

Matthew 18:12-22 // Serving the Brother Who Sins

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Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] We pick up in verse 12 and Jesus is speaking to his disciples. And he says this, 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. In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

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. 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.

If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church. And if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

[1 : 12] Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?

Up to seven times? Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Well, thanks James very much for reading.

And if we've not met before, my name is Martin Ayers. I'm the lead pastor here. It'd be great to talk to you afterwards. Do come and introduce yourself. Let's pray as we come to God's word.

[2 : 19] Just to remind you, it's really helpful if you can have the Bible open. As we look at it together, it's page 985, Matthew chapter 18. In the church Bibles, it's page 985. And there's an outline in the notice sheet if you'd find that helpful.

But let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God who speaks, that your spirit speaks to us as we open your word.

And so we ask that by your grace, each one of us will hear your voice addressing us personally just now. And your words will not just be knowledge for our heads, but will be words that bring life, spiritual food that rebuilds us and renews us.

We pray you'll be at work in us for what is pleasing to you. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, as we get going, and without the 90-plus Roots Weekend Away people here, I just thought it would be good to think about how we serve each other.

So just turn to a neighbor, or if you came with the person sitting next to you, maybe in threes, let's just have a moment to speak to someone near us about ways that we see people serve each other at St. Silas.

[3 : 37] So different ways we see people serve in our church. Okay, let's come back together.

We heard last week that the teaching in chapter 18 of Matthew is kicked off by a great question, a key question. Chapter 18, verse 1, it's who's the greatest?

The disciples asked Jesus that question. Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And that might seem quite a strange question to ask when Jesus has taught them that he has to come and suffer and be delivered into the hands of men who will put him to death.

And then he says to his disciples, if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Maybe it seems strange to then ask the question, well, who's going to be greatest?

But at the same time, it's not that strange a question to ask when Jesus has already also said in chapter 16 of Matthew that he is on a building project and the thing that he is building, his assembly, his church, his kingdom, is the one thing that defies death.

[5 : 29] And so it would be natural for someone hearing that to think to themselves, if what Jesus is building with his church is the one thing that death cannot destroy, I'm going to line up my life behind that project.

I'm going to line up my ambitions behind that project. And so then a natural thing to ask is, okay, Jesus, how do I be great in your kingdom?

Who then is greatest in the kingdom? That's the question. And Jesus brings out a little child as his sermon illustration. And he says to them, verse three, truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

So the key, not even just to being great in the kingdom of heaven, but even to getting into the kingdom of heaven is you have to be like this little child. And the quality that Jesus is identifying in children is dependence.

It's lowliness, humility. Children, especially in that culture and at that time, children were not people that you look up to, they were people you look after.

[6 : 43] And the gates of Jesus' kingdom are wide open for anyone to come in who is willing to come empty-handed in humble dependence and say to God, I've got nothing, but I need a savior.

Jesus welcomes anyone like that. None of us walks through the gates into Jesus' kingdom like footballers go out of the tunnel before a match.

And if you've ever been to a football match, a lot of star players, when they come out the tunnel, they do this. There's a bit of a nod of, don't worry guys, I've arrived.

I'm playing today. None of us get into Jesus' kingdom like that. Rather, Jesus' community is a community of people who realize that we're nobodies in the sense of we can't bring things that got us in.

The only thing that we contribute to our salvation is the sin from which we've got to be redeemed. And the thing that will most commonly leave people outside of the gates of Jesus' kingdom refusing to come in is when people think they're a somebody.

[7 : 53] We see that all around us today, don't we? The more people achieve, the more money they've got or the more friends they've got, the more success they've had, the harder it is to accept that to be made right with God you need a savior and Jesus has offered to be that savior for you.

People don't think they need him so they stay outside. When you come in you realize you're a little one. We're all little ones in Jesus' eyes. And that affects how we approach God and it affects how we treat each other.

Last week we saw in verses 12 to 14 that great ones in Jesus' kingdom welcome the least. The principle actually comes in verse 10.

