

Part 33: The Hard Work of Discipleship

Tyler Velin | Matthew 18:15-35

October 28th, 2018

After a long break away from the book of Matthew, we are right back into it. But in a very real sense the text we are looking at in Matthew could be a continuation of the Gospel-Focused Relationship series because it deals with the way we interact and respond to each other's sin.

Let me give a really quick recap of what's going on in Matthew. On a really broad level we have seen two big themes in this book. In chapters 1-16 Matthew is helping us understand who Jesus is. And this culminates in Matthew 16:16 where Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is, and Peter replies, "You are the Christ the Son of the living God."

That confession of Peter is the turning point to where we are today. Matthew instead of teaching us who Jesus is, is now beginning to tell us what it is like to live as Jesus' disciples.

Jesus is now teaching his disciples what it means to live out that faith in the context of his church. If Jesus is the Christ, and if you believe that and are one of his disciples, what becomes your new ethic in life; the new principles upon which your life is built?

At this point the whole narrative of Matthew is leading to Jerusalem where Jesus will be killed. So in a very real way Jesus is preparing his disciples for life when he is gone. In chapter 16 Jesus promised to establish the church, in these passages he is preparing them to be the church.

If you are a believer, you must understand the work of this passage. If you are non-believer, you must understand the heart of this passage. This is because the church in many ways is like the world, but in so many more ways it is unlike any community you can belong to in your life.

Everyone holds this in tension, and it's often hard to reconcile. The church ought to be different because it's people who have been saved by Jesus. But the truth is, those saved people aren't yet perfect. And imperfect people sin against each other.

We are right to expect the church to be distinct, kind, compassionate and all those other things. But we are wrong to expect the church to be perfect.

Jesus is going to address today how we live as people saved by Jesus, but still wrestling with our sin. This is really important because there are lots of people who are hurt by the church or who harbor hate for the church for one of these two reasons.

One, broken people in the church can often deal with being sinned against poorly. They can be harsh, angry and arrogant. Jesus wants to help us move towards others in a different way in this text.

Two, broken people in the church often misunderstand the motivation and heart of people who approach them regarding their own sin. What happens more times than not is typically the person who is being approached about their own sin finds this uncomfortable, and they either leave the church all

together, or bounce around churches hoping to find one which doesn't probe as much into these issues. Jesus wants to help us be prepared to receive help from others in this text.

This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. When he told us to pick up our cross and follow him, it doesn't just mean the hard work of dying for the sake of infinite and perfect Jesus, it also means the often harder work of dying for the sake of broken and sinful people who are still saved by grace. And this is hard work.

Today we are going to look at not only the hard work in this text, but also the posture of the heart as we do this hard work. Jesus is first going to show us the hard work of discipleship, and then he is going to show us the heart work of discipleship.

Discipleship, helping other people follow Jesus, is not primarily about gaining knowledge or growing in community, it is about helping each other see and be changed by Jesus Christ in every area of life.

Last time we were in Matthew 18 we saw an illustration of a shepherd leaving his 99 sheep to find the one which wandered away. Jesus in this parable is telling the church that it is their job to help their fellow believers by pursuing those who are wandering from the gospel. The two verses before and after this parable remind us of how serious he saw this task: **Matthew 18:10,14.**

It may be uncomfortable to think about moving towards another believer's sin, or to think about another believer moving towards your sin. But Jesus makes it clear here that if we are not willing to do this, we actually despise our brothers and sisters. This hard work of discipleship, moving towards sin is part of the way God wants us to keep his flock from perishing.

Now in the parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd finds the sheep and brings the sheep back, and there is much celebration. Wouldn't we all like that experience? This is the best case scenario: you have a brother or sister in your community group, who has veered from faith and you go after them, you remind them of the gospel and they come back to you and you both rejoice at God's goodness.

But what happens when things are different? What happens when they don't come back? What happens when they continue to sin? This is where we get into our first point today: **The hard work of discipleship.**

If you want to know how hard this work is consider **Matthew 18:15-20**

If you are not a Christian in here today, you may at this point be slowly trying to make your way towards the aisle before things get weird in here. In this text you will hear the gospel, but I want to be clear here that this passage deals with believer's interaction with believers.

