

Time of Grace Ministry
Out of Context: Where Two or Three Gather
Matthew 18:15-19
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And if there's one thing that as a pastor breaks my heart is when people run and they think they're fine. And they think they're good with Jesus and they think just the church is judgmental and who are these Christians to look at my behavior when they're imperfect themselves and they run.

The former pastor was letting me have some of his old books. A few weeks ago, I was in the basement of a guy who used to be a pastor, rummaging through box after box after box of the books that he used to use when he was in ministry. As we went through all those boxes, he started to tell me the story of why being a pastor was part of his past and no longer part of his present. And of course, it was complicated like all situations like that are but, essentially, he told me it's because he wanted to practice at his church this one thing that Jesus preached in Matthew 18. And when he came forward to his church and said he planned on practicing it, the church says, "You can't and you won't and if you try, you can't be our pastor anymore."

And so after a lot of nights of agonizing prayer with his wife, with his friends, with people that he trusted, he stepped away from the church and he left ministry. As we went through all those boxes, he came across a book that was actually about the topic that Jesus covered in Matthew 18 and he said, "Mike, do you know at our church, we actually read this book as a church leadership team? And when we read it, people said they loved it; this was the right thing to do that Jesus taught." But when it came time to actually practice it, everything changed.

Now before you judge that church, I should tell you something. Our church - in its about decade-long history - has never fully practiced what Jesus preached in Matthew 18. In my career as a pastor over 11 years now, I have never fully followed every step that Jesus taught in Matthew 18. In fact, when I reach out to the secretary of our campus, which has existed for 150 years, I told her, "Find me the last time this happened at our church," and she looked back decades and decades and couldn't find a single time. She jokingly said, "Do you want me to check when the church council minutes were written in German?" Because she couldn't find anything in English.

Do you know what Jesus taught in Matthew 18? The teaching that was so hard that churches would rather get a new pastor than practice it? I'll show you a snippet of how he started in verse 15. He said, "If your brother or sister sins," in Matthew 18, Jesus was talking about sin that happens in the church among Christian people. He wasn't addressing the kind of sins that happen with our friends and our family members and our neighbors who don't believe in Jesus. But what happens when sin happens here? If we could visualize sin like this red ball, when you come to church and someone in the family - a brother or sister - Jesus says, sins, what do you do? And the truth is, 99.96% of the time that teaching's not that difficult because when a Christian

sins, when we see this in our hands that we thought something or we did something or we said something that wasn't in line with Jesus, we want to put it down and we don't want to touch it anymore; we repent and we apologize and we're sorry. And as brothers and sisters, we get to do the easiest and most beautiful thing; we get to tell people about Jesus. That there's forgiveness for this and there's mercy for this and Jesus died for this at the cross.

But what happens when a brother, a sister, doesn't want to put this down? What happens when they sin but they don't really seem that sorry for it? What happens when they hold onto this and they plan on doing it the next time and the next time and they're not ashamed but they're proud of it? What does a Christian do then? When your best friend is flirting with a married man or your best friend is about to abandon his wife and kids because he thinks he's found something better. What do you do? When someone says they don't have time to serve their family but they have time to stare at their phone. When they claim they don't have money to help the poor but they get the latest upgrade and they're paying \$100+ a month for cable. What do you do? When someone claims to be a follower of Jesus, instead of struggling with sin and battling sin and falling into sin but letting it go, when they hold onto that sin, it's repetitive and it's a pattern and they don't seem all that broken up about it, what do you do?

Well, if you were here last week, you know exactly what to do. Jesus said when you see a sin in another Christian's life, before you speak a syllable to them about their sin, do you know what you need to do? Think about your own sin. Jesus said, "Judge not, or you will be judged." Make sure the standard you're holding those other Christians to is the standard you're holding yourself to. Don't measure their behavior with money or marriage or sexuality or whatever before you measure yourself.

But let's assume you've done that. Let's assume you're not a pretender, you're not a hypocrite; you really do care about God's will. You're trying to own your sin, repent of it, and grow but this brother, this sister, doesn't seem to. What do you do then? Well, that's what Jesus lays out in Matthew 18 and if you didn't get my drift just yet, it's going to be hard. So hard that few churches, sometimes whole denominations, don't practice what Jesus preached.

So are you ready to dive into 200-proof truth? The real teaching of Jesus? Open your Bible or just follow along on the screen with me as we look at Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18. We start today with the four steps that Jesus laid out for dealing with sin. If taking notes in your program, here's where we're going to start. Jesus says, "When a brother or sister sins, they don't seem all that repentant or sorry, here's the very first thing you and I should do is to go and to show on the down low." Here's how Jesus says it in Matthew 18. He says, "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over." Unless there are extenuating circumstances like someone's in danger, this is a case of an abuser, you should keep this conversation as small and quiet and private as possible for as long as possible.

