

Confronting Sin

Matthew 18:10-20 on February 16, 2020

Please read Matthew 18:10-20 before reading any further in transcript.

Right out of the gate, there's a problem with today's sermon; the problem is right there in the title: "Confronting Sin." Raise your hand if you are excited about confronting someone else's sin? Whether you are the person being confronted, or the one doing the confronting, if you are excited about confrontation, I'm a little nervous for you. Even when confrontation is called for, it's rarely popular. I'm guessing most of us would much rather spend our energy AVOIDING¹ confrontation. If not outright avoiding it, perhaps RATIONALIZING why it's not really necessary. Or maybe simply PRETENDING that there's really nothing to be confronted.²

Last week, one of the things that we learned from Jesus was that Kingdom Greatness calls us to take sin seriously. In today's passage, Jesus continues to expand on this idea. Kingdom Greatness calls us to address a fellow believer's sin in a beautiful and God-honoring way. Rather than "confronting" someone in a hostile way because we are upset with them, Kingdom Greatness calls us to serve one another in a helpful way, in our shared struggle against sin. In today's passage, Jesus teaches us how Kingdom Greatness gives us 2 particular word pictures. These word pictures help us reframe how we should approach a fellow believer who is struggling with sin. These word pictures will be the two main points in today's message.

Matthew 18:10 begins, "See that you do not despise one of these little ones...." Why would anyone "despise one of these little ones"?³ Despise them for what?⁴ First of all, let's keep in mind that these "little ones" are not all so little. By "little ones" Jesus is not just referring to little 5-year-olds. He is referring to everyone who believes in Him, young and old alike. We learned about this last week. In order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, we need to become like little children. Therefore, "little children" refers not just to young believers, but to believers of all ages.⁵ Even so, why would Jesus warn them not to "despise" a fellow believer? The answer lies in the preceding context. Jesus just got done warning His followers to take extreme measures against the things that cause them to sin. Therefore, right after this caution about taking sin seriously, Jesus then says not to despise a fellow believer. In other words, don't despise a fellow believer for their struggle with sin.⁶ Don't look down on them; don't treat them with contempt.⁷ In fact, rather than despising a fellow believer for their sin, Kingdom Greatness calls us to rescue and restore them. These are the 2 main ideas that we want to look at together this morning: Rescue & Restore. First, let's look at RESCUE. **Kingdom Greatness calls us to 1) Conduct a search & rescue for a wandering believer.** In Matthew 18:12-13 Jesus asks, "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off."

¹ One analogy for AVOIDING something that we really need to deal with is "the Elephant in the Room."

² As I wrote this introduction, I was wondering if some of us might skip church today because we're just not comfortable with this idea of Confronting Sin.

³ Naturally, verse 10 creates a lot of curiosity in us regarding angels. However, we didn't have time in this sermon to address this curiosity, so I put a few thoughts in this footnote. Matthew 18:10 begins, "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven." There is actually a fairly wide range of interpretations regarding verse 10's reference to the "angels" of these little ones. Although it is far from conclusive, verse 10 could very well be a reference to Guardian Angel's that watch over us. Personally, I can't help but think of the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life," with the angel named Clarence. But this fictional movie takes quite a few liberties with just how Guardian Angels behave. In one sense, we could say that ALL angels are, to some extent, essentially "Guardian Angels." Hebrews 1:14 asks us, "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" If there are indeed "Guardian Angels," they are not exclusively for children. Check out Psalm 34:7 and 91:11. However, some scholars argue against this idea of Guardian Angels. Instead, they make a good argument for interpreting the word for their "angels" as simply their "spirits." (D. A. Carson argues that the idea of Guardian Angels for each little one "will not bear close scrutiny." See his case laid out on pp. 454-455 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9: Matthew & Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010) Also, read and consider Genesis 48:16 and Acts 12:1-19. So, if "their angels in heaven" refers to "their spirits in heaven," then verse 10 is teaching something else. Verse 10 may actually be teaching that once God's children die, their spirits will then rest in heaven before God for all eternity. In the context of Matthew 18, this would demonstrate just how precious these "little ones" are to God. Ultimately, the bottom line is that we don't really have enough information to be adamant about an exact interpretation here. (If you think Matthew 18:10 is tricky to interpret. Answer this, what happened to Matthew 18:11? 😊)

