

Pursuing Holiness in the Church, Part 1

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Preacher: Ife Ojetayo

[0:00] Faithful are the wounds of a friend. Profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

! Let us pray. O God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we ask that you shower us with your grace! Lord, that we may with humble hearts listen to the words of your Son, and by the ministration of the Holy Spirit, be shaped by it and be transformed in ever-increasing measure into the image of our Lord through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Good morning. If you are a visitor worshiping with us this morning, may I say we are delighted to have you with us. I know many of you are friends and family of the foes, and you are here to witness the baptism of little Solomon David. I want to remind all of us that what we will do in a moment is not merely a cultural or social observance. It is a sacred right in which God himself, the God of the universe, promises to impart his divine grace upon the recipient of the sacrament. In baptism, God promises to mark Solomon David as his home forever, and to grace him with all the benefits that comes from being part of the body of Christ, the church.

[1:56] So it is then appropriate, I think, that we look this morning at one of the marks of Christ's church. If you remember that in our series, True 1 Corinthians, for those of you who are members who will be going along with us through the book of 1 Corinthians, we've been talking about the local church.

This congregation, this church here, is an outpost, an embassy, if you will, of God's heavenly kingdom. So, this morning, as this young child is baptized into Christ, it is done in the context of a local church, under the faithful profession of believing parents and Godparents. The church is unique, because it is a place where God dwells by his Holy Spirit.

In other words, we can say of the church that it is the only place in all the earth where heaven truly touches earth, because God himself is among us. He lives, abides, and dwells in our midst. And if that is true, what then shall we say are the marks of a true church? Because I know you don't have to be a regular church goer to know that that statement, that the church is the place where heaven touches our heart, earth, isn't always true of every place that calls itself a church.

But there are three primary marks of a church. And by marks, what we mean by that is that there are three things that makes it apparent that a gathering, like this, the one we have this morning, no matter where in the world it is, that such a gathering is a true assembly of the people of God, an outpost of heaven and earth.

[4:18] These three marks are, number one, the faithful preaching and reception of God's word. And that's why we gather this morning, isn't it?

To hear God's word, read and taught, every Sunday and in our midweek Bible studies, because we know that by it God shapes us and molds us as his people.

God's word is our true north. The second mark of a church is the faithful administration and reception of the sacraments.

We will this morning be observing both sacraments commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ, holy baptism, and the Holy Eucharist, the Lord's Supper.

And the third mark of a true church is faithful exercise and acceptance of discipline. That third one puts a lump in our throat when we hear it, I think.

[5:31] It does in mine. But it is God's prescribed for the care of his church, so that his church can continue to grow. This third mark is what Jesus addresses here in our gospel reading in Matthew 18.

And I think this passage in Matthew 18 is a good detour from our 1 Corinthians series. And as we look at what Jesus says about how we are to deal with sin in our midst, we will later see Apostle Paul expound on Jesus' teaching here in Matthew 18.

When we get to 1 Corinthians chapter 5, when he continues his letter to the Corinthian church. And you know, as a pastor, there are two great sounds a pastor loves to hear in the church.

It's the sound of small children, and the second one is the rustling of Bible pages. So if the children of Holy Trinity can do their part, which they've been doing so far, surely you can do yours by taking your Bible and opening to Matthew 18.

It's on page 979 of your pew Bible. Page 979 of your pew Bible. Now, in these six verses, we are given the process of reconciling with one another, and the reason why we must follow that process.

[7:11] Now, it's a given. It's a given that we will sin against each other in the church. It's a given. Listen, the church is not a collection of perfected sins.

It isn't. Rather, we are sinners, all of us, who have been justified. We have been declared innocent before God based on the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.

And so because we still wrestle and wall against the flesh, the blood, the flesh, the world, and the devil, we will sometimes sin against each other.

It's a given. It should not surprise us when such things happen in the church. It should not scandalize us when such things happen in the church.

That's why Jesus gives us this procedure. But how to deal with it. Jesus, knowing this, gives us the process to maintain peace and unity in His church when sin threatens to bring disunity.

[8:25] So let's look at the process. The first three verses is the process. Verse 15 to 17. 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. This process can only work within the context of a church.

We cannot presume to employ it in a secular environment. Look there, as Jesus begins this passage, this section.

If your brother, the word brother there implies sister as well. It's actually a Greek word that actually implies siblings. Brothers and sisters.

And so that's where we are in the family of God. Brothers and sisters. So if your brother, this familial description is used because Jesus recognizes us as children of His Father.

[9:33] We are children of God. Adopted into God's family through Jesus Christ, our elder brother. So right away, Jesus lets us see the nature of how we are to relate with one another in the church.

As siblings in Christ. Our relationship flows from the ground of love. God's love for us and ours for Him and for one another.

So the process outlined in verse 15 to 17, which we've said is the exercise of discipline in which the exercise of discipline in the church is actually an expression of love for one another.

So what if your brother sins against you? What should you do? Jesus gives practical answers for us. And graciously, He gives us steps, steps, detailed steps in addressing the issue.

