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The Gospel According to Matthew

The Purity of Christ's Kingdom

August 25, 2019

Sermon Text: Matt 18:15-20

Scripture Reading: 1 Cor 5

Mat 18:15 “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.

When we study Scripture, we must always be certain that our interpretation and application fits the overall context of the passage we are considering. Otherwise we are bound to err, and that kind of error is rampant today. This very passage before us is an example of Scripture that has been and continues to be misused to oppress

the righteous and excuse the wicked. So we must take care.

What is the context of this scripture which we say concerns the subject of “church discipline”? The immediate context is that of Jesus rebuking His disciples for their arrogant self-seeking which led them to despise the little ones. Jesus came down on them hard, as we saw last time. Millstones around necks would be better. That is what we saw.

So how does this passage fit? The broader context is that it is in the Gospel of Matthew, a Gospel about the King and the Kingdom. Jesus told the disciples as He rebuked them:

Mat 18:3-4 and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (4) Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom, you see. Who gets in. Who is greatest.

Now, let me suggest to you that in this passage about what we call church discipline, Jesus is continuing with the same subject which I think is better called “kingdom discipline.” He has just rebuked the disciples for their sin – which ultimately was sin against Him. And now He is going to teach on that same subject and show us how this discipline is very necessary and how we are to practice it. Listen to Jesus –

Mat 18:15-20 “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.

(16) 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.

(17) 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.

(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. (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.

(20) For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

If your brother sins against you. Here then is the situation. Someone who claims to be a Christian, and may well be, sins. He or she sins against *you*. Therefore Jesus is addressing here a very specific situation. He is not intending for His instruction here to be applied in every single case of a professing Christian sinning. We know this because of what we read earlier in 1 Cor 5 –

1Co 5:4-5 When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, (5) you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

That was a different category of sin. It was an ongoing, blasphemous sin pursued openly without shame or repentance in the church. No mention of going to him privately or returning with one or two others. Nope. Straight to the final step – put him out. And this, by the way, is the text we use in regard to the domestic abuser hiding in the church pretending to be a Christian. Put him out. Now. Don’t brag about how gracious you are. Put him out!

And there are other Scriptures that come under this same heading.

Gal 6:1-2 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. (2) Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Jas 5:19-20 My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, (20) let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

2Th 3:14-15 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.

Rom 16:17-18 I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. (18) For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.

Jud 1:19 It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.

So one very, very typical error churches and Christians commit when it comes to dealing with sin in the church is to quickly run to Matthew 18 and treat it as if it is the only instruction in the Bible about the topic.

Understand? We are not to deal with heretics/false teachers in the same way as Matthew 18 outlines. And then there are other cases when we address sins in people who really are brothers or sisters in Christ, with the goal of bringing them back into the truth. You don't do that with a wolf in wool.

I have helped several churches over the years write their constitution and bylaws and doctrinal statements. When you research such documents from other churches, you will most often find Matthew 18 as the only procedure identified to be followed in church discipline. That is wrong and it will end in disaster. Either you will treat a real sheep in the flock too harshly, or you will deal with a wolf too naively and softly.

And yet I have found that there is a real stubbornness among Christians, especially among those in independent churches, about saying much at all in their doctrinal statements and bylaws on the subject. They simply quote Matthew 18, say this is what is to be done, and then move on. This is willful blindness to God's Word.

Alright then. We see that Matthew 18 us based upon the Old Testament law of evidence, which is then carried over into the New Testament:

Num 35:30 “If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses. But no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness.

Deu 17:6 On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness.

2Co 13:1 This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

1Ti 5:19 Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Heb 10:28 Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Now, here is where once again a wooden, stiff approach to interpreting the Bible (aka hermeneutics) gets so many people into trouble and causes

the wicked to escape and their victims to suffer.

A witness does not have to be a person. A witness is evidence, including physical evidence.

I have spoken with numbers of people over the years who have been victims of horrific crimes, and yet their case was dismissed by their church because it was claimed there was only one witness.

For instance:

Joh 8:17-18 In your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true. (18) I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me.”

Now, how did the Father bear witness about Jesus being His Son? Yes, at His baptism and on the Mount of transfiguration there was the Father’s voice. But Scripture also points us to Jesus’ miracles and signs.

Heb 2:3-4 how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, (4) while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

And more:

Act 14:3 So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.

