

OpenTheo

Matthew 18:15 - 18:17



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this message, Steve Gregg explores Jesus' teachings in Matthew 18:15-17 regarding conflict resolution within the church. He emphasizes the importance of privacy and mercy in dealing with a brother who has sinned against us. Gregg encourages us to seek the involvement of respected witnesses when trying to establish the truth of a matter, and to trust in the process of church discipline when necessary. Ultimately, the goal is to restore the person in question to a place of right standing with the church and with God.

Transcript

Today we're going to pick up our study in Matthew 18, beginning at verse 15. Jesus is the speaker in the passage, and he says, Moreover, if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses to even hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them.

Okay, here we have a very important passage about resolving relationship difficulties. It's a clear teaching that Christ gives, and yet one that despite its clarity, the church either has refused to understand or simply understands and will not practice to a large extent. Now, not entirely.

Of course, I do know Christians who have practiced what Jesus said here. But there are certain complications that make it more difficult to practice because of the lack of unity in the churches generally. This is a passage that ultimately results in what we call church

discipline.

It starts out with your brother sinning against you. Now, if your brother sins against you, what should you do? Everyone listening to my voice has been sinned against by somebody, has been wronged. Somebody has treated you unjustly or unkindly, and you know it, and you're sensible to that, and it concerns you.

Now, what should you do? Well, sometimes people simply say nothing, and they'll think they're being gracious by saying nothing. But in many cases, by saying nothing, they're not necessarily being gracious. They're simply storing up their anger and their resentfulness against that person, and even if they feel that they're commendably self-controlled in not bringing it up, yet the resentment they feel toward the person and the unresolved difficulty affects negatively their feelings toward the person, their love for that person, and their relationship in a practical level with that person.

And that is something Jesus says is not the right way to resolve the problem. On the other hand, of course, some people would just like to go and lambaste the person and scold them and make them feel condemned and awful for their sins. And that's not Jesus' style either.

Jesus said he didn't come to condemn the world. He came that the world would be saved. And what Jesus is actually describing here is a procedure of restoration of somebody who sins.

You know, sin alienates from God and from man. Sin is when you don't do what God said. It's when you do what you prefer to do rather than what God wants you to do.

And when you make choices like that, you are turning your back on the will of God and offending him. You are also doing that which is harmful, generally speaking, to others, and so sinning typically injures God and other people. But perhaps, at least from the point of view of the person sinning, equally important is that when you sin, you are hurting yourself because you're alienating yourself from God and you're depriving God of a relationship with you that he desires and you're depriving yourself of the benefits of a relationship with God when you live in rebellion against him.

So, if your brother sins against you, that brother is doing something that harms himself as well as others. And love for your brother would give incentive to you to try to cause him to stop doing that which destroys himself and his relationship with God. Now, in the passage immediately preceding this in Matthew 18, Jesus gives the example of the lost sheep.

He says, what do you think if a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray? Does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains and seek the one that is straying? Now, Jesus is saying that God cares about every soul, every wandering sheep,

every sinner. And what he's telling here is how a person who is beginning to wander, how one of his sheep who is beginning to stray and beginning to sin can be restored before they get too far away. It is the task of other Christians to try to prevent their fellow Christians from falling away from God.

So, when your brother sins against you, he is doing that which is not consistent with following Christ. He is beginning to stray. He is beginning to do what would ultimately, if he does not repent, he is doing that which will ultimately lead to the loss of his soul.

And therefore, out of love for him and a desire to recover him, you walk into the situation even though it may be uncomfortable for you. Let's face it, a lot of times we don't address people who sin against us. We may commend ourselves that we are very tolerant or very thick-skinned or very able to absorb in a gracious manner injuries, but in many cases it's just plain cowardice on our part.

We just don't want the confrontation. The confrontation promises to be an unpleasant one. We don't like the unpleasantness, so we just internalize it and hold our grudges and just don't say a word.

