

Kingdom: A Journey Through Matthew

Kingdom Community

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KINGDOM COMMUNITY Matthew 18

If you have Bible, and I hope you do, turn with me to Matthew 18. I am so excited about this text this morning, particularly for us as a church. I know that there are some people here who are visiting with us today, who are not members of this faith family called The Church at Brook Hills, and we are obviously glad you are here. You are welcome here. At the same time, this text just begs for me as pastor to speak specifically to the brothers and sisters who comprise The Church at Brook Hills, to show us what it means to be a kingdom community. So that's what I'm going to do.

At the same time, if you are a Christian and a member of another church, and you for whatever reason were not able to worship with the church of which you're a part today, then I hope you will be encouraged and reminded of what it means to be a member, a part, of that local church. If you're a Christian and you are not a member of The Church at Brook Hills or another church, I pray that you will be convicted today of the importance of the body of Christ, and that you will be challenged to commit your life to a kingdom community, a local church, whether that is this one or another one in Birmingham or wherever you might live. And if you are not a Christian, then I hope you will see the love of Christ today. Jesus has designed His church to be an expression of His love. And oftentimes, unfortunately, non-Christians don't always look at the church and see love, but I hope you will see that today, that you might receive His love, and become a part of His church.

So we've got a ton of ground to cover, so let's dive right in. This is the fourth major teaching section of the book of Matthew, and it spans one chapter. So the first one was Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount. The second one was in Matthew 10, where Jesus sent out His disciples. The third one was Matthew 13, which is where Jesus taught all of those parables in succession. And now, this is the fourth one, and it all hangs together. What we're going to see is that the first four verses of this chapter set the stage with Jesus' teaching about what it means to be a Christian. And then, the rest of the chapter unpacks how we relate to one another as Christians in the church.

And in this chapter, we're going to see Jesus, for the second time in the Gospel of Matthew, refer to the church. The last time was Matthew 16; these are the only two times in all the Gospels that Jesus refers specifically to the church. And one writer called this chapter "the single greatest discourse our Lord ever gave on life among the redeemed people in His church."

So this is a very important chapter. But it's also a very misunderstood chapter. So many of the verses we're about to read have been misinterpreted and abused in so many different ways. And as a result, we've missed what they mean. So we need to recover the riches that are contained here, particularly as they apply to us in this room as The Church at Brook Hills.

Becoming a Christian ...

So let's start by reading the foundation of the chapter: The first four verses of Matthew 18.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Okay, this passage has to do with becoming a Christian. So Matthew begins this chapter by saying, "At that time..." cluing us in to the place where this chapter starts and the place where the previous chapter left off. Over the last couple of chapters, we've seen some powerful pictures of Peter, one of the disciples, confessing Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. And then we saw Jesus take Peter, James, and John up on a mountain with Him to see His glory transfigured. And the effect of all this is that the disciples start wondering, "Hey, who among us is the greatest?" Peter has obviously been singled out, but he's also been rebuked. Peter, James, and John got invited to come upon the mountain. So who is the favorite disciple here? Who is the greatest disciple?

To be a citizen of the kingdom, you must become a child of the King.

And amidst this discussion, what does Jesus do? He calls to Himself a child, and He puts the child in the middle of them, and He says, "Truly, I say to you..." In other words, "Mark this down: Unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." And the message is clear: To be a citizen of the kingdom, you must become a child of the King. This is the essence of what it means to be a Christian: To be a child of the King.

And here Jesus is pointing to the necessity of conversion. You'll notice the language here of turning and becoming like a child. Jesus is calling His disciples here to a fundamental change. In order to become a citizen of the kingdom, you must turn from yourself. See the essence of humility here: You turn aside from yourself, and you trust in the Father. You thrust yourself upon Him in need of Him.