We also see a case decided by King Solomon in which there were no human witnesses at all:

1Ki 3:16-28 Then two prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. (17) The one woman said, "Oh, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house, and I gave birth to a child while she was in the house. (18) Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. And we were alone. There was no one else with us in the house; only we two were in the house. (19) And this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him. (20) And she arose at midnight and took my son from beside me, while your servant slept, and laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. (21) When I rose in the morning to nurse my child, behold, he was dead. But when I looked at him closely in the morning, behold, he was not the child that I had borne." (22) But the other woman said, "No, the living child is mine, and the dead child is yours." The first said, "No, the dead child is yours, and the living child is

mine." Thus they spoke before the king. (23) Then the king said, "The one says, 'This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead'; and the other says, 'No; but your son is dead, and my son is the living one.'" (24) And the king said, "Bring me a sword." So a sword was brought before the king. (25) And the king said, "Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one and half to the other." (26) Then the woman whose son was alive said to the king, because her heart yearned for her son, "Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and by no means put him to death." But the other said, "He shall be neither mine nor yours; divide him." (27) Then the king answered and said, "Give the living child to the first woman, and by no means put him to death; she is his mother." (28) And all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice.

A case decided upon non-verbal testimony, you see. Evidence in a very practical test.

We must never therefore refuse to make a judgment using the excuse "well, there is only one witness (human) so the case cannot be made." Can you imagine what would happen in the secular courts if that rule were

followed? All physical evidence excluded!

When we have a case of sin in the church, there is virtually always other evidence that can be found. Let's say a woman comes and says that her husband is cruelly abusing her and has been for many years. He isolates her. He refuses to let her have any access to the bank accounts. He threatens her. He refuses to provide her with medical care. Now, let's just use some plain common sense. You don't even have to be a Sherlock Holmes brilliant detective to sort this out. *Is there going to be corroborating evidence that we can find and observe which support this lady's claims?* Of course. Even though the guy has never left a mark on her. And every piece of that evidence qualifies as *a witness*.

Churches do not have a very good track record of obeying the Lord in these things. Most Christians seem to want to ignore sin within the camp, while others seem to delight in prosecuting the wrong person! But the Lord holds us all accountable for obeying His Word, and this passage in Matthew 18 IS His Word!

We are accountable for doing all we can to see that Christ's kingdom, as it exists in our local church, is a true Light for Him. We are responsible for seeing that His Name is not

blasphemed because of some evil lurking among us.

Rev 2:18-20 "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. (19) "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. (20) But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

The whole church held accountable, you see.

Let's consider this closing section:

(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. (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. (20) For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

You will notice that verse 20 is often quoted but rarely properly. We don't need two or three Christians gathered

for Christ to be present or for Him to hear our prayer. He is present by His Spirit in every Christian. No, what He means in verse 20 is that His authority and agreement are with the two or three witnesses who testify about a sinning person who claims to be a Christian but who refuses to repent.

And what Jesus means is that when we properly and rightly follow His command here, He stands by us in the verdict.

Compare this:

Mat 18:18 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.

And...

Mat 16:19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Matthew 16:19 was spoken by the Lord to Peter, while 18:18 was spoken to the disciples. This tells us that Christ was not giving Peter some unique authority, but was giving it to all believers – to the church. What was that authority? It was this:

When we see someone who is walking in sin, who sins against us, and who refuses to repent, that person is to be put out of the church. This excommunication is the verdict that this person is not a member of Christ's kingdom. The gates of the kingdom are closed to him by Christ's authority. Thus, Christ gives His church the keys of the kingdom, to open or to close by the light of the gospel.

What if at some point in this Matthew 18 process, such a person repents? Then what was a binding verdict is now loosed. The kingdom is opened to him. Through repentance his sin is forgiven.

2Co 2:10-11 Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, (11) so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

The wicked often despise Christ's church. They scoff at the judgment of the body of Christ. But they will not scoff on that Day when Christ comes and they find that in fact Christ stood with His church in her righteous judgments. These are sobering and awesome things which we must exercise with the fear of the Lord. When we have the duty to discipline a

professing Christian, then we must see it as our duty and faithfully carry it out. We must do so with wisdom and show no partiality in our judgments because Christ our Judge watches from His throne in Heaven.

Finally, let me speak to anyone who might be listening and who is tempted to regard the judgments of Christ's church with contempt. Take our little church right here for instance. What power do we have? What authority? Many people would say "none" and mock any judgment we make. I warn anyone who is tempted to do so – beware. Christ is present and gives His authority as King to the citizens of His kingdom. Their message is the gospel, for life or for death.

2Co 2:14-16 But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. (15) For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, (16) to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?