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Matthew 18:15-20

Church Discipline

I was 18 years old and had just recently moved to Tennessee for college. Before college, I lived in Alabama, where I had grown up in the same Southern Baptist Church my whole life, and had only visited other churches on rare occasions. And so I found myself, for the first time, visiting new churches every Sunday and trying to figure out where I should join. And one of these Sundays sticks out very visibly in my memory; when I visited that new church Sunday, I saw something I had never seen before: as a part of their Sunday morning worship service that morning, *that local church brought up a church member and directly addressed and dealt with her sin publicly!* I had *never* seen such a thing before. I knew people in my church growing up sinned; I heard it talked about, but always quietly, never in a public, formal way. And before that Sunday, if you would have told me about a church that publicly addressed the sins of their members, I probably would have balked at the idea as archaic, cruel, and unloving! But what I saw that Sunday blew my mind; it completely changed the way I thought about the church, about how we are to love each other and deal with real sins, and about how to understand and obey the Bible (particularly passages like Matt. 18:15-20).

You see, that Sunday, as I visited that new church, they brought up a young woman (either still in high school or right out of high school, I can't remember). She was a baptized believer and a member of the church. However, she had been living in ongoing sin; she was not married, but had recently discovered she was pregnant. As she spoke with her parents, and then the pastors of the church, she was convicted of her sin and *repented*; she turned back to the Lord and the church, clinging to the gospel in faith. And that Sunday, she publicly confessed her sin before her whole church family; she confessed that what she did was wrong; she repented of it and proclaimed her faith in Christ and her desire to put away those sins and obey the Lord in that area. And then an amazing thing happened: *the whole church forgave her, publicly, for her sins; the pastors, and the rest of the congregation, publicly reminded her that she's completely by the gospel of Christ, that they love her, and that they were committed to helping her repent, remain in good standing in the church, and raise her baby, no matter what obstacles came her way!*

Isn't that an *incredible* picture of the gospel of Christ? Isn't that an incredible picture of the power of confession, repentance, grace, and forgiveness? Of the *love* we can have for each other in Christ, as a local church? And yet none of it would have happened if members of the church did not address this young woman's sins and call her to repentance; none of it would have happened if she did not confess and repent; none of it would have happened if the church did not publicly address her specific sins, so that they could publicly *forgive, love, and encourage, and support her*. This beautiful picture of the gospel, this church's public love and forgiveness, and this young woman's powerful confession and repentance, were made possible by the church's pursuit of *biblical, loving, gospel-centered church discipline*.

Every single one of us is a sinner. I am quite confident we all know this to be true. No one is perfect. Every single person sins, messes up, disobeys, and gets it wrong. This is true of every person on the planet. And so it is also true of churches, isn't it? Every church is made up of individual sinners; that means, if you stick in one church long enough, that we'll each others' sins and ugliness, each other's flaws and failures. Stick around long enough, and someone will *sin publicly and clearly*; someone will sin privately *against you*, in a way that hurts, offends, or involves you to one degree or another. No church is exempt from this; sin will happen. You will see it. You will be sinned against; you will even sin against someone else! So this question is: "What do we, as a church, do about it when it happens?"

Jesus answers that question for us here in this passage, Matt. 18:15-20. *Jesus Christ himself is the very one who instituted church discipline* - and he gives it to us as the *medicine we need* to deal with the symptoms of our sin disease as it wreaks havoc among our church body. Here Jesus outlines for us the *circumstances and instructions* for how to carry out church discipline for the good of the individuals involved and for the good of the whole church. Though the topic might make us a little uncomfortable, *God demands that we deal with each others' sin* in our local church family. No, we're not given license to be self-righteous, judgmental, haughty, or cruel. But we *are* commanded to deal with each others' sin, even in public ways at times, *in Christ-like love*. We are commanded here to hold one another accountable, even to lovingly yet firmly rebuke one another for clear sin, and to help each other *repent*. For that is the goal Christ gives here: to see each believer, each member of the church, to *confess and repent* from sin in order that they may be restored, reconciled, and forgiven, remaining in good standing within the church and, most importantly, before the Lord.

In other words, in this passage, Jesus very practically answers the question: “What do we do when a fellow Christian, *particularly a fellow church member*, clearly and willfully sins?” So let us look at each of these steps, so that we, too, might obey the Lord in carrying out biblical church discipline as it is needed, here at Bread of Life Baptist Church, for the good of each person, the good of the church, and the glory of God.

So, point number one...