It begins with a brother moving towards a brother. That's because Christians gathered together as a church are committed to helping Christians live out their faith. We just witnessed two baptisms, tonight we will witness them being voted on as members of our church. And when we are baptized, or when we become members of a church we are asking, and the church is affirming, the desire to be treated as a believer.

This includes growing in holiness and repenting of sin. It doesn't mean you are committed to being perfect, but it does mean that you want to know where you are blind to areas of sin in your life. This is a text for believers.

Specifically it is a text for you. Until we get to verse 18 all of the "you's" in this text are singular. Meaning when your brother sins against you, you go to him, you go get help, you tell it to the church, let him be to you as a tax collector or gentile.

Why is this important? It is important because instead of being a corporate manual for church discipline, this text is a daily field guide for everyday life in the church. It influences and it shapes what we call, and will discuss later, as church discipline. But it isn't written to the elders, it's written to any individual disciple.

If you've been in this church long, you know we love discipleship, we love helping each other follow Jesus. We also love evangelism, sharing the message of Jesus with others. But do not be unprepared. Do not miss the end of these two efforts. As we grow in evangelism, we will most likely be faced with more sin, sin in all directions, including potentially sin against ourselves. Why? Because new Christians act like new Christians. Maturity happens over time.

If we want to be a church who champions evangelism, we must also be a church that realizes that when people come to faith, they wobble and fall just like you too did when you were saved. For the sake of evangelism: hear this text.

If we are passionate about discipleship it means that not only does the potential pain of interpersonal sin go up, but so too does that awkward moment where one person who has been so encouraging to you must also be confronted with sin by you. For the sake of discipleship: hear this text.

Jesus actually gives us a process here, if your brother sins against you, go to him or her on your own and tell him about it. If she refuses to listen, go and get one or two other believers and ask them for help. If he refuses to listen to you and your fellow believers, tell the whole church, ask them for help in this area, and if this person refuses to listen to even the whole church, let them be to you as a Gentile and tax collector, that is assume that they are not a believer.

This may seem like a cold and mechanical process, but we have to remember to not do this is to despise your brother, but to do this is to work for their eternal preservation. A few points to help us understand this passage a little better.

First, if your brother or sister sins against you, the very first step you make is towards them. Now this is becoming more counter cultural because what typically happens is we make the first step towards social media and we passive aggressively make it known that we have been sinned against.

Or we start right away by telling a whole bunch of people what went down. Why do we have this desire? Because we want to feel vindicated in our hurt. We want people to know that we have been wronged. But this is not where Jesus calls us to start. That's why this is hard work.

Moving towards your brother or sister first means prioritizing their eternity and their joy over and above your own comfort and pride. If we as the church do this step well, Lord willing most conflict ends here. No one except for you and your fellow believer will know about this, but God will. God will be pleased,

and that's the true test of our heart. If pointing out sin is about public shaming or slander, we will always do this poorly and the pews of our community will be stained with blood.

But if we do this right, we will as Jesus says in this text, gain our brother [win him over]. But what if it doesn't happen, what if this person doesn't care about you or the perceived sin in their heart?

Go and get one or two other fellow believers and ask them for help. This is important for three reasons. First these people will help you understand if this is actually a sin issue. Often times we elevate things to sin issues when we are personally hurt. But these two believers will help you understand if the issue at hand is actually the result of the erring brother's sin [not doing what Jesus has commanded, doing what Jesus has told us not to do].

Second, these one or two others go with us and plead with the brother or sister. They add weight and accountability to this motion. In fact when Jesus in verse 16 tells us to do this he is quoting a legal procedure from the book of Deuteronomy. This is not because this interpersonal issue is like a court case, but he is stressing how thoughtful and serious we ought to consider this.

Now one quick word here on gossip. There are some people who feel restricted to do step two because it may be gossip. I want to help you with that tension. There are also people here who read this command as, "Go and get one or one thousand others." You might also need help here. One way to check your heart when you move to this step is 1. Have I done step one, and 2. Is the person I'm talking with part of the solution. Will they help me help this person?

If you are telling people about this who in no way are in a position to help you help the other person, that's gossip. If you tell people just because you want vindication, that's gossip. But if you tell people because you think you have a brother or sister who is in unrepentant sin and therefore might need our help, that is discipleship.

And if they refuse to listen to this smaller delegation. At this point they continue not just to struggle, but they remain hardened in unrepentance. They refuse to see their actions as sin even when confronted by two or three others. Then, then you can tell it to the church.