Jesus says, see that you do not despise one of these little ones and by that he means, I think, those who are lowly in the eyes of the world, the overlooked ones, the least, the last and the lost.

And Jesus tells a parable that shows us God's heart for the struggling believer, the wayward believer, the weak believer. In verse 12 he says, what do you think?

[9 : 05] It's so striking, isn't it, that he starts it like that. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine behind 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. In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any one of these little ones should perish.

In other words, if you want to be like God, if you want to love the things that God loves, when we come to church or you go to a small group, we are to go with a particular concern for those who are wayward, those who are struggling.

Even if they are people who are lowly in the world's eyes, we would come thinking, who isn't here who I thought would be here?

Who might be drifting? And we go out for them and we look for them because we long for them to come home to God and we know God longs for that too. I think of a friend whose son drifted away in his teenage years.

[10:16] He stopped going to youth group at church and he wouldn't listen to his parents anymore about Jesus and it was his friends from the youth group who knew he was missing, who persevered with him patiently.

They didn't think, oh, he's let us down. Oh, I was so disappointed in him. We thought he was our friend. No, they went after him and they patiently persevered as his friend and encouraged him, come back to Jesus.

And he did. He did. And this is a distinctive mark of being a Jesus-centered community. If you're in Friday Night Live or you normally go out into youth zone on a Sunday morning, how brilliantly distinctive it can be if you make your youth groups at church a place where the culture is, not that we all look for the kind of shiny people and want to spend all our time with them, but rather we look out for everyone.

We look out for each other. And even if someone comes along who the world overlooks, we see who they really are in Jesus' eyes. This is a child of the king and I'm going to treat them as special and I'm going to serve them.

And that really changes the community of a youth ministry in a church. And then for the rest of this morning, Jesus gets specific for all of us about serving Christians who are caught in sin.

[11:43] So our first point, Jesus' great ones confront others when they sin. Look with me at verse 15. 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. So a Christian, they sin against you or you see that they have sinned in some way.

You realize they're caught in a sin and what you see about them is that they've either not noticed or they don't seem to be bothered about it. They don't seem to care. What Jesus calls us to do in that situation is go to them.

You don't fire off a WhatsApp message to them. You don't put it on social media what they did. You go to them and you point out their fault just between the two of you.

Now the world would tell you, do not do that. If someone mistreats you, what does the world say? The world says, avoid them. Never go near them again.

[12:49] Avoid the conflict. Don't confront them. Hide from it. Bury it. And you sometimes even see that in church. In church life, you can find people sometimes who have avoided one another for years and years because something was said or something was done and it was just never dealt with.

And Jesus says, in his community, he wants us to resolve these problems. He says, go to them and point out their fault. And you go to them and not to others to complain about them.

So you don't gossip and you don't flatter. Gossip is when you go to, you say something behind someone's back that you wouldn't say to their face. And flattery is when you say something to someone's face that you wouldn't say about them behind their back.

And Jesus says, rather, go to them and point out their fault. Why? Not to get it off your chest, not to offload so that you feel better, but because you are concerned for them spiritually.

We see them like the lost sheep in the parable. And as we hear God's word this morning, maybe for some of us, we're going to have to think, there's a conversation I need to have.

[14:10] It's going to be difficult, but I've left something unresolved. I need to deal with it. What takes wisdom is to think, even if I was hurt, maybe it wasn't sin.

Maybe I was hurt by what someone said I did, but it's because of their incompetence. They made a mistake. And in those situations, we need to be gracious and just let love cover over something.

Or it may be that someone has sinned against us, but it's such a minor thing. It's a minor offence that we can let love cover it over. But where it's something more significant, a serious issue, that makes us concerned for where they're at spiritually, we are to go to them.

And it's worth asking, at this point, let me ask you, if someone comes to you like that, how open are you to that kind of conversation? Even if someone is a bit clumsy with it, but their intention is to say something like, when you said that, it really hurt me.

Or when you did that, I noticed that you did that and it was wrong. I think you were wrong to do that. In a conversation like that, how would we react? I think it's difficult to receive that kind of conversation.