Christianity calls us to be more courageous than that and to even risk life and limb for the salvation of others. How much more simply to risk just the discomfort of a confrontation? Now, Jesus said, if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. And if he hears you, you have gained your brother.

Now, obviously, gaining your brother is considered to be the desirable result. That's why you do this. If he'll hear what you have to say, you'll gain your brother.

Now, this is something we need to really adjust our own attitudes about. When someone sins against us, sometimes gaining him back as a friend is not the first thing on our list of priorities. Perhaps holding a grudge against him, letting him know how offended we are, making him feel badly about what he did to us, not letting him be our friend anymore, making him suffer for what he did to us.

Those are the kinds of low attitudes that sometimes manifest when somebody has sinned against us. But the real thing that we should desire is to gain that person back. And Jesus says, toward that end, you go to him privately, just between yourselves, tell him the problem.

And if he hears you, in other words, if he agrees with you and repents, you've gained your brother and all is well. It doesn't have to go beyond that. Now, notice Jesus said, you go and tell him between yourself and him alone.

This is out of respect to his privacy. It is possible that your brother who sinned against you may, A, have not known that he was sinning against you. It might have been insensitivity on his part.

It might be a blind spot on his part. He may have meant no malice, and you do him a favor by not exposing him to others when in fact he meant nothing by it. On the other hand, he may have meant it, he may have been malicious when he did it, but he may have since regretted it.

He may be prepared to repent, in which case it would be wrong to simply tell the world what he has done. And by the way, if you tell one other person, you may be inadvertently telling the whole world, because once gossip begins to go around, there's no restraining it. So Jesus says that when somebody has sinned against you, instead of going and telling everybody else or even one other person about it, preserve that person's privacy at least long enough to find out if they are repentant.

Go to them alone. Now, many of you listening to me have had friends, or maybe not friends, maybe just people in your life who have wronged you and you're holding a grudge against them. And you have told others about it, or maybe you haven't told anyone about it, but the thing you haven't done that you should do, you haven't gone and told the offender.

You haven't gone and told the person himself. For all you know, that person may repent, or may not have even known they were doing wrong in the first place. You owe it to them to let them hear why it is that you have something against them, so that they can clear it up, if they would.

And so you do that just between yourself and him alone, Jesus said. That preserves the privacy of the situation, and if you gain your brother, no one else ever has to hear about the situation. After all, if you did something inadvertently, let us say, or you did it on purpose but later regretted it against somebody, would you not like it best if that person cleared it up between you and him alone, and then no one else had to hear about it? It would be a matter of embarrassment to you for others to hear about it.

How would you like it if before you were ever confronted with the situation, that person who you had wronged had told everybody in the neighborhood or in the church about it? Well, you would feel, maybe you'd feel you deserved it, but it would still be not what you'd prefer. You'd prefer to get this cleared up and just keep it a private matter. That's what Jesus says you should do.

That's how you express love towards someone who has sinned against you. Remember, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that you should not hate your enemies, you should love your enemies and do good to those who persecute you and who do wrong to you. This is what you're supposed to do.

Now, if they wrong you, you go to them. It is an act of mercy on your part that you do so, because they need to be restored. If a person has sinned and has not repented, they have a breach in their relationship with you and with God.

This is not good for them. And therefore, out of kindness to them, you go to them. Now, by the way, some of you out there are just going to rejoice to have heard what I just said, because they're going to say, good, I was just looking for an excuse to go and give them a piece of my mind.

Jesus is not talking about going and giving them a piece of your mind. He's talking about going in a conciliatory way and trying to clear the matter up and try to elicit from the person the repentance that will demonstrate that they will not be continuing to do this to you or to others. And in order to guarantee this best, in case you've never learned this, it's best to go in a meek manner.