⁴ καταφρονέω = "to look down on someone or something with contempt or aversion, with implication that one considers the object of little value, look down on, despise, scorn, treat with contempt." (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 529). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

⁵ Matthew 18:6 clarifies, "If anyone causes **one of these little ones—those who believe in me**—to stumble...."

⁶ One could also argue Jesus is warning believers not to despise them by causing these little ones to sin. "We should humble ourselves and never cause others to sin because God never despises his people but rather is always concerned to go to great lengths to preserve them." (Blomberg, C. (1992). *Matthew* (Vol. 22, p. 276). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.)

⁷ This makes a lot of sense, especially when we consider the next 2 things that Jesus talks about in verses 12-19: Don't despise a fellow believer for wandering away from the rest of the flock. And, don't despise a fellow believer when they sin against you.

This is a “search & rescue” mission, not a “judge & criticize” mission.⁸ Jesus gives some specific details about the parameters for this search & rescue mission:⁹ First of all...

1. This is a wandering believer. This is not an evangelistic call to reach out to lost sinners. This is a message about reaching out to a fellow believer who has wandered away. It’s interesting to note that, in Luke 15, Jesus uses this same parable. There He applies it to the unbelieving lost; but not here.¹⁰

During this particular teaching in Matthew 18, He is using this same parable to teach a different truth about a different situation.¹¹ In Matthew 18, Jesus’ focus is on wandering sheep, that is, wandering believers. The 2nd detail is that...

2. This wandering requires a search. This wandering believer is wandering away from the flock. The 1 goes off alone and leaves the safety and company of the other 99. Now, I suppose the owner of the sheep could just decide to cut his losses: “Oh well, I guess that’s just the cost of doing business. These things happen. Sometimes one of these little guys wanders off alone.

Eventually I suppose a wolf will get him or he’ll fall off a cliff somewhere. Serves him right though; if he wanted to be safe, he should have stayed with the flock!” But (*praise God!*) this is NOT the owner’s response. He doesn’t just write the sheep off as a tax loss. He doesn’t just ignore their absence. He doesn’t even wait to see if maybe they’ll eventually get hungry and find their own way home. Instead, he saddles up. He commits himself to the time, energy, and inconvenience that it will take, to pursue this one little sheep. Just for this 1, he leaves the 99. This reveals the very personal heart of God; His nature is to care about each and every one of His sheep.¹² The 3rd detail is that...

3. This wandering requires a rescue. The reason the owner is SO happy when he finds this wandering 1, is that he is well aware of the serious risk to this little one. Verse 14 makes it clear that the Heavenly Father is not willing that ANY of these wandering little ones should perish. The owner understands that this wandering sheep is gone, possibly never to return.¹³ The owner feels compelled by a sense of urgency to go find them. The owner is EAGER to make sure that they are ok and to bring them back home.¹⁴ So this is Jesus’ 1st word picture:

Conduct a search & rescue for a wandering believer.¹⁵ Let’s take a few minutes and bring this home for some immediate application: 100 is a lot of sheep to keep track of, and our church has not just a hundred sheep, but 100s of sheep. This presents a significant challenge to us, as pastors & elders, to take care of everyone at our church. At Efree Bemidji, and really at any local church, it is vital that everyone in the Church Family takes care of everyone else in the Church Family. The New Testament refers to this as the priesthood of believers. In other words, we should all be ministering to one another.¹⁶ So if you happen to know of someone who hasn’t been around for a while, won’t you please reach out to them? In fact, not just if you happen to notice, but would you make an intentional effort to notice. Would you make it a habit to consistently do sort of a “head count”? This might mean looking around your section on Sunday morning for people who normally sit near you. Or, it might mean taking a minute to reflect on who normally shows up for basketball, or for Bible Study, or for any number of other activities.

