

## Intro - Open to Matthew 18:12-20

When you hear the words church discipline, we rightly cringe a bit. It is challenging, it doesn't give us warm fuzzies, and it has been avoided by churches for that reason. That avoidance only exacerbates the issues and sin in the church. So here is where we start: Jesus' words on how he sees us.

### Matthew 18:1-6

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"<sup>2</sup> And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them<sup>3</sup> and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.<sup>4</sup> Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.<sup>5</sup> "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,<sup>6</sup> but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

He sees us as children. Little ones who are greatest when humble and free from sin. We are growing and we must be humble enough to admit that we are not mature and will not be fully mature until the day of our glorification in heaven. This was the issue for the disciples who argued amongst themselves about who was the greatest. It cannot be so of us. We must kill our pride and assume that we have not arrived and are not above sin, above mistakes or above straying like sheep which is up next. Even worse is those who would entice or allow or encourage a little one, a Christian to sin. We must be far from causing them to sin but imploring them to run from sin.

When we approach church discipline in the middle of chapter 18, we must remember that we are children who, like **Proverbs 3:12** tells us, the LORD disciplines those he loves. We will be disciplined informally for sure. A friend can give you correction of you in sin, a sermon which hits your pride, or a challenging trial which points you back to truth. Whether informal or formal, it is good for us. The holiness of his children is a major concern of God. It is also a concern for his people the church.

After Jesus tells his disciples the stakes, he teaches about cutting out sin like you cut off a hand or foot or eye. Then he turns to the parable that shows his little ones are also sheep. Sheep to be gathered when they go astray.

## Pray

## One – God's Care for the Little Ones

### Read Matthew 18:12-14

Jesus tells this parable for us to consider the love of God for the stray ones. The stray sheep. It's assumed in verse 12 that of course a good shepherd goes after lost sheep. He doesn't even have to count! He knows that one is missing and goes after it.

What speaks even greater volumes is the rejoicing he has over the one who returns. Mirroring the parable of the prodigal son, the Father mourns his rebellious son and yet rejoices with love when he returns. God doesn't look down on those who are lost. He doesn't scold those who wander. When it returns, when he brings it back, it is brought back to celebration.

This is God's goal for what follows. Restoration. If they are truly God's sheep, they will return. We can be confident that God, despite the church's fumbling or challenges, will bring back his little ones. His sheep will return.

Verse 14 speaks of God's will that not one of these little ones should perish. This is not calling every human a little one, this is specific based on the first few verses of the chapter, that a little one is one of the elect of God. The proud ones who never humble themselves as a child, will not enter the kingdom. The little ones are in the flock of God. They are those who are truly saved by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The church, the flock of God, is who the Lord wills and keeps from perishing.

So as the parable ends and our instruction for the church's role in this restoration effort begins, we must have this parable, and the humility and the risk of verses 1-6 in our mind as we turn to Jesus' prescription for the church's care of the little ones.

## Two – The Church's Care for the Little Ones

### Read Matthew 18:15-17

As the first step is outlined in verse 15, let's consider two types of sins that this process addresses. First is sin personally done against you. You are the right person to encourage them to repent. When you succeed, its pure joy.

Second are the sins in a brother who is persisting in sin. This considers the parallel passage of [Luke 17:1-4](#) where it is not just sins against another person, but any sin should be confronted privately at first so that we might win our brother or sister. This should come from someone with a covenant relationship with the person in a local church. You shouldn't go to someone in another church who you don't know who you know is sinning is drunkenness night after night. But you should engage with concern for your friend in your own church.

The goal is not confrontation but reconciliation, repentance and holiness. The church is the bride of Christ and no public sin should be ignored. Private sins and small offenses that are one-offs or annoyances in personalities should be overlooked and the offense absorbed out of love for your brother. [Proverbs 19:11](#) teaches that **“it is to one's glory to overlook an offense”**. Yet, public and persistent sin is what church discipline is for. It should be done gently and based in a strong relationship if possible.

The true hope is that most church discipline ends here. They listen. This is not listening like you did to your mom growing up. It is not just, “I heard you.” The assumption of the Greek word for “listen” is that when someone listens, they respond and act. To listen to the one you offended is to be reconciled to them.