It doesn't mean you go in a manner that's apologetic and where you're the one who's, you know, you're the one on the defensive or anything. But it means that you go without malice, without condemnation, and you go gently, and you make it as easy as possible for that person to repent without embarrassment. Jesus or Paul said in Galatians 6 and verse 1, If you see your brother overtaken in a fault, you who are spiritual should restore that person in a spirit of meekness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.

That is, when you go to that person, you should go in a meek manner, in a gentle spirit. And that is, of course, more likely to gain the desired result. If you come with an accusing, angry, hostile attitude, even if the person was maybe capable of repenting, you might arouse in them a defensiveness that would make it harder for them to humbly repent.

The idea is to make it as easy as possible to restore this relationship. Now, Jesus said in verse 16, But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. Now, what this seems to be indicating is that if you go to your brother, he may not initially agree with you that he has done wrong to you.

There are, after all, injuries that can be committed that are, you know, open to interpretation. And where he might say, well, I didn't really do you any wrong. You know, I did the right thing.

You had it coming or whatever. They may feel that they've done you wrong, or they may feel that they have, but they don't care. They don't feel it's an issue that needs to be resolved.

In that case, you need witnesses. And the witnesses, Jesus says, are brought in because, as he said, In the mouth of two or more witnesses shall every word be established. Jesus is here quoting from Deuteronomy chapter 17 and also chapter 19.

This is an Old Testament principle that applied to the courtroom. That a person who is accused of a crime could not be really condemned unless there were two or more

witnesses against him. That's what Deuteronomy teaches.

And Jesus says, you know, this principle that you establish the truth by the mouth of at least two or more witnesses rather than condemning a person on one witness, that should extend to interpersonal relationships as well. And if the person does not agree with you that they have wronged you, or they don't think it's that big an issue, they need to have confirmation of that from others who also recognize that what they did was a sin and that they ought to repent of it. And so you bring two or, he says, one or two more, so that in other words there's a total of either two or three people who comes to this person.

Again, the number is small. You don't bring the whole church in on this, although the testimony of the whole church would seem to carry a lot of weight. The point is here they may yet repent when confronted by just two or three people.

And if they do, you can still preserve their privacy much better than if you brought up the whole church at this time. Now, if you're trying to do this with somebody, if somebody has wronged you, and it might be your wife or your husband. Your wife or your husband may have left you, may have divorced you even.

Or it may be some other situation. Someone in business has wronged you, has cheated you, or someone in the church has maligned you or gossiped or slandered against you. If these things happen, then you talk to them alone first.

And if they won't agree to change and repent and come back and do the right thing, then you need to go with one or two more. And I would say in the case of dealing with Christians, to bring a pastor along would be a very good idea. Although in some cases simply a mutual friend or something would be good.

But the point is the people you bring along should probably not be total strangers to this person, since the testimony of total strangers will not necessarily add strength to your case in the eyes of the offender. But if there's a friend, a respected friend or a pastor who can come in as one of these witnesses, I think it is the best situation to try to get this person to turn around. Now, it says in verse 17, And if he refuses to hear them, now that means you've gone to them at both levels.

You've gone privately and then you've brought in a couple of witnesses and they're still refusing to acknowledge the need to repent. Jesus said, if he refuses to hear them, then tell it to the church. And this seems to mean make the matter public to the congregation.

Now, this is for a couple of reasons. One is that this person is beginning to show signs of obstinance. They are sinning against you.

There are other witnesses that agree to this, but the person does not have any interest in repenting, which means that this is a pattern of behavior that they do not regret and

which they might repeat on any occasion. The whole congregation, therefore, is at risk of being victimized by this person's activities unless they are warned. Now, the assumption is this is a person in the church.

This is a church disciplinary situation. We're not talking about a non-Christian here. We're talking about somebody in the church.

A Christian brother has wronged you or a Christian sister has, and they are refusing to repent. Well, the whole church has to be warned. Why? Well, because the church, and especially in biblical times, and it ought to be so at all times, the people in the church are very vulnerable to each other.

They should be. That's what love does. People sacrifice for each other.

