

# Matthew 18:15-20

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[ 0 : 00 ] The Lord loves His people. He loves us all, and He loves each and every one of us.

The parable that we read at the beginning of our reading this evening speaks of God's love for every last one of His little ones, to use the language that Jesus has been employing to speak of His disciples.

He is not willing that any of them, not one of them, should be lost. And as Jesus continues His teaching in response to the questions of the disciples, and as Matthew draws to bear or brings to bear, I think probably different aspects of Jesus' teaching, the concern is that we as His little ones, as His disciples, would also love in the manner that God loves.

As the Lord loves us, we are to love one another. As we were thinking about last Sunday morning, we are to welcome the weak, and we are to walk with the wandering.

And the parable was used as the evidence or the instruction about that second aspect of how we are to show love. Not only welcome those who come, but also lovingly pursue those who stray.

[ 1 : 41 ] What about the verses that follow from verses 15 to 20, immediately following the parable? Do these verses have anything to add that help us fulfill our duty of love?

Or has Matthew moved on to bring to our attention and draw together teaching of Jesus? It's important and helpful, but not necessarily linked to in any particular way to what has gone before. Do these verses, especially verses 15 to 20, do they constitute a coherent whole? Or are they different sayings of Jesus that Matthew has brought together?

When we read them, they do give the impression of being quite distinct. Distinct sayings of Jesus or distinct chunks of teaching.

I was trying to find a word that was better than chunks, but I didn't come up with a better one. So you'll just have to bear with me on that. But you have in verses 15 to 20, I think when you read them through, 15 to 17, it's very clear that that's a coherent whole in itself.

[ 2 : 56 ] Then verse 18 seems to move on to something else. And then 19 and 20 seems to have its own theme. And I suppose the question I'm asking is, do we see them each useful and valuable in their own way, but unconnected?

Or do we see them as being connected? Did Jesus, when he was teaching, did he say these things one after the other?

Or has Matthew brought together teaching of Jesus in a thoughtful way, certainly, but brought together from different occasions? It seems to me that most likely is that that is what Matthew has done.

He's brought together here and recorded for us teaching of Jesus that may well have been given on different occasions, but not in a random way, in a way that ties in with the purpose.

And the purpose being to help us as believers to love as God loves us. And in this case, in a very particular real-life situation, how we can show love to others, especially those who are stumbling or straying, those who have sinned.

[ 4 : 09 ] I think verses 15 to 20 provide us the three parts of that section, provide us with three elements, three ingredients that must be present if we are to show our love wisely and in a God-honoring way to those who have stumbled or strayed.

And of course, there will be times when that's us, and we'll be relying on others to do as Jesus directs. But three elements, three ingredients that are necessary.

And what are they? Well, let me suggest what they are, and then try and establish how I came to that conclusion from the passage. I think one element that is crucial and that we find in verses 15 to 17 is a clear motivation.

There needs to be in us a clear motivation to walk with the wandering, to pursue those who stumble and stray. That's an element that is necessary if we're going to do what we're being asked to do. But a second element that I think is relayed or put across in the second small chunk in verse 18, a saying of Jesus is what I'm calling an agreed yardstick.

[ 5 : 39 ] And the yardstick is required to establish if somebody is wandering. We're saying we need to pursue the wandering and bring them back. But who decides if somebody is wandering at all?

On what basis do you determine if somebody has stumbled or if somebody is straying or if somebody has sinned? You need a yardstick to establish that.

That's a necessary element. And I think verse 18 touches on that. But then you also need what I'm calling a helping hand, not just any hand.

We need God's help in doing what Jesus would have us do. We need God's help in bringing the wanderer back home.

So I think these are three necessary elements that are referred to, that are presented to us in this matter of loving others as God loves us, and particularly as that love is expressed in God as the good shepherd, God's help in the Lord searching, the one sheep that has been lost.

[ 6 : 49 ] We too are to seek out and to search and pursue lovingly that sheep who is straying, or that brother who sins against you, to use the language of verse 15, where the part of the passage that we want to think about begins.

So let's think about these three elements. The first found in verses 15 to 17, the second in verse 18, and the third in verses 19 and 20.

First of all then, a clear motivation. And the motivation is, must be love. The love of God. Where do we find that in verses 15 to 17?

The word love is not found in these verses. So where do we find? In these verses, it established that our motivation must be necessarily love.

Well, I think we find it in the insistent and repeated goal that underpins and accompanies each step of this process that is outlined.

[ 7 : 55 ] You know, you have these three steps, and we'll look at them in a moment. But underpinning every step of the way is a goal, and the goal is to restore.

