

Search and Rescue

Matthew 18: 15-20

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Well, today I want to step away from our study of Romans as we celebrate the Lord's Table and look at a topic that's more suited for our time together today. You know in your formative years as you're growing up there are certain events that happen that for whatever reason remain embedded in your memory. I'm sure we all have those events that stand out on the pages of our memory. For me, one of those happened in 1976. It was shortly after noon on Sunday, June 27th, 1976 that an Air France airbus took off from Athens International Airport.

A few minutes later a man and a woman with hand grenades and pistols hijacked the airplane and demanded that the pilot take the plane to the airport at Entebbe, the capital of Uganda. Uganda had become in those days a safe haven for terrorists under the leadership and protection of the mad man and dictator Idi Amin. Once the plane actually reached Entebbe the hijackers made their demands, and essentially this is what they demanded. Israel and four other nations must release fifty-three pro-Palestine terrorists from prison. And if their demands were not met, they would kill all 102 passengers and flight crew that were in their care.

The news unfolded this day after day as you might imagine even as today just not with 24-hour coverage. It was in July not many days after that that Israeli commandos under the command of Colonel Jonathan Netanyahu attempted what was one of the most daring and brilliant rescues in modern military history. All but three of the 102 hostages were rescued alive, and only one commando was killed and that was Colonel Netanyahu himself. He was shot in the back by a sniper from the control tower. Netanyahu was on rescue operation, and he undertook that rescue operation at great personal risk, and as it turns out at great personal cost, the highest of costs.

As I think about that event that's sort of embedded in my young consciousness it reminds me that that's the very kind of life saving rescue that God holds each one of us individually responsible to do. And He holds every church responsible to do it as well. I'm not talking about the kind of rescue from other people who mean us harm; I'm talking about the rescue of people

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from their own sin, from the bondage and enslavement of their own sin. Christ outlines the process for such a rescue operation of our brothers and sisters in Matthew 18 (what is today one of the most controversial passages in the New Testament), and it's where I want us to turn this morning for our time together.

Perhaps no other passage of Scripture is more neglected in American evangelicalism than this one. To confront someone about his sin is seriously out of step with the sort of make everyone comfortable and then they'll keep coming back to church sort of approach in today's evangelicalism. But folks as I've reminded you again and again, the first question we should ask is not what do I think, what do I like, what do I want to do, what am I comfortable with or for that matter any other question that includes the pronoun "I". Our highest concern must be what does the Scripture teach? What has God said? What has our Lord commanded us? Scripture is often counterintuitive. The Christian life is a life of faith. That means trusting God and obeying God even when we don't like what He says, even when it's uncomfortable, when it doesn't seem to make sense to me and certainly when it's out of step with the culture.

In our day one of the most difficult and counterintuitive commands of Scripture is what theologians call "church discipline". There are very few churches that practice it. In fact, I suspect there are people here today who have never been in a church where it's been practiced. But the faithful practice of church discipline is crucial to the existence of the church. In fact, the Reformers argued that if there was no church discipline it was not truly a church. I'm not sure I would go quite that far, but I would say this, it isn't a healthy biblically based church. At least in that extent, to that extent.

Matthew 18 then addresses the issue of church discipline. And church discipline is nothing but the simple process of a search and rescue operation of a fellow believer who has been caught in his sin. It's been some 8 years since I last taught this text to our church family, and many of you have come since then, and the elders and I both all felt that it was important for me to work through this passage again. So, let's read it together, Matthew 18. I'll begin reading in verse 15.

"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, ... you've] won your brother. 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. 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. 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. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. “For where two or three have gathered together in My Name I am there in their midst.”

Now Jesus here teaches us the process that each of us must follow when we see a Christian that we know in sin. Now I want to work through this passage by sort of letting our Lord answer some questions for us as the passage unfolds. Specifically, He answers here for us four questions about this crucial issue of church discipline. So, let’s ask the question and then allow our Lord to answer it.