[15:31] And we need to be very humble as we hear someone. And we need a deep grasp of God's grace so that as we hear someone point out sin in our lives, we're able to think, Jesus

already knows this about me.

In fact, what strikes me in these conversations is sometimes I'm very defensive about the particular thing that someone's raising. and I kind of forget in the moment that if this person really knew how sinful I was, they wouldn't even speak to me.

So we are to come with humility and we're to listen graciously, remembering, even if this person is right and they're exposing sin, Jesus knows that.

And I'm in a community of people who depend on his grace and he freely gives that grace to cover all our sins. Now if a person won't listen, what do you do?

Well you move on to stage two, which is in verse 16. Verse 16, Jesus says, 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.

[16:38] So notice here how slow and careful Jesus wants us to be. If we go to a person and we humbly point out their sin, what we think is their sin, and they are defensive, they might be right.

We might find that we've misunderstood the situation and it wasn't sin. It might be that we were wrong. It might be that we say, look, I think you were wrong to say that and they, as they explain it, expose that we were in the wrong and we need to be open to that as well.

But if we get to a point where we think, no, I still think they were wrong and I'm still concerned that they haven't repented and they won't listen, we bring one or two other people into the circle of confidence about it and we go with them so that they can also, with us, urge the person.

We think there's an issue there and we think you need to repent and seek forgiveness of the person you've wronged. Slow and careful. Why? Again, we're concerned for them spiritually.

We want them to do well with Jesus. We want them to be restored and if they still won't listen, you're on level three. Verse 17, Jesus says, if they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church.

[18:04] So now you seek a wider group to help clarify with the person they are in spiritual danger unless they repent. So we see here how different Jesus' community is called to be and I think this is very striking when it's applied by Christians in their lives.

I remember a friend, Ken, and we were in a meeting of Christians talking about a decision that had to be made and someone was, I thought, quite rude to Ken in the meeting and I could see that Ken was a bit upset about it and then sometime after the meeting I went to see Ken and said, are you okay?

are you alright? I saw you were upset and he said, oh thanks for asking, don't worry, it's completely dealt with. I went to see the guy and I said to them, can we talk?

I think we've got an issue here and he's apologised and I've offered him forgiveness and we've reconciled and it's dealt with and I was so struck by that that he'd not let it fester, he'd not let resentment build up, he'd gone to see, it was so counter-cultural, gone to see them, offered them forgiveness and the person had been humble enough to repent and there was reconciliation and growth from that.

Jesus was honoured and that's our first point. Jesus' great ones confront others when they sin to serve them and if they won't listen, then we move to our next stage, that's our second point.

[19:32] Jesus' great ones discipline others when they won't repent. Let's pick things up again in verse 17. Jesus says, if they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

That is someone who was not part of God's people at that time. So this is now about excommunication or church discipline. Nothing wrong with tax collectors today.

At that time, they were outside of the kingdom of God and it doesn't mean that we treat them badly. Jesus got nailed for treating tax collectors and pagans lovingly.

He had compassion for them. He spent time with them but he treated them as people who, he invited them to repent and receive forgiveness. So the key point here is as the person has not listened, the church is called by Jesus to treat them as not a Christian unless and until they repent of their sin.

Practically, one way that that's done well by a church, I think, is by what sometimes people call fencing the table. So when we share the Lord's Supper, that we would say to someone in advance, we don't want you to have bread and wine with us.

[20:51] It wouldn't be appropriate for you at the moment to have bread and wine when we share it because that's the family meal and reluctantly, we're going to treat you as though you're not a

Christian because we don't think you are until you repent.

I was in a church where a woman who was married started having an affair and she was unrepentant about that and she still wanted to keep coming to church. So the church leadership followed the steps here in Matthew 18 and eventually they said to her, you can come on a Sunday because everyone's welcome on a Sunday but we don't want you to come anymore to your midweek group because in the way their midweek groups were structured, they saw their midweek groups as places for church members, for those who were part of the church family. So you can't come to that anymore and when we have the Lord's Supper, you can't share bread and wine anymore. And it was in the hope that it would show her, it would be a signal to have the importance of repentance.

