

## Wandering Sheep 7-10-05

Matthew 18:15-20 (NIV)

*<sup>15</sup>"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. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. <sup>18</sup>"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. <sup>19</sup>"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup>For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."*

After Jesus' discourse on true greatness, humility, and not looking down on others, He gave instruction for what to do when the inevitable offenses take place. He showed us how to avoid conflict by holding one another in high regard, but then told us what to do when we fail. Jesus warned that offenses were inevitable. (Matthew 18:7) He didn't give us the details of church government, or outline programs for this or that, but He did tell us how to resolve the inevitable conflicts. Perhaps this is the one thing He did leave instruction for because His new command is that we love one another. (John 13:34-35)

*<sup>15</sup>"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.*

This first instruction could stop the majority of conflicts within the church, so I'm going to go over it carefully with you and trust that we will hear Jesus' instruction to us. First, Jesus is saying that this is about conflict within the church body. He is addressing someone who has been wounded by a fellow believer. This is not about dealing with the world. (1 Corinthians 5:9-13) We should expect them to sin against us and readily forgive them for they know not what they do. It is much more painful when a believer hurts us because we expect love from them. (Psalm 41:9) The people who hurt you the most are those you are closest to. Notice that Jesus is addressing the wounded party. He is asking the wounded one to take action.

Just what are the implications of "sins against you"? The Greek word is *hamartano*. The most common usage was "to be without a share in something". It is literally the negative of respect, in other words disrespect. They don't treat you like a brother or sister. They act as if they have nothing to do with you.

The next most common is the one you hear in sermons, to miss the mark. The mark was decency and kindness, but in some way they missed that with you. Their conduct didn't conform to the minimum of respectable behavior toward you.

It can also mean to wander from the path of righteousness and honor. This last meaning would tie it together with the one sheep that wondered off in preceding story. I prefer this last meaning, though certainly all are applicable. It seems the theme of the entire chapter is to help us have a right attitude and relationship with one another.

**Commented [notes1]:** <sup>7</sup> "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! Matthew 18:7 (NIV)

**Commented [notes2]:** <sup>34</sup> "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:34-35 (NIV)

**Commented [notes3]:** <sup>9</sup> I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- <sup>10</sup> not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. <sup>11</sup> But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. <sup>12</sup> What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? <sup>13</sup> God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you." 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 (NIV)

**Commented [notes4]:** <sup>9</sup> Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me. Psalms 41:9 (NIV)

Instead of thinking about superiority and personal rights, we are to see one another as God's little ones, greatly loved of God. (Matthew 23:8)

**Commented [notes5]:** <sup>8</sup> "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers.  
Matthew 23:8 (NIV)

The person that offends us is then seen as one of the sheep in the fold that has gotten their eyes off the shepherd and wandered into dangerous territory. The shepherd wants them back. The path they wandered down was one of unrighteousness and dishonor. In some way they acted without respect toward you, and that wounded your soul. When that happens, you have a very difficult time forgetting the incident that caused you pain and the most common response is to look for others to sympathize with you. You all know exactly what I'm talking about. I struggle in this area like the rest of you. You want to tell someone of the injury to your soul because the sympathy feels good and makes you feel justified in your animosity. You feel validated and at the same time feel like you have another person on your side against the offending sheep.

Jesus said it is only supposed to be between the two of you. How many should know at this point? 2! Of course, if other people have been dragged in by the offending party, there is nothing you can do to stop that. But if no one else knows, you should not tell a soul at this point. Jesus said the course of action is to go straight to that person and show them their fault. In many cases, the one who has hurt you did not have a clue that their behavior has been so harmful. They haven't looked up to see how far from the fold they have wandered. Go as soon as the heat of anger has died down. Go as soon as you can share in love. The words translated "*show him his fault*" means to bring it to light, to make it clear so that they can see what they have done. (John 3:20-21)

**Commented [notes6]:** <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.  
<sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."  
John 3:20-21 (NIV)

If you are genuinely going with a desire to bring them back on the path, then there is no hint of vindictiveness or anger. Instead, there is the fruit of the Spirit, love, gentleness and patience. (Galatians 5:22-23) When you go humbly in the Spirit, considering your own weaknesses, you are much more likely to win the person back. (Galatians 6:1) Your relationship can be stronger than it ever was before. That was the case with Paul and Peter. (Galatians 2:11; 2 Peter 3:15)

**Commented [notes7]:** <sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,  
<sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.  
Galatians 5:22-23 (NIV)

Let me also add that if you refuse to go, it is out of a lack of love for the person, and it most likely will result in bitterness and a lack of forgiveness in your own heart. If you see this person wandering away from the fold into the wolf's territory and don't act, it is a total lack of love. Maintaining superficial peace in a church so as to try to keep everyone happy only results in increasing damage and hypocritical spirituality. Love confronts lovingly to restore genuine peace and true spirituality. (Proverbs 27:5-6) Leaving the issue unresolved is a sign of unforgiveness on the offended person's part. Unforgiveness grows into a root of bitterness that defiles you. (Hebrews 12:15) The surest way to poison your own spirit and damage your health is to nurse unforgiveness. (Proverbs 14:30) It is never a healthy thing to avoid clearing the air.

