

# Matthew 18:15-20

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[0:00] One wandering sheep. And because, he says, verse 14, Now, if that's God's mindset, what will church discipline look like?

Nothing like the opening scene of the Scarlet Letter. God isn't interested in punishing Christians who sin. Jesus already bore the judgment for their sins at his cross.

Our sins against a holy God do deserve punishment and shaming. They do. And if you aren't a Christian today, right, your sins against God and his ways, we'll one day receive that.

But it won't be at the hands of a church. But if you've repented of all your sins and believed in Christ, the punishment and the shame that you deserve, he took those with him to his cross.

And as our substitute, he bore the divine justice fit for our sins and bought us a complete pardon. He took your sin on his blameless shoulders.

[1:39] He took your shame on his perfect person. He made satisfaction once for all on his cross. Which is why the psalmist can say, He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgression from us.

As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. And so friends, if that's your story, if you've trusted in Christ, turned from self and sin to him, let's celebrate that there is no condemnation.

He is not interested in punishing his people because Jesus Christ already bore that for them. And if that's not you yet, what's holding you back?

Will you, even today, repent of your sins and believe in Jesus Christ, the salvation of your soul? So God isn't interested in punishing Christians who sin.

[2:57] Jesus already bore the judgment for their sins at his cross. Now he's interested in calling them home. And that's why the process of church discipline doesn't look like shunning and shaming.

It looks like pleading with someone to turn back, to be reconciled. Right, we see that even further in the goal that Jesus sets out for church discipline right at the outset in verse 15.

What does he intend to happen? In verse 15, he says, if he listens to you, you have gained. Some translations say, you have won your brother.

And that's what we saw last week, right? The shepherd doesn't seek out the wandering sheep in order to crush it, but to bring it home. And that's the goal that he lays out for us today.

At Shoreline, we don't make a big deal about sermon titles, but we ought to call this one gain your brother because that's the whole point. And by the way, if you're a leader here today, if you're a manager or a parent, which is definitely a leadership role, or in the military, explaining the purpose and the mindset of something at the outset is what good leaders do.

[4:21] They don't just say, okay, here's the task, go do it. First, they say, here's the mindset. Here's why we're doing it. Here's our intention and why it matters.

First, that helps people get the big picture and understand its impact and purpose, but it also shapes the attitude with which they do it, right? If you understand verses 1 through 14, you can't possibly come to 15 through 20 thinking, let's shame that person, right?

So for those, you know, who like TED Talks, right, Simon Sinek did not invent start with why, right? Here's Jesus doing it 2,000 years ago. Back to the text.

There's no punishment, no ongoing shunning, nothing like that. Christ is paid the penalty for their sin on his cross and no further punishment is added. And I'll add, by the way, if they've sinned against me, no further punishment, my desire to punish and get even is left either.

Now, pardon before God does not mean that repentant sinners are immune from the worldly consequences of their sins or that trust is immediately restored in all their relationships, right?

[5:45] A murderer who repents can be welcomed into the fellowship of the saints, but they will still stand trial, right? Someone repenting of lying can be welcomed home to the church and will need to demonstrate growth and trustworthiness for trust to be restored.

And if they're truly repentant, they'll accept that. a pastor who's disqualified himself through a major moral failing can, upon repentance, be immediately be restored to the fellowship of the church, but not to leadership in the church.

Not until they do the long work of demonstrating dependable Christian character again from scratch. And if they're truly repentant, they'll accept that. So the goal here is to restore a person all the way back to what we saw in verse 4 two weeks ago.

To that place of humbling ourselves like a child. That's all Christians must do. To repent of their sins and to cry out for the Savior. That's what this process is for and what it's about.

It's not punitive, it's restorative. It's a process of reconciliation. Not a process for excluding people, but a method for regaining family.

[7:05] And so, just as the shepherd, verse 13, rejoices over the wandering sheep's return, that's the attitude he's cultivating among his people for the restoration for those who have turned to sin.

And so, with the Father, let us carefully watch over our brothers and sisters in Christ. Not with suspicion, not with a skeptical and accusing eye, but with loving care.

And though our text says if your brother sins against you, this passage applies to more than just my conflict with another person. Right?

