

Theme: Tough Love

Matthew 18:15-20

"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16 "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' 17 "And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. 18 "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. 20 "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

Let me ask a question of those of you who are parents (some of you will have to think back to when your children were younger): If you were given the choice would you rather spend a day in the park playing with your children, or send them to their room when they've behaved badly? If given the choice would you rather give your kids treats or time outs? Delightful things or discipline?

I would guess that most parents would rather not have to discipline their children. I don't think many parents enjoy that aspect of parenting. But good parents will discipline their children when they are disobedient, even though it is unpleasant. They do this, not because they are unloving, but because they are loving, and know that it is what is best for their children. The Bible even says, "**he who loves [his son] disciplines him promptly**" (Proverbs 13:24). We sometimes refer to this as Tough Love. It's often not pleasant for us to do and it's certainly not pleasant at the time for our children, but it is the best thing and the loving thing to do for them, even though it's "tough."

The Bible even tells us that God, our Father, also disciplines us with His Tough Love at times when we need it. The book of Hebrews reminds us, "**the Lord disciplines those He loves...Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons**" and that His discipline eventually "**produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it**" (Hebrews 12:6, 7, 11).

In our sermon text for this morning we see that Jesus also calls the members of our spiritual family, the Church, to administer discipline, this Tough Love. Just like disciplining our children, this process is not always pleasant, but it is important and it is, in fact, a great expression of Christian love! Since Jesus said to do it, we can be assured that it is one of the most loving things you can do, if it needs to be done—and if it is done in a humble, loving manner. Confronting someone in their sin for the purpose of bringing about repentance is a far more loving thing to do than just ignoring or approving of their sin, even if they resent us for doing it. It requires us to be so loving toward the person who has fallen into sin that we are more concerned about their restoration to the body of Christ than how they will react to us and treat us in response.

Now I know that most of us would rather do just about anything than have a confrontation with someone. I don't usually like confrontation either, and I don't know many people who do. But sometimes it is the lack of confrontation that causes as much conflict as anything else! If you had mold in your home, or if you had cancer in your body it would do even more damage if it was not *confronted* and dealt with. Some things are worth the cost of confrontation.

That is why Jesus calls us to confront the straying to bring them back to His fold. He tells us very clearly in our text, **“if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone” (v. 15)**. The sin doesn’t have to be one that’s directly against you either. Jesus is talking about anytime we know about a brother or sister in Christ deliberately sinning and living in unrepentance. The easy thing to do is to go and tell someone else about it, to gossip about that person’s sin, or to run and tell the pastor and hope he’ll deal with it. But is that what our Lord says we should do as the first step? No! He says, **“go and tell him his fault between you and him alone” (v 15)**. Why? Because we need to keep in mind the motivation and the goal in confronting a brother or sister who has fallen into sin: the motivation is Christ’s love; the goal is to gain back their soul to Christ’s flock. In fact, that is the motivation and the goal even if each one of these steps needs to be taken—even if excommunication from the church needs to take place—even that is done in Christian love in the hope that the straying brother or sister in Christ will realize the seriousness of their sin and turn away from it and turn back to Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

One of the most difficult things about confronting a straying brother or sister is the manner in which we do it. We can easily come across as being “holier than thou,” or too harsh. We can easily say and do things that could cause them to become defensive and not listen to our Savior’s call to repentance because of us. That is why God also gives us important instructions in other sections of Scripture. Paul writes in Galatians, **“Brothers, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.” (Galatians 6:1)**. We may not have fallen into their particular sin, but when we come to confront our straying brother or sister we need to **“consider ourselves”** and remember that we too are sinful and often fall into temptations and sins ourselves. Except for the grace and strength of God that could be us in their situation! Restoring someone in a **“spirit of gentleness”** means showing the same kind of loving and compassionate attitude that you would hope a fellow Christian would show to you if you were to stray. Yes, you would point them to God’s Law and show them the seriousness of their sin, but you don’t need to be insulting, verbally abusive, or mean about it. You would also point them to their loving Savior and remind them of how much He did to save them and how much He wants them back with Him as one of His own.

Jesus also helps us in these confrontations with those who have strayed by giving us His authority and power. The process of confronting a straying brother or sister is not just a formality that we follow rigidly in order to keep the church membership books clean. Jesus gives His church the authority in our text to act as His representatives, and He gives us the power to forgive or not forgive sins depending on the response of the straying person to our words of admonition. Jesus says in **v. 18, “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”** That is an incredible power Jesus has given to us! When we carry out Jesus’ instructions in the way He has laid them out for us here we can be sure that our actions are as valid and as certain as if Jesus dealt with the impenitent sinner Himself! Notice He gives this authority and power even to the smallest of congregations. He says in the last two verses of our text, **“Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (v. 19-20)**.

What we need to keep in mind is that church discipline is more about restoration than punishment. It’s about people being restored to the body of Christ, and keeping each other from sin. It is like surgery that corrects something wrong so that more serious injury or illness doesn’t happen. When we are dealing with something as serious as our fellow neighbor’s soul we should ask the Lord for the courage to confront them with their sin and then ask Him to give us the compassion to **“restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness” (Galatians 6:1)**. And if that sinner repents, if we **“gain back our brother”** (or sister) **(v. 15)**, let us rejoice with the angels of heaven and welcome them back to Christ’s family with open arms!

After all, just think of how many times Christ has welcomed us back with open arms—arms He stretched out for us on the cross to pay for the many times we disobeyed and strayed from Him!

All of us probably know individuals who are in need of this **Tough Love**. (We also have to admit that sometimes it's been us!) The question is do we love that person enough to firmly, yet humbly, confront them with the Word of God with the goal of leading them to repent of their sin and restoring them to the body of Christ. May God lead us to encourage each other to do this and may our Savior give all of us a heart like His! Hearts that *a/ways* show love to others, even when it's "tough!" Amen.