



Restoring the Fallen

SERIES: *Understanding the Church*

This morning we're continuing our series of studies on the church. We started by looking at how the church is founded upon the authority of the Word of God. We saw how the church is to be led by a group of godly men called elders. We talked about how we're to be God-centered, making the worship of God the centerpiece of our life together. And then, most recently, we looked at God's heart for the lost; how all of heaven throws a party when one lost sinner repents, and how he uses us to reach out to share the good news of forgiveness and freedom through Jesus to our friends and even to the ends of the earth.

This morning I want to begin to talk to you about what we call the Priority of God's People. Our purpose statement at CPC says that our mission is *"To make disciples*

of Jesus Christ who worship God's Person, obey God's Word, love God's People, and share God's Grace." I want to focus on what it means to love God's people. Here is how we define that as a church: *"One of the primary jobs of the church is the building up of believers in Jesus Christ. The church is to provide care, support, and training for believers endeavoring to live for God. In living the life of faith, we all desperately need the support, exhortation, and accountability that comes from being a significant part of God's family."*

The Scriptures use several metaphors for the church. We're the bride of Christ. We're the of temple God. We're the body of Christ. One of my favorites is that we're the family of God. We're brothers and sisters. We belong to each other. But what does that mean? What does that look like? Sometimes being a brother or sister in Christ isn't easy.

Suppose you receive a phone call one day from a friend. She says she has something important to share with you. You can tell from her trembling voice that whatever it is, it's not good. You arrange to meet her for coffee the next day. The look on her face when you see her is a mixture of fear and confusion. She proceeds to tell you that her husband, also a good friend, has been keeping a secret. For some time he's been blatantly cheating on his taxes, refusing to report "under the table" money that has made up a significant portion of their income for some time. She's repeatedly expressed her concerns to him about this, knowing that it was wrong to lie, and it also put their family in danger of legal action by the IRS. But he always has an excuse, and as of late he has even gotten verbally abusive in her attempts to talk about it. She doesn't know what to do. She doesn't want to betray her husband, but she's concerned about

where this might end up.

Needless to say, you're shocked. This guy has been an active part of your small group Bible study for the past five years. He's even counseled and prayed with couples about their marriage issues, including their finances. How could he do this? As a brother or sister in Christ, what should YOU do about it?

Turn with me to Matthew 18. Let's start by reading what Jesus says in vv. 15-18.

"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. 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 have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

Before we look at this in detail, I want you to notice that there are several important assumptions that Jesus makes in this passage.

I. The assumptions behind Matthew 18

A. *First of all, he makes the assumption that from time to time, believers go astray.* Part of becoming a disciple of Christ is going through a process called repentance. That means we change our minds, we make an about face, we turn away from sin and obey the Lord. But Jesus assumes that from time to time we will stumble and fall. It's clear that in this passage he is talking about fellow believers. He says, "If your brother sins..." He's talking about your brother or sister in Christ, fellow members of the family of God. As members of the family, we don't always bear the family likeness; from time to time we do things that betray the family name. Jesus assumes that.

B. *Second, Jesus assumes that when a believer goes astray, it's a serious matter.* Needless to say, we live in a day and age when the idea of righteousness and holiness is viewed as some kind of relic from the past or an impractical standard handed down from people who are so heavenly minded they're no earthly good. Unfortunately, that attitude has seeped into the family of God. It's the attitude that says, "Well nobody is perfect, so get off my back."

But Jesus says that when you or your brother sins, even once, it's a serious matter. It's a serious matter

because when we sin, we sin against a holy God. As a holy God, he calls us to be holy as well. Peter writes, **“As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior”** (1 Peter 1:14-15). When the church forfeits holiness, it forfeits its power.

But that’s not all. Jesus assumes that sin is serious because sin destroys us; it robs us of our humanity; it steals our joy. Jesus said, **“I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly”** (John 10:10). Jesus wants to make our lives full and meaningful. That’s why he came. That’s why he died. But sin is a serious matter because it empties us and strips of all true joy.

