

Matthew 18:15–20

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Preacher: David Helm

- [0 : 00] It's Matthew 18 verses 15 to 20. If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.
- If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 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.
- If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.
- 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. Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.
- For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated.
- [1 : 11] Well, good morning. And I just want to add my own welcome to you. The highlight really of our week to be able to gather together and hear God's word for our church family.
- And this indeed is his word for us on this week. If I were to title this sermon, it would simply be, we get there together. We get there together.
- Amen? We get there together. I don't know if you realize it, but our country is having a moment. A moment that is overly long.
- A moment that indicates that you go your way, I'll go mine, and we're all fine with it.
- When you read a text like this, it's certainly given your own personal experiences with spiritual authorities or church life in general, or with relationships that have ruptured where you've tried to approach conflict.
- [2 : 28] One of two things begins to happen. You read a text like this, and you're like, oh, oh my word, the damage that's come through this confrontation within ecclesial bodies.
- I'd rather just go my way and have you go yours. In other words, by disposition, some of us are lovers, not fighters, right? The lover would say, can we just not have to approach certain things?
- Interestingly, though, lovers often go it alone. The fear of approaching relationships where difficulty has emerged might mean just saying, I'm done with some collective, some communal understanding of life.
- It's actually what leads a lot of people to go through decades of life without ever becoming a member of a church, never actually affiliating themselves with a body where you're forced at times to interact with others who are trying to help you along the way.
- Yeah, lovers, ironically, sometimes decide to go it alone. And then there are the fighters, aren't they? I mean, just think of the other end. And those who aren't so concerned with let us get there together, they're at times, and with those in spiritual positions of authority, who administer a text like this as if they're quite ready and willing to have you go it alone, quick to judge, fast to move, ready to fight.

- [4 : 19] Yeah, I've been thinking about this moment in our country and in church life in general, this sense of, you know what, at the end of the day, you go your way and I'll go mine.
- So I wonder what this text might have for us. Or put more particularly, why would we want to give ourselves to relationships with one another where at times difficult things are discussed and relationships restored?
- I mean, what's the value add? I mean, there's so much tinder in that box. I better know the value add in approaching it. Have you ever thought about the context here?
- I love the context. By context, I mean the stuff that appears on either side of this text. I mean, look what happened last week. If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the 99 on the mountains in search of the one who went astray?
- And when he finds the one who wandered, the one who fell off the line, the one who began to live in ways not in accordance with the teachings of Christ, then he rejoices and brings him back to the fold.
- [5 : 33] The previous context is all about the restoration of a sheep. The priority that Jesus has that, no, we're going to get there together.
- Even the following context, you know, when Peter ends up hearing this story, which we're going to look at today, this little passage, if you look at verse 21, and I won't lean into it because we will next week, then the Lord says, well, how often do I have to forgive my brother?
- How often do I got to decide we're going to go on together, that we get there together? And the answer you'll see next week is stunning. Stunning. So this context actually on the front end or the back end informs everything that you ought to think about this text.
- It's a text whose purpose is restoration. It's a text whose purpose is recovery. It's the text whose exercise of it is repeated and repeated and repeated graciously and kindly that we would all, that we would all what?
- Get there together. There's another reason I think that we ought to think about defying the moment that we're in where we just walk through life together.
- [6 : 59] It's the reward in the text. Do you see it right there? It's right there in the opening verse. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother or sister.
- There's a reward here. There's something worthy here. Relationships are worth the work. Why? Because we gain one.
- I mean, if last week was a call to what we ought to do, seek those who go astray, this week really answers how you go about it.
- And the reward in doing so is you gain someone. I mean, this word is used elsewhere in the New Testament about acquiring wealth, as it were.
- I mean, you're wealthier when you get there together. You have this word when Paul says, I'm doing anything and being anybody in order that I might win some.
- [7 : 56] Same word here, that I might gain some. Your winsomeness, to win some, is a great reward. I mean, imagine just the opposite notion of the word of gaining or acquiring or restoring.
- The opposite is losing. Who wants to lose a brother? Who's a sister? Who wants to live in church life where all of a sudden they're not there?
- And at the end of the day, you don't even care. I mean, if following Jesus is the series theme for the fall, then this lesson is simple.
- Those who follow Jesus get there together. So how do you do it?