I think about our 21-month old little girl here, wanting/needing to be held, fed, read to, loved, provided for, wanting/needing parents who do for her what she cannot do for herself. I think about when I get home and she drops whatever she's doing and she runs up to me with her arms in the air and a smile on her face, and I pick her up. This is conversion, Jesus says. Turn from yourself and trust in the Father; humble yourself like a child.

Now, I need to make a necessary clarification here, because sometimes we can take this imagery farther than Jesus intends us to here. We can start equating all kinds of characteristics of children with what it means to be a Christian, but remember that what Jesus is calling His disciples to here is humility of heart, not childishness of thought. Jesus calls His disciples to humility of heart, not childishness of thought. So this is key to remember: Children have many characteristics that the people of God are not to copy. They don't know a lot, they can't focus very well on things for a long period of time, they make all kinds of poor decisions out of ignorance, and so on and so on. We are not to be childish in these senses. The emphasis here is on humility. The smartest, most intelligent, most successful, most noble, most gifted person in this room must come to Jesus with humility of heart, turning from yourself and trusting completely in the Father. This is the essence of what it means to be a Christian. To be a citizen of the Kingdom, you must become a child of the King.

And so I would ask every person in this room, "Are you a child of the King?" Have you come to the point where you have realized that God is holy, and you are sinful, desperately in need of a Savior. Have you come to realize that Jesus, the Son of God, came to die on the cross for your sins and rose from the grave in victory over sin so that you might be saved? And have you turned from yourself – from your every attempt to cover over your own sins and find satisfaction for your soul – have you turned from yourself and trusted in Jesus as the Lord over your life? Have you, like a child, left behind all you were holding on to and have you run to God the Father through Jesus as the only One whom you can trust with your life now and forever? If not, I invite you to do that today. Turn from yourself and trust in the Father. This is the essence of what it means to be a Christian, to be a child of the King.

Loving the Church ...

Now, that then sets the stage for the rest of this chapter, where Jesus talks about the Father's love for His children, and how His love affects the way we love one another in the church. Now this is where many people have abused this text. Look at the next verses. Verse 5 says, *"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."* And people read that and think, "Okay, you better receive children, care for children, and you better not cause a child to sin. Look at Jesus' love for children here. So we should love children, also."

Now obviously, there's truth there. We should love children, but that's not the point of this passage. You see, what Jesus has just done is He has equated all of His followers with children – children of the Father. He has used a physical child as an illustration of a spiritual reality. "Every one of my followers is a child of the King." So now, whenever we see "child" or "little one" in the rest of this passage, the reference is not to physical children, but to the spiritual children of God the Father. "Child" means "Christian" in the rest of this passage.

So when Jesus says, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me," He's not equating Himself with children. "Hey, if you love a child, you are loving me," No, He's equating Himself with Christians, with children of the Father, saying, "Hey, when you receive a Christian (a child of the Father), you are receiving me. And when you cause not a physical child, but when you cause a spiritual child of the King, when you cause one of the Father's children, when you cause a Christian to sin, it would be better for you to have a great millstone fastened around your neck and be drowned in the depth of the sea." The rest of this chapter is all about how the Father's children (i.e., Christians) are to be cared for.

And when you realize this, the imagery in this text becomes so powerful. Think about it, especially if you are a parent or if you have had a loving parent in your life. You know that it's one thing for someone to offend or hurt you, but it's even harder to deal with when someone offends or hurts your child. You can hurt me all day long, but you hurt my daughter, and things will not go well for you.

I was reading a blog post the other day from a dad having a figurative conversation with a boy wanting to date his daughter, and this dad said: "My daughter's heart is a fragile thing. If you play with hers, I will show you yours." He continued, "If you ever find yourself alone with my daughter, don't panic. Just correct the situation immediately. If I ever catch you

trying to be alone with my daughter, that would be the time to panic." Then he concluded, "It may sound like I'm joking in threatening you harm, and while I might not physically hurt you if you offend my daughter or violate her honor, when I am addressing the issue with you, you will not be laughing." A good father watches out for his children in an even greater, more passionate way than he watches out for himself.

