

Series: What Is the Church to Do?

Text: Matthew 18:15-20

Message #2 (June 20, 2010)

APPROPRIATE CONFRONTATION

Introduction

1. We got a good start last week as we opened the door to the question concerning how we should deal with sin in the life of a fellow believer. Paul made the point in Galatians 6:1-5 that the goal is restoration. That is what we want. That is what God desires. "If anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness."
2. The emphasis last week was not on the one caught in sin, but rather on the one or ones who would attempt such restoration. It is the spiritual responsibility to gently restore, but not necessarily an easy task. Often pride in the heart of the one who is attempting the restoration gets in the way of accomplishing the spiritual goal. We must not look down on the one needing to be restored. Rather, we are to help to bear their burden. That is where we started last week.
3. Having laid the groundwork for the goal and considered the warnings that must be heeded in order to reach the goal, we must now give attention to how we might actually proceed. It is rarely if ever easy or pleasant to have to confront another person who is caught in sin. More often than not we hide or maybe even run away from it. Most of us are uneasy with confrontation because we are afraid that what we say will be rejected or perhaps even turned back on us. Confrontations can turn ugly in a hurry. Even though the results could be wonderful, they may turn out to be awful. In the back of our mind we fear that the situation might be better off left alone. So we tend to leave it alone. We not only are afraid, but we really do not know what to do.
4. Does the Bible give any instructions on how to confront others in regard to sin? I believe it does and that is the focus of our attention today.
5. Jesus had a great deal to say about sin and restoration and forgiveness. The Gospel writer, Matthew, spends an entire chapter on the subject. We are probably familiar with several of the teachings in that chapter though we may not have connected them. Jesus begins by teaching on the greatness of the kingdom, using a child to illustrate. He ends that lesson with a warning to any who might cause such little ones to

sin. He follows that with a declaration of the awfulness of sin and what drastic action we ought to take to avoid it. Jesus then teaches the parable of the sheep who went astray and the shepherd who left the others in search of the sheep. He acknowledges the joy that comes to all when that which has strayed is returned to the fold. Jesus concludes with a parable on forgiveness in answering Peter's question, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

6. Tucked in the text, apparently prompting Peter's question is the teaching we need to consider. Believers sin. They will offend us. They will do and say unkind things about us. They will wrong us. What are we to do? How are we to deal with an offending brother or sister? If we apply what we learned last week, we are to restore them gently. But how do we do that? More often than not, those who are sinning against us do not think they need any restoration! And if they feel like they have nothing to confess or change or anything of which to repent, what are we to do? That's where we are today.
7. Jesus outlines a three-step process for those who must confront sin, each step designed to lead to restoration. He then provides the basis of the authority to take such action.

I. THE PROCESS DESIGNED TO LEAD TO RESTORATION (15-17)

- A. The private encounter – "go and tell him his fault between you and him alone"
 1. How to respond when someone sins against us – We are to go to that person. There are several things that probably should be said here. Sometimes when we are offended or hurt the other person does not even realize that they have done anything wrong. If our attitude is humble (consider last week's message) the issue may well be resolved in a matter of a few minutes. On the other side of this, most of us could work on not being so easily offended. We all need to be tenderhearted, but at the same time tough-skinned. Too often we turn those two around. We should assume the best in people and let them prove us wrong. But offenses do happen.
 2. What to say when someone sins against us – It is about the fault and it is spoken to that person alone. The conversation ought not to go beyond the parameters of the offense. We are far too quick to talk about something to others before we talk to the one we should be addressing. And the conversation is about the fault, the

offense. It is not a time to dump other things to try to make our case. We are not to be guilty of character assassination. This is about the offense and is to be spoken to the individual who initiated the offense.

3. What to do after we have brought the issue to our brother/sister in Christ – Either the matter is resolved and thus over, or we must continue to step two. Once again, the goal is restoration. If we clear the air of the offense it is very likely that we have gained a brother. The person will appreciate it that we have humbly come to them and that we have been fair and appropriate in our confrontation. Once the person sees the error of their ways, and makes the adjustment, the issue is over. And if it is over, make sure that it is over! But what if the person tells us to “take a hike?” What do we do then?

B. The small group assessment – “take one or two along with you...”

1. Addressing the question as to who is to accompany and why – Jesus does not specifically tell us who to take or why others are necessary but it is probable that we can get close to the correct answers. The OT Law required various charges to be based on two or three witnesses. If the charge could not be substantiated, there could be no conviction. That may be the issue here, but this is not a capital crime. It is a personal offense of one believer against another. It is more likely that the one or two others are so substantial that this second meeting has occurred. There is confirmation that a call has been made to repent and a confirmation that either restoration has been accomplished or the attempt has been rejected. Obviously now the offense would be known by others, perhaps creating additional pressure for the sinning brother to reconcile.
2. Affirming the goal – Though it is not stated, the obvious goal is that restoration would be realized. If after hearing again the call to reconcile in the presence of witnesses and the person refuses to listen, it is necessary to take the third step.

C. The congregational confrontation – “tell it to the church”

1. Who is the church? Some might make the case that this is instruction from Jesus to Jewish brothers so it does not apply to us in the church. This is, however, a pattern and is essentially repeated by Paul to Gentile churches, so I do not think that case can be made for such a limited application. The question remains, would this imply

that the person and the sin is be exposed to the entire church family or select people or the leadership or what?

