stumbling block if someone else knew. But your self-justification is the key that keeps you locked inside the prison of your own sin!

You may have confessed your sin hundreds of times to the Lord, yet you can’t seem to struggle free of its power. Sin is like certain weeds that when you pull them up, if you leave them lay there in the dirt, they will take root again. You need to throw it on the driveway and let the sun scorch the life out of it.

Jesus said, *“everyone who does evil hates the Light, an does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed”* (John 3:20). There from John 3, Jesus calls us into the light of His presence by way of the truth. Yet sometimes, our sin is so entangling and deceptive that we need a brother or sister to help us into the light. Perhaps this helps us understand why James

5:16 says, “confess your sins *to one another* and pray for one another so that you may be healed.”

I believe it would be good for us to see Jesus’ teaching on church discipline in Matt 1 from the perspective of helping a believer who is entangled in darkness back into the light. Before we jump into vs. 15-20, let me remind you of the flow of chapter 18 because the context is really important.

- 18:1-5 – Humility is *essential* for entering into the light of the kingdom of God. What water and air are to our physical bodies, so humility is to spiritual life. You cannot fight sin from a posture of pride—you will only defend it!
- 18:6-10 - Then, Jesus goes on to give us grave warnings about the danger of sin and causing one to stumble into sin. Jesus say, it would be better for you to cut off a hand or pluck out an eye that causes you to sin, than to have a whole body and be cast into the fiery hell (8-9).
- 18:12-14 – We discover the Father’s heart to rescue those caught in sin. It is not his will that even one should perish. Rather He rejoices exceedingly when even one stray sheep (sinner) is brought back.
- 18:15-20 – The Father calls us to join Him on His rescue mission. If one of the Father’s children strays off into sin, we are to go after our brother and win him back.
- 18:21-35 – When our brother’s sin is against us, we are to forgive him *as the Father has forgiven us*.

So Matt 18 calls us to humbly acknowledge the deadly peril of sin and calls us to join the Father in rescuing one another from it.

Jesus gives us a 4-stage rescue mission:

1. **Stage One - Private Pursuit:** *“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private...”* (vs. 15)

Let’s break it down:

- **“If”** – Let me encourage you to go asking clarifying questions rather than making assumptions and accusations. Things are never as simple as they first appear. Don’t assume you know the whole story.
- **“Sins”** – You don’t go merely because you are offended or because you disagree or have a different opinion. You go over a matter of sin, that if not addressed would be further detrimental to your brother and others.
- **“Go”** (take initiative to seek him out)

When? Jesus didn’t say. This requires prayer, discernment, and preparation (note: most of us err on the side of procrastinating rather than pursuing).

How? 1) go with humility (18:4); 2) go in love—he’s your “brother”; 3) go seeking his good (restoration is the goal); 4) go aware of your own vulnerability to sin (Gal 6:1)¹; 5) go gently (Gal 6:1); 6) go praying; 7) go with scripture (wherein the Spirit most directly works); 8) go in faith (trusting God); 9) go “in private” A private conversation is the best context for truth to be received. Furthermore, people are prone to judgment and sin has a defiling effect, so don’t needlessly advertise it. Go in private so as to handle your brother’s reputation with care. As a Christian, he bears the reputation of Christ.

Why? First, to “show him his fault” (15). That is, to help him see it and bring it into the light. Second, because it is the Father’s will and desire that he be rescued (13-14).

Now, if your brother listens to you; that is, if he agrees with you about his sin and comes to the light, you have won your brother! Mission

accomplished! But “if he does not listen to you” then you need to proceed to stage two of the rescue mission.

2. **Stage Two: Non-Private Pursuit:** “take one or two more with you...” (vs. 16)

When you take one or two spiritually mature brothers or sisters with you, you bring increased wisdom and discernment into the matter. It communicates that this is not just a personal matter you have taken up, but a serious matter that is worthy of other believers’ involvement to confirm whether or not you have misjudged your brother’s sin.

If, at this stage, your brother listens and agrees with you and comes into the light by confessing and forsaking his sin, the rescue mission is accomplished. But if still refuses to listen, then you must proceed to stage 3.

3. **Stage Three - Public Pursuit:** “tell it to the church” (17a)

This is not a mere announcement (“Hey everyone, you should know what so-and-so did!”). No, it’s a call for the entire church to pray and pursue their brother—to love him into the light by speaking the truth to him. Just imagine the power of an entire church family pleading with you to come away from your sin! It may seem horrifying to the one still hiding in the dark corner of his sin, yet his brothers have loved him enough that they are unwilling to leave him in the dark. His sin has been exposed. Hiding is no longer an option. The only question now is, what will he do in response to the light?

If he agrees with the church and turns from his sin, there is great rejoicing—church-wide rejoicing. But if he persists in his sinful ways, the church has no other option but to conclude that his loyalty to his dark sin and his disregard for the light of Christ, exposes his profession of faith to be an ingenuine sham.

¹¹ Galatians 6:1 – “...if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted.”

4. Stage four: **Regard him as a pagan, rather than a brother** (17b)

The sad reality is that *not everyone wants to be rescued*. After a careful, 3-fold process of unsuccessfully seeking to turn a professing believer from their sin, the church is to regard him as “a Gentile and tax collector.” That is, they are to regard him as a pagan—one known to not follow Christ by his life. In essence, the church is saying, “we can no longer stand behind your confession of faith as genuine. You have forsaken Christ by your persistent loyalty to sin.”