The goal might be worthy. The context might actually inform its purpose as something other than judicial retribution, but adjoining again of family.

[9 : 07] How do you do it? Let me just lay it out for us. First, winning your brother or sister back will require wisdom and outlook and wisdom and approach.

Can we look at that together? Wisdom and outlook and approach. Look at verse 15. If your brother sins against you, you go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.

I just take note of the word brother. To this point in the chapter, it's always been speaking of Christian life and following Jesus in terms of parental units and the child.

So the child-like one has been emerging for 17 verses. But now the metaphor switches. The family of God is talked of as brothers and sisters.

It's a familial term. If your brother actually sins against you. See, this is the outlook you have when you've been injured by someone you love.

[10 : 16] It's to remember that they are your brother, your sister. You may have been injured, but they're not your enemy. They are your brother or your sister.

They are your family. You know, I came from a large family. I'm one of seven children. We used to drive one of those old early 70s Oldsmobile or Chevy station wagons with the fake wood on the side.

And it was a nine-passenger vehicle. The last seat actually flipped up backwards so that in our family, driving along, you had three kids facing out the rearview mirror and three kids stuck in the middle.

Only the kid in the middle seat in the middle of the middle was in danger because my father could reach him with his right arm while still driving. And then one child seated between my mother and my father.

We would go on long road trips. We'd have to rotate every hundred miles. We'd switch seats. We'd crawl over. You always wanted to be in the front seat because, well, back then you might even be able to sit on dad's lap and go 90 miles an hour through Montana without a seat belt or anything.

[11 : 35] But those days are now gone. But people used to go by us in the car and we'd see them counting. They would be counting and we'd be going, nine!

We'd go together. And there was some relational disruption along the way. There was some injury.

There was somebody would take a front and really scar the other one in return. But we were family.

And we worked it out as brothers and sisters. Think of Christ Church Chicago in that way. A growing SUV going down the road, burning real gas.

I don't mean to offend you. It was just supposed to keep you awake. But at any rate, we're going to go together. That's what Jesus is saying here. Following Jesus means getting there together.

[12 : 45] And to get there together, you've got to have that wisdom and outlook. We need to begin starting to think about family. That this is a family of sorts.

Not your bloodline, but a faith line. Family. The people that are here in your midst. How would we treat them if we thought that they were family?

See, it isn't just a sense then of you go your way and I'll go mine. It's no, it's important. We're here for one another.

So if you want to know how you go about the work. It requires wisdom and outlook. The humility of family.

I think of what Paul will later say in the book of Galatians. He writes this. Brothers and sisters.

[13 : 41] If anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself lest you too be tempted.

Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. The law of Christ on those who are following him is that we view each other as family.

And that when these things happen and someone actually has sinned against you, you retain in your mind the notion that they are family and you go to restore them in gentleness and humility.

See, older men as though they were your father. Women as though they were your sister. Friends indeed as though they are your brother and your sister.

Wisdom in outlook. But not only that, wisdom in approach. Same verse. If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault.

[14 : 44] I love this. My Bible doesn't just put a period there but a comma. You don't just go tell him his fault. Comma. Between you and him alone. See, there's something personal here.

There's something private here. There's something about love here. When we follow Jesus together, we're actually concerned for the confidentiality and the privacy of relationships.

You go. It's personal. And it's private. It's one on one. It isn't being injured and then therefore trumpeting it to 15 other people.

It's being injured and therefore going to try to resolve this alone. This is wisdom in approach.

And winning is worth it. I love that line there. Listen. If he listens to you, you've gained him. If he hears you. If she actually hears you.

[15 : 46] You know, there was a time early in my dating relationship with my wife now of about 40 years where my ears were not ready to listen. It was a disastrous moment. It was a disastrous moment.

Fortunately, it ended with a bit of humor. But it's something I've never forgotten. She came to me over a real matter. And wanted me to look at it.

Asked me to listen to it. And my immediate response, truth be told, I think I was a fourth year undergrad. She was third year.

I just got up from the room, left her presence, and walked into the kitchen. Which, to her godly credit, she came in after and she said, why are you leaving?

And my response was, I didn't like it when you said I didn't deal with things. So I left. Yeah, let that sit for a minute.