Then Jesus goes on in verse 18 to say that he as the judge of the whole world supports his church when they act like this. Verse 18, Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Now in chapter 16, Jesus used that exact phrase positively to Peter of when the church spreads the gospel, the news about Jesus, that we become like earthly agents of what's going on in heaven.

[22 : 25] As we offer people, you can be part of God's people, you can have eternal life if you repent and trust in Jesus. As we do that, whatever we bind and whatever we loose happens in heaven.

We are earthly agents of heavenly realities. And now, the same phrase is being used at the other side of that, restrictively. That when the church follows these steps in Matthew 18 and they declare somebody as outside of the fellowship unless they'll repent, they are communicating the heavenly reality that without repentance there is no forgiveness of sin for that person.

And Jesus says he's present with church leaders as they do that. Verse 19, Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. Jesus is always with his people. He says that at the end of Matthew's Gospel, I'm with you always. But here talking about this special presence of himself at the moments when the church needs to act like this in discipline.

Folks, it's good to understand that process because whenever I've seen a church carry this out, they've been criticized by the congregation. People in the congregation have said it's been too harsh, they've put that person off, the person feels judged, they'll never come near church again.

[24 : 00] Well, I'm sure mistakes are made, but maybe the person has rightly been judged. Maybe it was appropriate. appropriate as a way of trying to wake them up to the danger that they're in spiritually.

And appropriate church discipline can be undermined by another church. The Christian writer Carl Truman says church discipline has never recovered from the invention of the motor car.

In that, what happens today, these days, is often when we confront people about their sin, they just go to another church. church, and I was in a church, previous church, where a guy who was really involved and in leadership left his wife and his kids for another woman, and the pastor pleaded with him to repent, and he wouldn't, and church discipline was imposed, and he just went to a different church with his new partner, and it was an evangelical church, and they were welcomed, and people were excited.

Oh, there were new people today, and he seems great, and he seems gifted, because he was gifted, and the elders of the church I was in had to contact them and say, you need to help us be consistent with this guy, because that's for his good.

He needs to realize so that he can repent and be restored. So that's our second point, and you can see why it leads to Peter's question then that leads to our third point, Jesus' great ones forgive and forgive and forgive.

[25 : 28] So Peter seems to be saying to Jesus, okay, Jesus, I'm with you, Jesus. This sounds hard, but I get it, Jesus. And in verse 21, Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?

Up to seven times. But he hasn't got it. Verse 22, Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but 77 times.

And when Jesus says that, he's not giving him like a higher number to count up to as though he can, you know, have notches and it's 75, 76, 77, I'm done.

You are unforgiven. Rather, what he's saying is, he's saying, your forgiveness will always be there. And the reason he uses this number is because it's a number that rings bells from the Old Testament where it's used about vengeance.

So in Genesis chapter 4, after Cain kills Abel, first murder in the human race, Lamech, a descendant of Cain, says this. He says, if Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech, 77 times. [26 : 41] So here's a man that he was declaring to his two wives, first man who was polygamy, and he says, you think that, you think Cain was good at vengeance.

If, if anyone wrongs me, what you'll see is vengeance like you've never seen it before. He's like the ultimate avenger. And he's saying, 77 times, I'll bring that vengeance.

Well, Jesus is saying, for the Christian, you are to be like that with forgiveness when people wrong you. It is our duty as Christians and this is really tough, isn't it?

Sometimes we'd rather the person stayed in verse 17, unrepentant, and then we could at least see them under discipline and we could feel that sense of vindication and maybe feel a sense of, well, they're suffering a bit for what they've done.

But if they repent, we have a duty as Christians to forgive. And it is hard and often, what I see in pastoral ministry is often in relationships in church life and in marriages, what stops reconciliation more often is not that the person won't say sorry and repent, it's that the other person won't forgive.

[28 : 01] And forgiveness is always costly. It's about us choosing to bear a great cost when we're hurt by someone else. We can either make them pay vengeance or we can forgive.