That is the concern. The concern is to restore the one who has wandered. The concern is not in any way, in any sense, to shun or to isolate or to cut off.

That's not the concern. The goal is to restore. Restoration is at the heart of what is intended in what Jesus instructs us to do. And why? Why the concern to restore?

Well, because we love the one who is wandering. We love the one who is straying. And because we love them, because we consider them part of the community, part of the family, part of the kingdom of heaven that we are part of, then this is what we want to secure, their restoration.

And that desire to restore, that objective to restore, is grounded in love. Our motivation is love, just as the shepherd is motivated by love as he pursues that one sheep who has wandered and who has strayed from the flock, just like the shepherd in the parable, just like God.

[ 9 : 21 ] Motivation is crucial. But as well as motivation, Jesus provides what we might call a step-by-step process that allows that motivation, that desire, to find expression in a wise and God-ordered way.

And let's just briefly examine each step that is outlined and give each step a name. I'm talking about verses 15 to 17, where, as we've read, three clear steps.

Let's give each step a name. First step I'm calling discreet love. The second step, wise love. And the third step, tough love.

First of all, discreet love in verse 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.

Now, the first thing to notice and stress is that this instruction is directed to you. If your brother sins against you, and there you is in the singular.

[ 10 : 33 ] So, each of us is being given this task, this piece of counsel. Each of us. This isn't directed to the minister or to the elders alone.

We certainly, it's directed to us, but it's directed to each of the members of the community. If your brother sins against you. So, all of us need to take note of what it is that Jesus is saying that we are to do in the circumstances described.

We all share in this responsibility. And this step, in verse 15, also establishes the circumstances in which it's appropriate and necessary to approach a sinning or straying brother.

If your brother sins against you. Now, that would limit the occasions when it would be appropriate to do this. Intriguingly, and just to complicate matters somewhat, you'll notice at the foot of the page a textual variant where it's noted that many of the manuscripts upon which the Bible is constructed, if you wish, do not have these words against you.

And so, there it would simply be, if your brother sins, go and show him his fault. And the weight of evidence for these two possibilities is fairly evenly balanced.

[ 11 : 59 ] In our version, plump for including the words against you. But a case could be made for excluding them. If we were to adopt the alternative reading, then that would increase the occasions on which we're required to act in the manner described.

But leaving aside this debate on the appropriate text to base the translation on, even if we limit ourselves to what we have, if your brother sins against you, I don't think we are obliged to take that as referring only to a personal offense suffered, but to sin that causes harm to the body or community of which we all form a part.

You know, I think we could envisage circumstances without too much difficulty of one, of us sinning in such a way, where maybe I myself don't feel personally slighted, but it's clear that damage has been done to the whole.

And I'm part of the whole. I'm part of the body. And so, in that sense, I too am hurt and damaged and offended. And so, there's a responsibility incumbent on me, even if it's not a sin that was directly against me.

The point, really, the principal point we want to stress is the manner in which we are to try and recover and restore the offending brother.

[ 13 : 29 ] And the manner is that it is to be discreet and private. This is discreet love. We are not to make the sin public.

We're not to seek to humiliate or point the finger or accuse in a self-righteous way. That's not what we're told to do. As it says in the verse, just between the two of you.

It couldn't be clearer. Just between the two of you. And the heartfelt desire is that the brother is won over, that he listens, and that he recognizes the fault and repents of it.

A key verb in this instruction in terms of what we have to do is the verb to go. If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault.

And, of course, that's the one thing that we seldom do. We seldom go. We are conscious of the offense. We're maybe hurt by it. We're offended by it.

[ 14 : 34 ] But how difficult to go and to speak to the one who has offended us, who has sinned against us in some way.

We don't want to get involved. How often have we said that or thought that? I don't want to get involved. Well, Jesus is saying you do have to get involved.

You have a responsibility to get involved. You can't simply wash your hands of it and say, Well, I didn't do anything wrong. I don't want to get involved. It will be messy. It will be difficult. And I just can't handle the stress of doing what Jesus is saying that we must do.

We need to go. But it's discreet love at this first stage. Private. Just the two of you. But then there's a second step that Jesus outlines, which I'm describing as wise love in verse 16.

But if he will not listen, take one or two others so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. In the event that step one proves ineffective, your brother doesn't listen.

[ 15 : 46 ] He doesn't repent. Then a further step is required. You're to involve one or two others as witnesses. Now, these are not witnesses of the original offense or sin.

And that's very clear. They're witnesses of the attempt to restore. That is what they're going to be involved in and participate in. Now, Jesus does draw on Old Testament teaching that relates to a judicial process where witnesses are required.

He draws from Deuteronomy chapter 19 and verse 15. But though Jesus draws from an Old Testament example of a judicial process, that doesn't mean that what he's describing is a formal judicial process.

He's drawing on the principle established in the Old Testament, the wisdom, the prudence of having witnesses to be involved in such circumstances.

And that is what is being called for wise love. The brother, he's not accepted your genuine and sincere attempt to restore.

[17:00] And so now it's necessary to involve one or two others. The witnesses will be able to help in, I would imagine, a number of ways. But I can certainly think of two ways in which the witnesses will be able to help in that meeting, in that conversation.

It could help in reinforcing what you are saying to the one who has sinned against you. And so add weight to the call to repentance. It's not just one person who maybe the one you're speaking to could say, oh, well, they're just resentful and they're like that.

And oh, I know what he's like. No, you would have that reinforced by one or two others. Or you may be in the wrong as you rebuke your brother.

You may be the one who's got it wrong. And maybe you've misjudged the situation. Well, the witnesses could help establish that. And maybe point your own error out and say, well, actually, do you really think he has done what you claim he's done?

Or is it actually wrong what he has done that you consider to be so wrong? Maybe you've misunderstood or misjudged the situation.

[18:10] One or two witnesses, wise, older, mature, would be able to help. And there's a couple of ways in which they could help. Wise love. But then there's a third step in the process that I'm calling tough love.

In the event that the second step proves unsuccessful, then this third step is required. And in verse 17, we're told, tell it to the church. Now, this is something that we're moving into maybe a realm that is very alien to us because we don't do this, really, if we're honest.

Maybe the first step we can identify with and even the second. But the third is, well, yeah, Jesus says that's what you should do. But, you know, what's that all about? Tell it to the church.

Is what is in mind the gathering of all of the believers in a given locality? Would it be legitimate to understand it as involving those who represent the church, so the leaders of the church?

Maybe that would be a legitimate way of applying what Jesus is saying. But however we understand what this might look like, notice that even at this stage, the purpose and the hope and the intention is to bring restoration.

[19:33] In verse 17, it says, if he refuses to listen even to the church. So obviously the hope is that he will listen. But if he doesn't, then this is what you should do. But even at this stage, the hope is and the desire is that he will listen and that he will repent and that he will be restored.

Restoration remains at the heart of what is being done, certainly the intention, the desire. But if he doesn't, and this is where love seems to go out the window, if he doesn't, Jesus says you are to treat him as a pagan or a tax collector.

So he hasn't listened three times. He didn't listen to you. He didn't listen to the witnesses you brought. He hasn't listened to the church, the leaders of the church, however we understand that. And there's a stubbornness there.

And so, okay, at this point, now you are to treat him as a pagan or a tax collector. Is that where love ends? Okay, we've loved enough.

You know, that's just too much to carry on loving in such circumstances. Well, far from it. This is love. We might call it tough love, but it's love. The brother who refuses to repent is behaving like a pagan.

[20:49] His conduct is that of a pagan. And so it's reasonable that he be treated like a pagan. That's what his behavior would suggest that he is. He may not be.

He may be a believer who is simply stubborn and sinfully refusing to repent, but his conduct identifies him as a pagan. So he's to be treated as such.

But this is important. How are we to treat pagans and tax collectors? How did Jesus treat pagans and tax collectors, tax collectors and sinners?

How did he treat them? Well, he treated them with love and friendship. So when Jesus is saying that we are to treat such a person as a pagan or a tax collector, he's not talking about them being shunned, being hated.

He's saying you are to treat them as if they weren't believers because that is the evidence of their lives. But still, you are to treat them with love and friendship and with a continuing desire to see their repentance and restoration.

[ 21 : 51 ] In this, there's a delicious twist to the language that Jesus uses and that Matthew faithfully records. And the twist is this, if we call it a twist.

It's that Matthew, of course, was a tax collector. That was his profession. And here this tax collector, he's no longer a tax collector, and yet he faithfully records what Jesus says about what you are to do with this brother who refuses to repent.

Treat him like a tax collector. Well, Matthew was treated by Jesus as a tax collector, and he was loved to repentance and faith by Jesus.

Discreet love, wise love, tough love. But then there's a second element that is necessary. There's this motivation of love, and it finds expression in the steps that Jesus outlines.

But then verse 18 provides for us what I'm describing as an agreed yardstick. What does it say? 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.

[ 22 : 57 ] Now, at first sight, this seems a little bit more mysterious, certainly to our ears. What does this even mean? What has this got to do with restoring those who have stumbled or strayed?

Well, binding and loosing is terminology that was used, vocabulary that was used by the rabbis, and that would have been very familiar to Matthew's audience that was largely a Jewish audience, his original audience.