Because this is SO important, I’m going to ask you to take a minute right now, and think about anyone you haven’t seen around church for a while. If you think of someone’s name, I encourage you

⁸ Just for fun, check out <https://www.vaildaily.com/news/sheep-rescued-after-3-days-stuck-on-vail-porch/> and <https://www.arcamax.com/entertainment/weirdnews/s-2189555>

⁹ When I was a young boy living in Crandon, WI, we lived in the Lake Peshtigo Mobile Home Park. It was great growing up with all kinds of other kids around to play with. We’d wake up early, eat a quick breakfast, and be out the door to play. We’d stop in for a quick peanut butter sandwich lunch, and then right back out to play. Then, usually, around supper time, we’d head back home again, eat dinner, and then be right back out the door again until dark. But there was never any need for a search & rescue mission. I was probably never away from home for more than 3-4 hours at a time, because I liked to eat. My motto was something along the lines of, “call me anything you want, just don’t call me late for dinner!” In Matthew 18, Jesus is concerned about a far more dangerous kind of wandering than this.

¹⁰ D.A. Carson asks a good question: “why could not Jesus himself apply [this parable] to more than one situation?” He goes on to point out that Jesus had an itinerant ministry where He traveled all over and spoke on many different occasions and in many different settings. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9: Matthew & Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 453

¹¹ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 1622-1623 footnote on Matthew 18:12-14.

¹² In other words, the needs of the many, do not outweigh the needs of the few. God’s heart is to rescue every single one.

¹³ This may very well bring up questions in our mind regarding eternal security and the perseverance of the saints, etc. Regardless of what we believe about eternal security though, the scenario depicted here is that of a fellow believer, a fellow sheep, who has wandered off into dangerous territory. Jesus is NOT teaching us here how to discern whether or not someone is a genuine believer. In fact, if anything, Jesus taught us back in Matthew 13’s “Parable of the Sower,” that we should not go out and try to separate the weeds from the wheat. That’s God’s job. See Matthew 13:24-30.

¹⁴ D.A. Carson makes clarifies, “This love for the *individual* sheep is not at the expense of the entire flock but so that the flock as a whole may not lose a single one of its members.” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9: Matthew & Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 455.

¹⁵ Again, let’s remember Jesus’ words in verse 10. “do not despise one of these little ones.” Don’t get mad at them for wandering. Don’t get frustrated with the hassle. Rather, pursue them. Go out there and bring them back!

¹⁶ See 1 Peter 2: 5, 9.

to write it down or put a reminder in your phone to contact them today. Please take one minute for silent reflection right now, to quietly brainstorm... (Once you've done this, please follow through and check in with anyone that God puts on your heart.)

Jesus moves on from the word picture of a wandering sheep, to the word picture of winning over a fellow believer who has sinned. In verses 15-20, Jesus lays out a careful plan for their restoration, with a focus on winning them back to the Lord. **Kingdom Greatness calls us to...**

2) Carefully restore a fellow believer. Matthew 18:15 begins, "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over."¹⁷ We find 3 simple, yet profound requirements in verse 15: The 1st requirement is to...

1. Go. This is often the hardest part, because oftentimes we don't want to go. Most of us are not eager or excited to confront someone else's sin. And, if we are, that may very well indicate a critical or judgmental spirit. None of us want to be "that guy." Last Sunday, Jesus put a very specific focus on each one of us dealing with our OWN sin. But now, the focus is on dealing with someone else's sin. James 5:19-20 reminds us, "My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins." Sin is our greatest threat. Confronting another believer about their sin is not about JUDGING them, it's about RESTORING them. It's about saving them from death; it's about not being willing that any of these little ones should perish. In other words, "confronting is caring." Careful restoration begins with one word: GO. The next requirement is to...

