

The Body of Christ, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 10: When a Member Strays: Restoration and Discipline

Matthew 18:15-17

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is a doctrinally and pastorally sensitive lesson, and it must be handled with great care. The subject is the church's responsibility toward members who fall into sin: restoration first, and church discipline only as a last resort, always aimed at saving the erring. The doctrine at stake is twofold. First, the church is a body that takes sin seriously and pursues its straying members rather than ignoring them; love does not look the other way. Second, and crucially, this passage assumes that a real Christian can fall into serious sin and be in genuine spiritual peril, which confirms our study's teaching that a believer can fall away and must be restored, against the error of unconditional eternal security. Yet the entire process Jesus gives is built for rescue: every step aims to gain the brother (v. 15), and even the final, severe step of withdrawal aims, as Paul says, at the salvation of the sinner (1 Corinthians 5:5).

Steer the class away from two opposite errors, both of which are failures of love. The first is harshness: a quick, condemning, self-righteous cutting-off that forgets the goal is restoration and the spirit is gentleness (Galatians 6:1). The second is indifference: an unwillingness to confront anything, dressed up as tolerance, that lets members destroy themselves while everyone looks away. Jesus calls for something harder and more loving than either, a patient, escalating, restoration-seeking pursuit of the wanderer, like a shepherd after a lost sheep (Luke 15). Be careful to present withdrawal not as the church's revenge or rejection but as its last loving appeal, and to emphasize joyful restoration when the straying one repents (2 Corinthians 2:6-8).

The formational aim is to shape both the students' hearts toward straying others and their watchfulness over themselves. Most students will never lead a formal discipline process, but all of them face the everyday question of how to respond when a brother or sister drifts: confront, avoid, or gossip. Help them embrace Jesus' way, going personally and gently, with the goal of gaining the brother. At the same time, let the reality that believers can fall make them tender toward the struggling and watchful over their own hearts. Keep the tone tender throughout; this is a lesson about a shepherd's love for one lost sheep, not about rules for expelling the unwanted.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus begins, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone” (v. 15). What does it tell us about the purpose of this whole process that Jesus starts as privately and gently as possible, and that He states the goal up front as gaining your brother?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the goal Jesus states in verse 15: “if he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” The entire process is defined by its aim, restoration, not punishment, not winning an argument, not protecting the church’s reputation.

Note where Jesus starts: “between you and him alone.” The first step is as private and gentle as possible. This guards the brother’s dignity, contains the matter, and gives the best chance for repentance without shame before others.

Stress the tenderness of beginning small. Jesus does not start with public exposure or final measures. He starts with a private, loving conversation between two people. The whole design moves from the smallest, gentlest step outward only as necessary.

Set this against our instincts. Our flesh wants either to ignore the sin or to broadcast it. Jesus wants us to go, personally and privately, for the sake of the brother. The goal, gaining the brother, should govern everything that follows.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Restoration, gaining the brother, as the stated goal of the whole process.
- Beginning privately and gently to guard dignity and invite repentance.
- The contrast with our instincts to ignore or to broadcast.
- The goal governing the manner at every step.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus start as privately and gently as possible?
- What does the stated goal, gaining your brother, tell us about the purpose?
- How does this differ from our usual instincts about others’ sin?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus assumes the loving response to a brother’s sin is to go to him directly, not to ignore it or to talk about it with others. When you become aware of a fellow Christian’s sin or drift, which is your stronger temptation, to avoid the discomfort or to discuss it with someone other than them? What would obedience to Jesus look like instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question names our two common evasions: avoidance and gossip. Jesus says go to him; we are tempted either to say nothing or to say it to everyone but him.

Expose gossip as a counterfeit of concern. Talking about a brother's sin with others, under the guise of concern or prayer requests, feels active but is actually a failure to obey Jesus, and it harms rather than helps.

Expose avoidance as a counterfeit of kindness. Saying nothing feels polite and humble, but if it leaves a brother in destructive sin, it is not love. Jesus calls us to the harder kindness of going to him.

Aim for the obedient alternative: when aware of a brother's sin, going to him personally and gently, and refusing both silence and gossip.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Avoidance and gossip as the two common evasions.
- Gossip as a counterfeit of concern.
- Silence as a counterfeit of kindness.
- Going personally and gently as obedience to Jesus.