First of all, when should we do this? When should we do church discipline? Notice verse 15, “If your brother sins go and show him his fault in private....” Now in this context “brother” refers to any professing Christian. In fact, Matthew 18 is an interesting chapter. It sort of anticipates the church which comes in Acts 2 at Pentecost. But this entire chapter is our Lord’s teaching about life in that community that will become and be called the church. He anticipates it, and He refers several times in this passage to the church which has not yet been formed and founded.

And so, in context clearly brother is a fellow believer or at least one who professes to be so. Notice brother is modified by the personal pronoun “your”, your brother. This means we’re talking about someone you know, someone within the sphere of your influence. We’re not called to be Christian bounty hunters, tracking down sin wherever we find it. We aren’t called to track down Christians we have no relationship with, your brother.

Now notice the little word “if”. “If your brother sins....” This word establishes the condition. It answers the question when. If your brother sins. When a Christian sins, you and I have a responsibility to initiate a rescue attempt following the process that our Lord outlines in this passage. It doesn’t matter whether that person is a spouse, a child, a parent, a friend, a fellow

student, a co-worker, a boss. The only question is this: Is that person a professing Christian? If so, then this process begins.

Now, does that mean that every time I think I observe a sin in others I need to confront them? The biblical answer to that is no. We're not sort of confronting machines. There are exceptions. Let me give you several exceptions.

First of all, you don't need to confront a person when the sin is a personal wrong against you that you can cover, that you can overlook, that you can exercise a spirit of forgiveness toward and move on. In 1 Corinthians 13:5 Paul says that "Love does not take into account a wrong suffered." In other words, we're not quick to when someone sins against us go confront that. If it's a personal wrong that we can cover, that we can overlook, then love does that. It doesn't keep track of wrongs suffered. First Peter 4:8, "Above all keep fervent in your love for one another because love covers a multitude of sins." When you love someone, you don't spend your life confronting every little problem you see in their life. You know if we did this in our homes, this is all we would ever do with one another, right? And it would be a pretty unpleasant environment. So, you don't need to confront when it's a personal wrong against you, that you can cover, that you can exercise a spirit of forgiveness toward and move on.

Secondly, you don't need to confront when the supposed sin is not a clear-cut violation of Scripture. In other words, if it's a personal preference, if it's a personal conviction, if it's an issue of conscience from Romans 14, you don't confront. You only confront when it's chapter and verse: thus says the Lord thou shalt or thou shalt not.

Thirdly you don't need to confront if you've heard about the sins second hand. Unfortunately, this happens. Someone comes to you and says I have to tell you something that happened. So, in so did such in such. Now you do not need to take that up and now feel the responsibility to go confront that person. Here's what you need to do instead. You need to say to that person, wait a minute. You know I appreciate your concern for them. Let me take moment and pray for you and let me remind you of what your duty is. You, having the first-hand knowledge of that need to go to that person as Matthew 18 spells it out.

By the way, parents, let me just say that as your kids get to your teenage years, I would encourage you (and even younger but certainly their teenage years encourage you) to do this even with them. They come to you with their sibling has sinned against them and say, have you done this? Have you gone to them privately? And then if that doesn't work, come back, and I'll sort it out. But let's start there. Because this is their responsibility as well. So, you don't confront when you've heard it second hand.

Number four, you don't confront when you haven't repented of sin in your own life. What does our Lord say in Matthew 7, "Take the log out of your own eye before you try to take the splinter out of someone else's eye." Unfortunately, this happens a lot in troubled marriages where there is sin on both sides, and there's a lot of confronting going on about the other person's sin, but they're not willing to deal with their own sin first. Don't confront until you've been willing to deal with your own sin.

So, when should we practice this? Well, if you go to the passages in the New Testament where Paul identifies specific sins, and he marries them to church discipline let me give you a little list. There's a wide assortment of sins deserving of church discipline. First Corinthians 5:1 incest. First Corinthians 5:11 immorality, covetousness, idolatry, being a reviler, a drunkard or a swindler. First Timothy 1:20 false teaching. Second Thessalonians 3 refusing to get a job and work to support your family. Divisiveness according to Titus 3. Now, that list includes sins of action and sins of inaction. Sins of the heart, sins of the mouth, sexual sins, dishonesty, lack of self-control and a refusal to work. In other words, there is really no category of sins that is exempt from this command. "If you're brother sins, go....". That's when.