People, you know, extend themselves to others. People put themselves at risk to others. They trust others in the church.

And if somebody in the church is going about unrepentant for some injury inflicted on another member of the church and will not repent even when confronted twice, that person has got a habit that may well result in him victimizing more people in the church. So you essentially warn the church about them. And furthermore, taking it before the church is another way of impressing the offender that he is in the wrong because he now has the whole church witnessing against him on this matter.

And Jesus said, if he does not hear the church, then let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. That is to say, do not welcome him as a member of the church anymore. This is what maybe the Roman Catholic Church calls excommunication.

Some people of my acquaintance call it being disfellowshipped. It's generally referred to as church discipline. What it means is that the church is a family, and the individual children of God in the family, if they misbehave, they are to be corrected.

If they will not be corrected, they are to be disciplined. And the discipline takes the form of not regarding them as a Christian anymore. It's a matter of putting them out of the church and saying, you are not welcome or trusted in this congregation until such a time as you show evidence that you want to live as a Christian and will repent of the sins that you've committed.

There's many times in the Scripture that such church discipline is recommended. Now, Jesus himself recommends it there in Matthew 18. The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 talks about a situation where a man is living in sin and has not repented.

And Paul says that the church should discipline him. Actually, in a way that has confused a lot of people because it says in verse 5 of chapter 5 of 1 Corinthians, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh that his spirit may be saved in the day of the

Lord Jesus. Now, notice this action is corrective and restorative.

Do this so that his spirit may be saved. Well, what does it mean? Deliver him over to Satan. What it means is put the man out of the church.

The church is a place where there is strong spiritual support against the attacks of the enemy. If you're a member of the church, you have the prayers and the fellowship and the accountability and the teaching of the Word of God and you've got all kinds of things to strengthen you and to protect you against the wiles of the devil. But when you are isolated from the church and thrust out back in the pagan world, you're much more the unprotected target of the enemy.

And to put somebody out of the church is to deliver them over to Satan, as it were, for the devil to have his way with them so that they will repent and come back. That's the idea. Paul makes it very clear when he says put that person out of the church, you know, get rid of this person.

Now, the reason is because that person is not choosing to live as a Christian and is therefore, you know, renouncing their position in the church. There are other times in the Scripture that talks about taking disciplinary action. In Romans 16, Paul talks about marking and avoiding certain people who are causing problems in the church, apparently unrepentant.

In Titus 3, verses 10 and 11, Paul says reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition. Reject him if he's a divisive person. Division in the church or the causing of division in the church is a sin.

And you admonish him once and then twice after the first and second admonition, reject him. It's the application of what Jesus said in Matthew chapter 18, which we just saw. In 2 Thessalonians chapter 3, Paul says this in verse 14, And if anyone does not obey our word by this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed.

Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. In other words, this man is to be disfellowshipped, do not keep company with him, because he's refusing to submit to the authority of the apostolate and of the Scriptures. And therefore, he is to be regarded not a Christian.

But you're not supposed to treat him as an enemy, but treat him as you would a brother who you were trying to restore. That's what Jesus is saying here. This is right on the heels of his talking about the sheep being lost and the shepherd's concern about going to restore that lost sheep.

That's what he wants us to do. He wants us to restore one another as we recognize that the person who sins against me may be hurting me, but he's hurting himself more,

because if someone sins against me, that does not necessarily have to have any negative impact on my eternal well-being. I may suffer a loss financially or physically, or even in terms of reputation, from what somebody does against me, but I cannot suffer eternally for the actions of another person.

Being a victim of somebody else's malice does not touch my spiritual condition, unless I allow it to, and I certainly wouldn't do that. In other words, I could become nasty, I could become resentful, I could take up a grudge, in which case my spiritual life is in danger, but that's always a choice I make. I don't have to do that.

The actions of another cannot necessarily hurt me, but they hurt themselves. And that is why Jesus exhorts us to take every measure possible to restore such a one.