Discussion Prompts

- Which is your stronger temptation, avoidance or talking to others?
- Why is gossip a failure to obey Jesus here, even when it feels like concern?
- What would going to the person directly look like for you?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus describes a process with escalating steps: first alone, then with one or two witnesses, then before the church (vv. 15–17). Why does Jesus build in these patient, escalating stages rather than moving immediately to public or final measures, and what does this reveal about God's heart toward the straying?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question examines the escalating stages: alone, then with one or two witnesses, then before the church (vv. 15–17). Each stage is a fresh appeal, not a step toward punishment.

Explain the patience built into the process. Jesus could have commanded immediate, decisive action. Instead He builds in stage after stage, each giving the straying one another opportunity to repent. The structure itself reveals a heart longing to restore.

Explain the widening circle. The matter stays as contained as possible, widening only when the brother refuses to listen. The one or two witnesses help establish the facts and add loving appeal (Deuteronomy 19:15); the church is involved only when necessary.

Reveal God's heart. This patient, escalating process mirrors God's own patience with us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). The church's discipline is meant to embody that divine patience.

Caution against shortcuts in either direction, jumping straight to public exposure, or never progressing at all. Faithfulness follows Jesus' actual sequence, with restoration as the aim at every stage.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The patient, escalating stages as repeated appeals to repent.
- The matter kept as contained as possible, widening only as needed.
- Witnesses to establish facts and add loving appeal.
- God's patience mirrored in the church's process.
- Avoiding shortcuts toward either exposure or inaction.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus build in patient, escalating stages?
- What does the structure reveal about God's heart toward the straying?
- How does this mirror God's own patience with us?

Question 4

Student Question:

Each step in Jesus' process gives the straying brother another opportunity to repent and be restored. Where in your own life have you experienced the patience of God or of others giving you room to turn back? How does remembering that shape the way you would deal with someone else?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question turns the patience of the process inward: where has the student experienced the patience of God or others giving them room to turn back?

Help students remember their own restorations. Most of us have been the wandering sheep, given time, gentle appeals, and another chance. Recalling this softens us toward others and guards against self-righteousness.

Connect received mercy to extended mercy. The one who remembers being patiently restored will deal patiently with others (Matthew 18:21–35, the very next passage). Forgetting our own rescue makes us harsh.

Aim for a posture shaped by remembered grace: dealing with the straying as one who has also strayed and been sought.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Remembering one's own experiences of patient restoration.
- Received mercy shaping extended mercy.
- Guarding against self-righteousness toward the straying.
- Dealing with others as a forgiven, sought wanderer.

Discussion Prompts

- When have God or others given you room to turn back?
- How does remembering that shape how you treat the straying?
- How does forgetting our own rescue make us harsh?

Question 5

Student Question:

If every step fails and the brother "refuses to listen even to the church," Jesus says, "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (v. 17). What does this final step of withdrawal mean and not mean, and how does Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 5, to deliver such a one over "so that his spirit may be saved," show that even this severe step aims at the sinner's salvation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a doctrinally weighty block on the final step. If all appeals fail, "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (v. 17), and Paul describes delivering such a one over, withdrawing fellowship (1 Corinthians 5:1–5).

Explain what withdrawal means: the church, with sorrow, recognizes the unrepentant member's chosen separation and ceases normal fellowship, no longer treating sustained, defiant sin as though it were acceptable. It is the church's last loving appeal, a serious wake-up.

Explain what it does not mean. It is not personal revenge, not hatred, not a license to be cruel, and not a writing-off of the person as beyond hope. The aim remains redemptive. Paul says it is done "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 5:5).

Show the redemptive logic. Sometimes the most loving thing is to let a person feel the full weight of their choice, no longer cushioned by the pretense that all is well, in hope that the loss will awaken repentance, as in the prodigal who came to himself in the far country (Luke 15:17).

