

“Love Is Holding One Another Accountable”

Matthew 18:12-20 ¹² "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? ¹³ And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. ¹⁴ In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. ¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, {15 Some manuscripts do not have against you.} go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶ But if he 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 Deut. 19:15} ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸ "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be {18 Or have been} bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be {18 Or have been} loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

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One thing I noticed when I went to a seminary which was Presbyterian in affiliation and particularly after going to a Mennonite college was that I had a different understanding of what the church was in comparison to most of the other students. Most of the other students coming from Presbyterian and Methodist backgrounds seemed to understand the church to be the sum total of its programs, its ministries. What the church did seemed to be more important than what it is as the body of Christ. The success of a church for many of my colleagues at seminary meant the success of its programmed ministry. If a church was having problems all you needed to do was fiddle with the programming and if that didn't work you got a new pastor who could develop new programs.

My Mennonite friends on the other hand lived their faith differently. What the church is was more important than what it did. They understood the church as a very close-knit community, the family of God. They taught that the true health of a church is not in its programs but in its relationships founded on mutual love and accountability. They were accountable to one another to love one another, be open and honest with one another, and support one another. They seriously attempted to lead the life that Jesus spelled out in the Sermon on the Mount. To live otherwise was to live in sin and one person's sin was not simply a private matter between that person and God. The sin of one hurt every body. They knew that the strained relationships that arose from one person's sin could stifle God's presence in their midst. So they dealt with it. As I said they took the Bible seriously and the passage we just read in Matthew about how to handle matters when a member is sinning is the way they handled things. If you sinned within the knowing of anyone in the community of faith, you expected to be dealt with according to this passage. The brother or sister who knew had the responsibility of following this path. If not they became complicit to it and then had something to hide. If you were too proud to acknowledge your sin when confronted, then they would return with two more

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people. If still you refused, then the ultimate penalty was what they called being shunned. This is where the community ignores you in hopes that you will return.

This kind of accountability is something that is completely foreign to us. We are more private with our sinning. (and I do realize that say the word sin in church these days is about the same as saying “S*#t “ in church.) We don’t expect to get a visit from a SWAT team of elders when we get caught in the wrong and won’t admit it. But my friends it hasn’t been too long since this rule of Scripture was practiced faithfully in Presbyterian churches. I think it was when we Presbyterians began to back off on making our members accountable to the church for their conduct both within and out of the church that we got into serious trouble as a denomination. There was a reason for this and it was that there was a nose side to this whole business and a malicious one as well which could lead to a spirit of witch hunting.

Nevertheless, the church that Jesus envisioned was one which judged its success on things like the depth of love found between its members, the ability of members to trust one another enough to share their weaknesses and pray together, and how you helped one another to become more like Christ. The early church did things a bit different than we do. It didn’t matter how well you attended the programs. What mattered was whether you were being transformed to become more like Christ and you were held accountable for it. To become a member of the early church was to say that becoming like Christ in everything I do is the most important thing in my life, so important that I would willingly die for him. That in essence is what it means to call him Lord. You knew that in order to carry out this task you needed the help and support of the church. In this way the Mennonites were different than most Presbyterian churches I have been in.

Let me step back here for a second a clarify something you may be saying to yourselves. Maybe you are saying, “Wait a minute, Randy. This passage is not about people sinning in general. It’s about what to do when someone sins against you. It is the process of trying to forgive someone.” I would agree with you. That’s how I’ve always understood it. But, I did some studying on it this week and have come to see this passage in a much broader way. Those of you who were reading along in the pew Bibles may have noticed that there is a superscript letter “d” in verse fifteen immediately following the prepositional phrase *against you*. If you look at the bottom of the page to the corresponding footnote it reads, “some manuscripts do not have *against you*.” Among those manuscripts are some of the oldest fragments, quotes, and copies that we have of Matthew’s Gospel. If I had another twenty minutes I would lay out in detail why I think *against you* is a later addition. But, I’ll spare you. But if you want to know, ask me later.

For our purpose here this passage comes as the final part of Jesus answering the question that the disciples asked in 18:1, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He answers saying basically anyone who humbles himself to be like a little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And then he starts to talk about sinning; particularly about the Twelve disciples as leaders in the church being the cause of a “little one” to sin. To tie it all together, Jesus says that our Father in heaven is like a shepherd who will leave ninety-nine sheep unattended to bring back the one who has gone astray. Our Father is not willing that any of his “little ones” go astray and get lost. So, since this is the way God is in his love

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towards us, Jesus tells us we, the Christian community, have the responsibility of holding one another accountable for our transgressions and he gives us the method for doing so.

I'm not trying to open up a can of witch hunting worms here. I am only trying to say that it is part of God's love for us that we help one another grow in Christ and that cannot be done unless we help one another deal with the sin that is in our lives. There is no true love where there is no accountability. Instead, all you have is fear. The way to do that is to address the person as discreetly as possible and prayerfully help them to overcome the sin which has them bound. That is why Jesus says if two of you agree on anything you ask for, the Father will give it remembering the context here is healing from sin and not tacky things like Cadillac's. That's why if we ourselves know that a particular sin has a grip on us, then we need to go get a Christian friend and pray. It is the only way to grow past it. That sort of childlike humility, while humiliating, is actually greatness in the kingdom of heaven. It is greatness because it is healing us, making us to be more like Christ Jesus, making us to be more like the New creation the Holy Spirit is working in us. He also says that this work of holding another accountable is not something we do alone for indeed he is in our midst. Finally, always remember that the intent behind holding one another accountable is not to be punitive, but rather growth in Christ. Amen.