

Shepherds and Sheep, Part 4:

When One Goes Astray

Matthew 18:10-35

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Preface

We have been dwelling on the relationship of Shepherds and Sheep this month, as your elders, who are your overseers and under-shepherds, are seeking with the help of God's Spirit to answer his call to faithfully care for and watch over this flock within Christ's fold, starting with you who are church members here. Letters are out, so that by now most if not all of you have found out which elder has chosen to take the lead in shepherding you, and what that will mean for you. The preaching of the Word these Sunday mornings has been designed to support that effort, to win everyone (or further win) everyone over to it. And this is the finale, for now, as we consider Matthew 18:10-35 and for the most part give attention to vv. 15-20, a passage that Dr. Timothy Witmer, my seminary professor who in many ways has influenced this sermon series, advised us to preach at least once a year—and we're about to find out why.

Scripture Reading

[Matthew 18:10] "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. [12] What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? [13] And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. [14] So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

[15] "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. [16] But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. [17] If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. [18] Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. [19] Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. [20] For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

[21] Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" [22] Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

[23] "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. [24] When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. [25] And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. [26] So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' [27] And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. [28] But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' [29] So his fellow servant fell

down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' [30] He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. [31] When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. [32] Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. [33] And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' [34] And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. [35] So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Introduction

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I begin with a question. What do the sheep who make up the church do when they notice that one of their own number may be wandering off, into danger, away from and outside of the good, green pasture of the Savior-Shepherd? I'm not asking, What *should* they do, but what in fact *do* they do? What do they incline towards? What is their tendency?

Let's come up with a pretend but concrete example. Let's say his first name is Christian, and his last name is Church Member. And you can't help but observe that his attendance has become irregular, somewhat erratic. And you're not the only one who makes this keen observation, and you discuss it among yourselves: "I wonder what's up with him...." "He really needs to be here...." Then, because you never watch sports on Sunday, you watch the highlights of your favorite football team on Monday, and you notice as you watch the replay of a touchdown that Christian Church Member is in the crowd cheering. The phone rings. It's your brother in Christ, a fellow church member: "Is that Christian Church Member I just saw on tv?" "I believe it was...." "Man, is that where he was yesterday, instead of church? His priorities are out of order!" Next week, *you* go to the game (it's on a Monday night). And you see Christian Church Member there, with a woman, who is not his wife! That same brother in Christ asks you at Bible study that week, "So, how was the game?" And you reply, "Well, it was great except I saw Christian Church Member there—with another woman!" "Are you serious?" "That guy is playing with fire...." "Yeah, if his wife ever finds out...." Now, at this point, you and your brothers do one of two things. You continue to discuss the matter, eventually moving on and forgetting about it. Or, one or more of you decide to tell the elders: "As our spiritual leaders, you need to know that Christian Church Member is a Sabbath-breaking, sports-idolizing, adulterer! It's time to Matthew 18 this dude. It's time for some excommunication!"

Now that may seem like an incredibly black-and-white, very silly story, and I suppose in some ways it is, but it illustrates what sheep all too often do to their fellow sheep. They don't follow Matthew 18:15-20. They may do absolutely nothing. Or they will just talk with others about the alleged offender in question, engaging in destructive criticism or what the Bible calls gossip, which isn't something that the ladies have a corner on. Or they skip all of the preceding steps outlined by Jesus and go straight to the elders and make their case for formal church discipline to take place. Jesus is very clear, however, as to what *ought* to take place. Step one, according to v. 15, is this: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother." If that is to no avail, step two comes in v.

16: “But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” And if that is to no avail, step three comes in v. 17: “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Now there are often layers to this in biblical churches, with intermediate steps to take before one is treated “as a Gentile and a tax collector”—in other words, publicly removed from church membership and no longer regarded as a true Christian, not apart from repentance at any rate, which is also known as excommunication. In a Presbyterian church, in which telling it to the church first means telling it to the church as represented by the Session, the body of elders, the Session may first bring an admonition and perhaps then something stronger in the form of a rebuke to the offender, also known as silent censures, behind the scenes warning the offender that unless he, or she, repents, he or she will be suspended from the Lord’s Supper. That would be the next stage. And if none of these measures provokes repentance, then the Session’s only recourse would be excommunication. In vv. 18-20, Jesus speaks of the church and its leadership binding and loosing, in such a way that when they act accordingly, in keeping with the written Word of God, including the teaching of Jesus here, they are reflecting the will of heaven. Jesus adds this too: “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” This, again, read in light of what has preceded, has to do with formal church discipline. When it is rightly carried out, our heavenly Father agrees with it, and Christ is to be understood as present, speaking authoritatively and solemnly through his church.

What I wish to impress upon us is that there can’t be rush to judgment, that preliminary steps must not be ignored. We can’t tolerate in our leadership or in the church as a whole a mentality that is church discipline-happy, or a mentality that is somehow eager to excommunicate. Now, it’s true that, as bedrock and foundational as this material is to church discipline, Matthew 18:15-20 is not the only portion of Scripture that speaks to this issue. Other Scriptures make it clear that this is a general pattern, not a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all set of steps that Jesus gives here. In some cases, in fact, when the sin is serious enough and of a public nature, like when a minister is teaching false doctrine, you don’t need to take the first two, more private steps detailed here—not when the situation already warrants more a more formal judicial process. However, many, many cases do start off being private in nature, requiring that Jesus’ teaching, as given here, along with the rest of the Bible’s teaching on this subject, be carefully, meticulously followed. And that’s what I especially wish to focus on this morning, to reinforce in this congregation something I believe you are already sensitive to. Again, though, nothing can be taken for granted. After all, as N.T Wright says of these verses and what they teach, “It is severely practical as well as ruthlessly idealistic: not a bad combination.” And, I might add, it is to be applied not only as guidance for formal church discipline, which is corrective, but as a handbook for something that is preventive in nature, as we live by these words in our everyday relationships with one another.

We Must Reflect Christ's Heart Attitude

This is how I would sum up God's word to us, Covenant Presbyterian. This is where we're going: Because Christ knows them by name and loves each and every sheep within his fold, we must reflect his heart attitude *When One Goes Astray*.

I. First, Make Personal Care and Concern Your Motivation

Brothers and sisters, the context of Matthew 18:15-20 must be given its due, lest we twist its meaning and application by wrenching it out its original setting. And that means examining what comes before, in 18:10-14. In vv. 10-11, Jesus stresses the need to have a high regard for his little ones. Then comes vv. 12-14: "What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." This is often labeled "The Parable of the Lost Sheep," but should probably be called, "The Parable of the Straying Sheep," reflecting the language Jesus actually uses. The straying sheep, after all, carries with it the connotation of one who already belongs to the Shepherd but goes astray. This can apply to one who is lost, who has never known Christ, of course—but primarily Jesus seems to have in mind straying Christians, wayward, prone to backsliding and so on. And this fits in well with what he is about to teach, with regard to a "brother" who offends.

What is the point of Jesus' parable, then? It is this, that each one must be loved. You see, Jesus doesn't think like a businessman when it comes to his sheep. He doesn't rationalize and say, "Well, I've got these ninety-nine, so I'm not going to risk further loss and bother with that one that's getting away." No! The God we know in Christ is like the parent who knows that at times there may be one child who needs extra attention, special attention. It doesn't mean that he or she loves the others less, but only that this one is in particular need. God's love for us in Christ is personal, you see. Being in his kingdom is not like waiting in line after having picked a number. You are not a mere number. You are known by name. You aren't treated the way I sometimes would be treated as a little kid at fast food restaurants, when I would always ask for no pickle: "Please, no pickle!" I would tell my father, and he would tell the employee. I was there—I saw it, I heard it—they knew, if they were listening at all, that I did not want a pickle. And yet, almost all the time, almost invariably, there would be a pickle on my hamburger. Well, that's what happens when you aren't being given the personal treatment. Not so with our heavenly Father—not according to Jesus. In his kingdom, each and every one of his sheep matters. "So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." *When One Goes Astray*, God goes in search of that sheep until he finds it, rejoicing when he does so. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to make that our heart as well. Because that's how we need to be when we are called to be one of God's vessels, when we see one of our fellow sheep going astray. We must act. If we love them with the love of this God, then we must pursue.

II. Second, Make Jesus' Instructions Your Mandate, Starting with Step One

Brothers, sisters, this is all I intend to cover, for the being, in fact. Just step one. If, Lord willing, I really do preach on this text once a year, I can cover the next step next time. But this is the pivotal point, the initial step that is all too often glossed over and disrespected as if it is unimportant. When everything else, should further steps be necessary, will hinge on your integrity and mine at this point. So let's zero in on v. 15 again: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."

Now who is first of all in view according to Jesus? If he is dealing with widening concentric circles, where the whole church is in the know and involved in the end, should things need to escalate and reach that point, then who is the first and narrowest concentric circle? We might be tempted to say "your brother and you," but I think we'd be jumping the gun. The first and narrowest concentric circle is, simply, "your brother"—or "your sister"—so stop there. You may become aware of your brother or sister doing or saying something, or engaging in some habit, that you find questionable. And yet you need to pause and ask, "Is it really necessary for me to bother him about this?" "Does she really need me to confront her?" Is it a sin, or it just something that I personally find annoying? Is it just the case of a sheep moving over into some grass that I myself don't enjoy as much, though it is still the pasturelands of Christ? And, if it is a sin, is it a serious enough sin? Has the sheep wandered beyond the pasturelands or is he or she just not as centrally located within the pasturelands? I know: All sin is serious, but there are degrees of seriousness—some sin is more serious, some sin is less. Does it really warrant me intervening? After all, if we need to have one-on-one, heart-to-heart talks on every little thing that bothers us, or even every sin that we spot, even if it's not so serious, then it's all we'd ever be doing. We need to beware of a busybody or hyper-critical, nitpicky spirit, and in many, many cases just let it go, and move on. If it's sin, it may at the very least be something your brother or sister should be given the chance to realize and repent of, as the Spirit of God works in his or her life.

So how do you know if it does require, to use Jesus' words, you telling it to your brother, or sister? Well, I recommend a book called *The Peacemaker*, and chapter 7 entitled "Just the Two of You." The author, Ken Sande, poses a series of four questions to help you and me discern whether or not we need to address the issue with our brother or sister:

- #1: Is the "offense" in question dishonoring God? It has to be serious enough that it is bringing down one's testimony to the name of Christ.
- #2: Is it damaging your relationship? This brings up the fact that the offending sheep doesn't need to be offending you personally for you to be under some obligation to act, to speak to your brother or sister. But often the offense, or perceived offense, is against you. And you know you need to reach out to your brother or sister if it's damaging the relationship such that you can't get past it. You can't just overlook it then. It's perhaps an inconsiderate wound that is just being inflicted again and again.
- #3: Is it hurting others? Now, of course, if it's sin it hurts God in some sense but here we're talking about people. And not all sins are equal in terms of how

much the sinner is hurting other people. Is he or she hurting family members, church members, others who depend upon this person, who are being let down by this person?

- #4: Is it hurting the offender? Is it self-destructive? Or could it lead to some self-destructive scenario?

If the answer is yes to some or all of those questions, then it is likely time to expand the concentric circle at this point to your brother (or sister) and you. Though going to him, or her, will take some guts, which you'll need to pray for. Just remember how often the Bible insists on this type of keeping of our brothers and sisters *When One Goes Astray*. I'll just give two examples, one from the Old Testament and one from the New. Proverbs 24:11-12: "Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, 'Behold, we did not know this,' does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not repay man according to his work?" James 5:19-20: "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

And, by the way, this might be another sermon for another day, but in Matthew 5:23-34, Jesus also teaches you to take the initiative if someone has something against you, if they haven't taken that step themselves, and even if in reality you're innocent. You still need to leave your gift on the altar and go seek reconciliation—straighten it out.

Back to the case, though, of you addressing the offender. You've determined that you need to take this step. How, then, should you go about this? Well, it will also take humility, which you'll also need to pray for. Again, Jesus' teaching speaks to this, in Matthew 7:3-5, where he counsels you, and me, to first take the log out of our own eye. The Apostle Paul, in Galatians 6:1, similarly counsels a spirit of gentleness. And you don't need to go in all guns blazing, "You did this, and you did that!" You can confront, without being confrontational. Learn some sort of indirect approach, like the prophet Nathan with David in 2 Samuel 12, where convicts the king through a parable. And go somewhat tentatively, being ready for the possibility that you may just learn that you are getting it all wrong, that you have been misconstruing your brother or sister. And being ready for some confessing and owning up of your own sin as well, especially if you yourself have been offended. In fallen human relationships, a completely guilt-free, innocent party is hard to find.