And that is the kind of zealous affection that we see in Matthew 18 from the Father for His children. Jesus says, "You receive my children, you receive me. You treat my children harshly, you will wish you had cast yourself into the bottom of the sea with a stone fastened around your neck." That's strong language.

We protect one another.

We must prioritize caring for the children of God, loving the church in these ways. One, we protect one another. We receive one another; we don't reject one another. And then we protect one another from sin. And this whole section really takes us past just verse 6. So read with me verses 7-9 too.

"Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

So what is Jesus saying here? He's saying that as children of the Father, we are selflessly concerned about each others' holiness. We don't want to cause another brother or sister to sin. There will be temptations in the world as long as there is sin in the world, so expect temptations there. We know that. You and I are bombarded with temptations everywhere we look in the world, everywhere we go, with people we meet, with things we watch and listen to. We are bombarded with temptations in the world.

And in light of this, we must then add to those temptations by leading one another to sin in the church. Don't gossip to me when I am already fighting off all kinds of temptation in the world. Don't lead me astray in the name of your supposed "Christian liberties" when I'm fighting every day not to turn those liberties into license to sin. Brothers and sisters, we are bombarded with materialism on all sides: Don't lead one another by encouragement or example into deeper materialism. Single brothers, don't lead your girlfriend into sexual sin when she's fighting for purity against all the impurities of this world as it is. Sisters, particular as we enter into spring and summer, don't dress in a way that leads your brothers -- who are already fighting sexual images at every turn in this culture -- don't dress in a way that leads your brothers to sin. It would be better for you if you would put a stone around your neck and throw yourself down into a watery grave. Do you see what Jesus is saying? "If you lead one of my children into sin, you bring offense to me."

We protect one another. We are selflessly concerned about each others' holiness, and we are radically committed to our own holiness. As children of the Father, we watch out for each other and for ourselves. "*If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off...if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out...*" Obviously, Jesus is using strong figurative language here to cause to realize that drastic action is necessary to overcome temptation. If something is leading you to sin, get rid of it, Jesus says. Don't toy with it, don't flirt with it, don't entertain it; destroy it.

And see how the two go together: When we are zealous about holiness in our own lives, purity before God the Father in our own lives, we will be zealous about protecting one another from sin. And when we are zealous about protecting one another from sin, we will be all the more careful not to sin in our own lives. Yet, when we are casual about sin in our own lives, we will casually lead others to sin in their lives. And when we are okay with leading others to sin, we will be okay with sinning ourselves. So let us protect one another, brothers and sisters. In a world where we will inevitably face temptations at every turn, let us work to protect one another.

We love one another.

We protect one another, and we love one another. Jesus continues in verse 10:

"See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."

Don't despise, look down upon, one another. Don't treat one another with contempt. Treat one another with care and love.

And listen to the reasoning behind this command. Jesus says we love one another in light of the Father's angelic provision for His children. "For I tell you," Jesus says, "*that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.*" Now what does that mean? This is the passage that people have used to suppose that each child in the world, or even each Christian in the world, has a guardian angel assigned to them.

Now, we don't have time this morning to go into an exhaustive study of angels in Scripture, but they are indeed all over the place. 108 times we see angels in the Old Testament and 165 times in the New Testament. These created spiritual beings appear in physical ways, in dreams and visions, and in other forms. We see them at different points carrying out God's plans, administering God's judgment, serving as God's representatives, accomplishing God's work, bringing God's provision, administering God's protection, serving God's people -- all kinds of things. But amid all that the Bible says about angels, it never says that the number of angels corresponds to the number of Christians in such a way that each one of us has a guardian angel assigned to protect us.

