



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Conflict: Take It to Him/Her, with Prayer” Matthew 18:1-6; 10-20

It’s good to be “back in the saddle”—sorry, back in the pulpit again. I hope today’s Bible message stretches us all, as God guides us. Please pray with me: *“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.”*

Please open your Bibles to Matthew’s gospel, the first book of the New Testament, and find chapter 18. We have red-covered Bibles in some of the chair pockets, and you’ll want one today, and you’ll want to leave your Bible open because we’re going to give it a real workout. We’re going to read verses 15-17 several times today, to get all that God might want to give us through hearing His Word. For the first time, let’s read from the screen (so that we don’t have to struggle with different versions we all may have). Jesus is speaking, and together we use his words, saying...

¹⁵ “If your brother sins [against you,] go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony 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, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Now, how do you hear that? It sounds like Jesus wants us to go to someone who has offended us or hurt us, and try to come to some reconciliation. If that doesn’t work, we are to take along one or two others who have witnessed the incident, and try with their help to come to some reconciliation. And if THAT doesn’t work, we are to throw the bum out!

And we would be SO wrong. We’ve read these three verses out of context. This is why so many people say, “You can prove anything from the Bible.” Your Mormon friends think it’s OK to take the verse Jesus uses in John 10:34--the one that says, “you are gods”, quoting from Psalm 82:6—and building a central doctrine of their religion on that one verse, even though there are a pile of other verses that curse anyone who says a person can be a god.

OK, then how can we do better at hearing what God wants to say to us? For one thing, we look at the context—the verses that come before and that follow the verses we are focusing on. Take a look.

Chapter 18 starts off with the not-too-flattering account of the disciples asking Jesus, “Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” Jesus holds up a little child and says, basically, “be like this”. No rabbi would have picked up a child to say, “this is the model citizen of God’s Kingdom”. Children were not valued; they had not passed the age of accountability—12 years of age—to have a *bar-mitzvah* (or *bat-mitzvah* for the girls) and be considered a real person, an adult citizen among God’s people. A child has not had a chance to pile up acts of charity and righteousness, in order to “pay his way” into heaven. This “worthless” one is a model for a citizen of the Kingdom of God? What’s going on here?

The child is not a paragon of virtue, nor (as sometimes we Westerners think) a picture of innocence. Not innocent, and not worthy; young and not even a person yet. Jesus calls a real kid over to join him where he is teaching, and the kid immediately responds. *That's* the quality Jesus is getting us to focus on. This child is a good picture of one who is receptive, eager to learn, uncomplicated, who knows she or he needs help to make it, and most of all, TRUSTS GOD. THAT's what Jesus is saying, in this rather startling parable. He wants his followers to leave behind their pride and adult sophistication, and become simple, teachable and receptive and responsive to Father God—and right now that's through Jesus --because of trust.

Jesus goes on. Treat kids with respect, and don't manipulate them. Welcome them—show them hospitality—because like with the “sheep and goats” of Matthew 25, when we welcome someone who trusts God, we are welcoming Jesus. So don't look down on a young child. Instead, look eye-to-eye with a young child. [Can you see how powerfully attentive that is, for an adult to meet a child, eye-to-eye?]

And on the other hand, if an adult causes a child to sin—to break his heartfelt relationship with God—just wait until judgment day! Each child—each trusting believer--has an angel in heaven, says verse 10. When that avenging angel gets hold of that sophisticated adult, that man or woman will wish that they had taken an engine block, tied it around their neck, rowed out to a lake in a boat, and pushed the block overboard to take them down. That would be better than what the avenging angel will do to them. Yikes! Jesus is fierce about protecting “little ones” with child-like simple trust in Daddy God, as Jesus called Him.

Then comes Jesus' story of the shepherd who loses one of his sheep, and leaves all the rest of his flock in the village sheep pen to go out after the lost one. In Luke's version of Jesus' story, Jesus seems to be pointing toward people who are not part of the sheepfold yet. But Matthew's version here is clearly pointing toward seeking lost people who are already “His”. And the shepherd sacrifices to find that lost one.

These are the verses that come before our focus text today. Now we're ready to read it again. We say together, . . . (Matthew 18:15-17, NIV)

Doesn't that sound different, now? At first, we thought Jesus was telling us to get rid of the offender—throw the bum out. But now, after reading Jesus' earlier words—especially his parable of the shepherd exerting himself to find and bring back the lost sheep—it's harder to come to that conclusion. The shepherd does not let the lost sheep wander farther and farther away, saying, “Oh, I guess he lost interest in being in my sheepfold. I hope he'll be safe.” Instead, the shepherd is active, seeking.