Psalm 51 gives us an example of what we are looking for. David sinned against Uriah, he sinned against Bathsheba but Nathan the prophet is who confronts him privately. As David pens Psalm 51 he writes, verse 2 **“Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin!”** verse 4 **“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.”**

We want our brothers and sisters in sin to confess like David. To see not only the sin they caused us, or another human, but chiefly to understand their sin is against a holy God. It is horrible to sin against a man, we are created in the image of God. Yet it is horrid to the eternal degree when we sin against God, or abandon his ways, or sin against him as we sin against the creator and Lord of all creation! That is what it is to “win your brother”.

This brings us to the second step starting in verse 16 which takes into account the flaws of one person confronting someone with their sin. If you are confronted by one person, you can shrug off the accusation, “it is his word against mine”. “His bible verses against my bible verses.” “His imperfections and flaws compared to mine.” The next step is to bring the

Old Testament standard of witnesses, 2 or 3. This lets the sinner encounter the weight of what persisting in sin will do. It will expand the ramifications as you persist in sin and by bringing the weight of more brothers. We hope it will turn them from sin.

As steps 3 and 4 come in verse 17, we approach the public involvement of the church. The full assembly of those who know and love and welcomed this person into their fellowship should be made aware of the sin of their brother or sister. We must guard this process from gossip or slander but this must be done in care for their soul. The church is then to pray and seek this individual to turn from sin and return to Christ and their fellowship.

If they refuse to listen to the church, we are instructed to no longer treat them as a believer, like they were in step 1 and 2 and 3, but to treat them like a Gentile and tax collector. They will no longer be considered a believer in Christ like a Gentile separated from the covenant people. We cannot consider them a part of God's people. As a tax collector they have not just been separated from us, but it carries a sting of betrayal like those who betray their people to collect taxes for Rome. To persist in sin is to abandon and forsake the blessings of salvation to be free from sin and alive to Christ.

This last step is rightly been named Excommunication. And it's not just defined here in Matthew 18. Turn to [2 Thessalonians 3:14-15](#)

**14 If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. 15 Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.**

Those under church discipline in our church right now have been brought before the church to warn them of their current public sin. There is a booklet available in the lobby called “What should we do about members who won't attend?” which is crucial reading for those who need to be convinced further of the biblical warrant for church discipline.

Those we have under discipline have not obeyed the biblical commands to hold fast to their confession of faith, or to gather with the saints as is taught [Hebrews 10:23-25](#) (the passage I will preach through next Sunday). They do not gather to take the Lord's Supper ([1 Corinthians 11:23-32](#)). They have not shown evidence that their faith in Christ is alive and well and have not responded or poorly responded to our letters and calls to confront them in steps 1 or two of this process.

The reason the term excommunication is accurate for this circumstance is it describes the foundational shift that will occur in our relationship with this member if the church votes to take this step. To excommunicate someone is to ultimately give them over to what they want. They want to be absent from us and not communicate with us. They want to be free of the church and its accountability and instruction. Despite efforts to restore them, we are handing them over to their own desires.

A more succinct definition of excommunication is what we sent to those under discipline: “Excommunication is the public declaration by the church that you are sinning in a public, significant and unrepentant way”.

We should not simply allow them to drift away or continue in sin. This would be to become like someone who entices them to sin. We would be allowing and endorsing their absence without care that they persist in abandoning their faith. If we were cowards and confused on the sin of forsaking the gathering of the saints, we could just remove them from the rolls silently or just ignore them in their sin. My call to formally consider excommunication is to be bold about the truth of sin and those who are members of our church who persist in sin. The church is to be holy, and this process is meant to keep unrepentant public sin out of the church.

Even in the finality of this pronouncement, to be treated like a Gentile or tax collector is to be treated as the people who Jesus loves and went after. Matthew, who wrote this Gospel wrote of who he used to be. He was a tax collector, treated with reproach, yet Jesus welcomed him in.

This is the call to all those who are excommunicated or removed from church membership to not persist in evil but to do good. To submit to Christ as Lord and Savior and not despise God’s people and God’s word.

I feel the weight of this. I hope you know that. I am not unaffected or unmoved by your concern for your family and your friends who may be brought forward for formal church discipline and if persistent in sin, excommunication. I will stand before God in judgment for either my permission as their pastor of their sin or of my misjudgment of a little one.