What's the first step? Go and tell Him His fault between you and Him alone. If He listens to you, you have gained your brother.

[10:46] Notice that Jesus commands us. It's a command. He commands us to go and tell the person who has committed the offense. It doesn't say go and tell another person.

I'll so and so, I've so greatly hurt you. which is the sin of gossip and only serves to make the issue worse.

Jesus says to us, speak to this person face to face with your brother alone, privately, privately. Alone means not with an audience.

And if He listens to you, if He listens to you, what is it to listen? To acknowledge the offense? To confess?

To seek forgiveness? And forgiveness is offered? If He listens to you, you have gained your brother. That there is the goal of confronting your brother or sister who has offended you in the first place.

[11:52] that's the goal. It's not to shame the offending party. It's not to shame the offending party, but it is to gain, to gain the little ones.

If you look earlier in chapter 18 of Matthew 18, Jesus referred to the little ones. The people Jesus is talking about there as the little ones are not just the little children, not just Solomon and Jane and Coyote, not just the little ones here.

He's talking about all of us. We are the little ones. We are God, the Father's little ones. And He being our elder brother. So each of us is a little one, precious to God.

None of whom the Father in Heaven wants to see perish. So the goal of this process, the goal is to gain our brother, to reconcile.

And if that's the goal, then the heart, the motive by which you initiate the process has to be with a humble heart. It isn't with pride to show how better off you are than the other person, to point at and poke holes at the wounds of the other person, but it is to restore the other person to relationship with God and with you in the body of Christ.

[13 : 16] And if there is reconciliation, then the aim, the goal of the process has been accomplished. And you have gained your sibling back. And there is peace.

And you can go on. Fellowship move with another. But Jesus says in verse 16, But if he does not listen, then take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

So the second part of the procedure process is witnessed. It has to be witnessed. Private and witnessed. So taking witnesses along with you is just to ascertain the facts of the matter.

In case you and your brother or sister whom you disagree with, disagree on the facts. Again, the aim here is not to say to the witnesses that you bring along, Can you believe how horrible this person has been to me?

That's not the aim of bringing witnesses along. The aim of the process is to win him or her back into fellowship. And if he doesn't listen to you privately, take one or two in a discreet manner.

[14 : 35] Take them with you. The principle of witnesses is to check if the offense is actually true. The witnesses are to judge if in fact there is an offense and to help in bringing about reconciliation between both of you.

And if the brother recognizes his sin and seeks forgiveness, what do you do? Then you have gained him back. You forgive readily, easily, immediately.

Forgiveness sought is readily and lovingly given and peace and fellowship is restored. But Jesus goes on in verse 17.

If the brother remains deliberately at strong in his refusal to repent, then, verse 17, 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.

Now, reporting it to the church here need not be the whole church. It doesn't mean that you call every single member together and assemble them and declare it.

[15 : 52] Reporting it to the church often means reporting it to the representative or leadership body of the church, the elders or the vestry.

Sometimes, it depends on the polity of the church. In the congregational church, maybe you do report it in the assembly of the whole church. But that's what Jesus means in verse 17.

Tell it to the church. And if the man or woman remains persistent in his or her refusal to repent, he is to be treated as a Gentile or a tax collector.

Now, if you've read through the Gospels, you understand what it means to be, in Jesus' day, to be a Gentile or a tax collector. They're, in fact, the same.

they're outside of God's covenant people. They're unbelievers. And so, that's what Jesus is saying here. If this person remains obstinately unrepentant, then treat him as someone who is not part of the family of God.

[17 : 02] So, I hope you can see here that it's no small thing, verse 17. It's no small thing. But what does it look like? What does it look like to treat someone as an unbeliever?

It might help us to remember how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors. He was a friend to them, wasn't he?

The Pharisees even hated him because he was such a friend to Gentiles and tax collectors. So, when Jesus says treat them as such, he's not saying hate them.

He's not saying he curses upon them. It means to love them but to acknowledge and identify them as being outside the body of Christ, outside the fold.

So, the process of treating a brother as a Gentile is what we often have come to know in the church as excommunication. it is saying to them, because you remain determined to continue in your sin, not listening to God's word, then you, dear brother or sister, you are not operating as one who is part of the body.

[18 : 26] But it's not meant to be a final verdict. We are not the judge of their souls. In fact, it's meant to be part of the process of discipline that God in His mercy will use that act of putting them

outside of the fold as a warning to them.

It's a dire warning to him or her to realize that the path that they're marching on will lead to separation from the source of life. So, in practicality, we are to love them.

And the most loving thing to do is to call them to repentance. I want you to notice the nature of Christian love. The nature of Christian love is not to pretend that nothing is wrong among us or to condone sin or excuse it in the church.

The matter, as Jesus has given it, the process, the matter begins privately for the sake of the brother and concern for truth, it will involve witnesses if there is no reconciliation.

And if they still refuse to repent, it involves the church. And then the church exercises appropriate discipline. And even after discipline, there is an ongoing love in the manner Jesus exemplified in his love for Gentiles and tax collectors.

