

The Church's Power

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[0 : 00] Nice to see you everybody on this Thanksgiving weekend. If you've joined us for the first time tonight, my name is Aaron, I look after the service and we're doing a series in Matthew's Gospel. We are at Matthew 18, 15 to 20.

So last week, from last week's passage, we asked the question, what kind of church are we going to be? What kind of church are we going to be? And the answer from Matthew 18, 1 to 14, so the stuff before what we read this evening, the answer from there was we want to be a church of little ones welcoming other little ones.

And what did that mean? It meant ruthlessly eliminating sin in your life so that we don't cause others to fall away because of our sin. And the great motivation for doing that was that people matter to God.

That's the kind of church we want to be. So are we going to be a church that deals with our own mess, not just for ourselves, but for the sake of other people? So that's last week. Deal with our own sin.

This week, Jesus says, are you prepared to deal with the sin in other people's lives? Do we want to be the kind of church that actually confronts others when we see sin in their life?

[1 : 13] That's consistent. Are we going to be the kind of church that ultimately would exclude somebody, that would excommunicate somebody? Do we want to be that kind of church? Do we want to be that kind of community?

I can see from your faces the answer is no, no. No, of course not. That's not very Canadian. That sounds awful. That sounds really difficult.

That sounds really difficult because it slams up against our treasured ideas of live and let live and inclusivity and self-autonomy and all that sort of thing. But Jesus' words here, what he asks, I mean, they sound so hard, don't they?

Remember from last week, if you're here last week, it was all about entering the kingdom, welcoming people into the kingdom, perhaps people of Australia, welcoming them back into the kingdom. And tonight, the passage seems to be talking about shutting some people out.

Wow. Wowza. But Christ is very clear. We should confront people when we see persistent sin in their life.

[2 : 26] And after multiple attempts, if they do not repent, we should treat them as if they were not a Christian. And Proverbs 27 is very helpful to us here.

Verses 5 and 6. Let me read these to you. Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Better is open rebuke than hidden love.

What does that mean? So open rebuke is a friend lovingly calling out another friend, telling them that their behavior or attitude is just not on. It's telling friends to stick with Jesus even when, you know, they're behaving in a way which suggests the opposite.

That's open rebuke. That is better than hidden love. Now, what's hidden love? It sounds like it's talking about a secret crush. It's not. Hidden love is the opposite of open rebuke. So hidden love is not confronting people when they need it.

It's love that is cowardly. It's self-protecting. It does not risk for the sake of other people. See, the wise person in Proverbs does the hard thing and has these awkward conversations because it's better for them and it's better for the health of the whole community.

[3 : 39] That's what the wise does. In fact, Proverbs has a lot to say about the wise person and the foolish person. And the broadest picture of the wise and the fool is this.

The wise disadvantages themselves for the community. The wise disadvantages themselves for the community. The wicked disadvantage the community for their own self-interest.

See, the wise is willing to have these tough, these risky conversations, even when it's difficult, and the fool is not going to have those conversations. They prefer hidden love. And they don't have those conversations because of self-interest.

They're too difficult. They're too risky. They could be too messy. Matthew 18 says, Have those tough conversations. Why?

Because sin is serious. In last week's passage, you remember, Jesus says, If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Your foot causes you to sin, cut it off.

[4 : 38] If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It's all metaphorical, of course, but it's saying that sin is a serious thing, and we don't want to leave other people in persistent sin. So Jesus calls us here to something very difficult.

And he's very clear. But despite the fact that he's very clear, and despite the fact that this is a vital practice for the health of a church, it's largely a neglected practice.

So, let's get into it. Let's see what Jesus has to say. So what's the first thing there? Verse 15. If you have your Bibles open, that's helpful. Verse 15. I'll read it to you.

If your brother or sister sins against you, go and tell them their fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you've gained back your brother.

Now, let me just make a sort of bit of textual criticism here. If your brother sins against you, that against you bit right there, against you, in the earliest manuscripts, it doesn't exist.