Now you bring it to the church for two reasons. 1. The larger body may now plead with this individual concerning his or her sin, calling them back to repentance, wanting with all their collective hearts to win them back. But 2. If this fails you may come to the realization that this person in fact may not be a believer. That's why Jesus says this in **Matthew 18:17**.

If there is someone who refuses to see sin as sin, refuses to repent of sin, refuses to even listen to others when spoken to about that sin, the fact may be that their heart is actually unrepentant in general. It may still be dead in sin.

Now this may seem strong and final, but we ought to consider the scope of Matthew and the interactions of Jesus. Who is it that Jesus is often spending his time with? Gentiles and tax collectors. How do we know that? Because the very man writing this book was a tax collector. Matthew was one of these "others."

Back in verse 15 Jesus uses the verb translated as: gained a brother. In 1 Corinthians Paul uses the same verb like this: **1 Corinthians 9:19**. If, and Lord willing such instances will be far and few between, we as a

church get to step three and are still met with unrepentance, we in this instance just shift from discipleship to evangelism. We do not withdraw from them, we just begin to preach the gospel to them instead of asking them to apply the gospel.

This is the task Jesus has given the church. This is the means he has given us of not allowing one of these little ones to perish. Jesus goes on to affirm that the church has been given the weight and the task of making hard and weighty decisions like this. Jesus gave the church this authority back in **Matt. 16:17-19**.

In Matthew 18 Jesus repeats these same words, but gives a new promise. Look with me again at **Matthew 18:18-20**.

Listen, there will be times where you do not want to move towards a believer and confront their sin. There will be times where the very last thing you want to do is consider the fact that this individual you once thought was a believer may in fact have never been saved. You as gathered church members may at times be called together to make a wise judgement on the sins of an individual, and in those moments we will not want this task.

It is a weighty task, a task which every elder is reminded of daily, a task in which members ought to soberly consider their commitment to each other. But it is a task which God in his wisdom has chosen to give to the church. We are called to care for the eternal souls of one another, we are called to make hard decisions and say, "Dear sister, if you do not see this as a sin, I fear you may not be a believer."

But we are not called to do any of this alone. Jesus will be with us. There in the midst of two or three believers broken in grief and struck by the weight of this task, Jesus is there. In our tears, Jesus is there. In our prayers for wisdom, Jesus is there. As we deal with erring brothers, Jesus says, "I am with you. I have equipped you for this. I am watching over my church."

The hard work of discipleship is caring for other people's eternity over and above our own comfort or vindication. And this is why God has given us local churches. People working together with grace and repentance to call each other back to God.

Now, we can sit here and we can feel the hard weight of this text. But this text in itself is not sufficient to fix the problem of sin in our midst. We can feel this weight and walk out of this room and be sinned against and immediately we can be provoked back to indignation or frustration over sin.

This text tells us what the hard work is, but the next story tells us where our heart receives help for such a work. This is the last point today: **The heart work of discipleship**.

Look with me at **Matthew 18:21-22**. Peter still leads with the very thing you will lead with. "I went to my brother, and he saw his sin. He is not unrepentant. I don't need to tell it to anyone else, but I don't want to be sinned against anymore! How much sin must I put up with before I don't have to forgive this person anymore!" Or, "What if that individual has been brought before the church, and there they realize their sin and repent, but still I was the one sinned against? He put me through so much strife, do I still need to forgive him?"

I love Peter because he asks questions that all of us want to ask, but everyone is too scared to ask it. Peter has asked the dumb questions in the Bible so that we don't have to. Jesus answers with what may

seem insignificant to you, but his point is that for those who have been forgiven by God, we never run out of forgiveness for others. And he shares a story.

Matthew 18:23-26. This servant came before a King, and his debt is so large that it is staggering. A talent is roughly twenty years wages, and we say roughly because a talent is actually a measurement of weight. So for this working servant his debt to a powerful king was in time 2,300 lifetimes of labor and in weight 375 tons of precious metal (gold or silver). That is almost twice the weight of the Statue of Liberty.

The King knows there is no way this servant can pay off the debt, but the servant begs the king for mercy saying, "I will pay it back if I just have more time." The story continues: **Matthew 18:27.** Even though the servant says he will pay it back, the King in his knowledge knows he cannot, so in his generosity he forgives the debt in full. Billions of dollars of debt forgiven.