[19:54] Jesus never excused the sin of the tax collectors. But he came to them lovingly. And he did what? He called, he preached the gospel to them and he called them to repentance.

Jesus never compromised truth. He never settled for a peace that is not grounded on God's word. The church cannot do the same.

sin. The church must do likewise as Jesus does. So it is an exercise of Christian love and truth that discipline is a mark of a true church because it is only in a church where Christian love flourishes that discipline is authorized.

You know, the world around us excuses sin and calls it love, doesn't it? But tolerance of sin is in fact hateful because it puts the soul of the brother or sister, the little one, which Christ loves, it puts their soul in peril.

And it says to the world that the church has a low view, a very low view of the honor and purity of Christ's bride, the church. May never be so among us here at Holy Trinity.

[21:20] Jesus is given the reason, given the process. And now in verse 18 to 20, he gives the reason for why this process is actually put forth.

The theological reason for this process is given by Jesus. It's the heavenly mandate which God gives us to gain the little ones. Look there in verse 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. 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. Church discipline is in fact God's discipline when it is faithfully and rightly exercised.

That is an important disclaimer, of course, because there are many ways in which church discipline is not faithfully administered, and it can easily be abused.

[22:26] So we must say church discipline is God's discipline when it is faithfully and rightly exercised. You know the famous verse 20 that we often quote, verse 20, for where two or three got it in my name, there I am among them.

You might have heard me quote it often when only one or two people show up, at adult Sunday school. And I say, well, you know, when two or three got it in Christ's name, there he is among us, and we go on with our Bible study.

So I often quote that, but in truth, that verse, the right meaning of that verse is within the context here of church discipline.

Do you see that? Jesus is saying to us here, the local church, church, we, the local church, we have the authority to excommunicate, again, that word just means discipline.

We put such a high threshold on it, it just means discipline. We have the authority as the church, the local church, to discipline a member of the church. That's the theological reasoning for this process.

[23:37] The church has the mandate from God to declare that someone is outside of the kingdom on the basis, how do we declare someone is outside of the kingdom?

It is on the basis of their persistent, stubborn, unrepentant sin. That's important because we're all sinners, right?

So we don't just kick each other out of the family of God after every sin, but it is on the basis of persistent, stubborn, and unrepentant sin.

This, in fact, is the keys of the kingdom given by our Lord to His church. In the same manner, the church has the mandate to welcome someone into the kingdom on the basis of what?

How do we welcome people into the kingdom of God? It's on the basis of their acknowledging their sin, confessing their sins, and repenting of their sins, and when that is done, the church has the keys of the kingdom to say, if that is in fact true about you, you are now members of the body of Christ.

[24 : 52] You are adopted as sons and daughters of the kingdom. Verse 18, truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound.

Bound there means shut out. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound, shut out in heaven. And whatever you lose on earth shall be loosed.

That is welcomed in. To lose is to welcome into the body. So if you welcome somebody into the body, they will be welcomed in heaven. If you bound them on earth, they will be bound in heaven. This is astonishing, really, if you think about it. Jesus is saying that when the church, functioning in love, relying on God's word as the standard of truth, humble in prayer, when they make judgments in matters of discipline within the local congregation, when they gather in Jesus' name, seeking his honor and glory above the glory and praise of man, Jesus says, he promises even, to be there with them.

That's the astonishment of this verse. If we find it strange and difficult to grasp that a loving church should exercise discipline, perhaps we need to examine what it is and who we think the church exists for.

[26 : 21] This local church is an outpost of God's kingdom on this corner of God's green earth. church, what we do and how we do it, reflects first and foremost on Jesus, our King, whose name we bear.

So we do not ignore sin in Christ's church. We do not gloss over it. We call one another. Again, remember that Jesus has said it's a given that we will sin against one another. we call one another in humility and soberness, we call one another to repentance. And when repentance occurs, we freely, fully forgive. Why? Because we've been forgiven ourselves.

willful willful unrepentance persists, we exercise the keys of the kingdom. Our goal, our goal throughout the process, is always to gain our brother or sister to Christ.

[27 : 40] That is ever our goal. God. And so, it might seem hard that we're preaching on this passage on a baptism Sunday. On the day where we're baptizing someone into the family of God.

But it's because we are siblings in Christ. Brothers and sisters, when we come into his kingdom in baptism, we become brothers and sisters. Solomon is Dan and Katie's son.

brother. But today, he also becomes their brother in Christ. Siblings in God's family. Inheritors, all of us, of the promises of God secured by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord and King.

That is a wonderful truth and mystery. And it is his promise that is God's promise. That when we hold unto him in our baptism, he actually holds unto us.

He holds fast unto us through our life in this world as pilgrims. Until that promised day when we will see him.

[28 : 58] When we will behold him face to face. We will behold the one who dearly loves us and give himself for us for our sins. That is why the church is a sacred place.

That is why when we observe and we gather together, God is in our midst, present with us, and he reveals the heart of our Father.

We do not seek that anyone should perish. in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.