

Becoming an Accountable Community

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. This is a reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 18, verses 12 to 20.

What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their faults, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

[1 : 16] If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church. And if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Again, truly I tell you, that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Well, thank you for that scripture reading, John. Good morning, everyone. My name is Andrew, one of the pastors here. I feel a little weird because I feel like every time Jonathan preaches, the turnout the next week is a lot bigger.

And then I notice when I preach, the next week it's a lot smaller. So I think that's what's happened today. Jonathan preached last week, and I get to preach to a bigger crowd today. We're super glad you're here. Sorry about that, Jonathan.

I'll try hard to make people come back next week. But I don't want to cut Jonathan too much slack because what happened last week was Jonathan actually intended to preach this text that was just read to us all the way through verse 20.

[2 : 28] He intended to preach that last week. And he realized, though, last week that he wasn't going to be able to squeeze it all into his sermon, so he asked me to pick up the rest starting in verse 15 today.

And, you know, I'm a team player, so I typed back to him on Slack. I said, you got it, boss. Anything you need. But then when I realized the passage that he left for me to preach, I was like, yo, of course Jonathan was going to leave me with this passage.

All right? I mean, the nice title of the sermon today is Becoming an Accountable Community. Right? But honestly, you could also title a sermon on this passage, you know, Four Steps for Removing Someone from Church Membership.

Right? Or maybe Excommunication According to Jesus. All right? So thanks a lot, Jonathan St. Clair. And here we go. The sermon, I'm sure that this is why people are flocking here today, a sermon on church discipline.

Something you're all itching to hear about today when you got out of bed, right? Now, I imagine that this text probably brings up a good amount of discomfort and tons of questions for a number of us.

[3 : 34] And I hope to address them throughout this sermon this morning. But first, I just want to explain Jesus' teaching here on church discipline in case this is a new concept to us.

Look down here. We're going to go straight into it. Look down at verses 15 to 17. It's actually pretty straightforward. But basically, Jesus is saying in verses 15 to 17, if someone sins, that is, if

someone goes against the ways of God, Jesus says that there is a three-step, four-step process. Step one, go and call them out on it. Go and personally, privately seek their repentance. Seek to get them to turn back to God. All right? So that's step number one.

And if they do repent and return back, great. Mission accomplished. All right? But then there's step number two. If they don't repent, step number two, will then take two or three witnesses and confront them again.

All right? And if they still refuse to turn back, step three, bring this issue before the church. And if they still refuse to change their mind and to change their ways, then step four is, Jesus says, to treat them as a pagan and a tax collector.

[4 : 40] Basically, treat them as someone who is now an outsider to your church family. And this process is what we call the steps of church discipline. And the final step is excommunication.

Now, if you're wondering what that might look like in real life, because we are a church that does practice church membership and church discipline here at Christ Church, let me just share with you what this might look like. Basically, if Jonathan St. Clair went out and he stole my car, okay?

Let's say Jonathan went out and stole my car. Jesus is saying that it's actually my personal responsibility as his brother in Christ to confront him about it privately, before I go off and get the whole church to get behind me and get my car back, all right?

To go to him privately to confront him and seek his restoration. That's step one when someone in our church commits a blatant sin, personal and private confrontation with the goal of restoration.

Now, I want to add a big caveat here, because these are Jesus' instructions for how to conduct ourselves in the church, in the context of the church. But the scriptures also talk about how we are to conduct ourselves, also in the context of civil society.

[5 : 46] And, you know, just because Jesus tells me to confront Jonathan privately for stealing my car, it doesn't mean that I can't also, you know, go contact the police.

And, you know, it's sad that I have to say this, but far too many churches have tried to, you know, be their own judge and jury, trying to deal with all kinds of things. Sexual abuse, domestic abuse, other sins punishable by the law.

And the churches have often tried to do it on their own, without notifying the proper, you know, law-enforcing authority. So I just have to say that. I want to assure you that that's not what Jesus is saying here, okay? He's talking about personal relationships in the context of the church.

All right, so that's step one. Step one for dealing with sin in the context of the church family is personal, private confrontation with the hope of repentance and winning that person back to the family. But if step one doesn't lead to repentance, if Jonathan won't give me my car back, won't even admit that he's wrong, then according to Jesus, I should get two or three witnesses to come alongside me to confront him.

And what I would do is I'd probably get Catherine St. Clair and Constance from our church to go with me to confront Jonathan and be like, Dad, give Pastor Andrew his car back.

[6 : 53] All right? I'm hoping that that would be more convicting for Pastor Jonathan. But if Jonathan still refused to give me back my sweet ride, right, if he continued in his ways of grand theft auto, what the next step would be, step three, would be to tell it to the church.

Tell the church. And this is kind of a scary part, right? Now, I have a friend, actually, who unfortunately went through this process of church discipline. She ended up in a romantic relationship with a man who was married to someone else in her workplace.

And she was at a Baptist church. And a Baptist church typically has more of a congregationalist way of governing. So they actually had her stand before the whole church in a members meeting.

And they reported her sin to the whole membership, essentially trying to shame her back to God.

And I don't at all condone what she did. But I want you to know that here at Christ Church, that's not exactly how it works, according to our book of order, according to our denomination.

Step three of taking it to the church is a lot more discreet than that. And what step three would look like if Jonathan still did not give me my car back, step three would mean taking it to the elders of the church. It would be me going to Tonya and Karen and Wes and Bill and Jocelyn and to our whole presbytery, our regional presbytery, who keeps me and Jonathan accountable, and having all of them, this church, confront Jonathan about his stealing of my car.

[8 : 20] But then, if Jonathan still refused to repent, after step three, after the whole church came to him and asked him to turn back to God, the final step would be to treat him as an outsider to the family of faith.

And no, this wouldn't mean posting bouncers outside of the church, not allowing him to come into the sanctuary, but it would mean exclusion from this table right here. Exclusion from this sacrament of intimate communion with Christ and his people.

Jonathan's refusal to repent, even after these first three steps of church discipline, would mean that all the members of Christ's church here should take a different view about our fundamental relationship to him.

No longer seeing him as a brother in Christ, but as someone outside the household of God. It wouldn't mean that we would love him any less, but it would mean that in our eyes, there would now be a huge distinction between who he was and who we are.

A huge distinction between who he belonged to and who we belong to. And this isn't just some mind game that we try to play, but church discipline is backed, it says here in verses 18 to 20, by the very authority of Christ.

[9 : 29] Look down with me at verses 18 through 20. When Jesus uses this language here of loosing and binding, it's the same language he used early in Matthew chapter 16 when he gives Peter the keys to unlock and to lock the kingdom of heaven.

Basically what Jesus is saying when he says, whatever you bind or loose on earth will also be bound or loosened in heaven. And what he's doing is he's giving the institution of the local church the authority and the role of practicing church membership.

The role of declaring who is in the kingdom and who is not in the kingdom of heaven. And like, I know a lot of times we cite this passage in our prayer meetings like, you know, where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them.

But you need to know that the direct context for that passage is actually Jesus' teaching here on church discipline. He's saying that wherever there is a local church gathering of his people, even if the church is but two or three people, there he is with them, standing behind them in their practice of church membership and church discipline.

Now in case you're wondering, Jesus is not saying that the church is infallible or an ultimate authority. As one commentator puts it, this doesn't mean that God is bound to add his divine sanction to just whatever the church does.

[10 : 43] But when the church does faithfully live up to her calling, when we practice church membership and church discipline rightly, we are exercising the very authority and the very presence of Christ in this world.

So church discipline, this is serious stuff commanded to us, commended to us by Christ. It's not just an organizational policy or an artificial construct. Church discipline is the process that God himself in Christ has given us to be the body of Christ in this world in a distinctive way.

And so there you go. That's my best shot at explaining the process and the purpose of church membership and church discipline according to Jesus' teaching here in Matthew chapter 18. We can close in prayer now, all right?

Of course not. And I imagine, again, that this teaching is quite uncomfortable for a lot of us.

Probably raises a bunch of questions, right? Like maybe you see Jesus' teaching here, these four steps leading to the removal of someone from church membership, and you're wondering, how can Jesus teach his church to be so exclusive and so methodically exclusive, right?

I mean, for our modern Western Bay Area sensibilities, this doesn't exactly fit with our value of radical inclusion, does it? Jesus, what's up with these boundaries? What's up with these lines?

[12 : 03] What's up with these distinctions, this distinction between insiders and outsiders? Jesus, are you really suggesting that we label other people, that we other certain people who believe and who live differently than us?

And this teaching is not just hard to stomach as inclusive Bay Area progresses, but even for those of us who don't necessarily, you know, uphold the secular orthodoxy of the Bay Area, even for those of us whose primary allegiance is to Jesus, this teaching on church discipline can still seem hard to square, right?

With the Jesus we thought we knew. I mean, just last week, just a few verses prior here in chapter 18, Jesus was just talking about welcoming children and the least and the lowly into his kingdom of heaven.

This is the guy who preached the Sermon on the Mount, right? Love your enemies, turn the other cheek, judge not lest you be judged. But here he's saying that there is a point where we should actually treat certain people as outsiders to his kingdom.

Even like idolatrous pagans and turncoat tax collectors. So like, what are we to make of Jesus' teaching on church membership and on church discipline when they seem so much intention with the inclusivity and the open-hearted love that we all value and even that we recognize in Jesus himself and his other teachings?

[13 : 27] And that's what the rest of this sermon is going to be about, considering whether Jesus' teaching on church discipline is actually opposed to his teaching on inclusion and love.

All right? Are they truly opposed? Is church discipline truly outside of the way of Jesus? Or is there something more nuanced, more profound for us to see in God's word this morning?

Now the first thing that I want to say is, hey, we've got to be honest though. Every institution, even the most inclusive by its very nature as an institution, it's got to be exclusive at least to some degree, right?

Every institution has to have some standard for inclusion and exclusion, whether it's an Islamic mosque or a Jewish synagogue or a church like ours or even like a sports team, a club, a gym, a big global publicly traded business like Google.

I don't think we could name a single institution, even the most woke, progressive, radically inclusive institution that doesn't have some criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

[14 : 26] It's absolutely just unavoidable if we're going to be honest. So if we're going to be intellectually honest, it's not so much a matter of being or not being exclusive or inclusive.

But the more important question is, what is the criteria? What is the criteria for inclusion and exclusion? See, in Jesus' teaching right here, he's keeping it real about the criteria of the kingdom. And it's really simple. It's simple, it's just, it's fair, and it's truly an equalizing criteria that doesn't specifically discriminate against any particular kind of people or people group.

In his kingdom, sin and waywardness from God constitute the grounds for exclusion. And repentance and faith in Christ constitute the grounds for inclusion.

And that's it. The same standard for everyone. A standard that neither advantages nor disadvantages any kinds of people. Jesus isn't trying to be any more exclusive than anyone else.

[15 : 24] He's just trying to be clear and real about his fair criteria for inclusion and exclusion. And besides, let's also not forget where exclusion originally came from in the first place, right?

Who was the first person to draw lines and boundaries and distinctions? It was us. It was humankind when we drew the first line, when we chose a different way than God's way.

And when we ran away from God and hid from him and each other, from that point on, there were two different ways to live. Two different teams. God's and ours. God's original intention was never to exclude, but exclusion was born out of our sin.

And you know what? The rest of the story of history is actually Jesus. According to Jesus, the rest of the story, according to his prophets, according to his apostles, is God's plan to actually include those who excluded themselves from him.

And not with some kind of compromised or relativistic inclusivity that just accepts everyone no matter what and without cost, but with a principled, inclusive love that costs the exclusion of his own son.

[16 : 32] On the cross, Christ was excluded so that we might be included. On Good Friday, Christ became an outsider so that we might become insiders. The son became the scapegoat sent outside the camp, crucified outside the city walls so that we might become citizens in the new Jerusalem, members of God's household.

This is the free gift of God's inclusive grace that's offered to anyone and everyone. So you see, even with the real exclusivity that exists and characterizes the kingdom of Christ, there is no other kingdom in history, actually.

No other institution that has actually been more inclusive than the church of Jesus Christ. That the household of God that's united in him and in him alone.

It is the most inclusive precisely because of the way that it is exclusive. See, Jesus is an equal opportunity offender here. He excludes all people according to the same single standard of sin. But at the same time, literally anyone, any kind of person can enter into the kingdom of heaven according to the same single standard of faith and repentance. And so a second and related thing I might add to this is that, you know, the very notion of radical inclusion that we so often celebrate and so often use to condemn Christianity and the church, honestly, apart from historic and orthodox Christianity, honestly, we wouldn't even be able to celebrate radical inclusion like we do today in the

secular West.

[18:02] This notion of radical inclusion that the secular West so often uses to bash the church, it got this from the church in the first place. If you're interested in reading more about this, I suggest Rodney Stark.

He did his PhD here at Cal. He taught at UW and Baylor. Or there's Tom Holland. He's an alumnus of Cambridge. He's another historian. Jerry Sitzer or Larry Hurtado. I recommend all these people who've done a lot of work on this.

And, you know, even with this, even with the history of the church, the history of its oppression, even after all the times the church has failed to live up to our own standards, Christ's standards, and Christ's purposes for us, still, I think you can make a strong argument that there's never been a more diverse, more inclusive institution than the Christian church.

As the great African theologian, St. Augustine, observed in the 5th century, all are astonished to see the entire human race converging on the crucified one from emperors down to beggars in their rags.

And, you know, the growth of world Christianity and the, you know, truly global complexion of the church has only continued to today. Like, did you know that Christianity is the most evenly dispersed religion across the continents?

[19:17] As of 2010, according to Pew Research, 25% of Christians were in Europe, 24% were in Africa, 24% were in South America, 12% in North America, and 13% in Asia.

So to say that Christ and His church are not inclusive is simply just contrary to the facts. But now the third thing that I want to say in regard to this alleged exclusivity of Jesus' teaching on church discipline, you know, is this.

What I want to say is, what if Jesus' teaching here on church discipline is actually way more inclusive than we originally realized? I want to show you that it's actually way more inclusive than we actually realized.

Now look down with me here at verses 12 through 14. Because it's really important to see these verses as the context for what follows in verses 15 through 20 when Jesus talks about church discipline.

Because, like, Jesus doesn't just, you know, out of the blue launch into giving instructions for how to kick people out of church. That's not what He's doing here in Matthew chapter 18. If we look at verses 12 through 14, we see that Jesus' instructions for removing people from the church membership, it actually flows out of His exhortation to the church to be a pursuing people of God.

[20:40] In verse 12, Jesus says, He says this first, What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the 99 on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?

And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the 99 that did not wander off in the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

And to just, to give some context for Jesus' original hearers in the ancient Near East, this would have been absolutely ludicrous, alright? Like what wise, what responsible shepherd would leave 99 of his sheep on a hill, put 99% of his wealth at risk to go after one wayward sheep, to preserve that tiny 1% of his wealth that is a particular headache to him, prone to wander again and again and again, and that might not even return with him.

The original hearers of Jesus' teaching probably would have thought to themselves, maybe just leave that one to the wolves. 99% is still pretty good. But see, what Jesus is saying here is that no matter how small, no matter how insignificant, and no matter how full his sheep fold, even at 99% capacity, God's heart is to pursue the one who is lost and far from home.

And Jesus is saying that this should be the heart of God's people as well, the church. Like, we must never be so preoccupied with the faithful 99 that we neglect to pursue the wayward one.

[22:15] And it is out of this context that we come to verse 15 and Jesus' instructions not on just how to get someone out of the church, but really, these are Jesus' instructions for how to win someone back into the fold.

That's what church discipline is about. Look at verse 15. If your brother or sister, if someone in your church family, he's saying, if someone who you are personally bound to and responsible for in your covenant community, if they sin, go, Jesus says.

Be that pursuing people of God that you're supposed to be to that one person. Go in the name of your good shepherd after that straying sheep and point out their fault. And not to shame them publicly, but out of love and out of compassion and in privacy just between the two of you, Jesus says.

And I love this part. If they listen to you, this is the goal. You have won them over. You have won them over. Like, pay attention to that. This is, you know, this supposedly super exclusive teaching of Jesus is not primarily about excluding people.

It's about winning them. Winning them back by the means of church discipline. Even when they've sinned and turned their backs on the family and the community and wandered far from God, Jesus says, don't forget about them.

[23 : 32] Don't just focus on the easy remaining 99. No, you go and you have the hard and often awkward conversation of pointing out that person's sin. And you call them to repentance.

And you fight. You fight the costly fight for their inclusion back into the fold. And see, this, this is the heart of Jesus' teaching on church discipline.

It's actually for the sake of inclusion. Its goal is to win people and that no one be left behind. So my question, my question is, are you down for this?

Christ Church, are we down for this? To practice church membership and church discipline with intentionality in the way of Jesus. Are we down to hold others accountable?

To pursue them? To confront them in their sin? And even if you are down, do you even have a close enough relationship with people in this church to do that? To know what people are struggling with?

[24 : 34] To know how you might call others out and back into relationship with Christ? To engage in the hard and messy and complicated but truly loving work of church discipline together as a family in Christ.

You know, earlier this week, I got a really discouraging text from a member in our church who's been away for almost six months. I've been reaching out to this person every few weeks and they texted me back this week and told me that apart from my texts, they've been really disappointed that no one's really reached out and no one's really pursued them.

And I don't say that to make anyone here guilty, but it did break my heart. It broke my heart. And sure, this person has their own responsibility in their connection to this church, but it broke my heart to read that text.

And I so pray for such a revival in this church that we would be a people who love and pursue one another, that we would be a church that is discontent to let people wander far away from a deeper relationship with Christ and His church.

You know, I don't just pray for us to be a pursuing church, but to be a truly communing, life-on-life church. This week, I had coffee with a new couple who's visiting Christ Church.

[25 : 53] They're deciding between our church and another church and they asked me straight up, how deep is the community here at Christ Church? They said, is this the kind of church where people are really invested in each other's lives, in the thick of each other's messes?

Is this the kind of church where people are confessing sins to each other regularly and holding each other accountable? You know, I don't say this at all, again, to make us feel guilty, but my honest answer and my honest assessment was that that was more the exception than the norm here.

And I told them that I see glimmers, I see pockets, I see a slowly emerging culture of real discipleship and accountability, but ultimately I told them that we are far, far from where we ought to be as a church.

And so my question for us, Christ Church, is will we be a pursuing people of God? Will we be a family that takes spiritual responsibility?

And I think that's the key word of the year for our church. Will we be a people that takes spiritual responsibility for one another? And if so, then who are the two or three people that God might be calling you to, to pursue and to invest in, in this church this year?

[27 : 10] Who are the two or three people in this church who you think might pursue you and invest in you? Are you even down to be vulnerable and held accountable in this church?

Like maybe your next step is simply becoming a member. Sure, maybe you've been a faithful attender for a long time, but are you ready to let the church be the church in your life?

To officially keep you accountable? The scriptures say that the Lord disciplines those he loves. And it's the same way with the church. The church, we discipline those whom we love.

But we cannot love you fully as your church unless you're an accountable member here. That's subject to the discipline of the church. And I know that sounds crazy, right? So countercultural, so counterintuitive, like why would anyone put themselves in a situation to be disciplined by the church?

And I fully acknowledge the countless cases of spiritual abuse that the church has inflicted. The crusades were real. The inquisition was real. Colonization was real. Story after story of abusive authoritarian shepherds who used their rods not to comfort and protect their flock but to threaten and punish.

[28 : 23] I know that's real. But friends, I'm not ultimately asking you to trust the church. I'm asking you to trust Christ and the process that he has given to us, the process that he has instituted in the church for our good and for his glory and for our witness to the world.

And I get it. Binding oneself as a member of a church to be held accountable by a community of fallible people seems so counterintuitive. I get it.

But what if church membership was like, what if it was like Odysseus, right? Odysseus tying himself to the mast of the ship, knowing that he would be enticed by the ultimately destructive siren songs. And what if membership was like his shipmates with beeswax in their ears, rowing hard to get him away from danger, ignoring his pleas for freedom, freedom to jump and swim toward his doom, even as he tore his own flesh trying to break free from the mast.

As the psalmist says, let a righteous person strike me, it is kindness. Let him rebuke me, it is oil for my head. Let my head not refuse it. Christchurch, we must not choose niceness over holiness.

[29 : 42] We must not confuse niceness for love. In his classic book, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this, nothing can be more cruel than the leniency which abandons others to their sin.

And nothing can be more compassionate than the severe reprimand which calls another Christian in one's community back from the path of sin. So again, this is not about kicking people out of the church.

Or even about the preservation of our self-righteous purity in this church. What church membership, what church discipline is about? It's about displaying the good news of God's love.

And not just his bare love like any other kind of love, but his holy love. Church discipline is how the church displays God's costly love to the world. By practicing church membership, the exclusivity of church membership, not tolerating sin, but holding people accountable and demanding faith and repentance for entrance into our community, we bear witness to what is ultimately and rightly exclusive, the holiness of God.

God's holy incompatibility with God's holy presence. And at the same time, by practicing church discipline and pursuing people just like our good shepherd pursued us, inviting back anyone who is willing to turn to him, even when it's hard and costly and inconvenient and awkward, we pursue them and we get them to come home.

[31 : 16] The stray sheep. When we lovingly practice church discipline and pursue our brothers and sisters in Christ, we bear witness not just to the exclusivity of church membership, but the inclusivity, the ultimate inclusivity of our exclusively holy God, who paid the greatest cost to win us back into the family of God.

Church discipline is our illustration to the world of the Son of God who is treated like a pagan and a tax collector in order that we might be treated as sons and daughters in the family of our Father in heaven.

That's what I want to commend to us this morning. Nothing that Jesus has not asked us to do, but to enter into this church with a heart for this church membership and church discipline, manifesting not just the exclusivity of the church, but God's radical inclusivity in Christ.

Will you pray with me? Lord, our understandings of freedom and inclusion and exclusion and bondage and oppression can be so distorted.

So Holy Spirit, would you open our eyes to the liberty of being slaves to Christ, to the liberty of being covenanted, committed to the church, even as fallible as we are.

[32 : 52] Help us, O God, to be the church that you want us to be. And we thank you that you promised that you would build your church, that the gates of Hades would not prevail against it.

We want to be that. We want to see that. We want to experience that, O God. So fill us with your spirit and fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, the rock, our cornerstone, O God.

Thank you for hearing us and thank you for what you're doing here at Christ Church. Lord, would you multiply it a thousandfold, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.