2. Point out their fault. There is nothing loving about ignoring someone else's sin. We're not doing our Brother or Sister in Christ any favors, by looking the other way.¹⁸ Not if we care about them. Not if we realize that sin is actually hurting them. Now, this doesn't mean that we need to be mean or rude about it. Pointing out someone else's fault, can be done quite gently and lovingly. In fact, it should be. After all, the end of v. 15 makes it clear that our goal is to win them over.¹⁹ Last Sunday we talked about the drastic measures that we should take against the things that cause sin in our OWN lives. I tried to make it clear that Jesus wasn't calling any of us to take drastic measures against someone else's sin. In other words, last week, Jesus taught us about personal holiness. But, this week, He is teaching us about corporate holiness. About how to help, win one another, back to holiness. It's important that we recognize, that even though the New Testament urges us to take drastic measures against our OWN sin, it urges us to be GENTLE in dealing with the sins of others.²⁰ For example, Galatians 6:1 specifies, "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently..."²¹ Certainly, there are occasions when we need to be firm in our rebuke of someone else's sin.²² However, generally speaking, we should "point out someone else's fault" GENTLY. Our initial starting point should be GENTLENESS. This is our Modis Operandi, our normal way of operating. So, Step 1 – Go, Step 2 - Point out their fault GENTLY. And, the 3rd/final requirement is to...

3. Respect their privacy. In verse 15, Jesus clarifies that restoration begins, "Just between the 2 of you." When we're trying to lovingly restore a fellow believer, we should be cautious not to air their dirty laundry. If it turns out that we can't win them over privately, then this may need to come later. But begin by respecting their privacy; by allowing them not only to give their side of the story, but also by being careful not to fall into gossip.²³ Fortunately, oftentimes, these 3 simple steps are all that's

¹⁷ The *NIV* just says "sins;" it doesn't specify sins "against you." But, several other Bible versions include "against you." Rather than getting bogged down discussing this nuance, let's just agree that all sin is ultimately against God. And that all sin should be taken seriously, whether it is specifically against us or not. Helping one another overcome sin is an important part of "becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus together."

¹⁸ This makes me think of Sgt. Schultz from Hogan's Heroes, "I see nothing." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34aq4nkSh7Q>

¹⁹ And let's keep in mind that God's KINDNESS, is what led each of us to repentance. Romans 2:4 asks the question: "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?"

²⁰ I should note here that when Israel was under God's theocratic rule in the Old Testament, the response to sin was much more immediate and drastic. This had to do with a very different setting than you and I are experiencing in 2020.

²¹ In reference to human priests, Hebrews 5:2 makes this observation, "He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness." See 1 Corinthians 4:21. Consider also, 1 Peter 3:15 and 2 Timothy 2:25, which are more in reference to unbelievers, but they also convey a particular focus on gentleness toward other sinners.

²² We see this, for example, in Galatians 2:11-14, when the Apostle Paul confronts the Apostle Peter "to his face."

²³ Privately means that we are careful to AVOID gossip and slander. There is no need to immediately air someone's dirty laundry for everyone to see. A gossip loves to be the 1st one to declare something naughty or scandalous. But gossip has nothing to do with loving restoration. Proverbs is filled with warnings against gossip and slander. See Proverbs 16:28, 26:20 and Psalm 15:1-3. See Matthew 15:19; 1 Corinthians 5:11, 6:10, 12:20; Ephesians 4:11; Colossians 3:8; Titus 3:1-2; James 4:11; 1 Peter 2:1; Jude 9-

required to win a fellow believer back to the Lord. However, sometimes we have to do more. Jesus goes on from verse 15, to lay out some further steps for restoration: Once we've tried to...

1) Restore them privately.²⁴ This summarizes the 3 requirements that we just talked about in verse 15. Then, verse 16 urges us to...

2) Restore them with the help of 1-2 witnesses. And, then, verses 17-20 tells us to...

3) Restore them with the help of the church. Ideally, we would never need to go past Step 1. However, sometimes we can't win someone over by ourselves. This is why we sometimes need step 2. Matthew 18:16 goes on to say, "But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'" Having witnesses helps to ensure that we're on the right track.²⁵ There's always a chance that we're wrong about the fault that we are pointing out.²⁶ In other words, one of the roles of these other witnesses is to confirm the truthfulness of the fault that is being pointed out. However, this doesn't mean that they necessarily need to be "eyewitnesses of the sin."²⁷ The other role of these witnesses is simply to serve as mediators, to make sure the dialogue is constructive and fair.

Matthew 18:17 goes on to say, "If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church...."²⁸ Telling the church sometimes means simply bringing the issue before the Elder Board. Other times, it may mean actually bringing it before the entire membership at an official meeting. It really depends on each situation. More often than not, though, once restoration reaches step 3, it's a matter for the Church Elders to wisely address. Unfortunately, even when we carefully follow all 3 of these steps in a God-honoring way, restoration is NOT a guaranteed outcome. So sadly, there is potentially a 4th/final step in careful restoration:

4) Remove them from the church fellowship. This is what Jesus is referring to at the end of Matthew 18:17, "...if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."²⁹ In other words, treat an unrepentant believer like someone who is not a believer, and not part of the believing fellowship. Sometimes this is referred to as excommunication, which simply means removing someone from the local church. Although this is rare, it is sometimes necessary. But let's not overlook a very important fact, even this 4th and final step is done in the hopes that we might still ultimately restore this unrepentant believer. In the hopes of winning them back to the Lord. We want them to come to their senses and return to the Lord. And then, also return to the church fellowship.^{30 31}

So, all the way through this process, our one goal, our primary aim is to win them over.³² To win them back to the Lord.^{33 34} I like how our church constitution summarizes this: "The restoration of the erring member shall be the single purpose, and love the sole motivating force..."³⁵ John 13:35 comes to mind, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Today's message is titled, "Confronting Sin." But a better title probably would have been, "Rescue & Restore." Brother or Sister in Christ, when we see a fellow believer struggling with sin, we need to make sure that we don't despise them. Instead, we need to conduct a search & rescue mission and carefully restore them to the Lord.

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10; and Revelation 13:6. In fact, "throughout the NT, the goal of all Christian discipline is restoration and rehabilitation, not retribution." (The NIV Zondervan Study Bible, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1968 footnote on Matthew 18:15-20.)

²⁴ "Restore them privately" summarizes the 3 requirements from verse 15: Step 1 - Go, Step 2 - Point out their fault, and Step 3 - Respect their privacy.

²⁵ This is not just a tag team effort so that you can really pummel them!

²⁶ "every matter may be established" = literally "may be made to stand." D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9: Matthew & Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 456.

²⁷ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1968 footnote on Matthew 18:16.

²⁸ See also 1 Corinthians 6:1-6.

²⁹ Removal from fellowship is what "treating them like a pagan or tax collector" means. A pagan refers to a non-Jew, and at the time there weren't many Gentiles who were following Jesus. Tax collectors were often Jews that were hired by the Romans to collect taxes from their own people. Most Jews considered these Jewish tax collectors, traitors for serving Rome. Learn more in the footnote on Matthew 5:46 in the *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1601.

³⁰ Not just to shame them. Not merely to heap more and more guilt on them. Not just kicking them while their down.

³¹ 1 Corinthians 5:5 says, "...hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord See 1 Corinthians 15:33-34.

³² The strategy of disassociation is to hopefully bring the person back around to a right attitude and cause them to repent. Read Romans 16:17 and 1 Corinthians 5:9-13.

³³ In other words, "The aim is not punishment but restoration to fellowship." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 2032 footnote on 2 Thessalonians 3:14.

³⁴ In the phrase, "treat them as you would," it's helpful to note that the "you" is in the singular. Therefore, "This suggests that each member of the church is to abide by the corporate [decision of the local church]." D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9: Matthew & Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, pp. 456-7.

³⁵ *Constitution of the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji*, Article IV, Section 3, Point A.