

Matthew 18:15-20
9/20/2020 Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Matthew 18:15-20 (NKJV)

15 “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

16 But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’

17 And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

18 “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

19 “Again^[a] I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.

20 For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

Congregational Soul Care

During my time at Park River Bible Camp, I had the opportunity to participate in both missing camper drills, and actual missing camper cases. They went something like this. The camp would be minding its own business, when all of a sudden, the bell would ring. The bell was usually the marker that it was time for the next activity, and would usually only ring 3-4 times. However, as a counselor, if it got past that, you immediately were on high alert, counting the rings, because 12 rings meant an emergency, like a storm warning or a missing camper. And once it hit 12 rings, you immediately sprang into action. Upon hearing 12 bells, you gathered your campers as quickly (and calmly) as you could, brought them to the gym, and, in the case of a missing camper, got to work. The missing camper procedure called for the staff to split themselves evenly and hit EVERY SQUARE INCH of camp. A couple counselors would stay in the gym to keep the rest of the campers safe and entertained, while the rest of us would be split between searching the main camp, the nature trails, the woods, and even up to the highway. We all fanned out as far as we could, working as fast and as desperately as we could to find the missing camper. Most of the time, the camper was usually just holed up in the bathroom because someone had said something mean to them, but there were a couple times where a camper had

wandered too far out into the nature trails/woods and was lost. I didn't realize it at the time when I was at camp, but the urgency of trying to find a lost and frightened kid is an apt illustration of God's love and pursuit of us. He sees us in our lost and weak state, and came to find us and bring us back to Himself. He did that primarily with Jesus, which I'll talk about in just a bit, but in this world, He uses us as well. **God uses His people to care for His people.**

First, in order to make us His people, God sent Christ to seek us out and reconcile us to Him. Then, God uses the congregation to bring His sheep back to Him, promising that Christ is with us as we love and care for one another.

So, first things first. Christ has sought us out and reconciled us to God. Before we can begin to talk about and understand the logistics of seeking each other out the way this passage describes, I think it's important to put this text, just like every other biblical text, in its proper context.

These five verses are just a snippet of a larger discourse of Jesus here in Matthew 18. Jesus spends the entire chapter talking about a few topics, including who the greatest in the Kingdom is (the children/those with childlike faith), false teaching, and the way His people are to conduct themselves toward and with each other.

Our text is nestled right between two famous parables: the parable of the lost sheep, and the parable of the unforgiving servant. The three together form a discussion on how Christians are to act toward one another. The central theme that unites these three texts together is that we, God's people, are to conduct ourselves with love and forgiveness towards one another.

But, in order to do that, we need to remember that it is the love and forgiveness of Christ that motivates that. Christ tells us in the parable of the lost sheep that the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep he has in a safe place in order to seek out the one that has been lost. So it is with God, the Father, and us, His sheep. It is not the will of the Father that any of His little sheep be lost, so He sent His Son to bring them, to bring us, back to Him. The divine came down to us and took on our lowly estate in order to rescue us and bring us back, even though we have separated ourselves from our Creator because of our sin

And in the parable of the unforgiving servant, we see that, rather than leave His Creation to suffer the consequences of their debt, the Creator stepped down into creation and paid the debt himself. Rather than hold our insane amount of sin debt against us, He forgave it in His Son. God loves and cares for us so deeply, and we see that deep love and care for us helpless human beings in Jesus. By faith, all this love, all this grace, all this forgiveness, is given to us free of charge.

And so, with our salvation so firmly secure in Christ, we turn to our text, which in turn points us to our neighbors.

Christ uses us in the congregation to bring His sheep back to him. Now, all of us who have been saved by grace through faith in Christ, we are God's people together here in the local community. You might say that we're a congregation. We're a group of God's people, gathered around the common confession of Christ crucified for us.

As such, we have neighbors to love, both here and out in the world. In fact, we are God's means of caring for our neighbor. Just as God uses means in order to deliver grace to us (Word and Sacrament), He uses means to care for us. He uses, as I said earlier, His people to care for His people.

And that's where we come to today's text. We are called to care for one another in the congregation, and one of the ways that we care for one another is using what is called "the power of the keys." The "power of the keys" is detailed for us in verse 18. It is simply the ministry of absolving, or forgiving, sins, or retaining them. When Pr. Alex and/or I speak the declaration of grace in the service after the confession of sin, we are using the power of the keys to the effect of absolving sins. When we use the admonition every once in a while, we are retaining sins, meaning that those sins of the unrepentant are not forgiven. If we speak either of those words to you privately, we using the power of the keys.

God has given the power of the keys to the congregation in order for them to minister and care for one another. It is not just something that Pr. Alex and I can do. You all have been given the "power" to speak a word of forgiveness or a word of admonition to a brother or sister who confesses sins to you.

The text lays out three "steps/ways/scenarios" that happen when a Christian brother or sister sins against you and the power of the keys should be exercised. The types of sins being talked about here are sins that are unrepentant sins personally against you, or public or severe unrepentant sin. The first step is to talk about it privately with each other, always keeping in mind that repentance, forgiveness, and restoration are ALWAYS the goal, regardless of the level of sin.

If there's no repentance, then the next step is to call together a handful of carefully selected people in order to help the offending party come to their senses. Again, repentance, forgiveness, and restoration are always the goal.

Finally, if the offending party still hasn't repented, then the matter is to come to the congregation, the assembly of believers. It is then their decision whether to use the keys to absolve the offending party (which should only happen if repentance occurs), or retain their sins and excommunicate them (which should only happen if there's no repentance at all). Though, even something as harsh as excommunication has the goal of restoration! Excommunication does not mean you stop loving the person, nor does it mean that you completely ostracize them from the church! It simply means, as the text says, to consider them a "Gentile and a tax collector". Basically, like an unbeliever. Like someone who needs to be introduced to the faith. That doesn't mean they can't come to church (though some situations might warrant that), or you can't see them anymore, or anything like that. Usually it means not being able to take communion or participate in similar activities where church fellowship is extremely important.

Though Christians have certainly abused excommunication in a host of ways (nobody expected the Spanish Inquisition, after all), and though it certainly can be hard to tell someone that is loved that they can't come to communion and they are to be treated as an unbeliever, it is

all to shake them and bring them back to their senses! And that is a good thing! Praise the Lord for all the ways He cares for us! Though it seems harsh at the time, we rejoice when repentance occurs and forgiveness and restoration can begin. We also rejoice that when those conversations have to happen, we do not go to them alone or in our own strength. Rather, Christ is with us as we love and care for one another.

It is certainly hard to confront our beloved brothers and sisters when they sin, and it's equally as hard to see them sinning. I've seen friends start to fall away, and it hurts, as I'm sure you all know. However, we give thanks to God that Christ is with us always, especially when we gather and pray together.

As we continue to live in this broken world and deal with everything that comes, as we care for our neighbors, Christ goes with us. He has promised here in the text that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there (v. 20). He has promised that when as little as two people agree on a prayer request and pray for it, it will be heard.

What glorious comfort these promises are! What a comfort to know that our prayers are heard, and that as we gather together and pray and study the Word, Christ is with us! Christ is with us now, in this service, He was with us as we gathered in the parking lot for our drive-in service, He is in Bible study, He's in Confirmation, He is everywhere that his people gather around His Word, and everywhere where His Word, and especially the Gospel, is proclaimed.

As we proclaim the Gospel to one another, Christ goes with us. As we rebuke and admonish our neighbors with the Law, Christ goes with us. As we care for the needs of our neighbor, whatever they are, Christ goes with us and works through us.

And that gives such comfort and purpose to our love and care of our neighbors. It is not us in our own strength trying to hold the Church together by our own striving. Rather, Christ is always working in His church through His Word, through His Sacraments, and through His people.

And when He works, we know it will be done. Though we fail and sin and hurt each other, Christ still works to constantly bring us back to Him in repentance and faith. The means may include a simple Word from the pulpit or from devotions, or it may come in the form of Christian brothers and sisters seeking to restore a fallen brother. Regardless of the means, Christ has promised to always be with the work of His people. Wherever we are gathered in His name, seeking Him in prayer, learning His Word, teaching His Word, studying His Word, He has promised to be there and to work and answer.

Conclusion

So, as we wrap up thinking about the text, we remember that Christ has sought us and reconciled us to God, that God uses us in the congregation to bring His sheep back to Him, and that Christ goes with us as we love and care for one another. **God uses His people to care for His people.**

Just as us counselors were sent to find and rescue that missing camper, just as rescue teams go out and find a missing person, so too God has sent Christ to seek us out, and He sends us out as ambassadors of Christ to call His people back to Him. Because as we call others back to Christ, living with love and forgiveness in our hearts and showing them to our neighbors, the love of God goes forth to all we come across, calling all to repent and return to their Father. Amen.