

## Matthew 18C

- In a moment of pride and selfishness, the twelve apostles inadvertently became stumbling blocks for another disciple of Jesus
  - John told Jesus about an encounter they had with another of Jesus' disciples who had been trying to cast out demons in Jesus' name
    - Because that man wasn't a part of the inner group of twelve, the apostles assumed he was acting out of turn and tried to stop him
    - But Jesus quickly rebuked his apostles, saying that whoever this guy was, he was engaged in a common mission
    - That is whoever is for you – those who seek to glorify Jesus and serve the Kingdom – that person is on your side
  - And then Jesus pivoted into a teaching on stumbling blocks
    - Jesus charged His disciples with inhibiting the other man's obedience
    - He said they were a stumbling block and declared woe to any follower who became a stumbling block to other believers
    - Speaking in hyperbole, Jesus said it would be preferable to drown or sever body parts than to engage in that behavior
  - I'm sure the apostles were shocked and embarrassed to discover that their treatment of that disciple had been so misguided
    - They thought they were protecting Jesus' honor and preserving good order among His followers
    - But in reality, they were just protecting their own selfish interests
- Jesus ended with a parable about 99 sheep, which explained how the Father sees a wandering sheep like the one the apostles confronted
  - He said the Father rejoiced over a wayward disciple when he is turned back to the flock
    - Wandering sheep are a fact of life for a shepherd, so he's accustomed to chasing them down
    - But when he encounters one, he doesn't beat the sheep until it repents for wandering away

- Nor does the shepherd excommunicate the sheep from the flock as penalty for having dared leave in the first place
- No, a good shepherd goes in search of the stray, and when he finds it, he gently leads it back to the flock
  - That was the mission of the Messiah...to seek and save the lost, not to criticize and rebuke them
  - So that's how Jesus wanted His disciples operating in His name
  - But that's not what the apostles did...
- When they encountered someone they believed to be a wandering sheep, they didn't try to restore him, they tried to shut him down
  - And when that didn't work, they went to Jesus hoping Jesus would take action against him
  - And to justify their actions, pointed to the fact that this disciple was not part of Jesus' inner circle, which just exposed their pride
- So not only were the disciples wrong in their assessment of the man, but they were also wrong in their response to him
  - First, they incorrectly judged the man by thinking he was working against Jesus when in reality he was on their side
  - Secondly, even if they believed the man was sinning, they should have taken steps to restore him not penalize him
- It was their second mistake that prompts Jesus to move into a new section of teaching on how believers respond to a wandering sheep

**Matt. 18:15** "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.

**Matt. 18:16** "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that **BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED.**

**Matt. 18:17** "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

**Matt. 18:18** "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

- We've reached a well-known passage in Matthew's Gospel known as Jesus' instructions on church discipline

- What Jesus gives us here is a patient, loving and gentle approach to leading a wayward sheep back into fellowship
  - But the passage is so often quoted out of context, that I feel we've lost some appreciation for the larger context of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18
  - And as a result, it can be applied in ways that run contrary to the purpose Jesus had in mind
- Before we look at the details, the first thing to note is these instructions are not some "Break Glass in Emergency" response to extreme situations
  - Jesus says we follow this process when a brother sins
  - How often do we encounter believers sinning around us?
- Obviously, this is the everyday, normal way we help one another stay close to Jesus and we should be following it regularly
  - We all suffer temptations to stray, and in fact, we all *will* stray from time to time
  - And when someone departs away from the straight and narrow, Jesus tells us here how to respond in love
  - And to do so without sinning ourselves
- And that process begins in the most obvious of ways...when a brother (or sister) sins and we become aware of it
  - Maybe we see the person do something out of character or perhaps we discover they are engaged in persistent sin
    - Maybe the problem is they have come under false teaching or a corrupting influence
    - Perhaps we realize they are harboring bitterness and an unforgiving heart toward someone else
    - Maybe we see they have become haughty or arrogant or maybe they are simply lax in their walk with Jesus
  - When we see this in a brother or sister, the Bible says we have an obligation to deal with it ourselves
    - We go to him or her in private to confront them about the issue

