

The Body of Christ

Lesson 10: When a Member Strays: Restoration and Discipline -- Matthew 18:15-17

A good shepherd counts his sheep. And when the count comes up one short, he does not shrug and say the flock is still mostly there. He leaves the ninety-nine and goes after the one that wandered, searching the ravines and the thickets until he finds it, and then he carries it home on his shoulders, rejoicing. Jesus told that very story, and it is the doorway into the hard and tender subject of this lesson. When a member of the body strays, the church that loves like Jesus does not simply let them go.

It would be easier to look the other way. Confrontation is uncomfortable, and our age prizes a tolerance that minds its own business. But Jesus loved people too much for that. In Matthew 18, right after the parable of the lost sheep, He gives His church a careful, step-by-step process for going after a brother who has fallen into sin. "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." Notice the goal in those last words: not to win, not to punish, but to gain your brother.

Jesus lays out a path that starts as privately and gently as possible and only widens if it must. First, go alone. If that fails, take one or two others. If that fails, tell it to the church. And only if the straying one refuses even the pleading of the whole church does it come, sorrowfully, to a final separation. Every step is designed to give the wanderer another chance to come home. The whole machinery is built for rescue, not for rejection.

This is one of the most misunderstood and neglected teachings in the modern church, and it is easy to get wrong in two opposite directions. Some churches are harsh, quick to condemn and cut off, forgetting the gentleness and the goal of restoration. Others are indifferent, unwilling to confront anything, letting members destroy themselves while everyone politely looks away. Jesus calls us to something harder and more loving than either: a community that pursues its wandering members the way a shepherd pursues a lost sheep, longing to carry them home.

Group Discussion: We live in a culture that often says the loving thing is to never judge and to let everyone do as they please. Where is there truth in that instinct, and where does it fall short of real love? Can you think of a time when someone cared enough to confront you, and it turned out to be a gift?

Personal Reflection: Think about how you respond when you see a fellow Christian drifting into something harmful. Do you tend toward confrontation, avoidance, or gossip about it with others? What would it look like to respond instead the way Jesus describes, going to them personally and gently?

Read Matthew 18:15-17

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Luke 15:3-7, the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to seek the one lost sheep; Galatians 6:1, restore the one caught in sin in a spirit of gentleness; James 5:19-20, bringing back a wanderer saves his soul from death; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, withdrawing from unrepentant sin so the person may be saved; 2 Corinthians 2:6-8, restoring and comforting the one who has repented.