And this is where it gets hard, right? I mean, most of us, even as Christians, don't love conflict, even if the conversation is a good one to have. Most of us get really anxious about these kind of conversations, we love it when people like us and people tend not to like us when we have these kind of conversations so what we tend to do, even as Jesus' followers, is to talk about people

instead of talking to people. See, Jesus knows it is so, so tempting to talk about someone: "Are you guys concerned about so and so? I was kind of bothered at the Bible study when she said..." Now, it's going to be hard talking to someone but Jesus knows it's going to be impossible to fix it unless we talk to people. And so he says, "If your brother or sister sins, go and show them their fault just between the two of you." Because it just might work.

I love the hope that Jesus gives. He says, if they listen to you, you have won them over. But what if they don't listen? What if after not just one conversation but a dozen of conversations and texts and emails, what if they shut you out? What if they say you're being judgmental and this is none of your business? And how I live my life is between me and God? What if they won't even return your texts anymore, communicate, what if they bail on you? What do you do then?

Well, that's stage two of Jesus' plan. He said if it gets to that point, then you go and show but not so low. Now look how Jesus puts it in Matthew 18. He says, "But if they will not listen, take one or two others along so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." And sometimes, when you come with a witness, do you know what happens? People listen. Maybe at first they just assume this was one like super judgmental person from their congregation but now they know like, "Wow, maybe this is serious? Maybe I need to think about that. Because I respect those people and I know that they love me and if all of them are concerned." And if they listen to you at that point, do you know what you get to do? You get to give them Jesus!

But what if they don't listen? What if they push you away even more? What if they're not even going to listen to two or three people who are gathered around an open Bible? Well, then Jesus says you move to stage three and stage three is to go and to let the church know. Here's how Jesus puts it in verse 17. He says, "If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church." This would be the first time ideally when I would find out about the sin in your circle of friends or your family. You would tell the leadership of our church and that at point, what we try to do is anything possible to save this wandering sinner. Jesus doesn't tell us the exact way to do this but I could imagine that we'd gather as a church family, we would have a special meeting, and I would have to tell you the name of the person who's caught up in sin and the sin that they're committing. I'd have to open a Bible and show you why we're so concerned for this person's soul and I would plead with all of you: "Do any of you know her? Do any of you have other information about him? Why is he pushing us away? Is there something going on in his past or history that we need to be more patient and not move forward too quickly?" And as a church, we do anything and we do everything because an eternity is at stake and we just go all out communicating our concern.

And if that person listens, do you know what you get to give them? Jesus. What if the whole church gets involved? What if the pastor calls and emails and texts and shows up on their doorstep and they still push away? They still hold onto their sin? Well, then we move to the final stage where Jesus says we go and we let the unbeliever know. Here's what he says at the end of verse 17: "And if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

Now what do you think that means; that we'd treat someone as a pagan or a tax collector? I mean, didn't Jesus love pagans, unbelieving people? Yeah. Didn't he reach his arms out in love and have meals with people like Matthew, himself, and his tax collecting friends? Absolutely. Would we keep on loving this person who's holding onto their sin? Would we reach out to them? Absolutely. But do you know the one thing Jesus didn't do with pagans? Act like they weren't pagans. He didn't treat them as God-fearing, grace-believing people. He didn't act as though they'd be okay if they took their last breath and died that day. And this is the brutally hard step that the church is called to do. That if after all those conversations, a person who claims to be a Christian is holding onto their sin, you and I would essentially have to tell them this: You might say that you love God but you don't because love for God is to obey his commands and you don't even want to obey his command. You might think that you have a personal relationship with Jesus as your Savior but listen, you don't. When Jesus said if you would actually believe in him, that you would love the things that he taught, but you love the things that Jesus hated. You might think that you have the Holy Spirit in your heart but you don't because the Holy Spirit inspired every verse in this book and you don't even want to hear the things he wrote in this book. We would have to say with broken hearts and tears in our eyes, "If you took your last breath today, if a car accident happened, if a stroke in the middle of the night, you would not go to a better place. You would die as a pagan and you would suffer in hell.

Can I be just real with you for a second? The reason I as a pastor have never gotten to that point is because sinners are cowards. Because instead of repenting, instead of trying to give the church the reason that they could still be a Christian and live in sin, they run. They run. If there's one thing as a pastor that breaks my heart is when people run and they think they're fine. And they think they're good with Jesus and they think just the church is judgmental and, "Who are these Christians to look at my behavior when they're imperfect themselves?" and they run. And they say, "Thanks for everything in the past, but I don't need you to be my pastor anymore." Yeah, "Thanks for everything with the church but I'm going to find a new church home," and they find a place and a pastor who has no clue about their sin so they can hold onto it knowing no one knows.