Now we see angels protecting God's children. It's an angel that's sent to deliver Peter out of prison in Acts 12. It's angels who shut the mouths of lions in Daniel 6. Angels guard God's people in their ways according to Psalm 91. Angels fed God's prophet, Elijah, in 1 Kings 19. So we have this picture of angels carrying out the work of God in unique ways, and so we are led to believe that God is using angels to do the same sorts of things today in our lives. But that doesn't mean we each have a guardian one assigned to us. Instead, the Bible speaks in more general terms about angels, like Hebrews 1:14: "*Angels are ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.*" So biblically, my encouragement would be to think about angels more in terms of "zone coverage" than "man-to-man." They cover everything that needs to be covered, but they're not necessarily assigned physically to each one of us. Picture the zone with a little box and one thrown in here or there.

And this is important because, if the Father has angelic attendants that He sends out to serve and provide for and protect His children, then how much more should we love His children? And from this, Jesus goes into the story of the shepherd who has one sheep wander off, and the shepherd goes running after that one, and the picture is beautiful! Love one another in light of the Father's individual pursuit of His children. See how the Father cares over one: *"It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."*

Oh, just let this soak in for a moment in your own life. Child of God, the Father cares for you. Not just the person beside, in front, behind you, but you. The Father cares for you. And the Father is committed to pursuing you as His child. You wander from Him, and He will pursue you. In John 10, Jesus says, *"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me....My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."* Oh, these are rock solid promises for the child of God. No one can snatch you out of the hand of the good shepherd. The Father has individually pursued you.

So if this is how the Father loves His children, then this is how we must love one another. This is how we must pursue one another, particularly when one among us wanders. We seek after that brother or sister because this is what God does.

We restore one another.

This leads right into the next section. When we wander, we restore one another. Verses 15-20,

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed[f] in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

Now this is a passage that we have talked about before because it is foundational for understanding our process, as a church, of discipline and restoration in the body. This is something that is essential to the health of a church. Now we don't think that in our day: We think, "Church discipline -- isn't that legalistic? Isn't that unloving? Just show each other grace!" Well, yes, show each other grace, and grace involves turning one another from sin. Mark Dever, Pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., who spent some time with our elders this last week, has written:

Imagine this church: It is huge and is still growing numerically. People like it. The music is good. The people are welcoming. There are many exciting programs, and people are quickly enlisted into their support. And yet, the church, in trying to look like the world in order to win the world, has done a better job than it may have intended. It does not display the distinctively holy characteristics taught in the New Testament. Imagine such an apparently

vigorous church being truly spiritually sick, with no remaining immune system to check and guard against wrong teaching or wrong living. Imagine Christians, kneedeep in recovery groups and sermons on brokenness and grace, being comforted in their sin but never confronted. Imagine those people, made in the image of God, being lost to sin because no one corrects them. Can you imagine such a church? Apart from the size, have I not described many of our American churches?

Another pastor writes,

The church today is suffering from an infection which has been allowed to fester...As an infection weakens the body by destroying its defense mechanisms, so the church has been weakened by this ugly sore. The church has lost its power and effectiveness in serving as a vehicle for social, moral, and spiritual change. This illness is due, at least in part, to a neglect of church discipline.

One of the ways we love one another is by restoring one another.

So remember, the process of church discipline and restoration is, step one: Private correction. Verse 15, *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."* Now you notice in this verse, it says, *"If your brother sins against you..."* And some translations have "against you" while others don't. This is one of those extremely rare, always minor instances in Scripture where we have variants in our earliest manuscripts of the New Testament. And I say "minor" because in the end, it's really not that significant because, even if Jesus only said, "If a brother sins against you," the reality is that Galatians 6:1 tells us more generally, "If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently." And there's no specific reference there to whether or not you are directly affected by that sin. So the teaching of the New Testament as a whole is that if a brother is caught in sin or if a brother sins against you – either way – here's what you do: "Go and show him his fault, just between the two of you."