I. We Must Personally Address Each Other’s Sin as Clearly, Lovingly, and Privately as Possible (Matt. 18:15a)

Verse 15 begins our passage by setting up the scenario for us; and Jesus begins with an all-too familiar and relatable situation: a “brother,” a fellow Christian you know, *sins against you*. As we all know, there are hundreds, if not *thousands* of ways this could happen. Maybe a fellow Christian has offended you; maybe they are gossiping and slandering you, insulting you to your face or behind your back. Maybe they are erupting in sinful anger; maybe they are often a contentious, argumentative person that causes strife, division, and bickering. Maybe they are teaching wrong things; maybe they are justifying sin or tempting you or others to disobey God. Maybe they are proving to be a hypocrite. Maybe they are caught up in clearly unrepentant and public sin, to such a degree that it is *hurting the church’s witness* and outright denying the Christian life we promise to live as members of the church; for example, if a church member is proclaiming to be a Christian but is living with a girlfriend or boyfriend, or sleeping around, or espousing heresy, or refusing to come to church over a long period of time - in such situations, they are clearly sinning *against the church and against the Lord*.

So when something like this happens and you become aware of it - what do you do? Jesus begins by giving us step 1: “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.”

First off, Jesus tells us clearly that *we must address it*. We can’t turn a blind eye or ignore it; we can’t justify the sin and make excuses for the individual (“yes, it’s wrong, but he’s just a teenager, after all;” or “well, that’s just the way she is.”) Most of us don’t like conflict - at the least, I know that I personally don’t. Most of us don’t like being in uncomfortable situations or telling someone that they are wrong. So far too often, when something like this happens, we do one of two things: we either 1. *Ignore it*, pretending it didn’t happen and making excuses for the

sin; or 2. We respond to the sin with *more sin*; instead of addressing our brother or sister and dealing with it, we go behind their back and tell everyone what happened (which is just gossip); we pretend like everything is ok, while all the while we harbor bitterness and anger in our hearts, until it boils over. Or, when we've finally had enough, we drag someone's name through the mud and lash out at them because we've been hurt.

But such responses will not do; we don't fight fire with fire or sin with more sin. Jesus tells us we must, indeed, *deal with the sin by personally addressing the sinner*. And yet we always do so *with love*. When our fellow Christian sins against us, we must go to him or her *as privately as possible*, to address the sin in a way that is firm, yet gentle. It's difficult to give a rebuke in love, and even more difficult to receive one well; and so, Jesus tells us here to do so *as privately as possible, so that we cause as little humiliation as possible*.

Now, obviously, it is not always possible to keep a situation private; the more public a sin is, the more publicly it will have to be addressed. If two people are sinned against by a brother at the same time, those two people should lovingly yet firmly confront their brother about it.

But regardless, the principle remains the same: we do not want to make it any more public than necessary; before we tell anyone else, we should go to our brother and sisters, lovingly confront the issue and rebuke the sin, and *give them a chance to humble repent*.

Which leads to point 2...

II. Our Goal in Church Discipline Must Always be Repentance and Restoration (Matt. 18:15b)

When we're sinned against or witness the clear sin of our brother or sister, we're called to love them enough by doing the hard thing and confronting them about it. But Jesus sets us straight right out of the gate: we are not ever to do so from a self-righteous, haughty, judgmental, or *vengeful* manner. We are to do so *in love, seeking the other person's good*. The rest of verse 15 makes this point clear: "If he listens to you, you have gained your brother" (Matt. 18:15b). The whole point of confronting your fellow believer and gently rebuking them by pointing out their clear sin is *so that he or she will confess and repent from that particular, willful sin*.

As we saw last week, in vv. 1-14, *sin hurts us*. If we proclaim to be believers, but continue on in willful, unrepentant sin, then this shows a *hardened, unbelieving heart*, which very well might show that we are *not Christians* if we never repent. To be a Christian is to be a

believer - to believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ! This gospel is the *good news* that, though we are sinners who deserve God's eternal wrath in Hell, Jesus Christ, the God-Man, came and lived a perfect life in our place, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again on the third day; whoever believes and trusts in Him will be saved by grace through faith alone! But true, saving faith is a *repentant faith*. We are called to *turn away from sin* and turn to Christ as Lord over our whole lives. A believing heart is a *repentant heart*. Therefore, our goal for ourself must be to continually *repent from our sin and turn to Christ in faith* every single day; and this must also be our goal for each other, when we see each other struggling against sin!

And so our goal in church discipline is *always each other's repentance!* It is an act of love, because we care about each other's salvation!