Point to the joyful goal: restoration. When the disciplined person repents, the church is to forgive, comfort, and reaffirm love, lest he be overwhelmed by sorrow (2 Corinthians 2:6–8). Discipline is never the end of the story God desires; restoration is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Withdrawal as the church's last loving appeal, not revenge.
- What discipline does and does not mean.
- The redemptive aim: that the spirit may be saved (1 Corinthians 5:5).
- Letting a person feel the weight of their choice, in hope of repentance.
- Joyful restoration as the goal when repentance comes (2 Corinthians 2:6–8).

Discussion Prompts

- What does this final step of withdrawal mean, and what does it not mean?
- How does 1 Corinthians 5 show that even this aims at salvation?
- Why is restoration, not separation, the goal God desires?

Question 6

Student Question:

This passage assumes that a genuine believer can fall into serious, unrepentant sin and be in real spiritual danger. How does that truth confront the idea that a Christian, once saved, is automatically and unconditionally secure no matter how they live? How should that truth make you both watchful over yourself and tender toward others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a heavy doctrinal block. The whole passage assumes a brother can fall into real, unrepentant sin and be in genuine spiritual danger, even to the loss of his soul (James 5:19–20). This confronts the doctrine of unconditional eternal security.

State the truth plainly and pastorally. Scripture warns repeatedly that a Christian can fall away (Hebrews 3:12–14; 10:26–31; Galatians 5:4; 2 Peter 2:20–22). If falling away were impossible, this entire process of pursuit and the warning of lost salvation would make no sense.

Distinguish this from a fearful insecurity. The point is not that Christians live in terror of losing salvation over every stumble, but that salvation is preserved through ongoing faith and obedience, and that persistent, unrepentant sin is genuinely dangerous. Grace is real, and so is the call to remain faithful.

Draw out the double application Jesus intends. This truth should make us watchful over ourselves, taking heed lest we fall (1 Corinthians 10:12), and tender toward others, since they, like us, are in real need of being kept and restored.

Avoid both extremes: the false security that says no sin can ever endanger the saved, and the anxious legalism that doubts God's grace at every turn. The biblical balance is confident faith that perseveres in obedience, and humble watchfulness that takes sin seriously.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The reality that a Christian can fall away (Hebrews 10:26–31; 2 Peter 2:20–22).
- The confrontation with unconditional eternal security.
- Salvation preserved through ongoing faith and obedience.
- Watchfulness over self (1 Corinthians 10:12) and tenderness toward others.
- Avoiding both false security and anxious legalism.

Discussion Prompts

- How does this passage confront the idea of unconditional security?
- How should the danger of falling make us watchful over ourselves?
- How should it make us tender toward struggling others?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus gives this teaching to the church as a body, making the care and discipline of straying members a shared responsibility, not just the job of the preacher or elders. Why does Jesus entrust this to the whole congregation, and what does it require of ordinary members to take part in it rightly?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus entrusts this process to the church as a body; the final stage is “tell it to the church” (v. 17). The care and discipline of straying members is a shared responsibility, not only the work of preacher or elders.

Explain why Jesus involves the whole congregation. The body that knows and loves the member is best placed to appeal to him; many voices of love carry weight; and the whole body is affected by sustained sin in its midst (1 Corinthians 5:6). It is family business, and the family takes part.

Describe what right participation requires of ordinary members: love for the straying, freedom from gossip and faction, prayer, willingness to appeal personally, and support of the elders who lead the process. It is not a license for the congregation to pile on, but a call to loving, orderly pursuit.

Connect to earlier lessons. This is the body caring for its own (Lesson 3), bearing burdens and restoring the fallen (Lesson 9), under the oversight of its shepherds (Lesson 7). Discipline is one expression of the every-member life of the body.

Caution about order. Shared responsibility does not mean disorder; the elders shepherd and guide the process, and members participate under that oversight, with gentleness and love throughout.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Care and discipline as the shared responsibility of the whole body.
- Why Jesus involves the congregation, not only its leaders.
- Right participation: love, prayer, no gossip, support of elders.
- Connection to body life, burden-bearing, and shepherding.
- Shared responsibility carried out in order, under oversight.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus entrust this to the whole congregation?
- What does right participation require of ordinary members?
- How does this connect to the body life we have studied?

