

# Restoring a Brother

Matthew 18:15-20

A funny thing happened quite a few years ago in Darlington, Maryland. Edith, a mother of eight children, was coming home from visiting a neighbor one Saturday afternoon. As she walked into the house, she spotted five of her youngest children huddled together, concentrating with intense interest on something. When she slipped over near them, trying to discover what was going on, she could hardly believe her eyes. Smack dab in the middle of the circle of attention were several baby skunks. The alarmed mother screamed at the top of her voice, "Children, run, run, run." At the sound of her voice, each child grabbed a skunk and ran. I think you can picture what happened next.

This mother learned a valuable lesson that day. It turns out that panicking, screaming, and overreacting is not the best way to handle skunks. All you end up with is a stinky situation.

Larry Crabb once wrote, *"The difference between a spiritual and unspiritual community is not whether conflict exists, but is rather in our attitude toward it and our attitude in handling it."* Another preacher wrote, *"The mark of community--true biblical unity--is not the absence of conflict but the presence of a reconciling spirit."* - Bill Hybels, Leadership, Vol. 14, no. 1.

This morning, we are going to see what advice Jesus can give us for dealing with our "skunks" and conflicts. Turn with me to Matthew 18:15-20.

1. Our text is found in the midst of Jesus' teaching concerning the children of God, Kingdom Kids. The chapter opens with Jesus taking a **"little child"** and perhaps holding him on His lap **"in the midst"** of the disciples. He taught them that unless we become as **"little children"** we will **"by no means enter the kingdom of heaven"** (v.3). He also taught that the one who **"humbles himself as a little child"** is the **"greatest in the kingdom."** In vv.6-9, Jesus warns those who would cause **"these little ones,"** God's spiritual kids, **"to sin"** or stumble. In vv.10-14, Jesus teaches that we are not to **"despise one of these little ones,"** we are not to look down upon any of His kids. Even those who go astray, Jesus, the Gentle Shepherd, will search out and bring home. God does not desire that any of them should **"perish"** or that they become useless to the kingdom.

Discipline is important in every area of life. There must be discipline in the classroom or students will not learn. There must be discipline on the court or field or there will be no victory. There must be discipline in military maneuvers or lives will be lost. We must be disciplined with our money or we won't have enough to pay our bills. We must be disciplined with our eating or we will become overweight. You get the picture. Every area of life requires discipline, doing what you know you should do whether you feel like doing it or not.

2. This text teaches the subject of discipline, correcting and restoring God's children when they stray. As parents, we understand the importance of discipline. **Proverbs 13:24** says, **"He who spares his rod hates his son, But he who loves him disciplines him promptly."** When our children rebel, we use discipline to bring them back to obedience. Discipline is a teaching tool. Even the word discipleship is rooted in discipline.

3. Remember we are Kingdom Kids. God, as our Heavenly Father, disciplines us, because we are His kids. **Proverbs 3:11-12** says, "**My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor detest His correction; For whom the LORD loves He corrects, Just as a father the son in whom he delights.**" God uses circumstances to bring us back when we go astray. **Hebrews 12:7-8** says, "**If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons.**"

4. Not only does God discipline His children, but He involves other believers in the discipline process. In this passage Jesus teaches us what to do "**if your brother sins against you**" (Matt 18:15). The whole point of the discipline process is to *restore* your brother to a right relationship with you and with God. Verse 15 says, "**If he hears you, you have gained your brother.**" Remember Jesus had just told the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd sought after the lost, straying sheep until He found it. When someone strays into sin or hurts you by their sin, it's like losing a brother. The discipline process seeks to gain him back, or as the NIV says, "**If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.**"

Paul says it plainly in Galatians 6, "**Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.**" The whole point is to restore a brother, not to belittle him or prejudge him—not to lose a brother but to gain him back.

Let's learn three simple truths about biblical discipline.

## **I. Restorative Discipline is Necessary.**

Why is this process necessary? Why do we as fellow believers need to get involved in each other's lives even to the point of correcting each other when we go astray and sin? Here are:

### **Four Reasons for Biblical Discipline That Seeks to Restore.**

#### **A. To keep the Church Pure.**

1. God is very serious about purity. He wants us to live in holiness. He says in **1 Pet.1:16**, "**Be holy, for I am holy**" (cf. Lev.11:44).

2. We hear much preaching and teaching about God's love, His grace, His mercy and His forgiveness. However there is a great deficiency in teaching about God's desire for purity and holiness. God desires that His children "**walk in the light as He is in the light**" (1 Jn.1:7). God wants us to confront our sin. He desires holiness not hypocrisy.

3. In **Acts 5:1-11**, we learn of the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, two early Christians who lied to the Holy Spirit and selfishly held back part of a gift dedicated to God. The result--God struck them both dead. And as you can imagine it changed the attitude of the whole church. Verse 11 specifically says, "**So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.**"

4. In another incident, because the Corinthians were profaning the Lord's Table at their communion services with their immorality, God brought severe discipline. 1 Cor.11:30-31 says, **"For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged."** Causing them to fear sin protected the purity of these churches.