And they would have known that these terms, to bind and to loose, meant to allow or disallow conduct based on an interpretation of the Torah, of the law of Moses.

So the rabbis would bind and would loose, and that meant establishing what was conduct that was allowed, pleasing to God, and what was conduct that was disallowed.

It was not pleasing to God. It was sinful. This was what they did, and they had God's authority to interpret God's Word to establish what was right and what was wrong.

[ 24 : 06 ] In the same gospel, we have recorded how this authority had already been granted to Peter, in representation of the 12, in chapter 16, and in verse 19.

There we read, I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. And is now, here in chapter 18, extended to the whole community of believers.

Now, why is this relevant or important to the matter to hand? Well, it's important because how else are you to determine if somebody has sinned or stumbled or strayed?

You need an approved and authoritative yardstick. Now, how does that work for us today? How do we bind and loose? How do we decide what's right and wrong?

Well, we turn to God's Word. That's why we have the Bible. God has provided us His Word as our yardstick. And it is the Bible that will determine what is right and what is wrong, and which will help us decide if somebody has sinned against us or not.

[ 25 : 15 ] If there's no yardstick, if there's no established and authoritative body of truth that can guide us, then we're in a subjective chaos.

What's right for me is wrong for you, and vice versa. Who decides? And I go to somebody and say, you've sinned against me, and they say, well, no, I haven't. No, but you have. What you've done is sinful. No, it's not.

And what do we do? Well, you know, you say potato, I say potato, and you can't move forward. But what Matthew is recognizing is that's not the case.

We do have a yardstick. We can turn to a source of authority that can determine for us what is right and what is wrong. A community that establishes right and wrong conduct for those who belong to the community is very countercultural, certainly today.

Certainly today. Some of you may remember. I don't know if they still have this logo. I was saying that they've changed their logo. But Burger King, for many years, had a logo.

[ 26 : 21 ] Have it your way. And you could understand that very limited to the burger. You can have it the way you like it. Fair enough. But curiously, Burger King have changed their logo.

And now their logo is not your logo, their slogan. It's be your way. Be your way. Now, apart from the appalling grammar, it's a very subtle and interesting change of slogan.

Be your way. And the rationale for the change, and this is from corporate headquarters. It's not me interpreting it. But Burger King are saying as the significance, the meaning of their slogan, be your way, is this.

And I quote, that they, that is our customers, can and should live how they want any time. Well, isn't that a parable of our age?

Do your own thing. If it's right for you, then that's fine. You live your life as you please. Somebody else lives it in another way. Well, that's okay. Who am I to judge?

[ 27 : 24 ] Isn't that the mantra of our age? Who am I to judge? Who are you to judge? You can't judge anybody. Let people live. Let people be. Live and let live, and we could go on.

But, of course, that brings chaos. That brings the disintegration that we see all around us, and not so in the kingdom of heaven. In the kingdom of heaven, in Christ's church, we have an authority that allows us to establish what is right and wrong conduct for those who belong to the community. And here in verse 18, Matthew is making that clear. As we, as God's people, in the light of God's word, reach conclusions on the basis of the Bible's teaching, we are effectively agreeing with or echoing heaven.

And so what we bind or loose on earth is similarly bound or loosed in heaven. So an agreed yardstick. But finally, in verses 19 and 20, we have the third element, the third ingredient necessary for us to draw back and bring back those who are wondering.

And that is we need a helping hand. Matthew brings here, and as I've suggested, he's drawn or brought and recorded at this point a teaching of Jesus that may well have been given on another occasion, but that was suitable and appropriate given the matter to hand.

[ 28 : 55 ] And it's a teaching on prayer. And, of course, we could think about what we read in verses 19 to 20, and it would be entirely legitimate, in a general way. And preach a sermon on prayer, drawing out the principles that are established in these two verses, and apply it in any number of circumstances, and that would be entirely legitimate.

But, of course, our concern this evening is to say, well, what has this got to do with the duty of love that we have of bringing back those who are wondering? Well, I think what it has to do is that it's an acknowledgment that this is difficult, and we need help, and we need God's help.

If we are to restore our brother who has sinned, who has stumbled, we need the help of God, and God can help.

Remember, it is God who provides our example in the parable of lovingly pursuing the one who has strayed, and he is the one most concerned to secure the restoration of your brother.

If that is your concern, that's good, but you can be assured that God is much more deeply concerned to bring about this restoration. And so, of course, he's willing to help, and he's able to help, and we secure his help.

[ 30 : 10 ] You secure his help by praying, by asking for his help. Prayer is to accompany every step of the process. When we're first sinned against, we pray that God would help us to forgive the one who has sinned against us, that he would help us to respond with wisdom.