So the goal is to keep the circle as small as possible as long as possible. Don't talk about another brother's sin with other people, Jesus says. This is our first tendency, right? "Did you hear what he or she did?" Brothers and sisters, that is sin in and of itself. Ephesians 4:29-32: It is a sin to talk about a brother or sister in a way that does not build up him up her according to their needs in Christ Jesus. We must zealously guard and protect each other's character for each other's good and for the glory of Christ. The more a person's sin is known and discussed by others, no matter how well-meaning they may be, the easier it is for that brother to become resentful and the harder it may be for repentance and restoration. So don't fish around with hints to try to find out who knows what about a brother or sister's sin. Go to your brother or sister, period.

Now the implication here is that a brother or sister is continuing in that sin and is not turning from it, is unrepentant. And that's key. This is not just talking about when someone sins, "Okay, time to bring the hammer down on them." This is when a brother either sins directly against you and has not come to you in repentance, or if a brother is caught in sin and is not turning from it, love him enough to go to him. Love him enough not to talk to everyone in the world about it. Love him enough not to sit back and watch him wander deeper and deeper into sin. Love him enough to go to him in private correction.

And the goal, Jesus says, is to win your brother over. Go to him in a spirit of love and humility and grace, such that when he sees his sin, hopefully he will say, "Yes, I need to turn from it." And by the grace of God, he will, and your communion in Christ will be even that much deeper. This is a good thing.

Step One: Private correction. And this step doesn't involve any kind of official organization of how church discipline is handled. This doesn't involve any leaders in the church. This is where most of church discipline is intended to happen, and it's intended to happen all the time this way in the context of our relationships with one another. Everyday, in a sense. People loving one another to go to them and not talk to anyone else, but to go to them and pull each other back from sin. We do this. We are 95% of the way there with church discipline and restoration in the church.

At the same time, Jesus says, there are some situations where he will not listen, where your brother or sister will not receive correction in their sin. And if that's the case, "Take one or two others along..." Step 2: Small group clarification. Jesus quotes here from the way things were handled in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 19:15, where others are witnesses to the truth of something. But the picture here is to now involve another believer or maybe two. Again the circle stays really small here. And you want believers who are gentle, humble, loving, and will go with you to that brother or sister to talk about this unrepentant sin.

Now the point here is to broaden the circle slightly so that one or two other brothers/sisters see the sin and show the love and concern for the brother who is caught in sin. And the goal is not to now begin ganging up on that brother. So you don't go and try to find a couple of people whom you can build a case with against this brother. The goal is to find one or two people who themselves are gentle, humble, and loving, and will go with you to talk about this with the brother or sister. Those one or two others may end up saying to you, "This is not a sin. You don't even need to be addressing this in a brother's life." Or they may say, "Yes, okay, we see this sin, and we want this brother to be restored to Christ." So you involve one or two others. Again, this is not necessarily a church leader or pastor, though it could be. But oftentimes it's best to involve someone else who knows that brother or sister and knows about what's going on in their lives and cares for them. And this, then, takes care of even more situations.

However, Jesus says, if a brother refuses to listen to them, "Tell it to the church." Step 3: Church admonition. Here again, Jesus refers to the church. You might circle it here in verse 17; it's mentioned twice. Again, the word is *ekklesia*, the gathering of believers, the church. And this is where the circle clearly grows to the gathering of believers in a local church. So the church is made aware of the brother or sister's unrepentant sin.

Now that may sound unloving, even embarrassing, but feel the tone behind what Jesus is saying here. You may think, "Why tell a whole group of people about this brother and his sin?" And the answer is so that now, the entire church is saying together, "We love you, and we want you to come back to Christ." What Jesus teaches next here is that "*if he refuses to listen even to the church*" -- and the implication is that there is a time where the entire body of believers is saying to a brother or sister, "Come back to Christ" -- and this is designed to be a clear demonstration of the grace of God. Brother or sister, God loves you so much that if you are caught in sin, He will send an entire army of believers to you in demonstration of His love and mercy and grace to bring you back to Him. Wow, what a picture of the love of God!