5. Though God assigns divine discipline, He also expects us to police ourselves. And He expects the church to care about the spiritual condition of each other. Galatians 6:2 says, **"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."**

### **B. To offer the Believer Protection.**

When we drift away from the Lord and fall into sin, when we knowingly walk in darkness, we put ourselves and those around us in danger. Paul deals with one common way that people stray away from God in his first letter to Timothy. He says, **"People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."** (1 Timothy 6:9,10)

A pastor friend who grew up in south Florida tells the story of when he was a boy, he and a group of friends went wading in a canal. His mother saw him and totally embarrassed him by screaming and yelling at them to get out of the water. When he told her how embarrassed he was, she said, **"Son, there are alligators in that canal. I was only protecting you and your friends."**

### **C. To affirm every Believer's Value.**

1. **vv.12-13** pictures Jesus as a shepherd, leaving the 99 and seeking out the 1 that went astray.

2. Jesus had said in verse 10 of this chapter that we are not to **"despise"** other believers, because they belong to God. God does not will **"that one of these little ones should perish"** or become useless to the kingdom. God's discipline is evidence of His great love.

### **D. To uphold God's Command.**

1. Correcting another believer is difficult. It requires courage and faith. I think this is why there is so little discipline in churches today. We are afraid. It is much safer to gossip about someone's sin than to lovingly rebuke him.

2. Yet, Jesus doesn't give us the discipline process as option. It is a command. Jesus says in v.15, **"If your brother sins... go and tell him his fault."**

Let's look at how to restore a brother who has strayed into sin:

## **II. Restorative Discipline has a Process (vv.15-17).**

### **A. Step #1: A Private Meeting (v.15).**

1. Who is it that must be disciplined? It is a **"brother"** or fellow believers, not an unbeliever, but a professing believer. Any believer who falls into continual,

unconfused sin is to be confronted. We are all included, the pastor is not excluded. Each of us should be confronted when we sin.

2. **"Sins"** here is the common NT word for sin. It basically means "missing the mark." Obviously, we are not to be thought police or to spy on one another. We are to look out for obvious, on-going destructive sins in each other.

3. This may include a personal offense. Some versions say in v.15 **"if your brother sins against you..."** However, this is all-inclusive. Any flagrant sin in my life is a sin against God and **"against you."** 1 Cor.5:6 says **"Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?"**

4. Reproof should take place quickly, as soon as the offense is known. Why? If we allow sin to fester, it grows and becomes much more difficult to overcome. In the case of personal offense, elapsed time leaves room for anger, resentment and bitterness to seep in the relationship.

5. Who should confront a sinning brother? The answer is *any believer that has been affected by it*. This is not the duty of the pastor or church leaders. It is your duty. Hopefully, you won't ever have to tell or involve anyone else.

6. **"Tell him his fault"** comes from a Greek verb that means *"to bring to light"* or help him see his sin. Sometimes we are unaware of certain sins.

7. Jesus says, **"If he hears you, you have gained your brother."** Hopefully, our brother will be restored at this private, one on one level. **"If he hears you,"** then no one else needs to know. You are honor bound to keep the matter private.

8. Our purpose should always be to **"gain"** our brother. This is a term that referred to making a profit or financial gain in the marketplace. All God's children are valuable. When one is restored, the kingdom has **"gained"** or profited.

9. We might be tempted to think, *"It's his business. Who am I to get involved? Judge not and be not judged, right? He's God's responsibility."* How many times has the Body of Christ suffered losses instead of gains because God's people don't care enough to get involved? How many times have straying members been hurt even more because instead of caring enough to humbly confront them, we have talked about them behind their backs? We must love each other.

10. Who is qualified to confront a sinning brother?

a. First, he is someone with a gentle, loving spirit. Again, Gal.6:1 says, **"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted."**

John Newton wrote, **"When people are right with God, they are apt to be hard on themselves and easy on other people. But when they are not right with God, they are easy on themselves and hard on others."**

b. Second, he or she is someone who loves the church. Any church that is hesitant to lovingly correct sin will never have lasting spiritual growth or the outpouring of God's Spirit.

c. Third, he or she is someone who confronts sin in his or her own life. Many times we hesitate to reprove someone else because of our own hypocrisy.

Remember what Jesus said about looking for the speck in your brother's eye when you have a log in your own eye (cf. **Mt.7:3-5**). Pray! Ask God to point out your sin first!

### **B. Step #2: A Semi-Private Meeting (v.16).**

1. If your brother "**will not hear you**" in your private meeting, Jesus instructs you go back with "**one or two more.**" Here he quotes the Old Testament Law "**that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.**"
2. The "**two or three witnesses**" confirm or agree with the one who first tried to confront. They will witness the proper biblical admonition and the response.
3. Hopefully, the erring brother will see even greater concern in this larger group and repent. When he is restored at this level, there is no need to go any further. Rejoice, that the straying one has been returned!