We maybe don't know, well, is this an appropriate circumstance in which to do what Jesus says, and we're not sure. Well, we need wisdom. We need direction. And so we pray, and we say, Lord, help us to know what we should do, if this is what we should do.

And as we approach the one we have to approach, and we're trembling, and we're nervous, and we don't know how it's going to pan out, we pray. We say, Lord, help me to speak wisely and winsomely and lovingly.

We pray. When we're not listened to and we need to involve others, we pray that God would help us to know who to involve, and, of course, the others will pray with us. In these verses very particularly, that seems to be what is in mind when it speaks of two or three agreeing.

As I say, that could be applied to any number of circumstances, but it can be very especially applied to this situation. You, one or two witnesses, you're about to go and speak to the one who has sinned against you.

[ 31 : 25 ] What do you do? Well, you pray. And what does Matthew tell us? What does Jesus tell us? Matthew records for us, Your Father in heaven is there to help you, and you need to ask for his help.

And as you and those who you have sought to accompany you pray, there is this promise that your Father will hear and will grant to you that help.

There's no guarantee that the erring brother will be restored. That's very obvious from what has gone before. But there is the guarantee that God will help you do what you need to do, and you can do no more than what you are asked and required to do.

And then you leave matters in the hands of God. And as we pray, the wonderful promise that we find in these last two verses of the passage we're looking at, the wonderful promise is of the Lord's presence with us in the very meeting, in the very conversation that we so dread or are fearful of. And in those circumstances, I don't know if you've ever been in that circumstance, of saying, well, I really should speak to that person. And there's a million things you'd rather do. You get a knot in the pit of your stomach at the very thought of going and speaking to them.

[ 32 : 53 ] You can find any number of excuses not to do what you've been persuaded you ought to do. You're trembling in anticipation, but be assured that Jesus will be with you.

For two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. Even in that first meeting, there's two brothers, one who has erred and one who is seeking to restore.

There's already two there. There's already two. And where two or three are gathered in my name, and it's in the Lord's name that you're there, seeking his glory, seeking the restoration of his saints, his little ones.

And Jesus says, I'm there. I'm there. I'm there with you. I do remember on one occasion, I'd be the first, or I am the first, to run a million miles from doing this kind of thing.

But I do remember one occasion where I was so constrained or circumstances, whatever it was, I found myself speaking to somebody, and in circumstances not unlike what's described here, though details, of course, aren't given in this teaching.

[ 33 : 59 ] And I was trembling, like literally trembling. Now, I was conscious of that, but I wondered whether it was just me. But subsequently, I knew it wasn't just me because the person I spoke to went and told somebody else, oh, he was trembling.

It was true. I didn't feel particularly humiliated by that, but it was true because it's not easy. It's difficult. But the Lord was there to help. And he will be there for you, for me, for any of us as we follow the instructions that he gives.

The Lord loves his little ones. He loves you. He loves me. His love is a persevering and a pursuing love, as that is beautifully illustrated by the shepherd in the parable.

And the Lord challenges his disciples. He challenges us to love as he loves. And our passage, this passage that we've looked at this evening, gives us very practical, very difficult, but very practical instruction, a route to follow, to lovingly pursue those who stumble and stray.

We need the love of God as our core motivation. If it is, our pursuit will always be with the desire to bring about restoration. But we do need a yardstick.

[ 35 : 14 ] We need an agreed source of authority that establishes what is right and wrong conduct. We have that. And we need help, big time. We need God's help.

And God, our heavenly shepherd, is willing and able to help if we will but ask him to grant us the help that we need. Well, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the manner in which it deals with life and relationships and the world as it is.

In all its brokenness and sinfulness, we recognize ourselves in the words of Jesus. We are those, not only who are sinned against, but we are those who sin against others.

And so, how necessary it is for there to be a means to bring restoration, for us to be restored, for others to be restored.

[ 36 : 14 ] And we thank you for the teaching that Jesus brings to us this evening. We ask that you would help us to take it on board and to go when it's necessary to go, to speak when it's necessary to speak, but to do so conscious that in our own strength we can do nothing, but you are there to help us.

And we can pray to you. And as we pray, so you will help us. We do thank you for the Bible. We thank you for your word. We thank you that there we have a source of authority that is unchanging. And the ideas of men and societies can change from one generation to another. But we thank you that in the Bible we find authority that is unchanging, instruction and guidance on that which is so important, what is right, what is wrong, what is pleasing to you, and what is displeasing to you. Help us to have wisdom in understanding what you teach us and bring to us in your word. And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen.