

## Do Everything Possible to Win Someone Over

Matthew 18:15-20

Pentecost 16

If a mom and dad had no rules whatsoever for their children... they could eat anything they wanted, anytime they wanted, as much as they wanted.... they could stay up as late as they wanted... they could buy anything they wanted... they could throw temper tantrums with no consequences... they could hurt their siblings without intervention... This total lack of rules or structure could indicate a couple of things. On one extreme, it could mean that the parents have no idea how to be parents and don't know how to care for their children. On the other extreme, it could mean that the parents don't really love their children or want to care for them.

Jesus, in our Gospel for today, gives us a system for dealing with sin inside the church, among believers, and he gives us this system because he loves us, he loves his church, and he loves everyone in it. Because he wants to protect it and he wants what is best for it, what is best for you, and what is best for all believers. He gives us this system because he loves people who sin and wants what is best for them.

Let's review this system, sometimes we call it the steps of church discipline. But, as we review it, we should remember that these are not just instructions for pastors or elders, rather they are steps that all of us can use. Maybe you have had or will have to use these steps with a brother or a sister in the faith. Maybe someone has had or will have to use these steps with you.

There are four steps in this series, we'll read each one, talk about it, and then go onto the next one. And, when we've made it through all of them, I want to talk about two questions. What is the overall purpose of these steps? And, what do these steps teach us about Jesus?

So, first, what are these steps?

Jesus said, **"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."**

Sometimes when someone sins against us or we witness in the lives of one of our brothers or sisters in the faith a major violation of God's law, we can think, "Well, it's not my problem." "It's not my place." "It's really no big deal." "I don't want to get involved." Sometimes, we may get upset and start to harbor resentment in our hearts against that person without ever talking to them. Now, we are sinning. Sometimes, we may be afraid to confront the other person. Maybe afraid because we don't like confrontation, maybe afraid because we know our own sin, maybe afraid because we have even struggled with the exact same sin. But Jesus says, "Go." He says, "Go." And he says to go alone.

Going alone is a way to treat the brother or sister with gentleness and respect. There are so many commandments that we break on a daily basis. One that I think is so easy to break is the Eighth Commandment, "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." I feel it is broken so often especially when we consider it's broader application, "We should fear and love God that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, or give him a bad name, but defend him, speak well of him, and take his words and actions in the kindest possible way." By going to our brother or sister alone at first, we are doing everything possible to protect their reputation. After all, isn't that how we would want someone else to treat us if we fell into some sort of sin?

The ideal situation is that the issue is resolved in this first step... the brother or sister recognizes their sin, they repent, they are forgiven, they are restored. Situation resolved! No one else has to know about it.

But sometimes that doesn't happen. Jesus knows this and so he gives us a second step, **"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.'"**

Jesus, in his wisdom, gives us some flexibility. He says, "take one or two others along." One or two, depending on the individual, depending on the situation. Jesus, in his wisdom, also knows that if the brother or sister is going to persist in their sin and eventually the matter will go before the church, it will be important to have witnesses involved.

But these witnesses and this step also serve another purpose. The witnesses may realize that a brother or sister is not actually sinning. They may realize that instead of a situation of unrepentant sin, the situation is a difference of opinions, or a difference between personalities, or a difference among preferences, or maybe the person pointing out the fault of a brother or sister actually has a weak or confused conscience when it comes to matters of Christian freedom. So, these witnesses are an important piece of the process to verify that the situation is real and severe.

And, if they confirm that a brother or sister has committed a sin and is unrepentant, then they can beg and plead with that person to change their ways and turn to Christ.

However, if they are unsuccessful, there is the third step. Jesus said, **"If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church."**

Now, after patiently trying to do everything possible in a private way, there comes a time when the situation becomes public in the church. Of course, the principles of love, gentleness, and respect will guide how this situation is communicated to the church. But, this third step does open it up so that more people can try to bring this person to repentance.

If the church is unsuccessful, there is a fourth and final step. Jesus said, **"And if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."**

This doesn't mean to treat them cruelly. Jesus showed immense love to the pagans and tax collectors. He spent time with them, he ate with them, he prayed for them. He lived, died, and rose again for them. But, in this context, a pagan or a tax collector means someone who is not a part of the church. There comes a point and time when a person, who is unrepentant and persistent in their sin, can no longer be a part of a Christian congregation and is no longer a part of the Christian church and this needs to be communicated to the person, in a loving way. This sounds very serious and it is. But, it's to show the person the severity of the situation and how their eternal well-being is at stake with the goal of waking them up, so they do eventually seek and receive forgiveness in Jesus. It's like when parents discipline their children out of love for their well-being.

After Jesus talks through these steps, he explains that he and heaven stand behind the action taken by the church here on earth. In other words, there is harmony between what is decided here on earth (when Jesus's steps are followed) and what happens in heaven, **"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."** And, Jesus reminds us to always include prayer in this process and assures us that he is with us, **"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."**

These are the steps for dealing with sin in the church. A sin that is very public from the beginning such as a large-scale scandal or sins committed against us by unbelievers, these types of situations may require different courses of action. But here, these steps, this is how we are to deal with sin in the church.

What is their overall goal and what do they teach us about Jesus?

The goal is to do absolutely everything possible to help a brother or sister who needs spiritual intervention. The point is not a series of steps to go through to remove bad sheep, weak sheep, sheep who are different from us from the flock. Again, I'll repeat, the goal of these steps is not to be a clear process to get rid of sheep, although that may be the end result. Rather, the goal of these steps to bring sheep that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, loves and died for back into the flock. Our goal should not be to use these steps to usher someone out, but rather to be a process in which we beg and plead with someone to be ushered back in. The goal is not removal but reconciliation. The objective is not to cleanse the church directory, but rather to go through a series of steps, patiently and in love, to encourage a brother or sister to find cleansing in blood of Christ.

This means it may be a slow process. We should consider these steps in the context of the parable of the Barren Fig Tree from Luke 13. In this parable there was a tree that for three years produced nothing. No fruit at all. The owner of the farm decided he was going to cut it down. But the gardener said, let's give it one more year. I'll dig around it. I'll fertilize it. Then, after one more year, if it doesn't produce fruit, it can be cut down.

That attitude of that gardener is the attitude we should have when going through these steps and it's the attitude that Jesus has with us. Let's consider our last question for today, what do these steps teach us about Jesus.

They teach us that he is patient and wants to do everything possible to call us to repentance when we sin, he wants to give us every chance and opportunity to turn to him, he wants to bring us back when we stray His goal for us is not removal from the kingdom but reconciliation with the Father. That has always been his goal. He said in Matthew 23:37, **"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing."** He tried and tried. He sent prophet after prophet. He himself came into this world.

When he came, he dealt with our sin. Our gospel for today tells us how to deal with the sin of other and how others should deal with our sin. But Jesus has completely dealt with our sin and the sin of the world. On the cross he paid for all our sin. On the cross he, the Son of God, was treated like a pagan or a tax collector. He took the death we deserve and in doing so he completely forgave all our sin, the sin of the whole world. He did everything possible, he has done everything required, from his life, death, and resurrection, to win us over, to completely open the door of heaven to us.

The persistence and patience that is implied in this series of steps is the patience and persistence that Jesus has with you and me. May we also be patient and persistent as we do everything possible to win over others. Amen.