[16 : 44] We both, after I realized what I had said, we both broke out laughing. It diffused the situation. But in one sense, my stupidity actually opened my own ears.

Really? I didn't like it when you said I didn't deal with things, so I left? That happens sometimes, doesn't it? Which is why this wisdom in approach is really important.

It needs to be personal. Sometimes this takes time. I mean, you might catch somebody off guard. Maybe they did injure you on purpose and sin against you.

But maybe there was something in their heart that they felt like, but you deserved it. And that's why you go one-on-one.

Because it checks you a bit so that you can talk this thing out. And you can go, oh, now I understand.

[17 : 49] That helps me to see where that came from. But it doesn't let anyone off the hook. You know, this happens to me a lot. I'll get there and I'll go like, yeah, so you need to ask for forgiveness, right?

But my thing was just, it might have precipitated it, but I never sinned against you, see? And we get into all this little tit for tad. Now, if they listen, hear.

That's the approach. Are you ready to hear from others? I mean, wouldn't that be great if we actually began to develop a church family culture here that wasn't as individualistic as the country in which we live?

Well, wouldn't it be great if we developed a mindset here that I need you and you need me and there are times that I need you to help point me and redirect me and draw me and thank you for coming to me.

Wow, see, this is interesting. Following Jesus has been great in this series up till now. Now, you know, I'm going to listen to him. I'm going to follow him. I'm going to fight sin.

[19 : 03] I'm going to seek other people. And now all of a sudden you're like, whoa, this is not just about me. It's about us. So winning your brother or sister back will require wisdom and outlook, wisdom and approach.

But secondly, verse 16, winning your brother or sister back may require a little bit of extra work. A little bit of extra work.

Let's read that verse together. 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.

Winning your brother or sister back may require extra work. This is the process. It might not have had the effect you wanted. I went really humbly.

I went as a brother or a sister. But they weren't really wanting to hear what I had to say. He says, okay. When that happens, just grab maybe one person in two.

[20 : 10] Probably you should grab someone that has the respect of the individual and is already in pretty good relationship with you and them.

Why is it good to do the extra work? Certainly you go first personally and privately. But when that doesn't work, Jesus is saying to us, then go relationally and winsomely.

And involve as few people as are necessary. Why blow this thing open? After all, love covers a multitude of sins.

There are some advantages to this. I think of my own life. I've often or someone once said of me, Dave, you're not always right, but you're never in doubt.

Well, okay. I took that as like a real compliment. But that could also be a personal deficiency. Not always right, but never in doubt. That can happen sometimes too when you have relational disruptions.

[21 : 18] I might think I'm right and this person really has done something to me, but I'm not always right. And this is where having one or two other friends with you can really help.

It's a check on you and a help to them. Because maybe they're able to listen to this exchange and pick it up where you guys weren't able to get it through it together.

And they go, well, wait a minute. Wait a minute. I'm a degree of separation between the two of you. But here's what I'm hearing. See, that's helpful, isn't it? And then both individuals have to listen.

I'm hearing this, but are you hearing that? And all of a sudden there's this exchange just with the entrance of one or two other people that provides help to you, but also assistance in the repair.

You can't repair everything on your own. I was in a shop yesterday looking at a problem with my vehicle and figuring out how the guy could help me.

[22 : 29] And he said, well, I actually can't help you, but I'm going to give you the number of the guy that can help you. So the one guy went to another guy, and I'm hoping tomorrow morning that the other guy can help me get back on the road.

And a lot of times our relationships are off the road. We're running rough. We're not right. We'd rather be in two vehicles. We'd rather you take your Uber and I'll take mine, and I don't even join you, and I have no responsibility to you.

And all of a sudden one or two other people go, whoa, let's look at this. This would be a great thing. It's interesting this little line here about that every charge may be established by evidence.

It looks very judicial. Indeed, it is judicial language. I mean, it comes right out of Deuteronomy 19, but rather than the judicial heavy-handedness here, I've come with two people that evidence might be established, that my charges might be made.

I mean, that's not really the same parallel, although it uses judicial language of Deuteronomy 19. The purpose of Deuteronomy 19 is that nobody gets charged for something by just one witness.

[23 : 43] One person doesn't have the right to hang your life. They're on the line. And so there's a protection here. So that the two or three are there.