- This rule means we don't go to other people before we go to the individual...period.
- Talking about someone's misdeeds with others before talking to the person directly is a form of gossip
  - So don't share your concern with a pastor or on the prayer chain or in social media or with your small group before talking to the person directly
  - So the first rule to avoiding becoming a gossip is to get comfortable with confronting people about their sin
- We go talk to the person in private as soon as possible with gentleness and patience and a loving spirit
  - Speak to them honestly about your concerns, and hear them out as they respond in defense or explanation
    - You may cry with them, laugh with them, hug them, pray for them...be Jesus to them by seeking to bring a sheep home
    - Private in-person discourse is the only way to engage in that kind of one-on-one ministry with a wandering brother
    - And it's also the most likely way to succeed in winning them back from their sin
    - Because it's much harder for someone to confess and repent in a public forum than in a private moment
  - And when you meet that person, remember that the point of the conversation is to win them back to Christ, *not to you!*
    - The goal is to win them to obedience to Christ, not to win an argument with them
    - You aren't trying to force them into a corner
    - It's not your place to make demands for restitution, or to give them the roadmap for changing their lives
  - Neither do we try to force them to comply or make threats of any kind against them
    - This is not an intervention – it's an invitation to repent

- The goal is to encourage them back to the flock, not to exercise authority or control over them
- By the way, when Jesus says go, He means have a personal conversation where you see their face and hear their voice and they can see and hear yours
  - In-person conversation is in view here and there are multiple reasons why that is what Jesus asks
    - First, in-person communication makes clear we are sincerely concerned for the individual
    - Secondly, it reduces the chance for misunderstandings since body language plays an important part in our communication
    - Thirdly, it allows us to see their response in the moment so we can tailor our choice of words to best effect
  - Today, we communicate in ways never imagined in Jesus' day, primarily in electronic forms of communication
    - Email has replaced written letters, texting has replaced phone calls, and social media has replaced face-to-face gatherings
    - These modern methods of communicating have their place, and they are convenient
    - But they are not compatible with Jesus' intent in Matthew 18:15
  - Texting someone they are sinning or sending long manifestos by email generally do more harm than good in these situations
    - We're communicating to that person that we want to make our opinions known
    - But at the same time, we're also saying we don't care enough about that person to invest in a face-to-face encounter
    - You're letting the style of communication overshadow the content
  - Furthermore, texting or email often makes the situation worse because we tend to lower our guard when communicating in those ways
    - The impersonal nature of texting and email can lead us to say things in rude or thoughtless ways...things we never would have said in person

- How many of us have sent an email or text we wish we could take back?
- Or have you ever reread some text or email you sent in a heated moment and been surprised at what you typed?
  - While we can say dumb things in personal conversations too, it's far less frequent and easier to walk back in the moment
  - A simple rule of thumb for how to handle difficult conversations is never deliver bad news in writing, only deliver it in person
  - When I've forgotten this rule and delivered criticisms or complaints by an email or text, I've usually regretted it deeply
- So Jesus tells us to meet face-to-face because it's better for us and better for the person we're trying to help
  - So don't take the easy way out...if you have something to say to someone, go to them personally, Jesus says
    - If they disagree with your concern, be prepared to share Scripture to back your concerns
    - Sometimes in the course of your discussions, you may discover your information was inaccurate
    - Maybe the person wasn't doing what you suspected or there was some other reasonable explanation, and therefore your concerns were unfounded
    - If that happens, you'll be thankful you kept the matter confidential rather than spreading false rumors about someone
  - On the other hand, if they respond to your concerns in humility and repentance, then Jesus says you have won (or gained) your brother
    - He means you have brought that lost sheep back into the fold walking with Jesus again
    - Obviously, this is the best-case outcome, and if it happens, you have met your goal and the case is closed
  - And in other cases, you won't reach an agreement on the matter, and if so, don't press further...depart as friends and remain patient
    - Allow time for the Spirit to use your words to bring conviction to the person's heart

- Don't demand instant repentance...most people need time and space to respond properly
- This process places love for the person above all else, so by dealing with the matter in person and in private, you have loved that person
  - I wonder how many believers could have been restored if two people had just had a personal, private conversation
  - To approach a misbehaving believer in any other way is not only less likely to succeed, it's also potentially a sin on our part
- If you do not reach agreement and if after some time there is no change, then you are required to take additional steps, Jesus says
  - Jesus says we try again but this time taking one or two more believers with us to confirm the matter
    - When Jesus says "confirm" the matter, He means to confirm the truth of it in the heart of the person acting in sin
    - To explain what He means, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 19:15