[5 : 44] It's not there. It's only in the later manuscripts. So most of the scholars, when they're interpreting this, interpret it as general sin in people's lives, as opposed to, like, one person offending one particular other person.

So let's go with that. But what's the first thing you notice there? If your brother or sister, it's an inclusive term there, if your brother or sister sins. Sin. Sin. Okay? So it's talking about sin.

So this is not an invitation to confront people who have annoying habits. So I can't go up to Joel and say, Joel, Joel, I don't like the way you eat.

Right? And I don't. I actually don't. But, like, it's too fast. It's too fast. Way too fast. That might be the case.

But this is not what this is talking about. It's saying here, if your brother sins, you must be convinced it's a sin issue that's clearly defined in the Bible. So it's gossip, or lying, or slander, or it's a sexual thing, or it's, like, dodgy financial stuff going on.

[6 : 53] You've got to be convinced it's sin. And then you see the next word. It says, go. If your brother sins, go. You must go and talk to them.

You don't wait for the person to come to you hoping they'll think to themselves, oh, I probably should talk to somebody about this. No, you go to them. See, the great temptation is, is, is to go to everyone else first.

The great temptation is me to go to speak to Chris and Kristen in the front there and go, listen, I just, let's say Joel has some sin, you know, it's terrible, and, you know, and I, I don't go, but I go to my friends over here and I go, you should, I, you know what he's doing?

It's unbelievable. Um, and this is a classic line, the church should do something about this, right? Right? Right? It doesn't say that. It says, you go.

I should go. I should be the one that goes. So first, you do something about it. Then what does it say there? If your brother sins, go, the next little bit, tell him his fault.

[7 : 57] Tell her the fault. And now, now, like, wow, how do we even begin to do that? Like, what are some guys, like, is there any help?

Do we have any other help in the Bible? Yes, we do have lots of help. One of them, I'll pick one of them, from Galatians 6. This is Paul. He's speaking about this kind of situation. Here's what he says. He says, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.

Isn't that lovely? So we go into these conversations quite humbly, hoping there's perhaps a plausible explanation. We go into these conversations knowing we all have, what the Bible calls, alien righteousness.

It's, Christians are right before God. We have a good relationship before God. Not because we're perfect, but because we have the righteousness of Christ. So we're just beggars showing other beggars where there's food.

So we go into these conversations quite humbly and gently. So we might say something like, listen, hey, I talked about something. I just think that there's this thing that you're doing, and it kind of looks like this.

[9 : 03] Doesn't look good, man. It doesn't look good. And I'm for you, and I love you, and I, and, you know, I think before being there, this is a temptation for all of us, and can we just talk about this? So go tell them their fault, and you do it gently, and you do it humbly.

Look, now, look what it says next. If your brother sins, go, tell them their fault. The next bit here, between you and him alone, between you and her alone.

We're still in verse 15. This is a one-to-one conversation. This is a private conversation. The aim is not so everyone sees that you're right, and they're wrong. The point is it's private, and it's face-to-face.

It's not email. It's not text, because manner in these conversations is so important. They need to see your face, and they need to see a face that's loving, and that's for you, and you just don't get that across in texts and emails.

So have a conversation, and it's got to be a face-to-face conversation. And still in verse 15, it says this, If he listens to you, and you have gained, if he listens to you, you have gained a brother, you have gained a sister.

[10 : 10] So this is the goal. It's restoration. It's restoration with you. It's restoration with the community. It's restoration with God. It's a wonderful thing, and perhaps a closer relationship that you had before. Now let me give you a personal example, and I was tempted to give you an example where I am the heroic confronter, but I thought it would be better if I give you an example where I was on the receiving end of this.

So this is something that happened to me in my early 20s. So this is, I just turned 50. So this is like 25 years ago, I think, around.

And I think the situation was this. I dated like three girls in quick succession. In series, not parallel. All right? So one after the other.

But still, no good. Like, still bad. Like, still bad. Like, unloving, poor form, not good for the community. Not good. Not good. It was bad.