The whole point of chapter 18 up to now has been about verses 1-14 bringing back every sheep from every kind of wandering. And we can tell from the rest of the New Testament in places like 1 Corinthians 5 that this is the same process for bringing back all Christians who wander into sin, not just those who have wronged me.

And as we walk into the process that Jesus lays out, we need to understand two truths before we can make sense of it. Two doctrines that make this all work together.

[8:23] One is regeneration and the other is church membership. We're talking a lot about church membership today. I didn't realize that as we were planning the service. First, regeneration. The gospel is a free gift of God.

It is not something we earn. And what it does for us is, first, it saves us from hell and purchases us redemption and entrance into God's presence forever.

And, second, it changes us. It transforms us. A doctrine we call regeneration. Right? When a person becomes a Christian, it's not like signing up for a club.

or registering to affiliate with a political party. Jesus called it being born again or born from above.

The prophets called it having the old heart of stone being removed and a new living heart being put in.

The apostles called it being made a new creation. Friends, becoming a Christian happens to your soul. people. You cry out for God and He transforms your inner person, giving you new desires and appreciation for His good law, a longing for Him.

[9:42] And, it's those inner transformations accompanied by God's indwelling all believers by the power of His Holy Spirit that drive us to walk in holiness with Him to continue to repent and to hear Him from His word and to gather with His people.

And so, if we don't have a changed life, that demonstrates that we have not received His free gift because His free gift changes us.

when Jesus said that you can tell a tree by its fruits, He actually meant that, right? An apple tree can't help but make apples. And Christians, likewise, can't help loving God and striving against sin.

Not with perfection, certainly, and not in order to get saved, right? But because in their salvation they have been made new. Now, why is that important here in this text?

Well, if we can't expect a life of holiness and repentance from Christians, then church discipline doesn't make any sense. It's nonsense, actually. But church discipline does make sense if the church can say, friend, your life doesn't bear the marks of new birth.

[11:03] We don't think you're a Christian. We implore you to repent and believe, right? So, ongoing, serious, unrepentant sin, whether it's sin against you, verse 15, or wandering away from God as we saw earlier in the chapter, the people of God must confront sin.

Secondly, church membership makes church discipline work as well, right? If a congregation doesn't have some form of formal membership, church discipline doesn't make much sense, right? Membership is not your act. certainly you apply for it, but it's an act of the church where the congregation affirms that to the best of our ability, we believe this person understands the gospel, trusts in Christ, and has been born again.

And we commit to living as disciples with this person. That's what membership is. Now, entering into that relationship, among many other things, is signing yourself up for this warning signal, church discipline, so you don't make a shipwreck of your faith, right?

Living the Christian life without membership is like driving a car and choosing to disable the warning lights, right? You won't know when something's going wrong because you've decided not to get the warning.

[12:33] And that's why this passage makes little sense without church membership. If there aren't formal boundaries, how can a congregation give you that warning saying, you're outside the bounds and then plead with you, please come back within them, restored to our fellowship.

So with all those ideas in place, first, that the purpose is to win brothers and sisters mired in sin back to Christ, not to punish them. Second, that we may be restored to Christian fellowship immediately upon repentance, but may still face earthly consequences for our actions.

And then third, that church discipline doesn't make sense without both new birth and church membership. With those ideas in place, Jesus shows us how to call someone back to the path of discipleship.

And it begins very small, verse 15. 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.

The first thing we see there is go. Go and tell him his fault. It indicates that we ought to be taking initiative as brothers and sisters in Christ for each other's welfare.

[13:48] And friends, also, let us take action early. Let's not let sin fester and grow. Early intervention can keep someone from greater sin.

And like we said last week, we need to be attentive to our brothers and sisters in Christ if we're going to know when they're going astray. Jesus says, go, and then he says, tell him his fault between you and him alone.

See, the purpose here, again, is restoring someone to the walk of fellowship. Not subjecting them to shame.

And so we should contain it to a smaller group of people, hopefully, one-on-one, right? So that we expose them to the least amount of publicity, so to speak.