**Deut. 19:15** "A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.

- In the Law Israel was commanded to require multiple witnesses to testify to the truth in any matter
  - The idea is self-explanatory: it's easy for anyone to throw false accusations around
  - And if a single accusation were enough to convict a person, then we could all become victims of slander sooner or later
  - So by having two or more independent witnesses confirming a charge, we significantly reduce the likelihood of false convictions
- Now in this case, Jesus is talking about convicting someone in a court
  - He's speaking about convicting a person's conscience by encouraging them to adopt a more honest view of themselves
  - By bringing other witnesses, we increase our chances that the person will see our concerns as valid and worthy of attention

- When one person tells us we are in error and need to change course, we can easily dismiss their concerns as bias or misinformation or lying
  - We call such a response to the truth “denial”
  - We deny that their facts are correct or that their assessment of our behavior is fair
  - So in our denial, we feel free to continue in sin without paying attention to their critique
- But when two or three respectable Christians come to us as a unified front bringing a common complaint, our situation changes
  - Under those circumstances, two or three witnesses confirm the matter to us, meaning they reinforce the truth of it
  - At that point, denying the facts or claiming bias becomes unreasonable and makes us appear foolish
- And hopefully that team effort will cause the person to abandon denial and repent, and if they do, the matter is concluded
  - Once again, the small group has succeeded in restoring a wandering sheep back into the flock
  - And the Father in Heaven is rejoicing over their return
- But what if the person refuses to budge...what if they are so stubborn they won't listen to reason even when presented by a group of trustworthy friends?
  - When we refuse to accept one person's feedback, it's denial, but when we reject correction from a team, it's now become defiance
    - And defiance to Christ and His word is simply incompatible with fellowship in the body of Christ
    - So Jesus says if a small group of two or three can't convince the person to change his or her ways, it's time to go public
  - When the Church is faced with the defiance of a brother or sister, we must bring the matter before the whole body
    - Notice we've gone through two steps of *private* confrontations before allowing the person's situation to become public
    - That tells you how much the Lord wants us to protect the honor of our brothers and sisters in the body



- The purpose in this step is *not* to re-adjudicate the facts or to try the person in a court of public opinion
  - The purpose is to bring awareness of the person's defiance to everyone in the body so that this person has nowhere to hide
  - Everywhere they go and everyone they fellowship with in the body will bring them back to the same conversation
  - They won't be able to escape their sin nor pretend it doesn't matter because it will be the only conversation they have
- The goal of this step is the same as prior steps: to bring the believer to recognize their sin so they will cease wandering and return to the flock
  - It's a form of peer pressure applied in love and in a sincere desire to help a person
  - Hopefully the person's defiant spirit will be broken and in its place will come a soft and repentant heart
- But in the worst case scenario, some believers will be so determined to remain in their sin that they will cut off their nose to spite their face
  - They will accept the loss of all fellowship in the body to avoid having to repent, and when this happens, Jesus says let the person go
    - He says if they will not listen to the counsel of the entire church body, the person is to be set outside fellowship
    - He says let them be as a Gentile and tax collector, which is euphemism from Jesus' day
  - A Jew would not associate in any way with Gentiles or with Jews who worked for the Romans collecting taxes
    - A Jew wouldn't eat with them, allow them to enter their homes or even speak with them
    - Now in the case of Gentiles or tax collectors, such behavior wasn't necessary or proper
    - And as we know Jesus often violated those Jewish norms
  - So Jesus isn't endorsing Jewish treatment of tax collectors and the like
    - He was simply illustrating the degree to which we should cut off the defiant brother or sister

- We have nothing to do with the person...we bar them from participating in the body at any level
- Should the church reach that last resort and put a person out of fellowship, the entire body must respect this decision
  - We cannot give the person comfort or sympathy in that situation until they soften their position and repent
  - The whole idea is to use fellowship with the body as the carrot to get them to do the right thing
- And in the end, it's for their own good...because a sheep that continues to wander away from the flock is in danger
  - They stand to risk far more in eternity for their failure to repent than what we are taking from them in the body now

[Heb. 10:26](#) For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,

[Heb. 10:27](#) but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES.

[Heb. 10:28](#) Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.

[Heb. 10:29](#) How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

[Heb. 10:30](#) For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE."