The story goes on: **Matthew 18:28-29.** The first servant encounters another, a fellow servant, one who owed him a decent, but not overwhelming sum of money. And this second servant provides to the first servant the same request the first servant gave to the King himself, "Give me time, and I will pay it back." But the first servant refuses. **Matthew 18:31-34.**

Did you notice the King's language here? He actually described to the first servant what happened back in the King's chamber when he was forgiven his debt. The forgiveness of the debt by the King certainly came from his wealth, but that wasn't the most important factor. The King rebukes the first servant not because he didn't forgive the debt, but because he wasn't merciful. What the first servant received from the King wasn't a sterile forgiveness by a bank, but it was the mercy of the King from his very heart.

This first servant may not have had the resources of the King to forgive like the King did, but he does have the resources to be merciful as the King was. The King says, I had mercy on you, should not you have mercy on your fellow servant?

And then Jesus tells us, if it wasn't clear enough, what we are to do with this parable. He doesn't always do this. But he does here which means, listen to him: **Matthew 18:35.**

In looking at the hard work of discipleship we saw a pattern and a process for going towards a brother. But in this parable we see the heart from which we should do all these things. If we want to forgive from the heart, if we want to pursue others from the heart, we must see the way in which Jesus has forgiven us and pursued us.

Look at what Paul says in **Colossians 2:13-14.** The debt between a King and a servant is always greater than the debt between a servant and a servant. And because the King himself has sent his son to pay the debt of our sin, we have the infinite backdrop of mercy behind us.

We forgive sins against us because we are not God. If God as King is able to forgive incomprehensible debts against his divinity, then shouldn't we be able to draw from that and forgive fellow believers who have sinned against our humanity?

Now I want you to see parallels here in closing because this is where our application comes in. If you look back at the King in Matthew 18:23, he called us into his court. The King went after us. Why? Because we would have never went on our own. We may be unaware of our sin, unknowingly racking up debt against the King. Or perhaps we know we owe him something, and because of that we fear him.

But when the King called the servant, the King made known the debt. Perhaps this is you today. Maybe this is the first time you've realized that any sin, even the smallest is the equivalent of debt this large towards God our King. But let the tension in the throne room lead you to experience the mercy of the King. Repent, ask him for mercy, for in Jesus he has provided abundantly for us.

God pursued us so that we may pursue others. Look at the pursuit: **Matthew 18:15, Matthew 18:28.** Both the fellow believer and the first servant went to their erring brother. One went with mercy and the heart of a disciple, one went with a heart which was full of wickedness.

To those in here who are or need to be seeking out someone who is stuck in sin which they are blind to, or who have been sinned against, do not go with the posture of the first servant. Because if that is your posture you may find that it is you who are in sin, and you must be reconciled first to God. You must go, but you must go with a right understanding of what you have first received in Jesus through faith.

To those in here who are about to be sought out. I pray that you experience the grace and winsome love of the fellow brother and not the first servant. As an elder at this church we are here to make sure that if you are in sin, and if you are repentant as the second servant was, you will not be met with the harsh treatment he received in this parable.

We want others to seek you out because they love you and want you to experience the joy of following Jesus with faith and repentance. This is again where we can often cut our ties and run from this. This is so common in our culture due to the amount of options.

We can often find a restaurant with better service, a gym with less clamor, a neighborhood with less business. You probably can find a church where they will not confront you with your sin.

But we cannot find a true church with a different call than this. To seek out a church that respects the boundaries of sin as an issue for you and you alone is to not find a welcoming church, but despising church. You might say, but the worship is inspiring and the language is emotional. But if the inspiration of worship and the language of emotion doesn't manifest itself with concern for your eternal joy then Jesus says that is not his church. It might look loving, it might look like God is there, but to not deal with sin is to actually neglect a way in which Jesus draws near to his church!

I promise you, that there will probably be a time in this church, in any gospel believing church where you as a believer are confronted with your sin. This is for your good. That you might experience the forgiveness not only of man, but the continued reminder of what Jesus did for you on the cross.

The church should be a safe place for broken sinners because the cross was a dangerous place for Jesus. Jesus has dealt with our sin so that we can in love deal with the sins of fellow believers this is a hard work which comes from hard hearts made new by the gospel.