**Commented [notes8]:** <sup>1</sup> Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.  
Galatians 6:1 (NIV)

**Commented [notes9]:** <sup>11</sup> When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.  
Galatians 2:11 (NIV)

**Commented [notes10]:** <sup>15</sup> Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him.  
2 Peter 3:15 (NIV)

**Commented [notes11]:** <sup>5</sup> Better is open rebuke than hidden love. <sup>6</sup> Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.  
Proverbs 27:5-6 (NIV)

The one on one confrontation in love will often reveal a misunderstanding. It often results in the offended person seeing the issue from a different perspective. When the offender truly has strayed from the path and needs to repent, it saves his relationship with the Lord and with you. Bringing the issue into the light causes them to face the issue that had been hidden in the darkness of their heart. It is reminiscent of David and Nathan. When King David was in adultery and guilty of murder, Nathan confronted

**Commented [notes12]:** <sup>15</sup> See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.  
Hebrews 12:15 (NIV)

**Commented [notes13]:** <sup>30</sup> A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.  
Proverbs 14:30 (NIV)

him with a parable. (2 Samuel 12:7) Suddenly David's sin was in the light. What he had tried so desperately to hide was now in the light of day. (See 2 Samuel 12) When that happens, we both embrace our sin and turn from God, or we embrace God through repentance and turn from sin. There is no middle ground any longer. What a joy to win your brother back as a friend to you and to the Lord. (Proverbs 9:9)

**Commented [notes14]:** <sup>7</sup> Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. 2 Samuel 12:7 (NIV)

Listen to how James, Jesus half-brother, described this scenario. <sup>19</sup>*My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back,* <sup>20</sup>*remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.* James 5:19-20 (NIV)

**Commented [notes15]:** <sup>9</sup> Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning. Proverbs 9:9 (NIV)

The one on one sometimes fails to win the person back. Jesus tells us what to do next. <sup>16</sup>*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 tells us to follow the Mosaic instruction. (Deuteronomy 19:15) People were only convicted of crimes when there were several witnesses to confirm the crime. When the sin is brought out into a little more light, that of a few other people, the person is more likely to see their need to repent. They may have reasoned that it was a personal animosity, or that the individual was out of line to confront them, but when a few others come to be witnesses to the injustice or slight caused by the offender, they are more likely to face their sin. They are there to confirm the facts and encourage repentance and restoration. They are trying to win the person back into full fellowship that sin has severed.

**Commented [notes16]:** <sup>15</sup> One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established. Deuteronomy 19:15 (KJV)

If the witnesses testify to the sin and the offender still refuses to repent, Jesus tells us the next step.

<sup>17</sup>*If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*

The entire church body is made aware of the situation. That sounds very drastic. It is rarely practiced today for fear of lawsuits. Why does Jesus teach such severe action? What is His new command? We are told to love one another. (John 13:34) We are to be known by our love. That is our major witness. (John 13:35) When the witness of the church is damaged by strife and contention, the testimony of Christ in our community is damaged. But remember, it is not only for the sake of the church, but also out of love for the wandering brother.

**Commented [notes17]:** <sup>34</sup> "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. John 13:34 (NIV)

**Commented [notes18]:** <sup>35</sup> By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:35 (NIV)

In that verse, Jesus tells us the fourth step, if there is no repentance. To treat the person as a tax collector or pagan, is to treat them as an outsider lost in sin. It does not mean that we are never to talk to them, but when we do, it is to encourage their repentance and restoration, not to have fellowship. The loss of fellowship with the body, the loss of protection of the umbrella of prayer and blessing of the body of Christ, can be tools that wake the person to their need to repent and humbly ask for forgiveness. The difficulties they experience will drive them to repentance unless they have hardened their heart in pride. There is an example of this in the letter to the Corinthians. Once the person repented, they were to welcome the person back into the fold with open arms, like the Father welcomed the prodigal son. (2 Corinthians 2:6-8) All is forgiven; fellowship is restored. Next Sunday we will have more on the importance of forgiveness.

**Commented [notes19]:** <sup>6</sup> The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. <sup>7</sup> Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup> I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 (NIV)

This is Jesus' very clear teaching on the steps to take when someone sins against you. I ask all who regularly fellowship with us to submit themselves to this instruction. It is for the good of all. This is never something to be exercised by an autocratic leader. That is Jesus' point in using the entire congregation. It is an act of love for the Lord, His body, and the offender and should never be a power play for someone to have their way. This is Jesus' instruction for the health of the church.

The end of this passage is often taken completely out of this context and used to say something that contradicts the rest of Scripture.