And by the way, this is the same thing for interpersonal conflict. If it's safe, go directly to the person with whom you have a problem. Not to gossip, not to Facebook, not to another group of people, not to an intermediary.

[14:57] have a personal conversation with the person who's wronged you. How many misunderstandings, how many chances for reconciliation are lost because we won't simply deal with conflict with the person we're directly conflicted with.

And parents, teach your children this when they come tattling to you. So long as the situation is safe, tell them to talk it out with the other child, if you can. And parents, and all adults, let's do the same.

Now Jesus says, tell him his fault. Now remember, the goal is to gain your brother back, not to exact your vengeance on them or shame them.

So, we ought to use a tone that communicates both the seriousness of the sin and shows our concern for them.

Jesus uses this word for show, tell him his fault, show him his sin in a few other places. And it helps us understand exactly what he's wanting for us to do.

[16:09] He used it another time in John chapter 3. He says, everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be, and here's the word exposed.

So, in part, this word is what Jesus is instructing us to do here is to bring sin to light and call it what it is, sin.

Not mistakes or weakness or something else, sin. He uses it again in John chapter 16. He uses the word again saying that when the Holy Spirit comes, he will, and here's the word, convict the world concerning sin and righteousness.

And so, Jesus is calling us not only to expose sin, bring it to light, saying, hey, you know, you're sinning here, but also to convict people of their sin and righteousness.

And so, that would sound something like, friend, you are sinning here. It's out of step with what the Lord has called you to, walking with him in holiness. Won't you turn?

[17:17] How can I help? God, this is Christ's instruction to his whole church, not just to the leaders in the church.

And so, friends, these are his marching orders for you. But what if they don't listen? He says, verse 16, if they will not listen to you, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Now, there are two reasons for this step, I think. First, as one scholar put it, he said, the primary purpose of the witness here is to affirm the matter to the guilty party and help him or her realize the seriousness of the situation.

That makes sense to us, right? And second, I think it also guards us from being overzealous in this process, being mistaken, right?

If I bring other people in, they can help me make sure that I'm right as I confront somebody, right? Bringing other mature disciples into the conversation might make me realize that what I'm confronting someone over isn't sin.

[18:33] We might think that someone's actions are unwise, that's not the same as sin, right? How they use their money, what friends they choose, how they arrange their calendar, they may be exercising freedoms in areas that we would not feel comfortable with, but it's not sin.

So utilizing the other brothers and sisters in Christ can help someone understand the weight of their sin. Oh, you know, if all these people are gravely concerned about the health of my soul here, well, maybe I should think it over again.

And it preserves the conversation from error. If I'm showing my brother his sin, this will serve to keep me from being a misguided lone ranger. Jesus continues, if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

Now, here still, the hope is that the person comes to see and understand their sin and return to humble discipleship. I love how one commentator put it.

He said, the object of the gathering, this gathering in verse 17 telling it to the church, is not to pronounce judgment but to strengthen the pastoral appeal in the hope that the offender may yet listen.

[19:51] The offender, faced by the disapproval of the whole local disciple community, ought surely to recognize that this was not just a personal grievance on the part of the initiator.

Jesus wants even this to be a seeking to gain your brother or sister. However, if that's still not possible, this is the only time that action is taken.

Right? The act of church discipline. He says, and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Right? And so it's not done by an individual. It's not done even by a group, even if it's the elders of the church. It's done as an act of the whole congregation. And what does that act say?

Does it pin a scarlet letter on them? No. What does discipline say? It says, brother, sister, either you've not been born again or you are living as if that's the case?

[21:00] Repent and believe, either for the first time or repent and return to the life of faith that you've strayed from. And then he says, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Now, this too still is not shunning. All along, how has Jesus been interacting with Gentiles and tax collectors?

all throughout the book of Matthew. How has he been treating them? In chapter 8, he celebrates the faith of a Roman centurion, a Gentile, and heals his servant.

In chapter 9, he calls a tax collector, Matthew, whose gospel we are reading, he calls a tax collector to be one of his twelve disciples. And this did not go unnoticed.

In Luke chapter 15, the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to him because they were welcome with him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them.