So church, love the brother back from his sin, but if he refuses to listen to the church, then step 4: Church excommunication. *"Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."* In other words, treat him (or her) as an unbeliever, outside of the church. Treat him like he is no longer your brother in Christ. He must no longer be treated as a member of the body of Christ. He must be excommunicated, expelled, from the church. And this is not an option. This is a command from Jesus, so to not do this in the church, would be to sin. We are sinning by not doing church discipline, and specifically, by not carrying out this step, if necessary.

Now let's be honest. This is tough; this is really tough. This is tough to do, but maybe even tougher to understand, isn't it? For the church to kick someone out, so to speak? "I thought the church was the place where everyone is welcomed, to say, 'No, you cannot be a member of this church.' That seems to go against the grain of everything we think, doesn't it?" But this is what Jesus is saying, and it's what the New Testament church did. 1 Corinthians 5 is one clear example, and there are others in the New Testament. And the goal there, as well as here, is that this, hopefully, prayerfully, will lead to the restoration of the brother or sister, that he or she will see his or her sin and return to Christ. It's for the good of that individual, it's for the protection and the purity of the church, and ultimately it's for the glory of God in the body of Christ. We must trust Jesus on this and obey Jesus in restoring our brothers and sisters.

And we must believe Jesus. Look at the promises He gives amidst church discipline and restoration. One, He has given us His authority. In verse 18, Jesus says, *"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."* This begins a series of abused verses, particularly when they are taken out of context. So this language is very similar to what we saw in Matthew 16. And here again Jesus is not giving some special authority to us outside of Himself, but attached to Himself and His Word. He is saying that what we do as a church in His name, with His authority, is a reflection of what He does in heaven.

So, if someone comes to the church and says, "I am living in sin and I am unrepentant. I will not turn to Christ," then we can say to that person with authority, "You are living bound in sin and your sin is not forgiven." Now it's not that their sin is unforgiven because we said so. Their sin is unforgiven because Christ has said so in His Word. And we as the church are a reflection of that. Similarly, if someone comes to the church and says, "I have sinned against God and I am turning from it, seeking His forgiveness, and repenting of my sin," then we can say with full confidence to that person, "He forgives your sin, and you are free from it." Now he's not free from sin because we said he is free. He is free from his sin because Christ has said he is free, and Christ has given us the privilege of proclaiming what He has said to be true.

So, the context here, when it comes to church discipline, and we are doing the tough work of maybe excommunicating a brother, someone might say, "Well, by whose authority are you doing this?" Jesus is saying in Matthew 18:18, "You are doing this by my authority. And when you do this tough work, you are doing it on my authority, the very authority of heaven." One writer said, "Never is the church more in harmony with heaven and operating in perfect accord with her Lord than when dealing with sin to maintain purity." There is a humble confidence that comes with knowing that Christ has given us His authority to speak against sin in the church. He has given us His authority.

He has granted us His support. Verse 19 says, *"Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven."* Again, another totally abused verse. This is not a blank check for finding somebody else who

agrees with you on just anything, and poof, God responds and gives you whatever you want. No, remember the context. Jesus has just finished talking about when two or three confront a brother in sin, and Jesus is saying, "Know this: When you gather together in unison to confront sin in church, know that you have the full support of the Father in heaven in what you are doing."

These are amazing promises that Jesus is giving here. He knows this church discipline thing is not easy; He knows we will be tempted to shy away from it and not carry it out. And so He is encouraging us here. You not only have the authority of heaven, but you have the full support of the Father. If the two or three confronting sin in that small group see unrepentant sin in a brother and caring enough to address it, then know that the Father in heaven is ready to provide you with everything you need in addressing it.