And let me add one more note that cinches it for me. Jesus concludes by saying, “Treat [the offender] as a pagan [literally, as a “Gentile”] or a tax collector.” Everyone knew how Jews hated Gentiles (that is, non-Jews) and how they also hated any of their own people who collaborated with the Romans by serving as tax collectors, often gouging extra money of their fellow-citizens to line their own pockets.

OK, here's the twist. Who did Jesus hang out with most, besides his disciples? “Tax collectors and sinners”. The respectable people always were criticizing him for that. Jesus had even picked a tax collector to be among The Twelve who lived with him throughout his ministry. What was this Jesus guy thinking?!

So . . . *what can JESUS mean when he says, “pagans and tax collectors”?* Oooh! Could he mean that we no longer share our most intimate life with them, but we still look at them as people whom God loves, and stick with them even though they have offended? Isn't that the opposite of “throw the bum out”?!

See what happens when we read a passage in context? This is a 180-degree turn from the way we might have understood Jesus, had we just read a couple of verses casually.

Now, I want to read this same passage two more times with you. However, this time, I want to focus on a single word in the text, the word “church”. Here's the passage again. We say together (Matthew 18:15-17)

This one word in this one verse has created a lot of problems. A lot of churches have read this, and pictured “church” as a group like this—or even an assembly of 5,000 worshipers at a time, as some congregations attract. When the “two or three witnesses” has not worked, they haul the offender in front of the hundred-some, or the 5,000, and “make them confess” to their offense. This is a shaming, humiliating attack. It's abuse, justified upon this one verse, as leaders understand they have a responsibility to keep the congregation pure. And perhaps this abuse is also pushed by an unexamined need to control, putting people into fear that “they might be next”. All that does is create more and more people faking the required proper behavior. Perhaps you're read of cases taken to civil court for damages by the victim of such an abusive church.

Is this “winning your brother”? A huge amount of damage has been done this way. It's unchristian, though it's in the Bible. How can this be?

This morning we've read these verses alone, then we've read them in Scriptural context, and now it's time to add “historical context”. The key is what we mean by, “church”. Originally, “church” referred to a small house-sized group of believers. Everyone knew everyone's personal life. But when God grabbed the Roman Emperor Constantine and brought him to Jesus, things changed. Constantine, after all, was the Emperor of the Roman Empire. Naturally, he thought he should be the head of the church, too. But these little house-sized groups scattered across cities and towns and villages—that kind of “church” was far too disorganized when you have an Empire to run. The Christian faith was a loose movement; the scattered churches had not even agreed on what letters and books really had the Word of God in them. Worse, Christians had some serious arguments over how to talk about Jesus—was he “a man who was so good he looked like God?” Was he “God who went through a little show of dying on the cross, but who did not really die”? Constantine called together a council at Nicea to work out a single way to talk about Jesus.

Over the years, as the Christian church as the official religion of the Roman Empire, the house-sized worshipping groups grew from the original little decentralized households of people to larger and larger groups. Larger specialized buildings were built to accommodate worship. A group of officers (sorry, clergy) was established to be sure everything was done in “the official way”. More and more, the people abandoned their own ministries, leaving the important stuff to “the hired holy men”. This was a huge change in “church”.

So that means . . . the “church” Jesus knew was nothing like what we think of when we hear the word “church”. We think of a building; or, we think of a large assembly of people. What if “church” in Jesus' time was only about a dozen people who all resided in the same village or town, and knew each others' business and lives? If you follow Jesus' words here, the

“final step” before removal is not what we might think--an embarrassing “trial” before a bunch of people who don’t know this offender. It’s a conversation with people that the offender knows love him and want the best for him; they have proved that in a kazillion ways already.

Now, THIS “small group of intimate friends” understanding of “church” matches the spirit of the rest of the passage. THIS understanding of “church” has a chance at restoration, instead of mere compliance. Restored relationships mean everything! And if the “offender” walks away, this is the loss of a brother you’ve had in your home for dinner dozens of times, who’s helped you in your shop or on your farm, whose son you “adopted” like your own. It’s hard to imagine the pain of doing without this “offending brother”, because he is still your brother. He is still someone God loves. Someone’s sin cannot be more powerful than God’s love, can it? If it were, what does that say about God’s love? Not much that’s good!

As a final check on this old/new understanding of “church”, let’s finish the context—the verses that come after our focus of the day. Here they are, verses 18-20. Listen again for God’s Word.