This leads to his third assumption.

C. *When a believer goes astray, it’s our responsibility to seek to restore them.* This, of course, is contrary to the spirit of the age. The world around us tells us that what an individual does in his private life is nobody else’s business. Confrontation, even compassionate confrontation, is viewed as a violation of our personal space. “Who are you to tell me what to do or how to live?” is the mindset. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Seminary, writes, “Individuals now claim an enormous zone of personal privacy and moral autonomy. The congregation redefined as a mere voluntary association has no right to intrude into this space. Many congregations have forfeited any responsibility to confront even the most public sins of their members. Consumed with pragmatic methods of church growth and congregational engineering, most churches leave moral matters to the domain of the individual conscience.”

One of the rationales that’s often given for this is, “But don’t we all sin every day? How can you judge me when you sin just like I do?” But it’s clear in this passage that Jesus is dealing with a situation where sin has not been acknowledged as such. The normal way to handle sin in a Christian’s life, since we all sin, is to judge it ourselves. Perhaps we become aware by the ministry of the Word, or by observation of someone else’s life that something we’re doing is clearly wrong, and so we judge it, we confess it, and we stop it. This should go on every day in each one of our lives, keeping a short account of sin in our relationship with God. When we do this there’s no need for others to get involved in this way, unless we ask them for prayer, or to keep us accountable, which is a good thing to do. But Jesus is dealing here with those cases where we refuse to acknowledge and judge our sin. When that’s the case, he says we have a responsibility to seek to restore our brother.

II. Restoration is to be sought for in the gentle spirit of a shepherd seeking a lost sheep.

A. **We go in the spirit of a gentle shepherd.** It’s so important that we understand the spirit of this

passage. It will help to look at the preceding verses. Throughout this chapter, Jesus has shown a concern for those whom he calls “little ones.” These are believers who are, for one reason or another, vulnerable and weak. He says in v. 6 that we should be very careful to never cause one of these **“little ones who believe in me to stumble.”** In v. 10 he says we should not **“despise one of these little ones, for their angels in heaven continually see the face of my Father.”** Whatever that means, it’s clear they have a special place in the heart of God. And then starting in v. 12 he describes a situation where one of these little ones goes astray. Look what he says.

“What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.”

It’s interesting, Jesus uses these same words in Luke to describe how God seeks the lost, an unbeliever. But here he is describing NOT someone who is lost, but a so-called “little one,” a believer who has gone astray. He says when that happens the will of God is that they be sought after, like a shepherd seeks a lost sheep, and restored. It’s not at all insignificant that the very next thing out of his mouth is v. 15, **“If your brother sins, go...”** Do you see the progression? WE are the shepherds who leave the flock and GO to seek out a fellow believer who has gone astray in order to restore him to the flock.

You see, the whole purpose of this step by step process is to restore. It’s not designed to be a punitive process, but rather a restorative process. We go not with our fingers pointed and chests puffed, but in the humility and gentleness and concern of a shepherd, not with a desire to punish, but with a desire to restore.

In the book of Galatians, the Apostle Paul deals with this very same issue and he describes in more detail the spirit in which this should take place, **“Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ”** (Galatians 6:1-2). Who are the “spiritual?” They’re not those who walk around quoting Bible verses; they’re those who are painfully aware of their own propensity to sin, who are gentle and willing to bear the burden of helping this person get back on his spiritual feet. That’s the spirit that permeates this four step process in vv. 15-20.

So what does this process look like?

B. **We go to the person in private.** Well, it starts with you. Jesus says, **“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.”** (The words *against you* are not in some of the better manuscripts, and many texts leave them out.) What this is really saying is, “if your brother sins, period” --

i.e., if your brother (or your sister) is clearly violating something that the Word of God says is wrong, and does not do anything about it.