[Heb. 10:31](#) It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

- Unfortunately, our modern lifestyle undermines the effectiveness of this method
  - In the first century, you would typically find one church in a given city or district under the authority of one set of elders
    - So if a person defied authority in the church and was set out of fellowship, they had nowhere else to go
    - That made this technique especially effective
  - But today, we have at least one church body on every city block and often more than one

- And these churches aren't working under common leadership
- So if a lost sheep is placed under pressure to repent, they only need to walk down the street to escape the discipline
- That's largely why we don't see this process used as often as we should
  - Because people under discipline usually refuse to submit to leadership
  - They take their ball and go home at the first challenge rather than submit
  - Here's the thing about submission...it's not submission when we only obey on things we prefer or support...that's agreement
  - True submission is obeying in matters where we don't agree
- Running away when you're confronted over your sin is never a pathway to great spiritual maturity and sanctification
  - It didn't work for King Saul, it didn't work for Jonah, and it won't work for us
  - Meanwhile, the value of sticking around and submitting to your church leaders is immeasurable
- By the way, the requirement to submit to the church in matters of discipline doesn't turn on whether the facts are on your side or not
  - You can be 100% right on the facts and yet you're still expected to submit to the church body
    - And in the long run, we will be better off spiritually by submitting in all cases even when we're right on the facts
    - Because the purpose of submission isn't to determine right and wrong
    - The value in submission is the humility it produces in our heart
  - Yes, sometimes the Lord exposes our sin to others so they will call us to account for what we did and we will be properly humbled by it
    - But it's relatively easy to submit to discipline when you know you're wrong

- But it's another thing to remain submitted to authority when you believe you're unjustly accused
- And sometimes, the Lord will allow us to suffer the injustice of false accusations or unfair judgments to bring us even greater sanctification
  - If you can remain humble and submitted when falsely accused, then you are truly walking in our Lord's footsteps
  - Because that's exactly what He did for you
- So that's the value of not running away from discipline...the Lord may use it to correct us and humble us, regardless of the facts
  - So if someone brings sin to your attention, receive it with an open heart
  - Don't run away, allow the Lord time to use this process to grow you spiritually
  - Remember, discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful
  - Yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness
- Finally, Jesus is so serious about restoring lost sheep, He tells the disciples that as they apply this process, they will be representing Jesus' judgments on earth
  - In v.18 Jesus says truly whatever you bind or loose on earth has been bound or loosed in Heaven
    - To bind or loose refers to the decision of a court, as in to bind is to convict and to loose is to acquit
    - We last saw these terms used when Jesus gave Peter the keys to the kingdom
    - As we noted then, Jesus is saying that the apostles would have unique power to execute justice within the church
  - So every Christian is to follow Jesus' rules for restoring wandering sheep
    - In the Church today we leave final judgment to the Lord
    - If someone doesn't submit to Church leaders on a matter, we know that in the end the Lord will judge between us

- If we were wrong and treated the person inappropriately, the Lord will shield them and make our error clear in time
- If they were wrong, then the Lord will address their failure to submit at the Judgment Seat
- But under apostolic rule, the Church experienced instant judgment according to the judgment of the apostles
  - The apostles possessed unique power to exercise authority and Jesus demanded the Church obey the apostles' judgments without exception
  - If and when there was defiance to an apostle's judgment in any matter, Jesus is saying He would back the apostles 100%
- Justice would be swift and sure to set an example for all generations in the Church
  - We remember what happened to Ananias and Sapphira when they defied Peter
  - And you may remember what Paul did to the man in Corinth who disobeyed his authority?

**1Cor. 5:1** It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.

**1Cor. 5:2** You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.

**1Cor. 5:3** For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present.

**1Cor. 5:4** In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus,

**1Cor. 5:5** I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

- This is what Jesus is talking about...He was so serious about obedience in the body that He invested the early leaders with these powers
  - But He wanted this power exercised with a love for the flock
    - Instead of harboring pride in their status and prejudice toward other disciples, Jesus wanted them to think like shepherds

- Shepherds aren't men of status and honor...they are lowly and uncelebrated caretakers of flocks
- A shepherd's goal is to keep a flock together, so when one strays, they make every effort to bring it back
  - Literal shepherds chase over hills and valleys retrieving wandering animals
  - Spiritual shepherds confront disobedient brothers and sisters calling them to repent and return to obedience to Jesus
- In all cases, our goal is restoration, not condemnation, maintaining the unity of the flock, not seeking to disqualify individuals within it
  - And though the process Jesus outlines here is important, it only works when applied with loving intent and a pastoral approach
  - And if we pursue it vindictively or in the hope of running someone off, we're the one leading others to stumble
  - And remember what Jesus said about those who would stumble one of His children