The truth can be made known. And in hopes, you know, restoration comes. Gain occurs.

Followers of Jesus are reunited. One who has wronged another one is suddenly back in the fold. Let me just tell you, winning is worth it.

I coached AYSO soccer, which is the youth soccer league in this part of the city. Had five children. They went all the way through. I used to lie in the fields at 8 a.m.

I saw many of you out there over the decades. For about 20 years, I'm on the soccer field. And my dad was a coach, basketball coach. And in our family, winning was important.

[24 : 44] I mean, doing your best is essential. But you were out to win. Unfortunately, in the youth soccer league, at least in my competitive spirit, winning wasn't even ever mentioned as a goal.

That was like, in fact, the real goal was a tie, which graded me. A tie?

Because then nobody loses. But the text is saying here, you want to gain something. You want to win something. You don't want to lose something. I mean, I used to tell my little soccer players, I'd pick up the ball.

The parents would be behind them. They'd sit down in front. And the first practice, I would hold the soccer ball like this. And I'd say, can anybody tell me the goal of soccer?

The little kids never wanted to say anything. The parents were always quiet, drinking their coffee from Starbucks Cup in the background. And I would finally say to the little kids, the goal of this game is to get this ball in the back of their net.

[25 : 46] And sometimes I don't care how you do it, pretty or not. We're here to win. And if enjoyment is the goal of the league, believe me, I've played competitive athletics my whole life.

You have a lot more joy and enjoyment when you win. So we're going to try to win. Now, maybe I'm a little warped, but what I'm trying to say is there's actually great exhilaration when you win.

Vote for my wife's chili today. It's enjoyable to win.

It's not necessarily bad. It brings a satisfaction to win. Just think of the satisfaction of relationships that are restored.

That's a win. Winning is a good thing when it comes to the church family getting there together.

[26 : 56] So be willing even to do a bit of the extra work. I was thinking of this little line at the back of James because the New Testament keeps coming with stuff that's related to our passage.

And while I don't normally pull you around to different places of the Bible, just be encouraged by the way James finishes. My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

That's all good. We seek to save. I mean, God saves us once through faith in Christ, but he saves us continually as we learn to stay on his path.

And we do that together. We have wisdom and approach. We have a willingness to do a little extra work.

And then the thing you've been thinking about, yeah, but what about when the extra work doesn't pay off? Well, there is where you get to the nexus of this text in regard to how it's been abused.

[28 : 16] I mean, you look at verse 17, but I want us to see it positively. If he refuses to listen, that is, if he's still unrepentant, if he's still going to just live in disobedience, if he has no desire, he or she has no desire to come back on line with following Jesus, then it says, tell it to the church.

Now, what does this mean, tell it to the church? Does it mean we put it in the bulletin on Sunday? Does it mean now we go, you know, napalm?

In this church, there is an ecclesiology that is a way of living with one another through representative rule.

So that the congregation has nominated those who now serve as elders and the congregation has elected those who are charged with the spiritual oversight of the church.

And I would just encourage you, given our church structure, that what it might mean to bring it to the church, because there's no indication here of even all that he might mean about the church. It's not all developed in the text.

[29 : 30] It's just the gathering, the ones who are following. Then I think you would just say, you know what, I think I'm just going to quietly find an elder and say, you know what, I've got something I just want to talk to you about, and I don't know what you'll do with it or what you all may do with it, but I need to trust that you'll be careful in these relationships.

If you come from a congregationalist background where, you know, every member votes on everything, then eventually what this text means is that the whole church itself is aware of things.

But here, we try to just limit the relational ruptures and restoration to the circles that require that need and not more, because we're trying to cover our frailties.

Not put them on display. But you bring it to the church. And then this is a sad part of the verse.

If the man or woman still would refuse to listen even to the church, then let him be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector. Let's just stop on that for a moment. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then the church actually, in a sense, disassociates themselves from that individual or that individual from the church.

[31 : 03] This is certainly never to be done quickly, but carefully. It's a real thing here.

There are times, and I've been a pastor now for many years, where we've arrived at that point. But we don't arrive there without an abundance of care.

We don't arrive there without an abundance of time. We don't arrive there without an abundance of attempts. And we don't arrive there publicly, but as long as possible with the individuals who are walking in particular ways.