We're going to sin; we know each other will sin! But the real question is: will we *repent and demonstrate genuine, humble, obedient faith in Christ* when we are confronted and convicted of our sin? That is the goal of church discipline; that is why Jesus commands us to confront each other in love - *because He pursues His disobedient children and brings them back to repentance*, even through our loving discipline towards each other!

So if you lovingly confront and rebuke your brother or sister who is in sin and they repent, then praise God! The process is complete because its goal has been reached! As Jesus says, "You have gained your brother" You have been a part of their discipleship and salvation.

But what happens if they *refuse to repent?*

III. If They Do Not Repent, We Must Involve Other Believers (18:16-17a)

Step 1 calls us to keep it as private as possible. However, the ultimate goal is our brother's *repentance, for their own good*, not ultimately confidentiality. And so, if they refuse to repent, Jesus tells us to increase the severity of the rebuke by involving other believers: "But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses" (v.16).

A. Step 2 - Two or three

Therefore, "step 2" means we start getting others involved, for the sake of our fellow believer caught in sin. We still try to keep it private and confidential, but we rope in others who can testify that the individual is, indeed, in sin and needs to repent.

Here's two practical applications for this step:

First, I think this step is the point in which we should notify at least one member of church leadership (typically a pastor). Since pastors are called to know, model, teach, and oversee spiritual obedience and growth in the church, it makes sense to include them in the process at the point that it starts to look like it will be messy and difficult.

Secondly, this is also the time to bring in another person who has witnessed the same sin occur, if available. This helps to drive home that the “accuser” is not just making things up or trying to hurt “the accused brother,” but that there is a real sin problem going on that needs to be repented from.

So, for example, let’s say Bob has been angrily yelling at, insulting, and provoking his fellow church member, Bruce. Bruce confronts Bob, telling him that he is concerned that he has an angry temperament and is proving to be an argumentative man. Bob gets defensive, denies his problem, and refuses to confess his sin or repent, but just makes excuses. After trying to work it out one-on-one, Bruce goes to their pastor. The pastor tells him that Bruce is not the only one to mention this problem, and brings in Steve, who has also accused Bob of being an argumentative, angry man who causes strife in sinful ways. So, the three of them grab coffee with Bob and lovingly but firmly point out that his behavior is sinful and unloving, and call him to repent and pursue Christ-like love towards his brothers and sisters.

Let’s say Bob has his eyes opened by the severity of his three brothers approaching him in serious love; the Lord convicts him and he repents; praise God! They help him address his anger and pursue self-control and love towards others. *They have won their brother! The Lord’s gracious medicine of church discipline has done its work of curing this specific case of sin.*

B. Step 3 - The whole congregation

But let’s go back; now, for argument’s sake, let’s say that instead, Bob doesn’t repent but instead makes excuses, refuses to acknowledge his sin, and just gets angry and defensive. What should they do now?

Jesus says that **Step 3** means we get *even more people involved* to drive home just how serious the matter of unrepentant sin is, so that Bob, or any other believer, will *repent*, so that their profession of faith will be validated. And so, we’re called to bring the case before the whole church: “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church” (17a). This is only the second time Jesus has used the word “church” in the gospel of Matthew; this is a big deal. This shows us that what he’s talking about here takes place in the context of the local church (just like Bread of

Life), between professing believers, “brothers.” And if a specific discipline case is not going well - if the person involved is refusing to acknowledge their sin and repent from it - then the last resort is to bring the case before the whole church, so that the *congregation as a whole* can recognize and rebuke that church member’s unrepentant sin and call them to repentance.

So to return to our hypothetical example, if Bob refuses to listen to Bruce, Steve, and their pastor, refusing to repent every time they meet together so that it’s clear the conversation is going nowhere, then they have no choice but to bring up Bob’s unrepentant sin before the whole church.

And this would be the case for any other blatant, unrepentant sin going on in a church member’s life: the same would go for the man who leaves his wife for another woman and refuses to end the relationship and go back home; or the person who keeps causing division and gossiping but only covers it up with more lies when confronted. If a person refuses to repent, they are *betraying their profession of faith in the gospel, breaking their covenantal promises to the church, and hurting the whole congregation*. Therefore, the whole church has the responsibility to hear and address the situation, calling the member to repent so that they can joyfully restore their brother or sister!

But what if, sadly, someone *still refuses* to repent at this stage? What if they justify their sin, make excuses, or cover it up in front of everyone? What if they even refuse to come back at all?

This leads to **Step 4**...

