

Sermon for Sunday, August 12, 2012
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Caring for Relationships
Matthew 18:12-20

Matt 18:15 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. 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.

Matthew 18:12-20 Caring for Difficulties in Relationships

Today we tackle a vital topic – caring for troubled relationships. The problem: when a relationship is broken, we want to heal it, we know we should try, yet we're afraid. The other person may not want to talk to you. They may have a totally different outlook on things. The effort to improve a situation may be painful in itself *and* things may get worse. The armed forces are committed to leave no soldier behind. Should we commit to "No relationship left behind"?

1. Seeking the lost (Matt 18:12-14)

As a whole, Matthew 18 says the church of Jesus is a community where we care for one another. We welcome each other. We don't tempt each other. When someone gets lost, we look for them. When a relationship is broken, we seek healing. Our passage begins with a short parable about that.

Matt. 18:12 What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? 13 And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. 14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

If you grew up in the church, you might think, "I know that one. This is about Jesus, the good shepherd who goes and seeks lost sheep." It's absolutely true that Jesus is like a shepherd who seeks lost sheep. Psalm 23 begins, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." When the Lord restores Israel, Isaiah says: "He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart" (40:11). When Israel's leaders failed, the Lord promised to send Jesus "Who will shepherd my people Israel" (Mic. 5:2). Because God cares for us when we're lost, we care for each other.

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11, 14). The apostles say he is the "great shepherd" and "the chief shepherd" (Heb 13:20, 1 Pet 5:1-5). In Luke, some Pharisees grumble that Jesus welcomes the "sinners" and eats with them (15:1-2). Jesus replies, "I'm seeking lost sheep. There is joy in heaven when I find one" (15:3-7). In Luke, the *sheep* are people who are completely lost - no thought of God, a chaotic life. Jesus says he "came to seek and to save what was lost" (19:10).

In Matt 18 the lost are "little ones" in the faith. We know Jesus seeks the little ones who wander off. But here Jesus explains what *we* should do. We should not mislead a brother, we should receive little ones, we should seek the lost.

There are different ways to be lost. A person can be utterly lost, without hope or direction, without God. We can also be lost inside God's house; it's temporary and partial. Most of us feel lost at times. There are differences. If we lose our wallet in a crowd as we leave a stadium, there's thin hope of recovering it. If we lose it inside the home, it's an annoying. I say, "It isn't really lost; it has an unknown location for an indefinite period." It will turn up.

At the moment, Jesus speaks of the somewhat lost. "What do you think?" he asks. Suppose a shepherd is in the hills. He had 100 sheep, but one has wandered off. Would he say, "I still have ninety-nine sheep. Good enough"? No, he will "leave the ninety-nine on the hills and... look for the one that wandered off" (18:12). He'll search until he finds the one that strayed. When he does, he rejoices more over "that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off" (18:13). It's our nature to try to solve problems and to rejoice when we succeed.

Jesus says God doesn't want "any of these little ones" (young), wandering believers, to be lost" (18:14). We should rescue the lost. It's hard but necessary.

This passage makes four statements about God's care for his people. First, God cares for us as individuals. Once, a crowd of people pressed in on Jesus and jostled him from every side. In the middle, he asked, "Who touched me?" The disciples replied, "You see the people crowding against you... and yet you ask, 'Who touched me?'" (Mark 5:31). But Jesus knew one touch was different. After a while the woman emerged and Jesus healed her. Jesus knows us one by one.

Second, God seeks us when we stray. He finishes the work that he begins in us Phil 1:6. Third, Jesus celebrates when we return to him: when we go from doubt to faith. When any sinner repents or returns to him.

Fourth, Jesus cares *for* his people *through* his people. We are responsible to seek the lost if God places them in our life. We should keep our eyes and heart open to see the lost. God cares for us by his Spirit and his providence, but he also tells us to care for each other. This applies to leaders, but also to anyone.

Paul says, "If someone is caught in a sin, you who are *spiritual* should restore him gently" (Gal 6:1). James 5:19-20 adds, "Brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and *someone* should bring him back, remember this: *Whoever* restores a sinner will save him from death and cover a multitude of sins". The spiritual *and* anyone. In Matthew 18:15 Jesus explains how to restore someone when they stray.

2. Restoring the sinner: the basic plan (Matt. 18:15)

Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you go and show him his fault, just between the two of you" (18:15). Every word counts. First, the word "if" could be translated "*if ever*." The nuance is we *do* sin against each other. When that happens, follow these principles.

Second, Jesus explains what to do when a brother sins. The topic is not hurt feelings or annoying behavior or etiquette. The topic is sin.

Third, the focus is sin "against you." There is a general responsibility to restore any fellow believer who strays, but we are especially responsible to act when someone sins against us. The reasons are obvious. If someone sins against us, we have direct knowledge. And if the sin is "against us," we are responsible to seek reconciliation with our fellow Christian.