So, there are times when the church says, you know what, that behavior is, first of all, these aren't tit-for-tat little things.

It's serious enough. It's disruptive enough. It's damaging the public witness of the church more than enough.

[32 : 22] And it has been repeatedly attempted to deal with, but now it is enough. You're unrepentant, unwilling, unlistening, and it's damaging and confusing our family, the whole family.

You need to move out from underneath the home. Parents have had to do this with their own children. It's one of the hardest things to do in life.

To finally say to a young man or a young woman, you know, you can't do that under our roof any longer. And it breaks the parent's heart.

But the hope, even with that action, is that that son, like the prodigal, will come home.

And what the child will see is that all the days they've been gone, feeling like out from under the tutelage of a loving home, is actually men and women who are like looking for you on the horizon and thrilled with the return.

[33 : 47] There's a moment in 2 Corinthians where Paul says that they had exercised this kind of judgment on an individual. And the individual then repented and came back.

And he says to the church, you know, very clearly, you know, welcome them back. Forgive them, lest the sorrow for what they have done kind of overwhelm them.

And so there ought to be, even in that moment, we're all going to get there together. It's worth it.

Separation from the life of the church is a horrific thought. And it doesn't come without admonishment first and care second and long time in prayer.

But the hope is always the same. We're doing this because we're family and we're going to get there together in ways that please our Lord, who's the chief of this home.

[34 : 59] Yeah, so you're in a church where we've been there. We've done that.

We've wept over that. There's an encouragement at the end.

I got so many more things I want to say, but I don't. I'm not going to. Other than to say this. Implicit in this text is membership in a body, in a family.

It's inductive logic is not inferior to deductive logic. It's just a different form of reasoning. And Jesus doesn't say you all have to be a member of a church here.

But inductively, his logic, his reasoning is that those who are members of his family are members of his body.

[36 : 13] I mean, what else can having someone separate from membership mean unless whatever membership meant was enough that said we were going through life together?

In other words, Jesus doesn't understand the individual going alone.

He doesn't get it. And so what's right here is, wow. Am I really going to trust Jesus enough to be a son or daughter of God and then to go the extra step and to demonstrate that horizontally by being a member of his family here, where people actually have a privileged responsibility to talk to one another when we go astray, to help one another come back, at times even to separate from that which we belong to, all in hopes that we would return.

But let's be clear.

We use that verse like going to prayer meeting. Wherever two or three are there, he's there with us. Did you know that that verse actually comes in the midst of church discipline? I mean, most of us are like, wow, I guess maybe I better be careful where I use that.

[38 : 03] What he's saying is, wherever there are two or three gathered, the gathering, the assembly, even if it's that small, whatever you determine to be the truth of the matter in the life of your fellowship together, I'm in it, says God.

I mean, that's what he said in verse 19 or 18. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything, it will be done for them in heaven. What he is saying is that when the church says, this is our decision, that heaven says, I'm with you.

Now that ought to put the fear of God into anyone who's given spiritual oversight in the family.

But what's forgiven in this family is forgiven there. What's bound here is bound there.

[39 : 18] Jesus is clear. So be encouraged. As you address relational disruption in your lives with wisdom and approach, as you address the step of doing a little bit of extra work, as you give yourself to a family that will carefully and with abundance of care be willing to address life issues together, the Father who's in heaven goes with you.

I suppose we could end this way. How we go about this, in large part, is the means by which we continue to walk with the Father in heaven.

We're having a moment. We're having a moment. Too long. Politically, too long. Socially, too long. Racially, too long.

Ecclesiastically, you go your way. I'll go mine. Or, we're more than happy to tell you, you're going alone.

And what this text says is, you want to follow Jesus? We, say it with me, get there together.

[41 : 05] Yes. Our Heavenly Father, help us to walk with real humility as a family, as brothers and sisters.

Help this church family to be more closely united in our covenantal in our covenantal vows toward one another.

Lord, for all who have taken vows and have said before you and us that we are members, may we truly give ourselves to it and never go it alone.

Lord, use other people in this congregation invitation to keep each one of us on track. Thank you that you've given one another to us.

May we be quick to forgive as you have forgiven us in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen.