

The Air We Breathe

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2 ESV)

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. (Matthew 5:13 ESV)

Confrontation Avoidance

August 20th, 2023

Matthew 18:15-20

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 18.

We are continuing our summer series in which we are identifying the subtle yet sinful thought patterns that permeate our culture and that threaten to creep into the church.

Our target today is confrontation avoidance.

I want you to notice that I didn't say *conflict* avoidance, because our culture is ready and willing to do conflict. You don't need to spend more than five minutes on social media to see that *nobody* is dodging that sparing match. We're angry. We've got some thoughts about some people that we've never met before, and we are ready to share those thoughts with the world! We're not avoiding conflict.

But *confrontation* is different. We avoid confrontation like the plague. Because that would involve meeting with people that we disagree with *in person*. That would involve looking them in the eye. That would involve a real conversation that might actually lead to real change. That's scary.

And so, we escape into gossip, slander and grumbling. We take to the internet and pretend that we're brave, but we're actually just hiding from the hard talks that we need to have. Everyone does it. It's the air we breathe.

But we will see in our passage for this morning that Jesus is calling us to rise about that immaturity. People are sinful, and conflicts are inevitable, but – thanks be to God – Jesus has provided us with clear principles for healthy confrontations. Look with me to Matthew 18:15-20. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

“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.” (Matthew 18:15-20 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let me lay my cards on the table for a moment: I think that the North American church is guilty of brazenly ignoring this passage. And our negligence here is terribly dangerous.

Is pornography a problem in the church today? You bet it is, but at least we all *recognize* it as a problem. The person battling *that* addiction *knows* that they’re playing with sin.

But we bring our gossip and our grudges right into the sanctuary, don’t we?

The goal of this series is to identify the carbon monoxide sins in the church – the sins that are so subtle that they creep in without *anyone* noticing – and I suspect that the alarm is going to go off for some of us today. Because we’ve been hurt by someone, and rather than speaking to that someone, we’ve been speaking to everyone else. Because that’s what Canadians do. Or we see someone going down a dangerous road, but rather than risking offense by warning them, we just sit on our hands and watch them wander away. Because that’s what Canadians do.

But followers of Jesus are called to a higher standard. We’re called to pursue one another in love. We’re called to have the hard talks. We’re called to do all of this in a healthy, Christ-exalting way.

To that end, in this passage, Jesus provides us with clear principles for healthy confrontation in the household of God.

Clear Principles For Healthy Confrontation In The Household Of God

I see seven principles here, so we are going to move quickly. First, this passage teaches us that:

1. Healthy confrontation is necessary when hell is at stake

Let me be clear at the outset, not all confrontation is healthy confrontation. Look again at verse 15:

If your brother **sins** against you, go and tell him his fault, (Matthew 18:15a ESV)

If he SINS. That's an important observation. Because a lot of our offenses have nothing to do with sin! Sometimes, we offend each other simply because we're clumsy.

Perhaps you're holding a grudge because someone accidentally cut you off in the parking lot or forgot to invite you to a birthday party. That's not sin – that's clumsiness. If you *need* to deal with that – if it's turning into sin on *your* end because you're finding yourself angry and unforgiving – then by all means, have that talk. But you could also just choose to forgive the clumsiness and resolve to move on in peace.

Healthy confrontation is *optional* in cases of clumsiness.

But healthy confrontation is *necessary* when hell is at stake. These are instructions for when your brother or sister SINS. This passage is the continuation of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 about how urgently we need to deal with sin. If you scroll back a little bit to verse 9, Jesus just said:

And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes **to be thrown into the hell of fire.** (Matthew 18:9 ESV)

Our passage this morning isn't about birthday party snubs. This is about when brothers and sisters are wandering down a road that leads to *hell*. And, when that happens, it is *necessary* that we go after them. Matthew Henry notes:

We should think no pains too much to take for the recovering of a sinner to repentance.¹

Please don't hear this sermon as some hypothetical, theoretical discussion. It's easy to do that. I was tempted to do that as I wrote this sermon. Because, if I'm being honest, when I apply this passage at ground level, *it hurts*. There have been far too many times when – thanks to my cowardly confrontation avoidance – I just threw up my hands and watched my friends dance away with the devil. Listen: Healthy confrontation can be difficult and messy, but avoiding healthy confrontation and watching people you love fall headlong into hell is 100 times worse. I don't ever want to do that again. Jesus has called us to more than that. The Apostle James wrote:

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ 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. (James 5:19-20 ESV)

O that we would be a church filled with people who are committed to saving souls from death. Healthy confrontation is *necessary* when hell is at stake. Which is why, second:

2. Healthy confrontation is commanded by Jesus

Look again at verse 15:

If your brother sins against you, **go and tell him his fault** (Matthew 18:15a ESV)

I wasn't initially going to include this point in the sermon, but the more I thought about it, the more I felt it needed to be said – and it needed to be said early. Some of us are going to be tempted to make the excuse, “That's just not how I do things. I don't have those talks. I don't belong in people's business. I'm not a meddler.”

If that's you, before you tune out, I want to make sure that you understand exactly *who* you are tuning out. This is a clear command from Jesus for you. This is an imperative verb. Go! Tell him his fault! Pastor David Platt explains:

¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary On The Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 1356.

This is a command from Jesus, so that a failure to do this in the church is sin.²

So, if you're going to tune out – if you're going to cross your arms and say, “These people just don't know how to mind their own business” – then you need to know that you are choosing sin. Healthy confrontation is commanded by Jesus. Next, we learn that:

3. Healthy confrontation is for restoration, not punishment

Look again at verse 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**. (Matthew 18:15 ESV)

That's the outcome we're after. We want to see people RESTORED.

But, because we live in a fallen world, let me fence this for a moment. *Restoring* a person doesn't mean *removing* all consequences. If a person's sin is *illegal* then, while they can certainly be restored to Christ, they *also* need to answer to the authorities. Romans 13 teaches us that the king:

does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. (Romans 13:4b ESV)

So, to be very practical, Matthew 18 is teaching that the child abuser or the embezzling pastor should be quietly restored as if nothing has happened. Such people *can* be restored to right relationship with Jesus, but that restoration will include facing real consequences. And it will likely include permanent boundaries for people who have been wronged. In the cultural climate we're living in, I think we need that qualifier here.

However, qualifiers aside, let's focus on the passage itself. What we find here is a principle for how we should engage with a brother or sister who has sinned. And what we see is that our goal in such situations is not to track the person down so as to make them pay, but it is instead to track the person down so as to *bring them home*. Again, the context of our passage makes this point obvious. Look back at the previous paragraph in chapter 18. Jesus has just finished sharing the

² David Platt et al. eds., *Christ-Centered Exposition - Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2013), 244.

parable of the good shepherd who leaves the 99 to find the one sheep who has strayed. He finishes that parable by saying:

So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. (Matthew 18:14 ESV)

Do you see the connection? WE are called to be an extension of the Good Shepherd! WE have the privilege of being used by God to pull wayward sheep out of the muck and the thorns. When we find the lost sheep, it's not our job to smack the wanderer, or to rain down shame and guilt – it is our job to resemble the Good Shepherd and to carry them out of the mess and into safety once again. No doubt, this passage was in the Apostle Paul's mind when he wrote:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. (Galatians 6:1a ESV)

Sometimes people are blind to their sin. David was. Do you remember the story of David and Bathsheba? David was guilty of rape and murder, and yet it doesn't seem that his conscience was pricked at all. He carried on with his business thinking that he was fine. Until Nathan looked him in the eye and confronted David for his sin. Only then did David come to a place of repentance. The point is: Some wanderers might not even realize that they're wandering. Go to them. Talk to them. Not to punish, but to restore. That's what healthy confrontation looks like.

Fourth:

4. Healthy confrontation must begin privately

We're still in verse 15, because there is so much in this one verse that we need to see. Look again with me:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, **between you and him alone.** (Matthew 18:15a ESV)

Can I make a painful observation here? We are – by and large – AWFUL at this!

When you see the sin, go and deal with it. Privately.

Don't go your close friends to "seek their counsel." Don't go to your prayer group to "solicit prayer support." And DEFINITELY don't go to the internet to air it out!

Go to them. And – let me add this important clarification – go to them IN PERSON. Text and e-mail are great for lots of things, but confrontation is not on that list. Go, look them in the eye, and talk to them. I've been part of more of these conversations than I can remember. And I've been on both ends of the conversation. I can count on one hand the number of times that those conversations didn't end well. On almost every occasion, the person needing correction was happy to receive it. On almost every occasion, both people in that conversation felt *better* about the relationship afterwards. And on almost every occasion, massive, unhelpful distractions were avoided by simply having the hard talk.

If we're going to make progress in this, I suspect that some of us need to repent this morning. We need to acknowledge – and I say *we* because I have been guilty of this myself – *we* need to acknowledge that there have been times when we made problems bigger than they needed to be, and we pushed people further from where they needed to be, because we disobeyed this command. We talked *about* the people that we should have been talking *to*. That is sin. We need to call it what it is, and we need to repent of it. And then we need to ask for God's help moving forward. Matthew Henry wisely counselled:

Let God's work be done effectually, but with as little noise as may be.³

Amen. Fifth, after having followed all the steps that we found in verse 15:

5. Healthy confrontation should follow the biblical process

As I said earlier, MOST confrontation will end after that first conversation. But, on the rare occasions that it doesn't Jesus has provided us with a process to follow. Look with me at verses 16-17:

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. (Matthew 18:16-17a ESV)

³ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary On The Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 1356.

The process described in this passage is what we refer to as church discipline. I want you to notice that this process describes our process for walking alongside a straying *believer*. Remember, verse 15 said:

If **your brother** sins (Matthew 18:15a ESV)

So, if you're unbelieving neighbour is stealing cable from the cable companies, we're not going to call a member's meeting to deal with that. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? (1 Corinthians 5:12 ESV)

There is clearly a *sphere of influence* that we are responsible for, and Paul describes that sphere with the phrase "those inside the church." However, even *that* can be fuzzy, because who does that include? We have lots of believing visitors who come to the church. If the brother who drops by to worship with us once every six weeks decides to engage in an affair, is it our responsibility to call a meeting to call *him* to repentance? Who exactly is *inside* the church?

This dilemma is why we practice church membership. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, it was *obvious* who was in the church and who was out. No one had cars, so there was no church hopping. And following Jesus was costly, so nobody saw Christianity as a hobby. If you were *in* there was no hiding it.

The way that we attempt to recreate that here is through church membership. That is a mutual relationship whereby you say to the church, "I am a believer, and I am *inside* this church family, and I want your help in walking with Jesus" and we in turn say to you, "We recognize you as a believer, we recognize you as being inside, and we accept accountability in helping you in your walk with Jesus."

Which brings us to this process. Let's imagine a scenario where you notice that believer Bob is having an affair. You go to Bob privately as per verse 15, and you point him to the Scriptures, and you remind him of the gospel, but Bob is just not having it. What then?

Well, as per verse 16, you should recruit two or three others who know and love Bob and who can testify to his affair. Then, as a group, you should go to Bob again and pray and plead with him to turn away from his sin.

But what if Bob is still committed to moving forward with the affair?

Well, if Bob is not a member of any local church, then the process really ends there. We can't call a church meeting to restore a person who doesn't belong to any church. If he's not "inside the church" as per 1 Corinthians 5, then we're at the end of the road.

But, if he *is* a member, then that means that he has asked us to help him in his walk with Jesus. He's asked us to chase him when he strays and to do everything in our power to pull him out of the muck. So, you would then report the situation to the elders, and we would verify and then bring the situation to the members of the church in a private meeting.

A detailed explanation of this process is laid out in our policies and guidelines, and I would be happy to share that with you if you'd like to review it. Our process is drawn directly from Matthew 18.

I'll be honest with you, it's weird that we do this. Most churches in North America don't do this anymore. It's not easy. It's not comfortable. It's certainly not the air we breathe.