[22:11] A sign of fellowship. So let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector does not mean ostracize and shun and shame them. It means consider them an unbeliever, which means we don't share Christian fellowship with them, unfortunately, and we instruct them not to participate in the Lord's Supper, which hopefully is an enormous wake-up call, which is the goal that they'd still be, even at this point, returned to repentance, and then in love we evangelize that person.

in two Sundays, we're going to have a congregational meeting. We're going to be asking the congregation to vote on revisions to our church constitution.

One of the significant changes that we're requesting the congregation make is to add a preamble to the section on church discipline. It essentially is going to function like verses 1 through 14 do in Matthew 18.

They're a preamble, showing God's heart for this process before getting to the actual process. It reads like this, church discipline is not an act of shunning or shaming.

Granting membership is the church's public affirmation that a person demonstrates a credible profession of faith and new life in Christ as well as committing to oversee that person's discipleship.

[23:44] It is unloving to affirm that someone has a saving interest in Jesus Christ when they do not. When a person demonstrates by persistent unrepentant sin that Jesus is not their Lord, removing them from membership is the church's public act communicating that the person's profession of faith appears fraudulent.

A congregation must not shun or shame someone removed from membership, but eagerly and earnestly! pray for their repentance and restoration. They are treated as an unbeliever, not for judgmental condemnation, but for evangelism.

Jesus concludes this passage with some unusual words about binding and loosing and agreeing together.

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. There are two main options, I think, for understanding that verse.

First, in the context that we've been talking about here, it might actually mean basically the church of membership roles. The church formally communicating who demonstrates a credible profession of faith and who doesn't.

[25:22] In other words, the church is saying these people are in binding, these people are out loosing. And so the binding and loosing would indicate here's who we, the church of Christ, affirm to be born again to a living hope through repentance and faith, and here's where we can't, who we can't make that affirmation for.

Or, it could be talking about behaviors, so to speak. Here's one New Testament scholar.

Frequently, rabbis, and that's the context of Jesus' ministry, the Jewish people, rabbis spoke of binding in the sense of declaring what God's law required or forbade.

Thus, to bind something was to teach or explain something as it reflected the word. So, this could indicate that the church is responsible and empowered to use the scriptures to outline the boundaries of what the life of discipleship looks like and warns those who are stepping outside

those bounds.

So, either it looks like church membership roles and declaring who the church can affirm to be a Christian and who they can't, or it's about those boundary lines.

Now, the nice thing is that we don't have to necessarily choose between them because we know that both are true and that they're bound together, right? They're linked, so we don't need to pit them against each other.

[26:46] Instead, what we realize from these solemn words is the significance and the weight of both church membership and the duty of the church to shepherd the life of disciples. And he follows those weighty words with weightier words still.

Verse 19, 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 I am among them.

Friends, Jesus is the good shepherd. And returning wandering sheep is the good shepherd's mission.

So as he does this work through his people, he promises us his ongoing presence and power for this difficult task.

And so as Pastor Jordan said, in Ephesians chapter 2, back when Caroline was still meeting as a house church, if you want to see God at work, throw yourself into the church.

[27:57] Throw yourself into the church, even the hard ministry of gaining your brother, and perhaps especially the hard ministry of gaining back your brother.

And you will find yourself in the power and the presence, he promises it, of the good shepherd, who himself is working to bring his wandering sheep home.

Let's pray to him. Lord, our God, we are so grateful that you are not interested in punishing our sins over and over again, but bore!

in Jesus Christ, all our guilt and all our shame on the cross. us. And thank you, Lord, that even as we wander, you are still looking to reconcile and redeem and bring us home.

Father, may we be a people who are shaped by that attitude. Father, as we go about the business of drawing a church body closer and closer together and building it up in love, we hope us to remember and to experience the fact that in that mission you promise to be present, powerfully present in our midst.

[29:34] And so, Lord, as we work to serve your church, may we know and experience you in your great love. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Would you stand with me?

It's good news that the Lord does have the power to redeem us, so we'll sing about that. We're grateful for the first line of this song, that he takes what is and makes it beautiful.

That's what he's done with the church. He's taken all of us from the state that we were in, which was dead in our trespasses and separated from him. And he's made us into the beautiful bride.

So,