Now the second question that our Lord answers here is: what should our attitude be? And this is so important. Because sadly there are many Christians who abuse other Christians under the auspices of our Lord's words here. They genuinely enjoy being confrontational They relish every opportunity to bloody and bruise a fellow Christian with the club of his own sin. To obey this command with the wrong attitude is to disobey this command. Now in the context here in Matthew 18 our Lord identifies two added attitudes that must control this entire process.

First of all, there has to be genuine love for that person. And we see this modeled in our Lord's attitude toward the one who strays. Look back at verse 12. "What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray does he not leave the 99 on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying?"

Now stop there a moment. Jesus uses this same illustration in Luke's gospel of God seeking unbelievers. But here in this context He's talking about a believer who has strayed into sin. And God is the one seeking. God in Christ is the Shepherd going out to seek the straying lamb. This is the heart of God. Notice verse 13, "If it turns out that he finds that sheep that strayed, truly I say to you" this is God again "... he rejoices over it more than over the 99 which have not gone astray. So, it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones..." that is who believe in Me "... perish" or are spiritually devastated.

So, here you see the heart of God, the heart of Jesus. Genuine love compels them to go look for the sheep that strayed. They don't say, oh well you know another loss. I've got 99. No, there's a genuine love for that one that has strayed. That ought to be what motivates us as well. Genuine love for them. Second Thessalonians 3:15, Paul writes, "Do not regard him as an enemy ..." that is, the person who has strayed into sin, "... but admonish him as a brother." Genuine love.

Secondly, there ought to be an eagerness to forgive. This is the second attitude we ought to manifest. This is demonstrated for us beginning in verse 21 following the paragraph we're studying. Because right after Jesus finishes teaching about church discipline Peter comes up and says, ok I get it. If they repent, I need to forgive them. How many times? Up to 7 times? He thinks he's being really generous because he's gone beyond what the Pharisees taught. They taught 3 times. Jesus says no, verse 22, "I did not say to you up to 7 times but up to 490 times." In other words, don't let there be an artificial limit on your forgiveness. Be eager to forgive if that person comes and asks your forgiveness. And He goes on and tells the parable of the unforgiving slave. May God help us not to be that unforgiving slave. Having been forgiven so much we're not willing to extend forgiveness to those who have sinned against us. So, we're to have an eagerness to forgive. As we go through this process it's not like well, let's see if you can

crawl your way back into my favor. No, where's there's repentance expressed there's an eagerness to receive that person back.

Now, those attitudes are found here in Matthew 18, but there's another text where two other important attitudes are laid out and that's Galatians 6. Turn there for a moment, Galatians 6 :1.

We find the third attitude that's essential and that is gentleness. Galatians 6:1, "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness...." That's the opposite of harshness. You are to be tender with that person as a shepherd is tender with his lambs. Gentleness.

There's a fourth attitude that Paul describes here in Galatians 6:1. It's humility. Notice the second half of the verse. "... *each one* [as you go about this] *each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted." In other words, you don't come into this process with the attitude of how could you ever do anything like that? You come into this with the attitude of listen, I understand, because I battle sin in my own life, and apart from God's grace I could be easily astray. I could be where you are. Humility.

A spirit of humility also means that if you're confronting someone who's over you either in age, they're older than you are, or they're over you in position. It's your parent, or it's a superior, someone God has placed over you in the authority structures in your life, then you need to come with humility. Paul explains it this way to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:1 and 2. He says Timothy if you need to confront an older man in the church and Timothy was a young man in his early 30's, he says if you need to come to an older man you don't sharply rebuke him. You appeal to him as to a father. So, you treat someone who's older than you are or someone who's over you in authority differently than you would treat anyone else. You come to them in a spirit of deference. You come to all of them in humility, but with those who are over you do so with deference and respect. You appeal to them you don't sharply rebuke them. So, our attitude then is to be love, eagerness to forgive, gentleness and humility.