*<sup>18</sup>"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.*

Whenever you attempt to understand the meaning of a verse, you must not only put it in the context of the passage but also in the setting of the hearers of that day. First, we see that the context is that of church discipline. When the body of Christ agrees to separate a person from fellowship, they are acting at the direction of the Holy Spirit, in obedience to God's word, and therefore are assured that heaven (God) is where the decision originated.

This was a common rabbinical expression. The rabbis sometimes spoke of a principle or action as being bound in heaven or loosed in heaven to indicate, respectively, that it was forbidden or permitted in light of God's revealed Word. A Jew of that day would have understood that Jesus did not mean that men could bend heaven's will to their own but that God (here called heaven, a common Jewish substitute for God's covenant name, Yahweh, or Jehovah) had an expressed principle with which the church must conform. —MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The

The passage has been used in the strangest ways to ask nearly anything that comes into the mind of the one praying. It is not about individual Christians bending the will of God to conform to their will, but about the body of Christ yielding to the Holy Spirit and coming into conformity with God's word, that is, that which has been determined in heaven. (1 John 5:14)

Jesus repeated the expression in a different form.

*<sup>19</sup>"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.*

This verse is also often taken out of context. The subject has not changed. The context is church discipline. The emphasis is to put the fear of God in the rebellious sinner who will not repent. That person cannot say that this is just a bunch of people and their opinion. Jesus is strongly declaring that they have the backing of Almighty God to make their declaration.

The eternal principle is that when there are a number of us in agreement in the Spirit, we are voicing the direction of the Holy Spirit. Again, we are not changing heaven, heaven is revealing to us God's will. We are praying it into the earth, not because we have gotten together and demanded that God do what we agreed upon, but because together we discerned the leading of the Holy Spirit that teaches us to pray God's will. (Romans 8:27) I have seen churches pray, claiming this verse as a promise, that their

**Commented [notes20]:** <sup>14</sup> This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. 1 John 5:14 (NIV)

**Commented [notes21]:** <sup>27</sup> And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. Romans 8:27 (NIV)

church would be overflowing with new members, that they would start new churches, that their finances would be multiplied, and on and on. None of it was done for them by their Father in heaven. Did the promise fail, or did they misunderstand the Scripture? When we are faced with the reality that a prophecy did not come to pass, or a promise not be fulfilled, then we must examine the validity of the prophecy (when from a man) or our understanding of the prophecy or promise in the Word. Many times we pull a verse from its context and culture and then wonder why it doesn't "work". God's word never fails! God is not a man that He should lie. (Numbers 23:19) It is we who need to reexamine our understanding of the word and search for the meaning of that word in that context and culture in which it was written. How did they understand that message in their day? That is the intended meaning.

**Commented [notes22]:** <sup>19</sup> God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?  
Numbers 23:19 (NIV)

There is a universal truth in this verse. When Christians pray together, and the Holy Spirit places upon their heart to pray for the same thing, they can sense the confirmation of the Spirit that they are praying God's sovereign will. Watch for that when you come together to pray. It is a wonderfully encouraging thing. It is not God's magic credit card to have your way. It is His assurance that you are an instrument of the Almighty.

*<sup>20</sup>For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."*

What is the context? The witnesses that confirm the sin of a fellow believer are those that have gathered in His name. God is in that judgment. Do you see how it fits with the passage? How have you most commonly heard it used? When a few of us get together to pray, our numbers are small but we encourage one another with the fact that Jesus is with us. That IS true, but it is NOT what this verse is teaching. It is not the context of the verse.

Jesus is with me when I'm alone. Yes, there is a difference in corporate worship, nevertheless, He is with each and every believer whether they are locked in a jail cell or driving their car or climbing a mountain. If He was only there when two or three are gathered, I'd never want to be alone again. We have numerous examples of God mightily answering the prayer of solitary believers. (James 5:16)

**Commented [notes23]:** <sup>16</sup> Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.  
James 5:16 (NIV)

"*In my name*" means with His authority. The intended meaning fits perfectly into the passage. When a few believers have gathered in the authority and direction of the Holy Spirit and remove a person from the fellowship, it is Jesus who is acting. Heaven agrees with their action of binding him from fellowship. When they welcome the repentant sinner back, Jesus is in their midst welcoming them back. Heaven looses them from their sin debt and isolation because they repented. (1 John 1:9)

**Commented [notes24]:** <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.  
1 John 1:9 (NIV)

Well, I hope I haven't completely discouraged you from using these encouraging verses. Instead, I hope that I have encouraged you to see them in the light of the passage and to use them correctly. Does this church dare to use church discipline? Absolutely! Fortunately, when issues have risen in the past, it hasn't had to come to the congregation. The offender either repented or separated themselves. We will follow the instruction of Jesus, for the health of the church, for us individually, and that of the offender. Jesus' way is the best way. Amen? Will you commit yourself to it?