But it is clearly commanded by Jesus, and he is better at watching his flock than I am. One old preacher once warned:

When discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it.⁴

Think about the church in North America for a moment. So many Christians take to social media to loudly and publicly decry the leaders in the church who did terrible things with no accountability. Because they're fed up! And they demand change! Hear, hear! And yet, how many of those fed up, righteously angry people refuse to place *themselves* in a relationship of

⁴ John Dagg as quoted by Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of A Healthy Church Fourth Edition* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 169.

accountability? Hmm. Angry tweets make us feel good, but they don't change much. Instead, as we witness those scandals *out there* let's resolve to follow God's process for accountability in here. That's how real change happens.

Healthy confrontation should follow the biblical process. But unfortunately, the next lesson we learn is that:

6. Healthy confrontation will not always lead to restoration

So, you go to the brother, and then you go with witnesses, and then you go to the church, but sometimes – even when the process has been followed with precision – the brother still persists in his sin. In such cases, Jesus explains:

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. (Matthew 18:17b-19 ESV)

Sometimes the process doesn't end with restoration. But it *always* ends with clarity. And that's not nothing. If the person refuses to let go of their sin and won't listen – even to the collective church – then they have given every evidence that they are not truly saved. It is the church's responsibility to say so. And, when we make that declaration as a congregation – when we *bind* on earth – that decision is ratified in heaven. Not because of *our* authority, but because Jesus has called us to speak and to act on behalf of *his* authority.

In our context, that will include the members voting to confirm that we no longer recognize that man or woman as a follower of Jesus. We then proceed to break into groups and to spend time praying for the restoration of that person. Matthew Henry notes:

Prayer must evermore go along with church discipline. Pass no sentence, which you cannot in faith ask God to confirm.⁵

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary On The Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 1357.

Now, to be clear, this doesn't mean that we are washing our hands of that person. We still love them. We still want them to be restored to Christ. We will still reach out if appropriate, and we will give them a hug if ever they grace these doors. But we won't go along with the lie that they are a follower of Jesus. In love, we tell them the truth.

Beware of the friends who are happy to affirm you in your sin. Beware of the churches who are too nice to warn you when you're on the road to destruction. We don't do this perfectly – not even close – but I agree with one old preacher who notes:

The abuse of discipline is reprehensible and destructive, but not more than the abandonment of discipline.⁶

Have the hard talks – even if you do it imperfectly. Tell the truth – even if you do it clumsily. Jesus doesn't expect us to be perfect, but he does expect us to be obedient. Seventh, and finally:

7. Healthy confrontation is hard, but Jesus is in it

We see this in verses 19-20:

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.” (Matthew 18:19-20 ESV)

This passage is frequently cited in small groups and prayer groups, and I don't want you to be embarrassed if you use it that way. Jesus IS present in those places. But you also understand that he's present when you're by yourself, right? Right.

Well, then what is he saying here? He's encouraging us with the reminder that he is with us when we go after those straying sheep. He gave the same reminder after giving us the great commission:

And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:20b ESV)

⁶ H. E. Dana as quoted by Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of A Healthy Church Fourth Edition* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 158.

When Jesus calls us to do seemingly impossible things, he accompanies the command with a promise of his presence. Pastor David Platt writes:

Jesus knows that church discipline is not easy, and that we will be tempted to shy away from it and not carry it out. He's encouraging us with the resources of heaven.⁷

Jesus is with us in the process because this is a tool that saves sinners. The devil is a deceiver, and he is good at luring people off the path. He is good at whispering false assurances and at numbing the conscience. So, how do you combat an enemy whose weapon is deception?

With the truth.

But telling the truth is hard to do. So, Jesus promises to help.

When you muster up the courage to talk to your friend who is going down a dangerous path, Jesus promises to be with you in a powerful way. When we call a meeting in an attempt to restore a straying member, Jesus promises to be with us in a powerful way. Can I tell you something? I have experienced this on so many occasions! I have walked into meetings wondering what I could possibly say only to find that Jesus had already prepared the heart of the person I was going to meet. I have experienced times when he brought Scriptures to my mind that I never would have thought of in advance.

He loves his church! He loves his people! He is the Good Shepherd, and you can be certain that – if you go out in search of one of his lost sheep – he will be right there with you every step of the way.

So, let's trust him in this. Let's stop avoiding the conversations that he promises to bless. And let's ask him now for the help that he promises to give. Let's pray.

⁷ David Platt et al. eds., *Christ-Centered Exposition - Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2013), 245.