Now, that brings us to the third question that our Lord answers here and really the heart of this passage. What is the process itself? Jesus lays out for us a simple but thorough four step process. Four steps. You keep four steps in mind you will understand this passage. This is the rescue plan our Lord has designed and we have no right to tamper with it. Here it is.

The first step: Private confrontation, private confrontation. Look at verse 15, “If your brother sins go and show him his fault in private.” Go. That means take the initiative. Don’t say to yourself, well I’ll wait and see if he asks if he needs help. Of course, he’s not going to ask if he needs help. He’s caught in a sin. Go. You’re to take the initiative and go. Is he going to be happy about the fact that you are intruding into his life, or is she going to be happy? No. That doesn’t matter. You are on a rescue operation. Jesus says, go. And show him his fault. The word “show” means to convince or to expose. Convince him. Show him biblically why what he’s doing is wrong. And do so in private. Literally, the Greek text says between you and him alone, between you and him alone.

Now Jesus says there are two possible results of this private confrontation. Verse 15, “If he listens to you....” Now, this could mean one of two things. It could mean that there is a reasonable believable explanation that what you thought you saw that was a sin in fact was not. And this happens sometimes, right? We see something, we think we see what we see and in fact there is a reasonable believable explanation. Don’t be gullible, but sometimes there is a reasonable explanation in which case you’re done. But Jesus says, “If he listens to you....” that is, he repents of the sin. There is a sin, and he repents of that sin, then you have won your brother. In other words, if this happens, your responsibility as a rescuer is done. You’re to forgive. You’re to drop it and move on. No one else needs to be included in the circle of the knowledge of the sin.

Now, there are a couple of exceptions to what I just said. Even if the person is repentant there are times which shouldn’t be dropped. Let me give you a couple of exceptions. First of all, when the sin involves someone else. They may be repentant to you and to God, but if they sinned against someone else, then you need to urge them to go to that person and make it right with that person. And it’s not over until that happens. Also, when the sin is so public that it requires public

repentance. There are times when that happens. When it's a sin in front of the whole community; and therefore, even though the person repents privately, there needs to be an expression more publicly of that repentance.

And one other exception is if the sin has consequences tied to it. For example, a God forbid, a pastor or an elder sins, and it's a sin that rises to the level of disqualification, makes him unqualified to be in the role of pastor, then even if he's repentant, then the consequences have to come in to play. But if he listens, generally, you have won your brother. That's one outcome. The other outcome is in verse 16, "But if he does not listen to you...." then you go to the second step. First step, private confrontation.

Second step: private confirmation. Look at verse 16, "But if he does not listen to you take one or two more with you." So, you're to go back to your brother a second time if he doesn't repent the first time. Now, you now give a person time, right? I mean don't do this like the next hour. Give him a week, several weeks to digest what you've shared. None of us respond well to confrontation initially or very few of us. Give him some time to sort of chew on what you've shared and to come to repentance, the Spirit to work in his heart. But, once you've given that reasonable amount of time if there's no repentance, you go back a second time, and this time you take one or two others with you. It's still essentially private. The knowledge of the sin is a relatively small group, two or three people. The point is: keep the matter as small as possible hoping for repentance. And you take these this one or these two people back with you.

Now, what are these people there to do? They are there to serve two purpose. First of all, they're there as witnesses. Verse 16, "So that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed." That quotation is from Deuteronomy 19:15. It's a key principle in the Mosaic law. There has to be at least two witnesses, two or three witnesses for something to be established as fact. Now these are not necessarily witnesses of the original sin or the original offense. Instead, they are there to be witnesses of this private confirmation.

If it goes to step three, to the third step, then three people will have been witness to what has unfolded so far. This is a protection. It is a protection for the persons being confronted because

sometimes people confront others out of ill motives. They want to hurt that person and the witnesses can say wait a minute. That's not a valid complaint against this person. It's also a protection for the person doing the confronting because they are there to witness the spirit and the concern that he manifests towards this person and what he has to say. So, they're there to serve as witnesses.