It was sinful. And I had a friend of mine called Julian. He says, mate, we should just go for a walk one day. And I remember this very vividly. We went for a walk in a place called Mission Drive, which is just this, it's a beach in Auckland City, back in the old country.

[11 : 27] We went for a walk and he goes, I want to talk to you about something. And he said, Aaron, you know, it was something along these lines. He goes, dating is just tough, right? It's really tough. And we, I know we all messed this up and this is tricky for everybody.

But what, what you've done these last few months, that was really bad. You can't really do that anymore. And, and that wasn't all.

He said to me, listen, I think this is such a tricky one that I would love to meet with you every week for a few months and we'll talk about it. Would that be cool? And I'm like, yeah, you know, I think that would be okay.

So we did. We met every week for three months until he was satisfied that my head and my heart was in a good place and that I was walking with Jesus in this area of my life.

And I'm so grateful to him for that. It was a risky conversation, but he was willing to put some sort of skin in the game, so to speak. And I actually have really precious memories of these quite difficult conversations with my friend Julian.

[12 : 28] And we're much closer friends after that, actually, like, like brothers. This is the goal. But, let's say this.

Let's say that that first conversation with Julian didn't go well. Let's say that I said to him, I have done nothing wrong. Which can happen in these conversations.

because the idea that someone would correct us can be very offensive to our hearts. You know, we have this baseline assumption of autonomy. We have this baseline assumption that we are our own moral arbiters.

And how dare you come and correct me? And so this is a worldly way of thinking, but it can sort of, you know, bubble up to the surface every now and then. So what would be the next thing? What does Christ say we should do next?

Well, that's verse 16 here. Here are the words of Christ. 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.

[13 : 27] So again, there is no rush to get this in front of the church and it's this big thing. It's Jesus saying, bend over backwards to keep this small and private.

You don't want public hurt. So you go grab a couple of people. You go grab a couple of friends who know you and trust you and know this other person ideally and like them and love them and you explain the situation and then you go to the person that you want to talk to and you pitch it like this. You say, listen, I know our last conversation didn't go great but it still feels heavy to me and I could be really wrong about this. I know you think I'm wrong about this and I could be really wrong about this but would it be okay if I just pulled another couple of people into this conversation?

I want to get some more input into this and there are a couple of good reasons to do this. This is why this is a wise idea. One, what's obvious it's just more persuasive if you have a couple more people involved but more importantly I think or secondarily it's a reality check on your own judgment.

Verse 16 is very clear. It says, you should establish the evidence. See, you as the person doing the confronting you actually may be way off base. You may have got this completely wrong because your heart is in a really funky place or your head is in a really weird place and you've totally misunderstood this.

[14 : 50] You get another couple of people involved and they're a great check for that. And in calling these two or three witnesses Jesus is actually referring back to the Old Testament to I think in Deuteronomy there's this Old Testament law that says you cannot convict somebody of a crime based on just one witness you need two or three witnesses.

This is a safeguard. It doesn't guarantee justice but it is a safeguard. So verse 16 it's telling us that in these situations gather a couple more people because the truth matters and we need to be careful about the truth.

So establish the evidence. But what if this doesn't work? What if as you know there's a couple of us and we've met with this person and the sin is it's quite clear and this person has no interest in repenting what do we do then?

Verse 17 If he refuses to listen to them tell it to the church. Now let me pause here by saying this. Jesus is telling us to be just astoundingly patient.

Isn't he? At first we can hear this thing go so harsh. It's so full on. No, this is astoundingly patient. I mean compare this to what online justice looks like when somebody takes a step in the wrong direction says something stupid or is out of step with cultural norms.

[16 : 22] How judgment is so quickly heaped on this person heaped, heaped, heaped with no option for restoration. They're just completely written off. Jesus is astoundingly patient.

He's calling us to this kind of patience. So what happens when he's clearly sinned you've got a couple of people involved but there's still no repentance. Verse 17 if he refuses to listen tell the church and if he refuses to listen even to the church tell him or her that they will be like to you a Gentile or a tax collector.

What does that mean? Now here we go. This is going to play out differently in different churches depending on the church polity but it basically it likely means involving the leadership of the church who speak to the person and after that if there's a refusal after appeal after appeal after appeal let him be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector.

The technical term for that is excommunication which again will look different for different churches. In St. John's it would look like telling that person they can no longer take communion for example. You're treating that person as if they are not part of the community of God anymore a Gentile or tax collector and it sounds harsh but this is it's not punitive it's you want them to understand the weight or the gravity of the offense so they come back to Jesus so they don't treat this thing lightly.

[17 : 45] So you could look at it like this if someone says I have the right to do whatever the heck I want and you can't tell me how to live folks that's just not how church a Christian community should operate.

That's not how the people of God operate. So the person who says that has actually already excluded themselves excommunication is just kind of making it official it's just sort of rubber stamping what the person has already done to themselves.

Let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Now before moving on let me remind you of how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors like friends.

he regarded them as precious lost sheep who matter to God. That's how we regard folks like in this situation because the goal is repentance the goal is restoration.

Now what about verses 18 to 20? Let me remind you of them before we finish here. 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 saying there's some kind of connection to what happens here and what happens up there.

[19 : 03] There's some kind of earth heaven connection going on. 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 verse 20 for where two or three are gathered in my name there I am among them.

So you know that last verse you've heard that a lot that last verse right? Where two or three are gathered in my name there I am among them. Now if context if there's ever an example of the importance of context here it turns out that that verse there where two or three are gathered in my name among them is not talking about you know the comforting truth that God is there even when your prayer group is really small.

That's actually not what it's talking about is it? I'm sorry I feel like I've just told you the tooth fairy doesn't exist or something but it's the two or three it's talking about the people who confront the person that's sinning isn't it?

It's the context it's pretty clear now in the context. And when it says that God is among them it's saying when you confront them with their sin and call them to repentance it's saying God agrees with you.

That's what it's saying God is endorsing this. They're very sobering verses. I'll say it in a few different ways so we get our heads around here. It's saying that our discipline that happens in church is an expression of God's discipline.

[20 : 33] So if we excommunicated somebody and we said officially you are no longer walking with Jesus so let's just make this official you're no longer doing that and sure that can be obviously really abused in a church but let's say it's done carefully with great patience and rightly it's saying when that happens in church that reality also exists in heaven.

So look at verse 19 one more time just so we've got this clear. If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask it will be done for them by my father in heaven. This is a favorite prosperity gospel kind of passage which says and people say you're just going to get two people to agree on one thing and then it will definitely happen.

Again context is so important. What it's saying is that the reality of exclusion down here is reflected in heaven or the father agrees with the church this person is actually on the outside.

They're doing their own thing. The church sees that and God sees this as well. This is a heavenly reality as well. And of course the opposite is true. So binding loosing. So binding is heavyweight. Loosing somebody. If you say the church this person actually does come back to Jesus and repents and it's a wonderful thing and you say you are forgiven and you're walking with Jesus and this is fantastic and we love you and we're celebrating you.

[21 : 56] that reality of them walking with Jesus is the reality of heaven as well. Let me finish here. So the question right at the start and it's the major concern of this section of Matthew's gospel is this.

What kind of church are we going to be? Here's what I think. Here's what the passage is saying. We want to be a church that loves enough to discipline each other.

to have the tough conversations with each other. It's discipline that's private and it's humble and it's slow and it's careful and it's accurate and it's corporate as a last resort if needed and knowing that it is painful and it is courageous and we cannot afford not to do this because when we avoid it we are saying sin does not matter.

When we avoid it we are doing the opposite of love. We're being indifferent and it hurts God's people. It hurts the individual. It dishonors the name of Christ. Folks, forgiveness is, I'll say this is the last thing I'll say, forgiveness is on offer to all constantly.

It's just always on offer. And what Christ is saying to us tonight is saying let's help each other get there by having these tough conversations.

[23 : 29] Amen.