



TIME OF GRACE®

Leave No One Behind: Even When Church Hurts

Study Notes

Summary

This message might seem odd, but it is important. Many kids get disconnected from church because they or their parents get hurt by someone at church. The pastor. The church council. A fellow member. Without the right reaction, these sins/hurts can uproot entire families for generations to come, leaving kids to tell the story of that one pastor who said that one thing to one of his parents. This message is meant to prepare people for the next time church hurts. What do you do? What do you say? When do you go?

- **Matthew 18:14,15:** ¹⁴ In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. ¹⁵ 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.
- When church hurts, _____ and _____.
- **Mathew 18:16:** 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.'
- When church hurts, _____ and _____ (but not _____).
- **Matthew 18:21,22:** ²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."
- **Colossians 3:13:** Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.
- When church hurts, _____ with, don't _____ on.
- **Isaiah 53:12:** He poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.
- When church hurt him, _____ didn't _____ on us.

Points to Ponder

1. **Agree or Disagree:** People who run away from conflict will never experience the deepest joys and comforts of belonging to a church family.
2. Study all of Matthew 18:10-35. How do God's view of children (verses 10-14), dealing with sin in the church (verses 15-20), and our willingness to forgive in response to God's mercy (verses 21-35) fit together? Write down three insights from meditating on these verses.
3. **Challenge:** If you've been hurt by someone at church, follow Jesus' wisdom and take the first step toward healing.

Homework for Next Week

Read John 14:1-6.

*"To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."
—C. S. Lewis*

Time of Grace Ministry
Leave No One Behind: Even When Church Hurts
Matthew 18:1-16, Colossians 3:13
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Pastor Mike Novotny

So what are you going to do when I sin against you?

Now thankfully, Jesus actually answered that question. And he answered it with a series of verses that I actually shared with you about six months ago at this church. Ironically, we were in the middle of a sermon series called "Out of Context," and I was trying to study like these phrases that Christians jack and kind of take out of context but when I looked back at Jesus' teaching, do you know what I realized? I had taken it out of context. I was picking up on this one verse where Jesus said, "Where two or three people gather together in my name, I'm right there with them." And I was using that to try and teach our church that, you know, Jesus wasn't just talking about coming to church in worship; he was talking about like having hard conversations when sin happens in the church. When two or three gather to have those conversations, he's right there with them. But what I didn't realize at the time was the context of what made Jesus talk about that very issue. The context was kids. Jesus was in the middle of this long, long sermon about the next generation; about the kids and the grandkids and the little ones who were gathered in church. And it was that context that made him ask that question: What do you do when the church hurts you? If you're not very familiar, in Matthew 18, Jesus' disciples started with this question. They said, "Jesus, what does it take to be great?" Like, if I want to be the best believer on my block, what should I do? What should I be like? And do you know what Jesus' answer was? Be like a kid. Matthew 18 says Jesus called a little kid, had him stand among these grown men with beards, and he says, "If you have faith like that, like the simple faith of a child that just trusts what our Father in heaven says, you are great in the kingdom of God." And then Jesus kept preaching; he started to think about kids and he said, "Oh, by the way, don't sin against these kids. If you do, it would be better to have like a cinder block tied around your neck and thrown into the depths of the sea." Kids are impressionable and how we teach them and treat them, for better or worse, will shape and mold them so don't mess with one of God's kids.

And then Jesus kept going and he said, "And never look down on a kid." Like little kids, you know, might be a handful in church and they might not write the big checks to keep the ministry going and be the most faithful volunteers but God loves children. In fact, he sends his angels to watch over children so never look down on a kid. And then Jesus kept going and he told this story about a shepherd who had a hundred sheep and one wandered away and Jesus said, God loves that one so much, he's not content with the ninety-nine. In fact, in Matthew 18:14, Jesus concluded that story with these words. He said, "In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish." Like God doesn't want to lose a single soul from the next generation; that was Matthew 18:14.

But do any of you know what Jesus said next? He said Matthew 18:15. And do you know what that verse says? It says exactly what you and I should do when the church hurts you. Here's what Jesus said: "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." That's Jesus' answer to the question when I hurt you, when the church hurts you, when our brother or sister, a fellow Christian sins, you don't run away, you don't bail, you don't find a new church, you don't pray about it, you don't talk about it with other people, you don't bring it up at your Bible study. The very, very first thing you do is you go; you go and have a conversation.

Now I want to put a little asterisk on the teaching because there's something I just don't have time to talk about today but I know is very serious and it affects some of your stories. If the church hurts you like in a very tragic, criminal way, I have a hunch Jesus would not tell you to do this. Alright, so if you've been in something or you ever go through something, God forbid, in the church where you're assaulted or abused, you don't just keep it private and meet behind closed doors with the pastor; that's a much different situation. But for most of the stuff we go through, this is exactly the perfect path. In fact, it's so important, I'd love for you to write it down. Jesus said the very first thing you do is that when the church hurts you, go and you show.

About a month ago, an email popped up in my inbox from a guy I used to pastor and every word of it broke my heart. It turns out in my classic Pastor Mike fashion, I said something really like dumb off the cuff while the cameras were recording and the microphone was on and someone really got hurt. And when he saw the message appear on TV, he was appalled and deeply disappointed in me and he had to show me. He sent me an email and even the subject line made me nervous and the content was even worse. He said after all the years that I had been his pastor, what I said on that single Sunday made him lose all respect for me. He was shocked that I would speak that way and act that way, not just as a Christian, but as a Christian pastor. But can I tell you something? As hard as it was to read, I'm glad that he did because he was taking Jesus' advice and he was going and he was showing. And he gave me the opportunity to be won over.

I replied to his email and I typed the words, "You're right. That was stupid. That was sinful. I wish I could take it back. I've asked for forgiveness. I'm so grateful that Jesus forgives me and I hope you can forgive me, too." In less than a day, do you know what happened? We were good again. He replied to my reply and he said, "Wow. I just realized that pastors are people. That even leaders in the church are going to sin. I really respect the way you reacted to that. I forgive you. I'm not going to treat you like this happened. We're going to move on; we're going to move past it." And in two emails, what would have torn us apart for years, brought us closer together than ever.

And the same thing can happen for you. Let me ask you - has anyone ever hurt you in the church? And have you failed to deal with that tension? And if a face popped into your brain in the five seconds of silence I just gave you, that was a sign from God. It was a sign that you have some homework today and if you want to get to it and get out your phone right now, I would be proud of you. And if you want to excuse yourself and go to the lobby and make a call, the Holy Spirit would applaud you. And if you want to walk away from the live stream or turn off the television and just deal with that tension, it would be the best blessing of your week and maybe

your year. Reconciliation is one of the most beautiful gifts. When we can work humbly through sin together and forgive each other in Jesus' name, we become the answer to the prayer that Jesus prayed the night before he bled. "Father, let them be one as we are one." The Bible says how good and how pleasant it is when the family of God lives like family with love and grace and forgiveness instead of bitterness, division, and awkwardness. So according to Jesus, the next time I sin against you, you know exactly what to do. You go and you show.

But what if it doesn't work? Well, Jesus actually has an answer to that question, too. Here's what he says in verse sixteen. He says, "But if they," the sinner, "will not listen, take one or two others along so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." Now I love Jesus for saying this. He says, when church hurts, you should go and show but this time, not solo. You've got to bring a brother or a sister; someone else so we can work through this and resolve this because we're not moving past this. Church hurts too much and healing is too good to act like that.

It's like these chairs. Let's imagine this chair is you and you have your eyes like fixed on worshiping God well in a local church. But there's this person next to you who had been worshiping by your side in the same direction but then they sinned. It's kind of like they turn away from Jesus and disobey him and they kind of turn their back on you and you show up on Sunday and this is the situation. And so you're trying to listen to Jesus and, you know, you're tapping them on the shoulder, trying to start a conversation, get to the bottom of an issue, but they won't turn, they won't repent. What do you do? Well, Jesus' answer is you bring one or two with you and when you do that, like one of two things is going to happen. Number one, we as a church are going to annoy the snot out of that sinner. Like it's not just going to be you tapping them on the shoulder - a bunch of us - we're going to be tapping them on the top of the head saying, "No, no, no. No, you're not going to hurt people that God loves this much and we're just not going to let you get away with it and come back next Sunday. We're going to deal with this. Like an unaddressed sin is a cancer in the body of Christ and this conversation is the chemo to kill it so we're going to have it." And so maybe, like hopefully, we can get their attention; help them to see that you're not just being sensitive, that this was sin, and in repentance, they ask for your forgiveness. You can go back stronger than ever to worship God together.

Or do you know what else could happen? Those one or two witnesses could tell you that maybe this wasn't the case but maybe this was the case. You know, maybe they sinned but maybe you did, too. Maybe the way you reacted to it was harsh or proud. Maybe instead of talking to them and keeping it quiet, you told everyone and ruined their reputation. Maybe both of us have some owning up to do; some humbling ourselves, some apologizing to bring forgiveness. But whatever the case and whatever the situation, God's greatest goal is that we as a church would be a family that reconciles and makes peace and lives together with one another. That hopefully, side by side by side by side, all of us can worship Jesus with clean hearts and without any tension to pull us apart.

So can I ask - have you let something go too long? Is there a person you try to avoid when you come to church? If I can encourage you, reach out. Try again. Ask for help. God's love for you, for this family in this place, matters way, way too much to do anything less.

Now I wish I had time to walk through the other steps in Jesus' process. If by chance that doesn't work, Jesus actually said there's another step that we can take. I don't have time to cover that today so you can open your own Bible and look at Matthew 18 to see how Jesus answered that question because I want to show you the reaction that one of Jesus' audience had when he first taught these steps. The apostle Peter was one of Jesus' closest friends and he was listening and taking notes in the program of his mind: "Okay, you go and show, you go and show but not solo." But then he raised his hand after Jesus said "Amen" with a question and this was the question: "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times but 77 times.'" And I wish I could have seen Peter's face. Seven times? Wait, wait - you're going to bail on someone because they hurt you seven times, Peter? You are not even close. Like, not seven times; seventy-seven. In fact, some people think the original Greek language of the New Testament is 70 times seven. Jesus is saying, "Peter, you keep counting them and when you get to 490, you come back and I'll give you another 490 to count to." You don't bail on people. You don't keep a record of their wrongs. You don't have thin skin in the body of Christ. You have to be strong and bold. You have to have hard conversations time after time. This is the plan of God.

I love how the apostle Paul summarized all of this in Colossians three. He said, "Bear with each other and forgive one another. If any one of you has a grievance against someone, forgive as the Lord forgave you." So what are you going to do when I sin against you? The Bible's answer is you bear with, you forgive, and you remember how much you've been forgiven. That's how we keep unity and love and roots in the Christian church.

So here's the big idea if you're taking notes. When church hurts, God says that we should bear with and not bail on. Why would you - like seriously, if I said something insensitive to you and you gave me another chance and then you gave me another chance and then if you gave me seven chances, I mean, all of your friends would be saying, "Oh my goodness, you've got to get out of that place. What a bozo! Like, you need to run and bail and find someplace new." So why would you be different? And when people get hurt in our age of outrage, we church shop, we church hop, or we church drop. We don't stick with a church like that so why would you? And the Bible probably has, I don't know, 17 answers to that question but I want to share just two today, alright? So before I say "Amen," let me give you two very, very powerful reasons to actually do this and bear with sinners in your church. Here's the first one: Because you will never get to the best blessings unless you bear with. Let me say that again: You'll never experience and get to the best blessings unless you bear with. I'll prove it to you - show of hands, how many of you are married here today? Any couples? A bunch of you. How many of you have been married over 10 years? Alright, don't say it out loud, those of you who've been married over a decade, how many times have you been sinned against in marriage? There's a woman at our last service who laughed out loud when I asked that question and everyone looked at her husband. Can you imagine, like, you could have not a toxic, but a really, really good relationship and you're going to get sinned against more than once or twice or seven times. But if you bail after the honeymoon is over, what are you going to miss? You're going to miss the time when marriage gets really good. When you've apologized and forgiven and worked through a thousand issues and your roots are so deep and thick and strong that you produce the fruit of

love and passion and understanding and intimacy and joy. The best marriages, we don't bail on each other, we bear with each other. Not once or twice or 77 times.

Show of hands, how many of you are parents here today? A whole bunch of parents. Parents, how many times can your kid sin against you before you leave them at the curb? Three strikes and Johnny's out? Can you imagine that conversation? "Hey listen, bud, you pushed the sippy cup off that little tray like six times today so, sorry, but I packed up your Sesame Street suitcase and I called an Uber so thanks for being part of our family." No! We never would and we love our kids, we cherish our kids; we wouldn't trade in our kids for anything. But how many times have they sinned? But we don't bail on them; we bear with them. And as the years go by, that relationship gets really good.

And you've had friendships like this, right? I mean, friendships where you've had misunderstandings and hard conversations but you didn't bail and now those kind of friends that you can like meet with after a year and it feels like you never left off because the most fruitful trees have been through a lot of storms. And the most fruitful Christians are the same. And church is no different. I mean, there can be a honeymoon phase of church when everything is new and exciting and fresh and the preacher's new and you love the music and everyone's great at your Bible study but let me tell you this: Things get really good, really good, when we go through it together. When we have to confess and forgive, know each other, humble ourselves, and forgive each other in Jesus' name, that's when a church is not just a church; it becomes a family - a family of God. So I want to encourage you, don't bail on the church. Bear with it because the best blessings are yet to come.

So that's the first reason I want you to bear with it. The second one, though, is the one that Jesus actually mentioned in the context of Matthew 18. You know, Peter's beard had just hit the ground: Seventy-seven times? And Peter, who always had something to say, I think, was quiet for the first time in his life so Jesus took the opportunity and he told the story. And the story he told Peter started like this. He said, "Peter, once upon a time, there was a king who had a subject in his kingdom who owed him 10,000 bags of gold." Scholars estimate 10,000 bags of gold was like 200,000 days' worth of work. In other words, it didn't matter if he became the CEO of a successful company, he had no chance of paying this off in his lifetime. "So Peter," Jesus said, "do you know what the king did? He had mercy. He took pity and he forgave the guy and he set him free." And do you know why Jesus told that story? So that before we bail on someone who hurts us, we remember the God who didn't bail when we hurt him. I know it's possible that I'm going to sin against you once or twice or maybe 77 times and you might do the same to me. But before we look at each other with anger and bitterness, first, Jesus says, look up. Look up at the God who didn't give you a second chance or three strikes until he kicked you out of the kingdom of heaven but the God who kept bearing with you through thick and thin, weakness and strength, sin, struggle, and addiction. This is the Jesus who was so hurt every time that someone got hurt and yet, instead of running away, he didn't bail on his plan to come to this earth and rescue and save you from your sin.

In fact, there's this great prediction about the life and the work of Jesus in the Old Testament. Isaiah 53 said this: "He," Jesus, "poured out of his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors," the sinners, "for he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the

transgressors." And when he gave his life, God erased every sin so that he would never, ever, ever have a reason to bail on you. And I want to tell you today, there are no exceptions to that promise. I don't know what your sin, what your struggle, what happened or how many times it did but I know this: He bore the sin of many. He made intercession. Between you and a perfect God is Jesus who intercedes so that no matter how many times you hurt your Father in heaven, he will never, ever bail on you; he'll bear with you.

And come on, isn't this why we want to reach the next generation? We could care less about what church, if it was some club. We don't care about Christianity if it's just some personal belief or self-improvement process but it's not. The reason we want the kids and the grandkids to come to church, to read this book, to be organized in their focused faith in Jesus instead of independently spiritual is because we want them to know this kind of faith. Not to give into the karma that the world peddles where, you know, you get a couple chances but it's going to come back to you. No, we want them to know grace; grace on top of grace. The grace that makes us sing, "God, you set me free from all my sin, from all my weakness, from all my burdens. You took it all and you gave me your love and your grace." That's what I want for my kids. I don't know what sins they'll commit in their future but I always, always, always want them to know that there is a Jesus who will never bail. He will bear with them because he already bore sin for them.

Now brothers and sisters, when we can do that, whew, church gets so good! When we remember the best blessings that are yet to come and the God who bore with us, we can have hard and holy conversations. Just like these people had with me. Let me show you a picture of an incredible family. That's little Henry in the middle; he was at our last church service. And those are his parents, Holly and Zeb. They gave me permission to show you this picture and to tell you a little bit of their story because Holly and Zeb are amazing people. They're not perfect people and they'd tell you that they have a lot of things to improve in their Christian life but they're fruitful, Christian people. They gather here in worship, they bring their kid even though it's hard when you have a little one, trying to corral him in church. They do life together with people in community, they pray for our family, they encourage people, and they forgive people at our church. They give generously of their skills. You might see Holly playing keyboards in worship; Zeb's an incredible graphic designer who blesses our church and gives his time and his talent. They're really, like, people who are rooted in Jesus and because of that, their son gets so much grace. He was here in church to hear about grace and sing about grace; to hear me preach about the God of amazing grace and forgiveness. But do you know the only reason that happened? Because those two didn't bail on me. A couple of years ago before Henry was born, once again, I stood right here and once again, I said something I wish I could take back. I was kind of clueless when the words came out of my mouth how personal they would be for Holly and how much they would hurt. And I would have expected her to bail. I mean, I've been a pastor long enough; I know what people normally do. But she didn't. Instead, she decided to go and show. And we sat down and we talked and I got to apologize and she, like Jesus, forgave. And now, here they are, a blessing to our church, showing me love, making me a stronger, sharper Christian. And do you know what happened like two hours ago? I never could have predicted it. I got done preaching this very message, putting up this very picture, and I sat down and do you know who toddled over to me? That kid. And I don't think I've ever picked him up in my entire life and he put out his arms to me and Holly said, "Henry, Henry, come here; come

by mommy." And he said, "No." And I held him, and we started to sing the next song and Henry pointed at the screen and he said, "That's Jesus." And I said, "Yeah, he is, bud." And we started singing about God and his kingdom and the next generation and the beauty of Christ and here I'm holding the evidence of God's crazy grace for me. This kid is singing praises at my side and he's listening with his little ears as I talk about the cross of Jesus. Why? Because they didn't bail and they bore with a very imperfect man.

Brothers, sisters, how beautiful when we don't bail. When we lift our eyes up to the God who bore our sins and we bear with one another in love, that's when church, it gets good. So now we know exactly what to do. God does not want a single one of these little ones to be lost. You might see the next generation and they might look different and act different, their music might be different, their technology use might be different, but God loves them and he wants to give them the same grace. So whether you're a pastor or a father or a mother, a sinner or a fellow church member, total stranger, a coworker, you know your role: Let your light shine. And when church is complicated and it's not all praises and sunshine and rainbows, when it hurts, you know exactly what to do. To weather the storm, to keep your roots, so that God in his crazy and unexpected, mysterious love can produce great fruit. So my prayer for you that not just the next generation but the kids of the next generation can know how amazing our God is.

Let's pray.

God, you are so good to me; to us. And every time we think that you're done, every time we're disappointed in the words that came out of our mouth and the choices that we made, there you are so faithful and so steadfast and so forgiving. And I pray that that message would sink so deeply into our hearts. God, anyone who's been deceived and tricked and hurt by legalistic religion, by any kind of Christianity that told them they had to earn it and be good enough for you to love them, I pray, God, that grace would be so clear today and so compelling and so beautiful, it would change our hearts. And I pray, God, for the kids. As a guy who's getting older, I see college students who are half my age and I so desperately want them to know you. We all do, God. We don't want the faith to stop with us. We want your beauty and power and grace to change hearts for centuries to come. So God, give us passion and make us wise. Keep us humble and help us to be that unique kind of church that doesn't get caught up in the drama but instead is famous for humility, love, and a focus on reconciliation. God, we so desperately need your help to do it but with your help, we can. Thank you for a clear word, Jesus. I pray that you would give us the courage to put it into practice and I thank you that your spirit will be with us every step of the way. We pray this all in your powerful, forgiving, and saving name. And all God's people who wanted it to be true with his help, may join their voices and they said, "Amen."