There's another reason this one or two other people are there. They're there to confront the sin. Notice verse 17, "If he refuses ..." and notice the change "... to listen to them. The implication is that these witnesses have joined the first person in trying to persuade the man to repent. Again, there are two possible outcomes: repentance and resolution if he repents, or continued rebellion against the Scripture if he doesn't, and that moves the process on to the third step.

Private confrontation is the first step. Private confirmation with witnesses there is the second step.

Third step is: public proclamation. Look at verse 17, "If he refuses to listen to them tell it to the church." Now, Christ doesn't explicitly mention the elders here because the leadership of the church as elders has not yet been put in place, but the rest of the New Testament makes it clear that the elders are responsible for all aspects of church life, so it's understood here at this point they have to become involved. They evaluate the accusation. They hear the evidence, and if the elders determine that there is clear biblical sin involved, and they determine that steps one and two have been biblically carried out, then the elders are to tell it to the church, that is the assembly of believers, the local church.

Now, why in the world would you tell the whole church about someone's sin? Look at verse 17, "If he refuses to listen even to the church...." In other words, the church is told so that all who know that person may join the two or three, and now the elders, in calling that person to repentance. The goal is to have an ever-widening group urge the sinning brother or sister to repent.

Now, Paul give us just one reason to skip this third step, to skip it altogether and that is in the case of what he calls a factious man. A divisive man either in his doctrine or his conduct Titus 3:10 says this, “Reject a factious man after a first and second warning.” In other words, go through steps one and two, and then reject him. Skip the third step and go right to the fourth step and put him out of the church. Why? Because there is nothing a factious person, a divisive person would relish more than having the church told to come to him because that gives him an opportunity to sow his discord to everybody who comes.

So, in the third step the entire church is now on a rescue mission. But here’s the crucial question. What kind of sin rises to the level that it should be told to the entire church? Now I gave you a brief biblical list a few minutes ago, but the truth is from what our Lord is teaching here. Any sin which a believer refuses to turn from is justified in church discipline. Let me put it to you this way, listen carefully. Church discipline is reserved for hard-hearted rebellion against the Scripture. It’s not for those who are weak, who struggle with sin. There are always those in the church who seem to be locked in a pattern of struggle with certain sins and they make us one step forward, and it feels like two steps back. It’s the ones Paul calls “the weak”. You always have the weak. As long as they’re willing to voice repentance and to attempt to change, the weak should never be disciplined. Public discipline is reserved for hard-hearted rebellion. It’s the person who says, “I know what the Bible says, and I don’t care. I know what I want. I understand what you’ve shown me from the Scripture. I understand it’s what the church has taught for 2000 years, but I’ve got my own views. I’ve got my own desires. I want to do what I want to do. And that’s it.”

Now, you would think that under the pressure of the entire church any true Christian would repent. Sadly, I can tell you from personal experience from the authority of Christ in this text that is not true. So, how does this happen? How can a professing Christian continue to justify his sin in the face of all of this?

Well, sadly I can tell you will hear excuses like this, and I’ve heard them many times. It will be something like this, “Listen I know that’s what the Bible says, but I just know that God wants me to be happy. This other church I’ve found, this other group I’ve found, this other Christian author

I've read, they understand me. This church is just too black and white. There's just no grace no love in this church. I know it's wrong, but it's what I want, and you know what if I do it, I know God will forgive me."

Jesus says, if he refuses to listen to the church, then you go to the fourth step which is: final excommunication. Look at verse 17, "... if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Treat him as if he were a Gentile and a tax collector. Now there's a very important point of Greek grammar in that last expression in verse 17. Jesus uses the singular pronoun "you". In English we just have "you" and it can be plural, or it can be singular, and the context tells you which it is. In Greek, there is a singular you, and there's a plural you. Jesus uses the singular you, and He uses a singular verb. In other words, Jesus says this, He isn't addressing the church as a whole. He's not saying, all you people out there do this. Instead, He's addressing every individual in the church. He's saying, let Him be to you and to you and to you and to you. This is Jesus' command to you personally. He says, if the church, and its leadership, speaks on an issue on church discipline, every Christian in the church is to respect that discipline. Jesus says if he still hasn't repented let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Now, in the first century believers knew exactly what that meant. They knew that meant treat him as a person who is outside the people of God. Put him out of the church. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 5:13 Paul says, "Remove him from your midst." In 1 Corinthians 5:11 he says, don't even have a meal with him. That doesn't mean a meal where you set up a time to get with a sinning believer to confront him about his sin. He's talking about the kind of meal that would be in the first century a hospitality cordial fellowship let's act like everything's fine between us. Be kind, be gracious just as you would to an unbeliever, but don't treat them as if everything is the same and as if they are a brother or sister in Christ. They may be, but they may not be. And so, we're to treat them as if they're not. Now why are we to do that?

Well, think about this. If you have a tender heart toward God, if you're committed to obedience and you sin, and a brother or sister of yours comes to you in the spirit we've talked about this morning and says, I'm concerned about this in your life, and then they come back to you with a with another one or two of your friends, and they're all urging you to repent, and then the whole

church. Everybody you know in this community that you're a part of comes to you and pleads with you to turn from your sin, what are you going to do? You have a tender heart toward God you're going to gladly willingly turn from your sin.

This fourth step is crucial because it doesn't let a person who is living in rebellion against God cling to their profession and tell you I'm a Christian. It lets them know that from the church's perspective, and more importantly from God's perspective, there is no reason to believe that they are in fact a Christian at all. Because they are living in rebellion against the Lord they claim. Let me just stop here and say even if your sin is never exposed, even if you never work through the process of church discipline if you are content day after day, week after week, year after year to live in a pattern of unrepentant sin coddling your sin, tolerating your sin, living with it as a beloved thing, then you may very well not be a believer either. You better examine yourself to see if you're in the faith. Jesus says if a person holds onto their sin like this, then treat them as an unbeliever because they very well may be.

That's the process: Private confrontation. Private confirmation. Public proclamation to the church. And then final excommunication from the church.

There's another question we need to answer and that is: what are the biblical reasons? What are the biblical reasons for doing this? Very briefly, I'm just going to give you these to consider. You can look them up in your own leisure.

First of all, for the sinning Christian, why did we do it for him? What's the benefit to the sinning Christian?

Number one, to restore him to the Lord and to the church. That's the point. Remember the little story Jesus tells right before this passage about the shepherd seeking? It's to restore the sheep that has strayed, bring him back into the fold. Galatians 6:1, it's to restore such a one. By the way, I love the fact that in this church, in the years I've been here, we have seen at least four of the people that we have had to discipline in this church publicly be fully restored, and they sit

among us in these three services today. Many of them do. Others are involved in other churches in other places. So, it works. It restores them to the Lord and to the church.

Number two, it creates a proper sense of shame. It doesn't humiliate them. It doesn't shame them in that sense. But the proper sense of shame about their sin. Second Thessalonians 3:14, "Do not associate with them so that he may be put to shame."

Number three, the fourth step of discipline is to deliver him over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh. That's what Paul says about the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5:5. When you put him out of the church, you're putting him out of the realm of where the Spirit works into the realm where Satan works, and you are delivering him to Satan for the destruction of his flesh.

And the reason for that, number four, is to save his soul. First Corinthians 5:5, "That his spirit may be saved."

What about for the church? What are the reasons for doing this for the church? There are three of them.

Number one, to keep the church pure. This matters to Christ. It's His bride. He wants it pure. He doesn't want sin tolerated. We're all sinners, but He doesn't want sin excused and tolerated and as it were, flung in His face. First Corinthians 5:13, "Remove the wicked man from among yourselves." Keep the church pure.

Number two, protect the church from false teachers and doctrinal error. This is one of the reasons we have to practice church discipline. Those who are false teachers, and we've had to do that in the history of this church as well.