Which means that we're saying, I'll pay myself. I will absorb the cost of how you've treated me. But even though it's costly, it's really good for us to forgive.

In fact, when we don't forgive, the resentment, the feeling of how we were treated, haunts us. And I'm sure you'll be able to think of examples of that in your life. of having to relive what someone said or what they did.

Frederick Buchenes puts it like this. He says, of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontation still to come, to savour to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back.

In many ways, it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you. See what he's saying?

[29 : 16] When we choose not to forgive, actually, we are letting ourselves be controlled by the past. We're living with the pain. And so forgiveness has two stages to it.

There is internal forgiveness and that is always required of the Christian. It's the attitude within us that says, I'm willing to bear the cost of what they've done to me.

I will release them in my heart from the debt they have incurred. And we're commanded to do that. The second act in forgiveness is external forgiveness or what you could call reconciliation.

And that's only required of us if the person repents. So we're called to forgive as the Lord forgives us. He has cleared the debt in his heart towards us so that any of us can come back to him.

But reconciliation only happens if we will repent and accept that offer of forgiveness. So we are to offer to reconcile with someone but if they won't repent we don't reconcile.

[30 : 23] And even if we do reconcile it's worth saying that that we can still say their sin has consequences. So in situations like an abusive marriage or where someone has repeatedly lied or cheated in the business world or something it's okay to say look I've forgiven them but there are safeguards now in the relationship to ensure that the victim is not hurt again.

when somebody is willing to repent and we say to them I forgive you we might not feel it yet but there's an act of will there and what we're saying when we say I forgive you is we're saying I'm not going to dwell on what you did I'm not going to bring up again what you did and use it against you I'm not going to talk to other people about what you did and I'm not going to let what you did stand between us that's what we mean when we say I forgive you to somebody so Jesus is saying this morning serving those who sin in his community is true greatness confronting their sin praying for them praying for their spiritual restoration offering them forgiveness and I don't know about you but any of us might be thinking this morning I'm not even sure I want to be great anymore this is hard certainly we might be thinking

I know I'm not great I know I can't do this and if we're feeling that Jesus is asking here something that we can't do we're actually in a good place the right place because what we'll see from the

parable he's about to tell that we'll focus on next week is that we don't find the strength to serve and forgive people who sin against us from within ourselves we find that strength from him from a deep and growing grasp of how much he has first forgiven us so that he has the right to ask us to forgive other people when you think from Jesus teaching here about what true greatness looks like it starts to look a lot like him doesn't it where else would you look for a man who came to serve the people who sinned against him who prayed father forgive them for they don't know what they do who calls us to repent for forgiveness and reconciliation because he has already paid the immense cost to make that offer of going to the cross here is true greatness and here is how he's treated you if you're a

Christian without it we'd have no hope and when we are sinned against as a Christian it enables us that we're never to look down on the person in the sense that the ground is level at the cross and we as a fellow sinner see their sin but we know I can't be self righteous in this situation as the Holy Spirit grows in us a deeper grief at how great the debt is of our sin we can become more aware of how magnificent the cross is that Jesus saved us and what great cost it was for him to be a just God who offers us mercy that he would cover the multitude of our sins through the humiliation of his death on the cross once we grasp that more deeply it gives us the strength to turn to others and offer them forgiveness in a moment we're going to sing again while we're singing there'll be prayer ministry over the back to my right it may be that in confidence and perhaps without naming names it would be appropriate to go and raise something that's come up this morning either a situation where you've been a victim and you're being challenged to forgive or where you're in a situation where you feel convicted and want to seek forgiveness but prayer ministry will be on hand for you today will be a great day to act on what we've heard but let's all pray together now let's bow our heads and I'll lead us in a prayer

Lord Jesus we praise you that you are the good shepherd we thank you that you are patient with us when we stray that you come to find us as lost sheep that you are gentle with us the little ones of your kingdom and we ask that you will grow in us a deeper grasp of how much you in love have forgiven us so that we in turn can serve and forgive the people around us who are caught in sin and heavenly father would we more and more be a community marked by the gospel of your grace for Jesus name's sake amen