Question 8

Student Question:

Carrying out this teaching well requires a rare combination: enough love to confront and enough humility to do it gently, without self-righteousness. Honestly, which side do you need to grow on, the courage to speak at all, or the gentleness to speak without condemning? What feeds that weakness in you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question names the rare combination the work requires: enough love to confront and enough humility to do it gently. Most of us are weak on one side.

Help the conflict-averse see their need for courage. Some never speak, mistaking silence for kindness. They need to grow in the love that is willing to risk an uncomfortable conversation for a brother's good.

Help the blunt or self-righteous see their need for gentleness. Others speak readily but harshly, with a tone of condemnation that wounds. They need to grow in the humility that restores in a spirit of gentleness (Galatians 6:1).

Aim for honest self-assessment and one step toward the weaker side: courage to speak, or gentleness in speaking, grounded in remembering one's own need of grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The combination of courage to confront and humility to do it gently.

- The conflict-averse needing courage.
- The blunt or self-righteous needing gentleness.
- Self-assessment grounded in one's own need of grace.

Discussion Prompts

- Which do you need more, the courage to speak or the gentleness to speak well?
- What feeds that weakness in you?
- What is one step toward growing on the weaker side?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus calls the church to pursue the straying with a process aimed wholly at restoration, avoiding two opposite failures: a harshness that condemns and cuts off too quickly, and an indifference that refuses to confront anything and lets members destroy themselves. Why are both of these failures of love rather than expressions of it, and what does a church that gets this right, neither harsh nor indifferent, actually look like in practice?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest block, setting Jesus' way against the two opposite failures: harshness and indifference. Both are failures of love, and a faithful church avoids both.

Expose harshness as a failure of love. The harsh church condemns quickly, cuts off without patience, and forgets the goal of restoration and the spirit of gentleness. It may feel zealous for purity, but it does not love the sinner as Christ does. It drives away rather than seeks home.

Expose indifference as an equal failure of love. The indifference church confronts nothing, calling its avoidance tolerance, and lets members destroy themselves while everyone looks away. This feels kind but is actually a refusal to love, like a shepherd who watches a sheep wander off a cliff and does nothing.

Describe the church that gets it right. It takes sin seriously and people tenderly. It pursues the straying patiently, privately first, with the goal of gaining the brother. It is willing to confront and willing to forgive, marked by both courage and gentleness, both holiness and mercy. It grieves over discipline and rejoices over restoration.

Ground the balance in Christ Himself, who was full of grace and truth (John 1:14). He neither winked at sin nor crushed the sinner; He pursued the lost and called them home. The church's discipline is meant to reflect that same combination of holiness and seeking love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Harshness and indifference as opposite failures of love.

- Harshness: quick condemnation that forgets restoration.
- Indifference: avoidance dressed up as tolerance.
- The faithful church: serious about sin, tender toward people.
- The balance grounded in Christ, full of grace and truth.

Discussion Prompts

- Why are both harshness and indifference failures of love?
- What does a church that is neither harsh nor indifferent look like?
- How does Christ Himself model the balance of grace and truth?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across Matthew 18:15–17 and the heart behind it. Whether God is calling you to go gently to a straying brother, to receive correction yourself, to guard your own heart from drifting, or to grow in the love and humility this work requires, name one specific way Jesus is shaping you through this passage, and what is the first step?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the capstone, turning a difficult passage toward personal response. The lesson has shown the church as a shepherd-hearted community that pursues its wandering members for the sake of rescue.

Tailor the step to the student. For some, it is going gently to a straying brother. For others, it is receiving correction humbly, or guarding their own heart from drifting. For all, it is growing in the love and humility the work requires.

Keep restoration and tenderness central. The aim is not to produce enthusiasm for confrontation but a shepherd's heart that longs to carry the lost one home, beginning with one concrete, loving step.

Close on the picture of the recovered sheep on the shepherd's shoulders, and the rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7). Invite the student into that joy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Responding according to one's situation: going, receiving, or watching.
- Restoration and tenderness kept central.
- A shepherd's heart longing to carry the lost one home.
- The joy of heaven over one sinner who repents.

Discussion Prompts

- How is Jesus shaping you through this passage, given your situation?
- What is one concrete, loving step in response?
- What holds you back, and when will you take the step?