Fourth, Jesus says, "Go." Jesus didn't say, "Sit and sulk." Or "tell someone about it and hope the news floats back to the sinner." Or "Act cold and withdraw. Maybe they'll guess you are offended." Jesus says go, take responsibility. Don't consult with fourteen people about the best way to do it. Don't make pseudo pious prayer requests. "We really must pray for Sylvester. He is really struggling with his anger again. Just the other day..." Jesus says "Go!"

Fifth, go and reprove. The term for reproof *elencho* belongs to the realm of investigation, inquiry, proof, and conviction. If a problem is clear, we state the facts and correct the sin.

We don't simply share our *feelings*. We take a direct, loving approach, to resolve matters. We take both Scripture and evidence of the problem. Paul says go gently, remembering our own sin (Gal 6:1). We're not hasty to condemn. We ask questions, allowing our friend to clarify. We can say, "This is how it seemed to me. Am I right? Did I miss something? Can you explain what happened?"

This is what God did when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. When the Lord came, he asked questions: "Where are you? Who told you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree..." (Gen 3:9-13). Questions allow dialogue. They continue the relationship. We do the same by asking questions. We assume he or she has something to say.

Sixth, we go privately. The original says, "between you and him alone." The reason is obvious. Private conversation allows dialogue. Public rebuke is confrontational. It makes people feel that they are under attack. They become defensive. The first instinct is self-defense or counterattack. Public rebuke hardly promotes listening. A private talk is the way to win someone.

There is one exception. If a public person commits public sin, it may require public rebuke. Once, Peter committed a public sin against some new believers, simply because of Gentile ethnicity. Because Peter was an apostle, Paul rebuked him publicly. It would be the same if, e.g., a teacher promoted heresy.

Seventh, we go to win our brother. This is the goal: repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. When things go wrong and we replay events, how we were hurt, it's easy to go in the wrong direction. The mistakes we make:

- ☐ We want justice. We want get even. To tell the sinner, "You are so bad."
- ☐ We want to run away. Stop the pain. Cut losses. Never talk to that person again.
- ☐ We blame ourselves. I'm hopeless. Everywhere I go, I cause trouble. It's best if I go away. It's the 'I'm breaking up, but it's not you, it's me' nonsense.

A team of business and communication experts tackled this issue in the book *Crucial Conversations*. It's sold over two million copies. A crucial conversation has three marks: Opinions vary, stakes are high, and emotions run strong. Repeat!

They found that people do three things in these cases. First they *avoid* the issue. They do nothing. Second they address it poorly: they lead with confrontation, they are cynical, etc. Third, some people confront problems effectively. They followed these people around and discovered why some people handle crucial conversations well.

First, they make the conversation safe and address the issue candidly. They speak with respect. They dial back the emotions. No accusations. Second, they foster dialog. Third, they focus on the core issue – whatever matters most.

You see that their research confirms Biblical principles. The Lord focuses on the core issues. The Lord fosters dialogue with us when we sin. That's what he did with Adam and Eve. When God called Israel to repent through the prophet Isaiah, he began, "Come, let us *reason together*. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." That should always be the goal: See a problem, reason it out, work it out, until all is as pure as snow.

Let me illustrate. This summer my wife and I shared dinner with friends who go to Central. After dinner we considered a "Question of the Day." Question of the day is spiritual exercise I learned from Lance Hudgens. After a shared meal, someone poses a question that fosters reflection and dialogue. For example, "Share one or two ways in which you enjoy serving other people." Our question was this: Share something interesting that happened in your marriage this summer.

They answered: We disagreed sharply about the way to discipline one of our children when she did something wrong. The wife wanted law, the husband grace. In the moment, the wife thought the husband was soft; the husband thought the wife was harsh. In the moment, both were tired. They had not spent enough time together for a few days. The disagreement was quite sharp and they decided, independently, to be kind and respectful to each other, but very quiet so they had time to cool down, examine themselves, and revisit their child's misdeed, their different reactions to it, and their following disagreement. They waited two days and then had a deep, rich discussion of everything. It brought them together in a powerful way. That is the way it is supposed to go.

Each one thought the other was in the wrong. It was an emotional high stakes disagreement. But they didn't ignore the problem. They didn't blast each other. They came together in love, seeking dialogue and agreement, and it worked.

While preparing this message, I've been involved with cases of sin and conflict. In one, several men were together and two of them got into a sharp, angry disagreement about politics. Before long, one apologized to the other man and to all who witnessed his anger. A little later, the other said, "I was wrong too. Forgive me." Done – although they don't plan to discuss politics for a while.

In the other, one man wronged another. The offended man said, "You need to apologize." The offender apologized and the first man refused to accept ("Nope"). What a contrast! What needless misery and turmoil.

Why go to the effort?

The last case raises a question. We love it when we work problems out, but when we can't, it's so difficult, maybe it's best not to try. Isn't it easier to ignore problems? Just walk away? Or maybe push and intimidate and get your way.

We go to the effort to seek reconciliation because it's God's way. Listen: love is a feeling, but it's more than a feeling. Love is a choice, but it's more than a choice. Love is a choice, but it's also an order. Love gives order. It structures life so it's easier to choose the right thing, easier to feel love. Love gives order to relationships so we can keep on loving each other. And the only way to keep loving and choosing each other is to seek restoration when things go wrong.