And it leads to the next promise: He has guaranteed us His presence. Verse 20, "*For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.*" Probably the most abused verse. How many times is it said, "Well, where two or three are gathered, Jesus is there. So since we've got two or three, we can know Jesus is here." Don't say that. What about when you were in your prayer closet alone today day? Does that mean Jesus was waiting for someone else to show up before He came into the picture? How many does it take for Jesus to show up at a prayer meeting? How about one! Jesus is not saying, "Once you've got two or three together, count me in." Don't say that.

Instead, Jesus is saying, "When you are in the difficult work of church discipline, when two or three of you are gathered with a brother or sister who is living in unrepentant sin, and you are doing the tough work of gentle, loving confrontation, be assured of this: My presence, which is always with you, will be especially real, especially strong, especially needed, and especially felt in the middle of that situation." Jesus says, "When you are carrying this out, church, be assured: You will experience my presence in a unique and powerful way." Wow, what confidence! Jesus has given us His authority, granted us His support, and guaranteed us His presence all toward the end that we might restore one another. So let's love one another this way.

We forgive one another.

This leads to the last exhortation here in Matthew 18 for the church: We forgive one another. Look at verse 21:

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to

their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Oh, there's so much here, and the story is pretty self-explanatory. In that day, it was common among rabbis to encourage people to forgive a brother for repeated sin about three or four times, after which there would be no more forgiveness. So Peter thinks he had an extra big heart, asks Jesus, "How often should I forgive a brother -- not three or four, but seven times?" And Jesus responds, "No, not seven, but seventy times seven." In other words, "You don't stop forgiving."

And then, in what can only be labeled an extreme illustration, Jesus tells the story of a man who owed upwards of what today could be labeled millions if not over a billion dollars. It was an amount of money that this servant could never repay to the king. And yet the king, out of sheer compassion for the servant, forgave the entire debt. And the picture is clear. Brothers and sisters, in Christ, we have received extravagant grace. There is no price tag that you or I could ever put on each of our sinfulness before an infinitely holy God. When you say, "Well, I haven't sinned as much as this person or that person," you show that you have no clue the extent to which you have sinned. Your debt is deep. And Christ has paid it. Out of sheer compassion, the Father has sent His Son to endure the wrath you deserve, and now you are free from the penalty of your sin. Free not only as a servant, but as a son!

In Christ, we have received extravagant grace, so now, as Christians, we extend extravagant grace. How harsh for this servant, who owed millions if not a billion dollars, and was freed from his debt -- how harsh for him to then go to a man who owed him ten dollars and when he could not pay it, put him in prison. That's outlandish!

And so the point is clear: For a Christian to not forgive is to do the exact same thing. Christian brother or sister, when you have been wronged, when you have been offended, when you have been deliberately, intentionally hurt, the Bible is not saying it is easy to forgive; the Bible is not saying it is natural to forgive; but the Bible is saying it is Christian to forgive. The Christian has no other option, not because we have to forgive, but because we are compelled to forgive. Only Jesus can enable this kind of forgiving heart in us. He gently reminds us of the extravagant compassion He has shown to us as the least deserving sinners, and by His grace, He enables us to extend that same extravagant compassion to those whom we would label the least deserving people. This kind of forgiveness must characterize the church.

How Shall We Respond?

As The Church at Brook Hills, we must care for every individual member ...

So, how shall we respond to this text, Church at Brook Hills? On two levels: One as a church, and then one as individual Christians. First, as The Church at Brook Hills, we must care for every individual member. This is a challenge in a church this size, but this is a challenge we must take up. Over recent months, our elders have been studying the Word together and praying about how we can make sure that every single member of this body is cared for well. And there's a lot of things we have been praying about and discussing. But

when it comes down to it, these are some of the overall, general things we have been working through.

One, elevating church membership. We realize we are in a culture (even here in Birmingham) where church membership isn't that important to a lot of people. I'm talking about people who would claim to be Christians. We live in a church attending, church hopping, church shopping culture, where people are wary to commit themselves to a church. And if this passage teaches us anything, it teaches us that it's important for every Christian to be committed to a church. To be a member of a church where you are saying, "If you wander from the Lord, I'm coming after you, and if I wander from the Lord, I want you to come after me." So we are thinking through how we can better prioritize our covenant with one another.