### **C. Step #3: A Public Meeting (v.17).**

1. Jesus tells us that "**if he refuses to hear them**" they are to "**tell it to the church.**" In this context, it is obvious that "**church**" or *ekklesia* refers to a general assembly of believers.
2. This is not to be handled by a committee but by the whole local body, whether there be few or many.

### **D. Step #3: A Public Exclusion (v.17).**

1. Jesus says "**if he refuses even to hear the church**" if he is bent on his sin, "**let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.**" In the Jewish minds of the disciples, "**a heathen**" was a Gentile who had no part in the covenant life of the people of God. They were to be avoided. What's worse, "**a tax collector**" was a Jew who had betrayed his own people.
2. In the case of the brother who was living in immorality in Corinth, Paul tells the Corinthian church to "**deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.**" (1 Cor. 5:5). And in verse 13 he says, "**put away from yourselves the evil person.**"
3. Unrepentant believers are to no longer enjoy the fellowship, encouragement or protection of the church.
4. In 1 Tim.1:20, Paul speaks of "**Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.**"
5. If he truly is God's child, God will not forsake him. Like the prodigal son, he will return home when he is sick of the filth of the pigpen.
6. Our responsibility is to keep on loving him, keep on praying, keep on looking for opportunities to restore him. 2 Thess.3:14-15 tells us not to "**...keep company with him that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.**"
7. Too few churches are concerned with discipline and those that are often do not follow this biblical process. Could you confront a brother or sister caught in sin? Would you?

What if one Sunday morning you noticed a fire in our church building? Wouldn't you immediately try to put it out? Of course. If you were unsuccessful, you would not hesitate to call for help. If two or three others couldn't help you, you would sound the alarm to the whole church. Unconfessed, unconforted sin is much more dangerous to our fellowship than any fire in our facilities.

### III. Restorative Discipline's Authority (vv.18-20).

#### A. Reflects the Authority of Heaven (v.18).

1. There have been some terrible misinterpretations of these verses. For example, the Roman Catholic Church uses them to teach that the church can forgive or retain sins. Further, other believers use the concept of "**two or three**" agreeing in prayer to claim all kinds of requests from God, believing that God is "**bound**" to answer their prayer. I have even heard this taught to mean that the vote of a local church is binding on the will of heaven.
2. The question that arises is *where does authority for discipline lie?* In Mt.28:18, Jesus clearly says, "**All authority has been given to Me.**" Jesus has "**all authority**" and He does not vest His authority in anyone else. The authority we claim for the discipline of fellow believer is in the Word of God.
3. Grammatically, the phrases "**will be bound in heaven**" and "**will be loosed in heaven**" are future perfect passives and are more accurately translated, "*will have been bound or loosed.*"

God does not conform to the will of the church but when the church relies on the authority of the Word of God, her action is already approved in heaven.

4. Again we might ask, "*Who are we to confront another person? Where do we get that authority.*" We get it from the revealed Word.

Imagine a Christian who wants to leave his wife and marry a Christian woman with whom has an adulterous relationship. The two of them may pray and "**bind**" heaven by asking God to give them divorces and allow them to marry each other. Does this mean God will honor their request and bless their relationship simply because they agree on it? No, Not at all because they have violated the authority of His word.

#### B. Depends on the Confirmation of the Father (vv.19-20).

1. If "**two**" (referring to the witnesses in v.16), "**agree** [*sumphoneo*, i.e. "symphony"] **on earth**" concerning sin and the purity of the church, "**it will be done for them by My Father.**" God will confirm their biblical decisions.
2. When we take up the biblical task of confronting sin, we are not alone. Although v.20 is often lifted from its context, the teaching is when we act biblically to preserve the purity of the fellowship, even when "**two or three**" reach out to confront and admonish a sinning brother in Jesus' name, He is "**...there in the midst of them.**" He goes with them through the process.

It is said that Leonardo da Vinci, when painting the Last Supper, painted Judas' face as the face of someone with whom he was angry. But, he found he could not paint the face of Jesus until he changed the face of Judas. When we have unresolved sin or conflict in the church, we cannot see the face of Jesus. But

when we gently and lovingly follow Jesus' process of restoring a brother, Jesus is with us, right in our midst.

### **The Erring**

Think gently of the erring;  
You know not of the power  
With which the dark temptation came  
In some unguarded hour;

You may not know how earnestly  
They struggled, or how well,  
Until the hour of weakness came  
And sadly thus they fell.

Think gently of the erring;  
Oh, do not now forget  
However darkly stained by sin,  
He is your brother yet;

Heir of the self-same heritage,  
Child of the self-same God.  
He has but stumbled in the path  
Which you in weakness trod.

Speak gently to the erring;  
You yet may lead them back,  
With holy words and tones of love,  
From misery's thorny track;

Forget not you have sometimes sinned,  
And sinful yet may be;  
Deal gently with the erring, then,  
As God has dealt with thee.

J.A. Fletcher, "Grace at Work"