And Sande and others believe that Jesus is leaving the door open to a third party helping this conversation take place in some cases, acting as some sort of intermediary or representative. This may be appropriate, given certain cultures—and you do see it in the Bible from time to time, like Barnabas speaking to the Apostles on behalf of the newly converted Paul in Acts 9. And it is likely very needed in cases like abuse, when a victim is confronting his or her abuser. The key, though, is that the third party acts normally just as a facilitator, so that real personal, face-to-face communication takes place between the

two of you. No, I'm afraid that this, ideally, is not something to resolve impersonally, through texting or emailing or even a phone call.

One very key thing that Sande adds is that this may take more than one conversation. Give it a chance, even if it means repeated attempts. Don't be in a hurry to get to step two. Which you may or may not need to at some point resort to. Because you go into this not knowing the outcome. Peace-faking is easy—happens all the time, as nothing gets dealt with, as people pretend everything is okay, that all is well. True peacemaking, on the other hand, means putting yourself out there. Yet the Bible asks for no less, with Paul in Romans 12:18 issuing the imperative: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

And if you just so happen to be the one on the receiving end of this, it need not sting you so much. We should not be petrified of a rebuke, of constructive criticism when it comes. We are loved and accepted in Christ, and we need to let that empower us to receive it, to process it rightly—we may need to hear it....

III. Third, Make Gracious Reconciliation and Restoration Your Goal....

Dear brothers and sisters, beloved, 18:15 has already been taking us in this direction. It says there that the point of reaching out one-on-one is that “if he listens to you, you have gained your brother”! You gain him back, and quite frankly when there is real conflict resolution the bond you then have is stronger than whatever bond you enjoyed before. When relationships pass the test!

Listen to the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter XXXI, section three, on the need for corrective, formal church discipline:

Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.

Did you notice the first reason listed? “For the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren!”

And the clincher here is the rest of the context, what comes after Matthew 18:15-20. Simon Peter, knowing what will make this process so challenging, asks Jesus in v. 21, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus replies in v. 22: “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven....” Jesus does not mean you can stop once you get to 490. He's speaking in a Hebrew, idiomatic way—he's saying that there is no limit to the forgiveness that you confer. And with forgiveness so crucial to it, at the very heart of it, you don't stop seeking after full reconciliation and restoration, complete with repentance.

It means Peter and the rest of us need to first receive God's forgiveness in Christ. We need reservoirs of forgiveness within, that come from God and how he has forgiven us, bringing us to repentance and reconciling and restoring us to himself. Which is the point of "The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant" that Jesus then tells in vv. 23-35, that we can only touch on. A servant owes a king a huge debt, which the king forgives. The servant is then stingy towards his fellow servant, punishing him, refusing to forgive this other man's debt, though it is miniscule, chump change compared to his original debt to his master, the king. The king finds out, is enraged, and revokes forgiveness, jailing him until the debt is paid in full. Then comes Jesus' punch line, in v. 35: "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Do Christians lose forgiveness? Does God renege on his redeeming love? Of course not! But to the naked eye, this is what it looks like, the way it is depicted in the story. Someone professes Christ and the forgiveness of sins, but does not extend mercy and forgiveness to others, thus showing his or her profession to be empty and false. Meaning that more awe-inspiring, transcendent things are expected of us who are true Christians, and of Christ's true church. Whether it's a private offense we must forgive, or a public offense the church must forgive, complete with the offender's reinstatement and restoration upon repentance, we must do so. We must not be begrudging and miserly with forgiveness—not when a holy, righteous God's forgiveness of us cost him everything, his own dear Son's sacrificial death upon the cross, as payment in full for it—and not when other people's indebtedness to us is nothing in comparison. Our Shepherd-God's reconciling love and grace must rule over us, even when we deal with it *When One Goes Astray*.

Amen!

Prayer