Jesus specifically says it involves a question of sin - and sin is defined by the Word of God. Jesus is not saying, "If your brother irritates you, or offends you, or ignores you, you're to go to him about that." There is another great word in the Christian life that covers irritations: it's the word *forbearance*. We all irritate each other, and offend one another, and when we do we're to *forbear one another*, we're to put up with it. But this passage is dealing with sin.

Notice he doesn't say, "If your brother sins, mind your own business and stay out of it!" Nor does he say, "If your brother sins, call up the prayer chain and get the church to pray for him." Nor does he say, "If your brother sins, go tell your pastor and see if he can help." No! he says YOU go to him. YOU take the initiative. It's on YOU to do something.

Of course, you should talk to the Lord about it, but when you go, go in private. Do you see the concern here for containment? To protect the dignity and reputation of this brother there is no need to get others involved. It's just you and him. Brother to brother. Sister to sister. There is no need at this point to get the leadership of the church involved. This sort of thing should take place in a healthy body every week, without pastors or elders even being involved. Scripture says we're all priests, and this is one of the priestly roles we play with and for one another. Now of course there are times and situations where the repercussions of a sin are such that more people need to get involved, perhaps a spouse, or a counselor, or a pastor, but that comes after you've met in private and if there is repentance, that person will want to talk with those who need to know.

Jesus says, "if he listens to you, you have won (gained) your brother." That's the goal. That's the motive - to gain them back. I've had people in this church play this role with me, and I'm so glad they did. And I've done this with many of you, and many of you have done this with one another. And do you know what happens? When that happens and there is repentance, the bond of brotherhood is deepened because we met at the moment of need when one of us was losing the battle with temptation and the result was restoration.

But sometimes that meeting results in a deeper division. There is no repentance. What do you do then? Do you give up on the person? Do you write her off? Do you ignore her? Jesus says take the next step.

C. Go to the person with others. The next step is to "take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed." Remember the purpose - restoration. We haven't given up on this person. This is not some spiritual posse looking to hang the perpetrator. This is one or two others who come prayerfully, and in the humility and gentleness of a shepherd.

What is the purpose of these other "witnesses?" At the end of v. 16 Jesus quotes from Deut. 19:15. That passage describes a judicial setting where the witnesses

serve as objective judges who confirm the truth or falsehood of the allegation, as well as the repentance or non-repentance of the person. They're not necessarily witnesses of the sin, but they help keep the report of the meeting accurate in case anything further needs to be done. Certainly the presence of one or two others, preferably respected friends of the fallen person, strengthens the reproof and demonstrates to him the seriousness of the situation. If he won't listen to one, perhaps he'll listen to two or three.

If he listens, and again that's the goal, it's over. No need to do anything else. But if he doesn't listen, still, you don't give up on him.

D. Go to the church. Jesus says to "tell it to the church." This could take place in a variety of settings, including a Sunday morning service, Communion, or even a gathering of friends. Once again, this sounds so punitive, but this is part of seeking to restore a precious "little one" who has gone astray. It's bathed in prayer and soaked in tears.

Now the whole church is involved in an attempt to reach the person. We don't tell the church so that that they might turn their backs on the individual. We're not to become a church of holier-than-thou judges or finger-pointing condemners, but fellow-pleaders for a change of heart, urging the person to change his mind about his actions. As an expression of love and concern, we urge him to repent, to give up sin, and to give in to the pleadings of the spirit.

Some people will be directly involved in this way, especially close friends, but others will be involved behind the scenes, praying for the person. Prayer is a powerful weapon to change people's thinking and attitudes. Pray that God will grant repentance to him, and pray for those who've been hurt by the sin, since others are always involved and hurt.

If this works (and time must be allowed to permit it to work), then nothing more needs to be done. The purpose of the discipline has been achieved. Restoration has taken place.

E. Treat him as an outsider to the faith. But if the offender continues in sin and resists all pleas, Jesus sets out a final and fourth step which must be taken: "**if he refuses to listen even to them, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.**" In the culture of that day this was equivalent to saying that he was an unbeliever, not a Christian at all. The whole congregation should look upon the individual differently. The church begins to regard him as an unbeliever. How do we treat unbelievers? We treat them with courtesy and love. We share the gospel with them. We invite them to church. We want to win them to Christ. Remember, Jesus befriended such people.