Believers are especially motivated to seek reconciliation. The prophets say God makes a "covenant of peace" (Isa 54:10, Ezek 34:25). Paul calls his message "the gospel of peace." He calls it "the message of reconciliation" (Eph 6:15, 2 Cor 5:19). Jesus is King of peace and Lord of peace (Isa 9:6,

Ths 3:16). If we say we follow Jesus, we follow the King of Peace. So we should seek peace. Paul even calls the faithful life "the way of peace" (Rom 3:17). Therefore we should seek peace and reconciliation. It reflects our identity, our recreation in the image of the God of peace.

When people rebel against God, they may be angry that he doesn't run the world better. He let someone die. He allows injustice. But he seeks us, seeks peace. He says, "I love you. Lay down your anger. I offer you peace." That is why we seek peace. It's why we're open to loving correction. We know we need it. It's also why we want to listen to counsel from each other, including admonition. We address errors before they become big problems. To do so is an act of love (Lev 19:17). We're neither shy nor rash. We do not love to chastise, neither do we shun it. It is a sad necessity. We don't go over trivia. But if we see clear, major sin, we go. If unsure whether to go, ask "Does it come to mind again and again (Eph 4:26) or disrupt worship (Matt 5:23)? If so, go.

3. Listening to each other 18:15-16

Listening comes up several times in our passage. Above all, Jesus says, "If our brother or sister listens we win them. Let's think about the way we listen. We listen with our ears. We listen charitably, trying to follow. If a speaker struggles, we help them. Some ideas are hard to express. We say, "Are you trying to say *this*?"

We also listen with our eyes, watching the speaker. Does their mouth say one thing and their body another? Is something else on their mind? As a professor, I noticed that some students made appointments for the most trivial matters. They came, we resolved the issue in two minutes, then they sat a bit tense, not ready to go. I asked, "Is there something else you want to talk about?" "Yes," they reply, "There is one other thing, if you have another minute...."

So we listen with our heart. The heart is the center of life, the core of our being. It is the source from which we speak and move. For this we must look and listen.

4. Accepting hard tasks in God's strength (18:16-17)

When we speak to a sinner, the goal is to win him. Praise God, many do listen and repent. But some are impenitent. They refuse to listen, refuse reconciliation. Jesus presents a series of principles for that case. It is not an exhaustive set of directions. If we gather all the teachings on reconciliation, it's clear that this addresses one kind of conflict. In this case there are witnesses to a clear, undeniable sin. Write and wrong are clear to all. That's often the case.

But not always. Sometimes the parties don't agree on the facts. There are no witnesses. Or it's a minor matter and it's best to let it go. Solomon says, a wise man overlooks small troubles. Proverbs 19:11: "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense."

Some people love to quarrel. Solomon says it's wise to avoid them. It's better to live in the desert than with a quarrelsome person (Prov. 21:19). Titus says we should stay away from divisive people: Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him Titus 3:10.

It can be hard to see which path is right. In Matthew 18, Jesus describes what happens when someone commits major sin, when there are witnesses, and they refuse to repent. Take the witnesses, establish everything, Jesus says, and keep working on it till they repent or everyone says – hard-hearted refusal to

repent is a sign of unbelief. If it persists, we must treat them on the basis of their actions. God grants grace to those who confess their sin, repent, and turn to Jesus for forgiveness. If someone refuses to repent, they refuse his grace and can't claim a place in his kingdom. But there is a broader point.... Jesus says leaders must accept the mantle of leadership (18:18-20). Jesus knows it is a heavy responsibility, so he assures the church of his presence in it.

Is any spiritual task more excruciating than pressing on with someone who is devoted to their sin, refuses to repent? Facts can be murky, motives mixed, hearts hard. For this task, Jesus promises: "If two of you on earth agree, about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven" (18:19). We use this promise in the context of prayer and rightly so.

But the passage is more specific. The Lord is with us when we meet to heal broken relationships in the church. The word translated "anything" – in the phrase, "If two of you on earth agree, about anything" has a specific meaning. The Greek is *pragmatos* which usually means a "matter" or "case" that must be considered.

Finally, Jesus promises that when two or three gather to pursue the lost, to win them, "I am with you" (18:20). It can be difficult to seek reconciliation. But we don't despair, for the Lord is with us, as we work to win the lost.

This applies to the church, to the family, to friendships – whatever broken relationship comes to mind. What a blessed community we would have if we followed Jesus' counsel. Everyone would seek the lost. Everyone would try to restore broken relationships. Leaders would assist with hard tasks. All would know that the Lord is with them. We would seek his healing graces for others and for ourselves. We see how this takes us to the Lord's table:

Jesus sought us when lost. He approached us when we lived in rebellion, before we knew him. When we stray, he speaks to us, through Scripture, prayer, teachers, and friends. He welcomes us into his presence despite our sin. He gave himself for our sin and sent his presence so we would find forgiveness of sin, healing in life.