I asked the guys to put our church covenant on the front of your Worship Guide today to remind us of that covenant that we make with each other as part of this church. I encourage you to read over it sometime this week, talk about it in your small group. We want to prioritize this covenant with one another and fulfill our commitment to one another. It is so easy for members of The Church at Brook Hills, particularly those who are not involved in a small group or through other avenues, to fall through the cracks. And based on Matthew 18, that cannot be the case. We want to fulfill our commitment to one another, even to the point of church excommunication, if absolutely necessary. Elevating church membership involves elevating what it means to be inside and outside of the church.

All of this for the care of one another, which leads to the next thing: Ensuring pastoral leadership. As the elders have prayed and sought the Lord over this, we have decided to restructure some of our pastoral leadership in a number of ways, one of which is to form a pastoral position called a Pastor for Member Care. That will help us oversee processes and relationships where we can indeed account for one another, and care for one another, and keep one another from falling through the cracks. This is a pastor who will oversee our membership process, as well as how we care for one another in times of particular need, whether in sin or in suffering. This pastor obviously would not be the only one responsible for caring for every member in this church, but serving alongside the rest of the elders in this task.

Some of you may know -- and this is something we've just begun these last eight months or so, and we're still tweaking some of it -- but our goal is that every small group is under the shepherding oversight of a particular elder. So that at least every member in a small group is indirectly under the care of an elder in this body. This is why we encourage everyone to be a part of a small group, which leads to us wanting to equip small groups all the more to make disciples of all nations. Small groups are obviously not perfect, but they are designed to be the intersection of biblical community and biblical mission: Showing the Word and teaching the Word to one another as you share life with each other, and then sharing the Word and serving the world around you, here in Birmingham and beyond.

Equipping small groups to make disciples of all nations and to make disciples of succeeding generations. As we restructure pastoral leadership, we are also re-looking at the best way to maximize, yes, parents and families, but also every single person in this church to pass the gospel on to the next generation. We are hard at work with, Lord willing, some great possibilities coming before the end of this summer for powerfully strengthening the way we as a church are passing the gospel on to preschoolers and children and students in our midst. So be aware of, and be praying for all of these things as a church, all of which flow from truths like we've seen in Matthew 18.

As Christians ...

And then, as Christians, let me just ask you these questions, and let me encourage you to consider them individually in response to this text: Are you causing, leading, or enabling a brother or sister to sin? This may be direct or indirect. In your relationships at work, in your relationships at home with your husband or wife, with your kids, with your parents, with your friend -- are you guarding, protecting, and nurturing your own personal holiness? Is there any place where you have become casual with sin and temptation in your life? If so, how can you, with God's grace, remove it drastically and completely? How can you more clearly express the love of the Father to the church around you? What are ways you can fulfill your commitment to brothers and sisters around you better? Is there anyone you need to humbly confront concerning sin for their good and for the Father's glory? Is there anyone who needs you to do this in their life? And how can you then do that humbly and biblically and compassionately? Are you harboring any bitterness or unforgiveness toward someone else? Mark it down: If you harbor bitterness or unforgiveness, it will not only lead to tension with that other person; it will tear apart your own soul.

May the love of the Father through Christ compel the love of His children in the church.

These are not easy questions to deal with in our lives, and these are not easy issues to deal with in the church. It'd be easier, we think, just to sit back and ignore these questions. And it'd be easier, we think, not to worry about things like church discipline and restoration in the church, which is why most large churches don't worry about things like that today. But as followers of Christ, we don't have the option of ignoring these questions or ignoring these issues. Why not? Because we have been loved like this. The Father has protected us, He has pursued us, He has restored us and He has forgiven us. So may the love of the Father through Christ compel the love of His children in the church.

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