Number three, to make us afraid of sinning. This is for all of us, to make us afraid of sinning. In 1 Corinthians 5: 20. Paul tells Timothy that unrepentant elders were to be disciplined publicly so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning. When we witness firsthand the destructive path that

sin takes in the lives of others, it makes us afraid of tolerating and coddling our own sin. Church discipline is a serious call to self-examination. Folks, this is serious business.

In fact, look at verse 18. Matthew 18:18, “Truly I say to you whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven. And whatever you loose on earth, [in the discipline process] shall have been loosed in heaven.” In other words, Jesus is saying in discipline the church is simply declaring the decision that God has made about that person based on the teaching of His Word. And this happens under Jesus’ personal command and authority. Look at verse 19, “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask [and again, the context is church discipline] it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.”

And Jesus is present when this process is in play. Notice verse 20, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name I am there in their midst.” We quote this verse sort of generally, you know, two or three believers together Christ is there. And that is true. But that’s not His point here. His point is when the two or three gather to carry out this process of discipline, Christ is there. It matters to Him. He is graciously like a shepherd seeking out His straying sheep through this process.

So, you can see the Scripture is clear. So, let me just ask. Why don’t most Christians practice this clear command of our Lord’s? Let me give you a couple of reasons.

Some just disagree with the Scripture. They’ll say things like, well you know that’s just harsh and unloving. Folks, what could be more unloving than to allow someone to expose himself or herself to danger without warning them?

Others just claim it’s proud. I mean who do you think you are? Let him who is without sin cast the first stone. Who am I to judge? Now on the surface that sounds spiritual. But let me give you God’s perspective. When the church in Corinth wouldn’t practice church discipline, Paul said this to them. First Corinthians 5:2, “You have become arrogant by not being willing to remove this person from your midst.” It’s not arrogant to do what God commanded us to do. It’s arrogant to refuse to do it.

Others refuse to practice this because of their own sinfulness. They're tolerating sin in their own lives. The last thing they want to do is to shine the spotlight on someone else's sin.

Sometimes it's ignorance. They just don't understand this is what they're supposed to do. After this morning none of us can claim that because Christ is pretty clear in this passage.

Others claim personality. You know, Tom, I appreciate what you're saying, but I'm just not a confronter. Hello. Welcome to the crowd! I don't want to see the hands of those who like to confront. Something wrong with you. There're no personality exemptions in this passage.

Others claim history. Well, I hear you but boy churches I've been in that's just been practiced with the wrong spirit it's been done the wrong way. Okay. I know that happens. But that doesn't change our Lord's command here.

Some don't practice it out of fear. I'm going to irreparably damage that relationship. Or sometimes church leadership doesn't practice it because they're afraid they're going to run people off.

Folks, we just need to leave our excuses and obey our Lord. Maybe today you know someone who professes Christ, and yet they are locked in a pattern of ongoing unrepentant sin. What are you going to do? You going to believe yourself and the culture and just say, well, that's their business. Or are you going to believe and obey your Lord who says you, go. Maybe today as you've heard the words of Christ, you've been convicted about not taking your own sin seriously. You've been tolerating, excusing your own sin and this passage reminds you, you need to confess it, and you need to forsake it. You need to do that. Proverbs 28:13 says, "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, But he who confesses and forsakes *them* will find compassion."

The Lord's table reminds us of our need for forgiveness, our need to judge our own sin and that forgiveness is possible because of what our Lord did at the cross.

Father, thank You for the reality that we celebrate in the Lord's table what Jesus did for us at the cross. Thank you that He poured out His life in our place and by His death the record is cleansed. You can forgive us, and we can know You and know Your Son. Father we thank You.

We pray that You'd help us to leave this place with the joy of the Lord in our hearts that You have given us forgiveness in Christ and that when we repent, You receive us. And Father help us to leave willing to carry out what we have learned together this morning. May we be willing to join You in the search and rescue operation for those who stray from You.

We pray in Jesus name. Amen.