And I have no clue what to do at that point. I mean, what do I do? Do I text them every week even if they never text me back? Do I show up on their doorstep unannounced saying, "I'm not going to let you go!" Do we send like a letter signed by the church's leadership team, "Hey! We think you're going to hell." I mean, what do you do? When you need to have the hardest conversation in a person's life, by text? Do we post it on your Facebook wall? If you're going to run, what do we say? And if we're the family of God, how could we watch someone run away from God and just watch it happen? I think this is why this never happens. In Jesus' day, you probably lived in a small village and you saw the people from your spiritual community and you couldn't run from it but today, we can. And if someone wants to hold onto their sin and live in it, there's a hundred churches that they could go to and a hundred pastors who won't have a clue. No wonder no one practices it, huh?

And if you're taking notes, here's Jesus reason why we would follow his four stages. The simple answer is love. Love. We would give up all of our comfort for the sake of love. Isn't that true when you really love someone you get uncomfortable for them? Or to quote Jesus, why would a

Good Shepherd leave 99 percent of his flock who are laying down for the night on the soft grass under the starry sky, why would he get up and go into wolf infested, dark valleys? Because of love. Because getting the 99 percent on the Savior sheep test is not good enough for a Good Shepherd. And with his reckless love, there is no valley so dark he wouldn't go down into it to find a sheep that's lost.

And so, I can make you this guarantee: If you hold onto sin, if I'm worried that you wouldn't see Jesus forever and ever, I will hunt you down. I mean, it will be awkward and you might hate me, you might despise me, my name - you shouldn't have given me your contact information because I'm going to blow up your phone and I'm not going to let you go. Not because I hate you, not because I think I'm better than you, but because I love you and your eternity matters way too much to me and way too much to Jesus to just watch it happen and stay comfortable with the new people who are coming to church. Love has to confront a sin. Love can't abide by bad behavior because sin hurts people and God doesn't want to hurt people.

That's why Jesus said in really strong terms in Matthew 18: "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." So if a person is holding onto their sin, for the church to bind someone's sin on earth is like to take a roll of church duct tape and wrap this sin in their hands and tell them, "This is stuck to you. Like you're going to come to church and you're going to listen to Christian radio and people are going to talk about how Jesus takes away sin but not yours. It's bound to you because you want to hold onto it, you don't want Jesus to take this, because this is your sin. If you die today - here's the crazy part of what Jesus says - whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Because we aren't just like judgmental church people. If we're doing this according to the Bible, then what Jesus sees in heaven is just what we say on earth. The sin is stuck to you. But whatever you loose on earth - if by the grace of God that person says, "Oh, my goodness, I almost gave up my soul. I almost cashed in my eternity for some relationship? For some sin? For some joy ride? For five, 10, 50 years?" If they realize that and they repent, this is the amazing thing we get to do: Whatever you loose on earth, we get to give that person Jesus. And we get to undo the duct tape and we get to take away their sin and we get to welcome them back and say, "You know, that's not just me telling you you're forgiven and loved, that there's no more guilt and shame. That's what Jesus says in heaven; it has been loosed in the presence of God himself.

That's why we do it. We love someone so much we don't want them to stand before Jesus with the one thing that Jesus can't stand. Which is why we need Jesus' final words. At the end of this section, Jesus says something that pastors love to quote out of context. He says, "Truly, I tell you that if two of you are on earth agree on about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." Because when you're reaching out to someone you love and they're not changing and you feel like you can't do it, I'm right there, he says.

Here's the big idea I want you to remember when you have to have a hard conversation: But God is here. When you're trying to find the courage to talk to that person instead of about that person, you can say, "But God is here." And when you feel like you have to bring one or two witnesses and you're waiting at the coffee shop and you can just read her body language before you say a word, "But God is here." And when the church is having a meeting and it just feels so

heavy and you just wish you could talk about easier things, you look in the third row and God is here. And when you have to write the hardest letter in your church's history and tell a person you've excommunicated yourself from the family of God, when your ink is trying to dodge the tears falling from your cheeks, you say, "But God is here." And this person might listen to me and they might not but God is here. And this might ruin our friendship, to be honest, but it's worth it for the sake of eternity and God is here. And someone might post this letter on Facebook and people might assume our church is just one of "those" kind of churches but God is here.

And so brothers and sisters, I want you to remember that. I want our future to be different from the past and I need you to know that God is here. As we try to love people in a better way than we ever have before, as we stop embracing this American value of tolerance that lets people walk away from Jesus, but God is here.