2. What can the church do? – Let me set up a scenario. Suppose some failure to obey God, thus bringing reproach on the name of Christ has occurred and that person is unwilling to repent. That information is shared with the body of believers asking them to humbly, lovingly, but firmly call this person to repentance? It might sound something like this: “I am praying that you will change your mind, that God will break your heart. I am choosing not to fellowship with you as I have in the past, not because I don't care about you, but because I do. I will pray for you asking God to break through.”
3. Remember the goal? It has not changed. The goal is restoration. The goal is to see the person brought back into fellowship with God and with the offended party and with the entire family of God. And when that happens, we can celebrate God's grace and mercy.
4. Suppose this does not resolve the issue? Where do we go from here? Jesus said that they were to treat that one as “a Gentile and a tax collector.” Later Paul would instruct the Thessalonian Church on how to treat those who were idle, who wouldn't work. He said, “Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.” But later he would say to the Corinthians that they should treat a particular man by removing him from among them and then to “deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” We will talk more about that next week, but the point for now is to treat them with concern that they may not after all belong to Christ. That does not imply that we are unkind, but it does say something about fellowship. By now we might be tempted to say, “Wait a minute! What possible authority do we have to do any of this?” Jesus provides the answer.

II. THE AUTHORITY UPON WHICH THE PROCESS IS BUILT (18-20)

A. Binding and loosing in heaven and earth

1. Binding and loosing were Rabbinical terms that spoke of authority to act – either to bind, that is prevent, or loose, that is allow something to happen. In regard to this matter of which we have been considering, Jesus is saying that what is done as

outlined in these verses has its approval already in heaven. God has already made His judgment against the sin in question and the action toward restoration.

2. To say it another way, the authority to so act has been granted to us by God already. What we are prohibiting and permitting here on earth has already been established in heaven. The authority to act in this manner has already been given by God.
- B. Agreeing and asking and what will be done (v. 19) – This statement and the one to follow are two of the most misused and misapplied verses in the Bible. The, “if two of you agree,” mentioned here is not some sort of guarantee obligating God to act. (“If I can find another brother to agree with me about something then God must do it.” – No)! The statement, along with the “two or three” in verse 20, point back to the one or two others added to the offended person who affirm the meeting and recognize God's authority to so act. As we follow this pattern, the Father will be at work in the situation. Jesus does not explain how or in what way, but he makes the point.
- C. The two or three and why God is among them (v. 20) – The two or three in verse 20 is not to make us feel better when only two or three show up for a prayer meeting, affirming to us that God is present even in such a small group. Frankly, God is present even if only one person is present, if that person belongs to Christ. The point is that when we obey God and deal with sin in this way, we can be assured that God has given His approval to our actions. “There I am among them” is not an affirmation of His presence (though He is present), but an affirmation of His agreement with our response. God desires that we obey Him. He hates sin and He desires that we would hate it too and when it is present that we would seek to rid ourselves of it. One of the ways He has determined to help us rid ourselves of sin and be restored to the family of God is right here in this text. When there is repentance, there must be restoration and that includes forgiveness. But what if we forgive and they do it to us again? When they repent again, we forgive again. And the reason is based on a comparative with God's forgiveness toward us as presented in the parable recorded in the rest of Matthew 18.

Conclusion

1. John MacArthur writes, “So many times in the life of a church people just drift away. And I have asked myself, ‘How many people did I know who drifted away into sin are lost to me because I didn't follow through with discipline?’ At the first signs of refusal to

repent, I gave up on them. Sometimes you hear people say things like, 'o well, they're gone. They were never much help anyway.' But the point is that if a brother drifts away into sin, you should go to him and do everything possible to not let that happen. If you don't see them, or if you know something is wrong in their life, you go first, and then you take somebody with you, and finally you tell everyone to go and put pressure on, pursuing them with a meek love in order to call them back from sin into the fellowship."

2. Gil Rugh continues the theme. "He may say, 'Stay out of my life; get out.' At that point you can't say, 'Wow, I did my part.' No, you did step one of your part; now for step two. If he does not listen to you, the second step is to confront him with witnesses... You can see that love has to be at work. This is hard to do, but love is doing what is best for the other person regardless of the personal cost involved. If he would not listen to you personally, then you take one or two mature Christians with you to confront him again about his sin." Does this ever work?
3. Kenneth and Joy Gage, in their book, *Restoring Fellowship*, share the following story. *A lesson could be drawn from a church in the jungles of Mexico. At one point the body faced the need to discipline one of the elders for the problem of immorality. Whether or not the church had a formal membership we do not know. But the congregation excluded him from fellowship in a way that was clearly understood by all. The man was required to attend all services (they determined that he needed that), but he was forced to sit on the back row (not a favorite seat in a jungle church). He was forbidden to join in singing (the worst possible punishment), and he was not allowed to partake of communion. In the truest sense, in that culture, he was excluded from the fellowship. Not surprisingly, the man repented, discontinued his illicit relationship, and was restored to fellowship...*
4. How important is it for the body of believers to be right with God, or if not, to get right with God? I think we know the answer. The question remains, "Are we willing to do what it takes, even if it is hard?"