¹⁸ “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

Let’s start with verse 20. “Church” is, “two or three plus Jesus”. THAT is church. THAT is the collection of little “cells” of “the Body of Christ” that turned the world upside down. When 3000 were added to the church on the day of Pentecost (in Acts 2), those 3000 were incorporated into a zillion little groups by the 120 followers of Jesus who had received the Holy Spirit that day. The Spirit had inspired them so that God could use their speaking to make people from many different countries understand, which got their full attention for Peter’s first sermon, probably given in Greek. Because of these small household-sized groups, they could devote themselves to the apostles teaching, the fellowship (meals every night together), the Lord’s Supper, and intimacy with God in prayer (Acts 2:42-47). That’s how they could share all their material goods; when someone had a need, they took care of it, without worry about repayment—for they knew Jesus had paid everything for them. Their love within these groups was so attractive; it was wildly contagious. The infection spread like “a plague of love”. Lives were changed forever. People became willing to die for this fellowship--this kind of “church”--where “two or three plus Jesus” were together.

“Two or three plus Jesus”—not just saying the name, “Jesus”, but sensing Jesus in their midst, like the two guys on the road to Emmaus after Resurrection Day (Luke 24). Jesus talking with them, and they listening—harder than they had ever listened to him before, letting themselves be formed—transformed more and more into his likeness. People that close to Jesus would hear from God just as Jesus said he heard from God. They would hear God’s will. So when they were all getting the same message from God, they could announce it—binding some people to their sins (no forgiveness), and setting others loose from their sins (forgiveness) as God had decided. In fact, the Greek of these verses could also be translated, “Whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in

heaven. They could ask God for what God wanted to have happen, and of course, God would make it happen, often through that sacrificial small church.

THIS is “church” as Jesus intended it.

OK, how is your head—and how is your heart—right now? Have you been stretched? Do you see new possibilities for Who God is, and how God “works” with those who love Him, as Jesus did?

Now, here comes the biggest challenge of all: are you ready to live that way, to “do church” that way? Are you willing to transform your Life Group into a small, face-to-face community that risks intimacy, spends ‘way more time together than just a weekly “meeting”, because you are “doing life together”?

One more Bible note: in our focus passage, most translations read, “If your brother sins against you,” and so on. But some of the oldest manuscripts do not have the words “against you”. Those manuscripts have Jesus saying, the sin, the offence, is not a hurt against you. It’s a hurt or transgression against anyone, or against God. You are not a party to it. This is not some kind of payback; you have no horse in this race—your narrow self-interest is not involved. The parables Jesus tells after this, all about extreme forgiveness, hammer this home.

But because you know this offending brother so well, you hurt when you see this guy miss his full potential to live like Jesus. So you put yourself next to him, and start working it out. This is what friends do—help each other be the best they can be. And there is likely to be conflict over this—I don’t appreciate you pointing out my faults, and you probably don’t like it, either. But I am much more willing to listen to someone who has put themselves out for me again and again, put themselves on my side over and over, had me in their home and helping their kids with homework, loving me with the love of Christ.

Is it too arrogant for me to say that our church—most churches in the Western world of churches—have lost this way of doing church? Is this Bible Word the Word of God to us this morning? Can we give up the “right” (or “responsibility”) we might have thought we had to “shape others up”, so that we can love with the tough love of Jesus, that asks so much more of us?

I’m glad I’m in this together with you. I could never do what this passage is calling us to do on my own. You and me and Jesus—working on a new kind of church--new to this world, old to the world Jesus knew, and powered by the Holy Spirit that brings Jesus to us, and us to Jesus.

The picture we’ve been using this morning is from the movie, *The Bucket List*, directed by Rob Reiner, starring Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson. There is a lot of material here for good discussion, even though it’s not a “spiritual” movie. I want to focus on the relationship between these characters.

Both men find themselves in adjoining beds on the cancer ward of a local hospital. They are so different—one owns the hospital, and has more money than dirt. The other is a family man who has given up a lot to care for those he loves. The stuck-up rich control freak (Nicholson’s character) can’t stand Freeman’s character, and soon the animosity is mutual. The only thing they have in common is that they are both doing to die—sooner, rather than later.

One of them recalls a homework assignment from a philosophy professor in college—to make a list of the things they really wanted to do before “they kicked the bucket”. That’s “the bucket list”. And in a moment of inspiration, they join in creating a joint bucket list, and set about scratching off these rare experiences that let them affirm this world and the privilege of life in it. In the process of doing these things together—living together day after day in the shadow of death—they get to know each other very well. We begin to see them doing things for each other—not just pleasurable things, but also things to make the other a better person.

This transformation into intimate friends was driven by death. Is that what it takes to move us out of our sick private, individualist isolation? Apparently so. A survey was done some years ago, asking people if they would want to know the day of their death. 94% said, “No”. We’d rather live our lives in this isolation, with lesser priorities filling our time. No wonder the “church of two or three plus Jesus” was so life-transforming. Jesus told us to die to ourselves—to “take up our cross daily,” as Luke records it. Dead to ourselves, we live for each other as God directs. How different our lives would be, if we followed Jesus!

To God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory in the real church now, and forever.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on August 31, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]