

October 2, 2011
Pentecost 16

"Caring Enough to Confront"

MATTHEW 18:15-20

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. ¹⁶ 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.' ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸ "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be^d bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ "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. ²⁰ For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.

There he was, lying along the road, bleeding and badly beaten. Robbers had jumped him and left him for dead. A Samaritan man rides by on his donkey, stops and has pity on the man even though he was a Jew, his enemy. He took oil and wine and bandaged his wounds. He put him on his donkey and paid an innkeeper to take care of him. You know the story. You not only have compassion for animals that are suffering, but you also have compassion and love for people who are suffering. You may even take some of your precious money and use it to help other people who are going through hard times.

In the words we just read, our Lord Jesus directs our attention to helping people who are caught in sin. There will be times in your life when you see people beaten up, and bruised and bleeding because they have opened their lives up to sin. It is so much easier to pretend not to see them, to turn the other way, and just keep on traveling down the road of life. Oh, how eager we are to help someone whose car won't start, or who is hungry and needs a meal, or just needs a few words of encouragement, or even our daily prayers. Confronting people caught in sin: that is the hard work of being a Christian especially in a culture where it is totally not cool to pass judgment on what another person is doing or believing.

Do you care about people? What kind of question is that? Sure you care about people. Do you care enough to confront them when they are caught in a sin that could ultimately destroy their faith and condemn them to eternal death and punishment?

Taking the bold steps

Jesus encourages us to take some very bold steps with people who are trapped by sin. "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." Notice it does not say "if your enemy sins against you" or "if your neighbor sins against you." It says, "If your brother sins against you." We call ourselves brothers and sisters in Christ because we are members of God's family through Jesus our Savior. When we see a brother or sister sinning against us, we should not go around telling other people about it without going to that person first

and helping that person see what they did was wrong. We want them to repent and get right with the Lord.

If you want a good example of dealing with people who are caught in sin think of how the Lord dealt with Cain who was angry at his brother Abel. In Genesis 4 we read, "Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it'" Cain when he failed to listen to what the Lord told him. He allowed his anger to become so bad that he killed his brother Abel. If someone gets angry at you and hurts you, what will happen if that anger continues? Will it get worse as they continually justify what they are doing, even if it is wrong?

In Galatians 6:1 the Lord tells us, "Brothers, if someone is caught in sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently." People get caught in sin. They do things they don't want to do. Then they justify what they do wrong, and it leads even more sinful behavior that eventually can cause them to turn against Jesus. You have seen it happen and so have I. God's word tells us to restore that person gently. I placed some netting over the fig tree to protect the figs from hungry birds. I notice a lizard caught in the netting. I carefully cut the netting where it was trapped so it could get free. Could it be possible that there are some days we have greater compassion for a poor little lizard that we do for brothers and sister in Christ who are caught in sin? We are so afraid to confront them because we don't realize fully how the Lord has called us to be responsible when we see sin pop up in their lives of other people. You go to the person alone, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

What if the brother or sister refuses to listen to you? My sinful heart would say, "Well I have done my job. He won't listen. There is nothing more I can do." Listen to what Jesus says about the next step. "But if he 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 is quoting the words of Deuteronomy 19:15 where it stresses the importance of having several witnesses to establish the truth in a court of law. So it is in the court of life. When a brother or sister won't listen to you about the danger of sin, you can take others with you to help the person see the errors of their ways and take it to heart. Today we might call this crisis intervention or tough love. It always, always, always has the best interest of the other person at heart, the salvation of their eternal soul. You want them to be in heaven with you, and not spend an eternity in hell.

What is the next step, if they still refuse to heed your warning? Jesus says, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." Notice it says, "If he refuses to listen." The word here for refusal has the thought of just not wanting to listen. Let me illustrate this with an argument I observed in a restaurant between a teen age boy and his mother. The boy was deaf so they were carrying on the fight in silence, communicating in sign language. It was obviously a heated argument as the mother and son signed faster and faster. Finally in frustrating the boy put his hands over his eyes so he could not see what his mother was saying to him. See the brothers and sisters who are determined to destroy themselves. The church needs to get involved to help them open their eyes and see how bad the situation truly is. Instead of two or three people, the congregation of believers gathers around and points out the sin to lead the person to repentance.

And what if they will not listen to their whole Christian family as it points out the sin? Jesus says, "And if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or tax collector." The actual Greek wording here says, "Let him be to you." That is how it is translated in the King James Version. The Lord does not want us to treat people like dirt and shun them and not speak to them when we see them caught in sin. He wants us to have compassion on them and pity them because of their lost condition. When Jesus looked at people he had compassion on them and saw them as sheep without a shepherd. Listen to the compassion expressed in Ezekiel 34 where the Lord says of the sheep that go astray, "So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals." See the little lost lamb, crying out in the desert as the temperature begins to drop at night. It won't be long before the coyotes tear into with their sharp teeth or the mountain lion pounces on it and breaks its neck. Such is the love that we have for brothers and sisters who are in the throes of sin and under the dominion of Satan.

Jesus once told the story of a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep and goes after the one that is lost until he finds. Then he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. He calls his friends and neighbors and says, "Rejoice with me I have found my lost sheep." In the musical version of Les Miserables, Val Jean stands at the wall and prays that the Lord to bring his Mariuis home. Remember the plaintive cry, "Bring him home, bring home." And so we cry out to the Lord in prayer to bring those people home who are lost in sin and in danger of perishing.

Relying on the Lord for help

If Jesus were still walking this earth, he would visit the people we love, our brothers and sisters, who are caught in sin and will not repent. He would reach out to them in love and bring them home. Now he asks us to do that for him, and he promises to give us the help we need to get the job done.

Notice first the power which we have in the church. "I tell you the truth whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." We have the power and authority to tell people, "You are still bound to your sin." I am holding in my hand some netting used to protect fruit from the birds. What chance would a lizard have it were trapped in this net? Our job in the church is let people know that their sins have trapped them and they will perish eternally. On the night of his resurrection Jesus told his disciples. "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." It is so hard to tell people the truth that sin will destroy them forever unless they repent and turn to Jesus for forgiveness. A pastor visited a member who was in the hospital and facing death. The elderly man said he was not afraid to die, because he had tried to live a good life. The pastor asked him if that is what he sincerely believed and the man said yes. In Christian love the pastor told him, "Then there is not hope for you because you are trusting in your works and not in Christ." He told the pastor to get out. He never wanted to see him again. But that night the Holy Spirit convicted him and brought him back to his senses. He called the pastor the next day and confessed his sin and his need for forgiveness. The pastor joyfully assured him, "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin."

We are not alone in this important work. Jesus is with us. He hears our prayers as we

reach out to the lost and straying. "Again, I tell you that if two or three of you on earth, agree about anything you ask for it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am with them." When we pray we want our prayers to be according to God's will. We want them to reflect the love that Jesus has for those who are lost. Jesus is with us. He told us so clearly in Acts 1, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth." With the Holy Spirit's power we witness to those who don't believe and we confront our brothers and sisters who are caught in sin. My prayer is that the Lord who hears our prayers will also help you and me better in this work as we care enough about people to confront them when they are caught in sin. Amen.