Does the church really have the authority to invalidate someone’s profession of faith? Yes. Jesus goes on in vs. 18-20 (which we will unpack in a moment) to emphatically give the church authority to call out fraudulent faith. That is, to assess a person’s profession of faith and render a judgment as to whether they should be recognized as a member of the body of Christ. This requires the careful process of church discipline. Thus, church discipline will either result in loving a brother back into the light or exposing fraudulent faith by the light.

Now, let’s look more carefully at **[vs. 18-20]**. To understand what Jesus means by binding and loosing in vss. 18-20, we need the backdrop of Matt 16:13-19.² The focal point there in Mt 16 was Peter’s confession: “You are the Christ the Son of the living God.” Jesus responded by saying, “upon this rock [this is, upon this confession of Jesus as the Son of God] I will build my church.” And then Jesus says to Peter, as a representative of the church, “*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, shall have been loosed in heaven*” (16:19).³

² Mt 16 & 18 are the only places where Jesus used the term “church” and are therefore foundational in how we think of the church.

³ We know the keys of the kingdom belong to the church and not just to Peter alone because Mt 18:19 clarifies that if any 2 or 3 believers agree on earth, it will be

What Jesus is doing here is giving the church authority to discern and declare on earth who belongs to the kingdom of God based on their confession of Christ as the Son of God.

So what does this have to do with church discipline in Matt 18? It is the same keys of the kingdom that bind and loose in Mt. 18:18-20. Jesus’ listeners knew what He was getting at because Jewish rabbis spoke of a principle or action as being bound in heaven to mean it was forbidden by God’s revealed word. For a matter to be loosed in heaven meant that it was permitted by God’s word.⁴

So in the context of church discipline, Jesus is saying that the church has been given the authority to declare that a person is bound in their unrepentant sin according to Scripture and is therefore to be regarded as an unbeliever. But for the one who agrees with his brothers about his sin and turns in repentance, the church has the authority to declare him forgiven—loosed!—unbound from his sin based on God’s word.

The point of vss. 19-20 is not a general promise of answered prayer or of God’s presence at a prayer meeting. It is a sobering point. Church discipline is not just a human process. God is working through it so that when the church brings Scripture to bear on a matter, God stands behind His word!

So Mt 16 gives the church the authority to welcome someone into the body of Christ based on their profession of Christ, and Mt 18 gives the church the authority to say to a brother who persistently rejects the counsel of God’s word, “we can no longer affirm your profession of faith—we will regard you as an unbeliever.” That’s how serious this is!

Now if it’s that difficult for a person to walk out of the darkness of sin and into the light of Christ with the help of a brother, or two or 3, or the whole church, do you see why I said at the beginning, “The most dangerous place

bound or loosed in heaven. Thus, Peter functions as a representative of the church in 16:18-19.

⁴ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur NT Commentary: Matt 16-23*. Pg. 137.

for you to be regarding your vulnerability to sin's enslaving power, is by yourself."

Some of you today are hiding in isolation. And Jesus is calling you into the light. And whether that requires a simple confession or whether it takes the help of two or three brothers, resolve in this moment to start moving toward the light to hear Jesus say, "loosed!"

I close with the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "*Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the [unconfessed] it poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community. [But] in confession the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought to the light. The [unconfessed] must be openly...acknowledged... It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted, but God breaks gates of brass and bars of iron (Ps 107:16). [When] the confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self-justification is broken. The sinner surrenders...He gives his heart to God, and he finds the forgiveness of all his sin in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother. The [confessed] sin has lost all its power....Now he stands in the fellowship of sinners who live by the grace of God and the cross of Jesus Christ.*"⁵

Prayer

Song

Communion:

- Bread: 1 John 1:5-9
- Cup: By the blood of Jesus we are "loosed" from our sin to walk in the forgiveness and fellowship of God and one another.

HOW TO NEVER NEED CHURCH DISCIPLINE

- 1) *Daily take your heart to God's word for instruction and correction.*
Let the Spirit show you your heart and be quick to respond in repentance and faith.
- 2) *Make knowing God your greatest concern and passion in life—to walk in the fear of the Lord and the love of Christ, revering both God's holiness and mercy. Your heart must fear sin greatly and love God's grace even more.*
- 3) *Seek and welcome regular accountability from a trusted, godly friend who will not just tell you what you want to hear but love you enough to call you up to God's holiness and grace.*
- 4) *Don't just write someone off when they attempt to speak truth into your life (even if they don't do it very well). Humbly listen and consider what they see in you.*
- 5) *See correction as a good and necessary expression of love (especially when on the receiving end).*
- 6) *Be willing to speak the truth in love to fellow believers out of concern for their good and God's glory (not just to make a point).*
- 7) *Make sure your understanding of the gospel is clear and robust.*

⁵ Ibid., pg. 139.

There is a popular version of the gospel that is true, but in its brevity fails to prepare us for what the Bible says about discipleship and church discipline. It goes like this: *Jesus Christ died for sinners so that if we just believe, we can be forgiven.* That's true but it's incomplete. A more robust understanding of the gospel grasps *that to believe means to turn from sin to Christ as saving Lord, relinquishing our independence to His rightful authority.*