IV. If They Still Don’t Repent, We Must Regard Them as Unbelievers Until They Do (18:17-20)

Jesus gives us the final stage of church discipline in the second half of verse 17: “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

The words “Gentile” and “tax collector” here are simply meant to refer to someone *outside of the community of God’s people*. In other words, this implies a sharp distinction between *the church* and *the world*. The church is meant to be made up *Christians only* - *people who profess faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ*. We saw this in Matthew 16:13-20, the *first* mention of the word “church” in the gospels. There, I argued that Jesus gives the church the authority to *mark out people as true believers, true Christians*, as members of the church; he

gives us this authority when he gives the “keys of the kingdom,” saying “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (*Matt. 16:19*) Just like an embassy gives out a passport, declaring someone a citizen, because they are convinced by proof of that person’s American citizenship, so is it with the local church: when we declare someone a “member” of our church, we are giving our “stamp of approval” on their profession of faith in the gospel, backing up their claim to be a believer. This is part of what it means to “wield the keys” of the kingdom, to “bind.” But this wielding also involves “loosing” - it also involves the authority and responsibility to declare when we *cannot* back up someone’s claim of citizenship in the kingdom. This is why Jesus uses the same language of the “keys of the kingdom” here in v.18: “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” If we cannot support someone’s claim to be a believer in good conscience, then we can no longer consider them a member of our church in good standing.

And so, if someone still refuses to acknowledge and repent when caught in their sin, even when brought before the whole church and called to repentance, we have no choice but to *put them outside of our church fellowship* - to consider them “a Gentile and tax collector;” to no longer consider them a Christian and fellow church member, but an unbeliever.

If this seems too harsh to you, then it might be that you do not fully understand what the gospel demands of each of us: *true faith is repentant*. Each Christian is called to follow Jesus, *repent from sin*, trust in the gospel of Christ, and obey Him - not just once, but *every single day!* Now, to be clear, this *dopes not mean perfection!* This does not mean that if someone sins too much then they aren’t Christians or can no longer be part of the church - by no means! This isn’t a matter of whether or not someone sins - we all sin! Every day! This is a matter of *the heart*: the question is, when we are confronted, rebuked, and convicted of our specific sins, what do we do? DO we have a heart softened by God’s grace, so that we turn from sin, turn to the cross of Christ, and humbly follow Him, by His grace? Or do we have a heart heartened by unbelief, so that we pridefully justify our sin, ignore it, or even outright embrace it, instead of embracing Christ? True believers do sin; but true believers *repent from sin*, hate sin, and strive to turn from it and obey Christ. We might fall a hundred times - but the question is, are you *still fighting against your sin*, or are you a willing slave to it? The gospel calls us to *freedom in Christ*. AND such freedom begins with *repentance and faith*.

And so, we must diligently call each other to repentance, help each other repent, and gladly restore one another when we do repent! But if our brother or sister *does not repent*, even after all these steps of restoration, even after their case is *brought before the church* - then what choice do we have left? We cannot see someone's heart. All we can do is evaluate the fruit of their life. If they proclaim faith but live a life running the opposite way from Christ; if they claim to believe but *refuse to repent*, then we have no choice but to *love them enough to warn them of their unrepentance*, to tell them we can no longer give them false assurance, and tell them that we no longer think they are believers. We must put them out of church membership - they will also be welcome to gather with us on a Sunday, of course! But we cannot consider them a brother or sister, we cannot consider them a member of the church or the family of God, *unless they repent!* If they don't, then in the words of Christ, we must regard them "as a Gentile" - a non-believer.

I can't emphasize enough that the whole point of church discipline is *love*. We don't go around doing this to everyone - only those who claim to be a believer and *join our church fellowship, as members*. We're a family And as a family, we have to love each other *even when it's hard*. We have to love each other enough to help each other *continue to repent from sin, believe in the gospel of Christ, and follow Him by continual faith!* If we truly want to see one another saved, then we have to help each other deal with our sin - even when they don't want us to.

We have to do so *because we really do believe that this gospel is true!* That Christ is our only hope! That our only hope of salvation is the grace of God in Christ Jesus, who lived, died, and was raised to save us from our sins! SO let us turn to Him; let each of us turn away from sin or any other hope; let us turn to Christ alone in repentant faith, no matter what; and let's love each other enough to help each other do that, day by day. And as we do so, Christ promises us: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." Jesus promises he will hold us fast and be with us. He will use church discipline to save and restore our brothers and sisters! Christ Himself will be with us in the midst of our difficult obedience! What more could we ask for?

And if you have been convicted today of your sin are not a Christian, but are interested in the gospel and believing in Christ, or if you're interested in Baptism or church membership, I would love to speak with you! You can come now or find me after the service. Let us pray.