You know, last Sunday after church, I was hanging out with some pastors at night around a bon fire and I asked them the question, "Have you guys ever done Matthew 18 in your entire ministries?" It got really quiet. But there's this older pastor and he was just about to leave - he actually had his lawn chair in his hand - he was walking away and he turned around and a memory stirred. He said, "You know, Mike, decades ago, we had to tell it to the church. This woman in our congregation was holding onto her sin, she wasn't changing it, and I told the church one day - I didn't tell the name just yet - but I told them we need to have a meeting about someone we're concerned about." And the sister-in-law of the sinner actually ran up to me and she said, "Are you talking about my sister-in-law?" And pastor said, "Yeah, I am." And she said, "Can I try to reach out?" and he said, "Of course." And so she did and do you know what happened? She listened.

For some reason, that one person got through and the Holy Spirit stirred in her heart. And I'm sitting there at the fire and I'm looking at this pastor's face and a smile kind of creeps across his expression. He says, "You know what, Mike? I still get the newsletters from that church even though I haven't been there in 20 years. And do you know whose name I see worshipping, serving? Hers."

Does it always work out that well? No, not always. Will people always listen when you have a good, biblical conversation about sin? Not always. Will some souls be saved because of your bravery and your love? Sometimes. Will Jesus be with you no matter what happens? Always.

Let's pray.

I thank you, Jesus, that when we as Christians wander from this teaching, you're the Good Shepherd who comes after us. I think back on 11 years of those people, God, that I just should have tried another time and I didn't. And we think about our grandkids and our sons and our daughters and our brothers and sisters, it's just tough to think about that we would let that happen for the sake of our comfort. So thank you, Jesus, for being the Good Shepherd. Thank you that right now we can confess that to you and you don't hold it against us; you separate that sin, you take it out of our hands. We pray for courage today. What kind of church would we be unless we drew people to you? Unless we chased after them in love? But we need wisdom to do it.

God, to know how many times we should try it each day and just know what to say and when to say it and how often to say it. Without you, that's going to blow up so help us. Promise, Jesus, that if we would ask according to your will you'd help us and so we're asking may your will be done.

I pray right now that you could put a face in our mind, a name on our heart, of a person that we might quietly reach out before this day is done. God, you love that person as much as you love us. You died for their sins as much as you died for ours. And so, I pray that you would give us your heart. That the amazing grace that you've shown to us is the grace that we could show to other people. There's nothing better in the world, Jesus, and you know it, than when one person repents. And so, even if it's just one, even if everyone doesn't come back, even if just one person walks through this door with their head bowed low, I pray that we could celebrate like the angels in heaven. Thank you for your mercy and your grace. And Jesus, thank you for in context the beautiful promise that you will be with us always. We pray this all in your powerful, your saving, your wonderful name, Amen.



TIME OF GRACE®

Out of Context: "Where Two or Three Gather"

Study Notes

Summary

These words are a comforting punch line when barely anyone shows up for church. But make sure to read the context! Jesus spoke these words at the end of his message on dealing with sin in the church. He offered a great comfort to churches that do the hard work of dealing with sin, warning the hard-hearted, and practicing church discipline. He is with them, even in those agonizing conversations with those who are clutching their own sin.

- **Matthew 18:15:** If a believer does something wrong . . .
- What are the four stages of dealing with sin?
 1. Stage 1: _____ and _____ (on the _____).
Matthew 18:15: If a believer does something wrong, go, confront him when the two of you are alone. If he listens to you, you have won back that believer.
 2. Stage 2: _____ and _____ (but not _____).
Matthew 18:16: But if he does not listen, take one or two others with you so that every accusation may be verified by two or three witnesses.
 3. Stage 3: _____ and let the _____ know.
Matthew 18:17: If he ignores these witnesses, tell it to the community of believers.
 4. Stage 4: _____ and let the _____ know.
Matthew 18:17: If he also ignores the community, deal with him as you would a heathen or a tax collector.
- Why do we follow the four stages of dealing with sin?
 1. Answer: _____.
 2. **Matthew 18:18:** I can guarantee this truth: Whatever you imprison, God will imprison. And whatever you set free, God will set free.
- Where is Jesus during the four stages of dealing with sin?

1. **Matthew 18:19,20:** I can guarantee again that if two of you agree on anything here on earth, my Father in heaven will accept it. Where two or three have come together in my name, I am there among them.
2. **Big Idea:** But _____ is _____!

Points to Ponder

1. Have you ever seen/witnessed/experienced the process that Jesus describes in Matthew 18:15-20? If so, what happened? Having studied Jesus' words, should anything have been done differently?
2. Compare 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 with 2 Corinthians 2:5-11. How did Paul urge the Corinthians to put Jesus' words into action?
3. **Evaluate:** It is just as hard to continually forgive a struggling sinner as it is to confront a Christian who is not struggling with sin. (Bonus: Read the rest of Matthew chapter 18 and see how Jesus' friend Peter reacted to this teaching.)

Homework for Next Week

Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-13.

*"The ones who disappoint you need you the most."
—Jack Hyles*