But they shouldn't have any role of leadership in the church. They shouldn't take Communion. In 1 Cor. 5 Paul says you shouldn't eat with them, probably talking about Communion. They shouldn't be recognized as being a believer because his deeds show

harsh, but remember all the effort that has been made to restore this person.

We still might wonder by what authority we can do this. What gives us the right to act in this way and make these kinds of judgments? Jesus tells us in v. 18. **"Whatever you bind on earth has already been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth has already been loosed in heaven."** That's meant to encourage us. Binding and loosing was an old rabbinical way of saying you're bound in your sin or loosed from your sin. If you repent, you're loosed; you're forgiven. But when you refuse to repent, you're bound in your sin; there is no forgiveness. Jesus is saying, "When you go through this process I've laid out for you, you're only doing what heaven has already done.

But still, we ask, how can we know this for sure? I mean, we're just people. We fumble the ball all the time. Church leaders make mistakes too. How can we trust them to do what's right in this process? The answer come in vv. 19-20.

III. When we act in the ministry of restoration, we do so in the place of God and the presence of Jesus.

"Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst."

These are not verses that should be yanked out of this passage and made to speak about what happens at a prayer meeting. This has nothing to do with a prayer meeting. The "two or three" that Jesus speaks of here are the two or three witnesses from v. 16. Jesus is saying, "When you go through this process and you agree together to bind or loose according to my Word, you can be sure that you are acting in the place of God. If that's not enough. Let me give you some more encouragement. When you gather together for that purpose, I'm there in your midst."

We all want Jesus to be in our church. Jesus leaves and we're sunk. Jesus promises us that when we do this work, when we seek to restore a fallen brother with the humility and gentleness of a shepherd, he is there; he is present. We may not be perfect, we may make mistakes in the process, but when we do what he tells us here, we're to do so in the place of God and in the presence of Jesus.

In the early 1970's, the elders at Peninsula Bible Church went through this process with a man who had been in leadership. He refused to repent, and the church decided they could no longer view him as a brother in Christ. It was a difficult decision. There was hurt, and there was confusion. But about seven years

elders. Here is what he wrote in part:

My fellow Christians,

Several years ago the congregations of PBC and South Hills Community Church took public action against me in accordance with Matthew 18:15-20. The charges against me were true.

I cannot reverse history and relive the events that led me to my downfall. I have harmed many people and brought ruin to myself.

Because I was an outspoken, prominent member of the Christian community my sins have been all the more deplorable and horrendous.

After I became a Christian some 18 years ago, I failed to deal thoroughly with lust... In time I became self-deceived, proud and arrogant. Moreover, eventually God shouted upon the housetops that which I had tried desperately to keep hidden. God finally let me go into alcoholism and sexual immorality, both of which were worse than I experienced before my conversion. Twice I went through the horror and hell of manic-depressive psychoses...that I might learn that God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble...

I am in need of your forgiveness for I have wronged you all. I earnestly desire your prayers for wholeness and complete deliverance.

It is impossible for me to retrace my footsteps and right every wrong, however, I welcome the opportunity to meet and pray with any individuals who have something against me that needs resolution. I am looking and waiting for the further grace and mercy of God in this matter. What you have bound on earth has been bound in heaven, and I now know your actions were done in love for my own good and that of the Body of Christ.

Shortly after they received this letter, the elders at PBC welcomed that man back in to the fellowship with a "welcome home" dinner as their own Prodigal Son. They killed the fatted calf. They asked him to stand up, and they welcomed him back as one who had been dead but was alive again. They bought a gold ring to put on his finger and they bought him a new coat and put it on his back and welcomed him home.

When a fellow believer goes astray, we need to seek to restore him in the humility and gentleness of a shepherd. When we do that in obedience to his word, we're acting in the place of God, and we're acting in the presence of Jesus.

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