I have prayed and continue to pray that this process, with flaws and errors like any human endeavor might be overcome by the sovereign care of God to soften the hearts of those who are the true little ones of God either today or in the future. Yet I also know that this can be the Lord’s means of hardening the hearts of those who were never of Christ and are being handed over truly to their sin.

The question for us is not: Is sin deadly? That is settled. The questions for us to consider in excommunication is: Are they truly living in sin? And will we honor God’s word and the seriousness of sin in the church of Christ?

These instructions come with another large question hanging over them: By what authority does the church do this?

### **Three – Church’s Authority over the Little Ones**

[Read Matthew 18:18-20](#)

This is a similar text to what we encountered in Jesus’ teaching in John 20. For the sake of time, I will simply say this: The church has the responsibility to preach the gospel and declare what forgiveness in Christ and godly living as a Christian means as you enter or are removed from the church. The ESV Expository Commentary says it well: To bind is to prevent entry into the kingdom. To loose is to permit entry. Leaders bind when they warn the calloused sinner, “Unless you repent, we cannot regard you as an heir of life.” They loose when they say, “God welcomes repentant sinners”

The church looses when it brings members into membership. The church binds in church discipline. We long to welcome repentant sinners of every kind and forgive them as the next verses show to an infinite degree.

### **Conclusion**

When you look at the 4 steps of church discipline, 1 and 2 should cover most everything the church encounters. If we are active in the lives of our brothers and sisters, if we are quick to resolve offenses and confess our sins to one another we will receive the blessings that follow. The reason we have so many in our church that are at stage 3 right now is because of two possibilities and their response.

The first possibility is they may have been brought into the church unwisely. If it is, their profession of faith was not real and we baptized them when it has later proved to be rotten fruit. We cannot and will not know this for sure. We cannot. Yet it is a biblical category. **1 John 2:19** says **They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.** One of the marks of a believer is perseverance to the end. If they abandon the church and the faith later in life, it is because their profession was not genuine. I pray that this process will wake them up to the reality of sin and they would truly be saved because they truly wish to be in the church.

The second possibility is that although they are true believers, their sin and persistence against the word of God has hardened them to rebuke and reproof. We cannot do what the Holy Spirit is tasked to do. He saves, preserves and sanctifies the elect. If their hearts are hardened against us and against faithful living in the church, we must trust and hope and pray and implore them continually to return to a church so that they do not have their life burned up yet escape the fire (**1 Cor. 3:15**). The hope is that they be turned from their apathy and spurning of the sanctification in the church because they do not wish their lives to be wasted and of no spiritual fruit but instead to bring glory to their Savior in heaven.

Whether saved or not, they are at this stage because they have not listened to our correction and are defiant of the call of the Holy Spirit to repent and turn from sin. When we went to them one on one, when we have implored them as a limited group with the deacons and myself, when we have sent them letters and called and contended with them to repent, they have proved persistent to ignore the calls to return to church, to join another church or to enter into any reconciliation or conversation towards reconciliation. Because of these responses we can feel confident in our judgment that the final step of discipline is right and pray it bears fruit either soon or down the road. Maybe the harsh cut off from the church is the wake-up call for the church to evangelize them with passion and tell them it is never too late.

The problem with church discipline isn't that the church discipline process is too harsh or too difficult, it is that the church doesn't practice what we preach. We teach that sin is an affront to a holy God but we tolerate it in our lives and in the lives of our brothers and sisters. Again, it's not as if the Bible has been tried and it has failed. It is that the church rarely tries to live according to the Biblical model and standard. Let's repent and believe again

# **The Church is Accountable to Each Other**

Matthew 18:12-20

Matthew 18:1-6

Proverbs 3:12

## **One – God’s Care for the Little Ones**

Read Matthew 18:12-14

## **Two – The Church’s Care for the Little Ones**

Read Matthew 18:15-17

Steps 1-2

Luke 17:1-4

Proverbs 19:11

Psalms 51:2,4

Steps 3-4

2 Thessalonians 3:14-15

Hebrews 10:23-25

1 Corinthians 11:23-32

“Excommunication is the public declaration by the church that you are sinning in a public, significant and unrepentant way”

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1 John 2:19

1 Corinthians 3:15

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