

Sermon for April 22, 2018 – Ministry of the Keys

Matthew 18:15-20 (EHV)

Theme: You are your brother's keeper.

- 1) Jesus shows you the way to admonish him.
- 2) Jesus gives you authority to do it.

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his sin just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And, if he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as an unbeliever or a tax collector. ¹⁸ Amen I tell you: Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Amen I tell you again: If two of you on earth agree to ask for anything, it will be done for them by my Father who is in heaven. ²⁰ In fact where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am among them.”

Confronting a person living in sin is one of the hardest things to do. I think to myself: “Who am I to talk to this person when I know that I am just as much a sinner as he? I like him and don’t want to ruin our friendship.” Thoughts like these tempt me to put off the confrontation; to wait for the right time . . . which never seems to come.

But then I read Jesus’ words in our sermon text. They have urgency. He commands me to “go” - not when it is convenient or when you think the time is right, but simply “go,” as in: “go now and show your erring brother his fault.”

Now, you might be thinking: “I am sure glad that I am not a pastor or elder - having to confront people in this way.” But, look carefully at our text. Jesus doesn’t just address pastors and elders. He commands every Christian to warn fellow believers caught in sin. You too are your brothers' keepers.

“But, who am I to confront my family member or friend? I wouldn’t know what to say and probably just get the person mad. Plus, knowing my background, my family member or friend would just look at me as one big hypocrite. No, someone else needs to do it, not me.”

But the Lord has chosen you! By virtue of your baptism, He has called you to be your brother’s keeper - a watchman over his soul. He has commanded you to warn him in love.

The thought of confronting erring brothers or sisters may terrify us, but it is, in fact, the greatest act of love we can show someone caught in sin. Let us consider this truth, under the theme: **You are your brother’s keeper.** 1) Jesus shows you the way to admonish him. 2) Jesus gives you authority to do it.

Part One: Jesus shows you the way to admonish him.

Jesus says: *If your brother sins against you, go and show him his sin just between the two of you.*

There are a few things I want you to notice in Jesus command. First of all, He doesn't just call the erring Christian caught in sin "a" brother, but "your" brother. In other words, regardless of who he is, the Christian caught in impenitent sin is someone you ought to love deeply. What happens to his soul should concern you greatly.

But what exactly does Jesus mean when he says, "sins against you"? For example, if I see a friend stealing a candy bar from the store, can I ignore it because his sin wasn't directly "against me"? No, I can't. Any sin a Christian commits with our direct knowledge is a sin committed against us - and we have an obligation to address it. Does this mean that if "Jamie" tells me that she heard that my friend "Joe" might have stolen something, that I should confront him about it? No. Why not? Because I did not witness the sin, therefore it was not "against me." What I hear is gossip - and that needs to be reproved!

But if you have firsthand knowledge of a Christian caught in a state of unrepented sin, Jesus says: *go and show him his sin just between the two of you.* Jesus' words have a sense of urgency. They are not a request, but a command to go and privately talk to the unrepentant brother about his sin.

"Who? Me?" you might be thinking, "I know my sins all too well. I would feel like such a hypocrite. Isn't there a passage that says: "Do not judge?"ⁱ Wouldn't I be judging him? Why not tell the pastor and just have him go?"

Because, Jesus did not say: if your brothers sins against you, go and tell your pastor. He commands you to go.

But what about the argument of being "too sinful" to address a fellow Christians' sin? My answer to that objection is: are you too sinful to be forgiven? Jesus paid for the sins of the world on his cross. His resurrection proves our forgiveness – which he offers to all. Everyone who repents and believes in Him receives this forgiveness. This is the very reason why God wants you to confront your brother living in sin: that he might repent and be forgiven.

On top of this, it is actually good if the memory of your sins makes you feel unworthy. If they didn't, then you would be in danger of confronting your brother with a pharisaical attitude – judging him in a hypocritical way. But if you go as a forgiven sinner - as someone who needs Christ's mercy every bit as much as the person you are confronting – then you will be careful not only show him his sin, but also his Savior Jesus Christ who died for his sin. Yes, the fact that you are a sinner who has been shown mercy makes you the best person to talk to your brother trapped in sin.ⁱⁱ

But do this privately – lovingly protecting his reputation. And be optimistic. If you go at God's command and with His Word, you can be assured that God goes with you.ⁱⁱⁱ And God's Word is powerful. Only it can bring about repentance and faith.^{iv} This is why Jesus adds: *If he listens to you, you have regained your brother.*

And what joy there is in heaven when this happens.^v God has made you a hero, as the apostle James writes: *My brothers, if anyone among you wanders away from the truth and someone turns him back, let it be known that the one who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*^{vi}

But what if the brother doesn't listen? What if he refuses to repent? Jesus says: *But if he will not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.* Notice that Jesus does not say: "gossip about your brother's sin at Church – asking any and everyone for advice. No, he wants you to choose one or two loving Christians who will keep the situation discrete so as to protect the reputation of the erring brother.

Can the pastor be one of the witnesses you choose to go with you? He certainly may, but understand that he is not always the best choice. Sometimes a trusted friend of the erring brother can have a greater impact than a pastor. People sort of expect pastors to warn against sin, but they don't always expect a friend to do it.

It must be stated, however, that the person you chose as a witness – even if that person is the pastor - is not to take over your responsibility of warning an erring brother. That responsibility remains with you – especially if the witness you choose does not have firsthand knowledge of the sin. The witness' job is merely to show concern and support as you call the sinning brother to repentance – noting whether or not if he actually repents. And if the erring brother does repent, then the witness and you are to assure the erring brother that He his sin is completely forgiven in Christ, and not bring up the sin again.

But if the person refuses to repent? Jesus says: ¹⁷ *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.*

Why tell it to the Church? So that the church – the erring brother's spiritual family - might hold an intervention for him: showing him how concerned they are for his soul. Hopefully all the people reaching out to him in love will convince him of his error and move him to repent. If this happens, rejoice with the angels, reassure him of the forgiveness Christ won for him, and treat him as royally as the father of the prodigal son treated his son when he repented.^{vii}

But if the erring brother refuses to listen to the Church, then he has revealed himself as an unbeliever and the Church is left with no choice but to break all ties with him, as Jesus himself says: *And, if he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as an unbeliever or a tax collector.*

What exactly does Jesus mean, when he says: *treat him as an unbeliever or a tax collector?* Is Jesus calling us to shun and hate people? Absolutely not! What Jesus is asking us to do is treat him as we would any other non-Christian. As the opportunity allows, continue to call him to repentance and faith. Invite him to come to church (just as you would invite your non-Christian friends) so that he can hear the Word. This is important, because only God's Word will be able to convert him back from unbelief to faith.

At the same time, things can't go on as they did before. Out of love for his soul, we can't allow the impenitent person to partake of Holy Communion, lest he eat and drink it to his judgement.^{viii} He can't be allowed to be on the congregation's council, boards, committees, vote or be married or buried in the Church. Why not? Because God wants us – the Church - to make it crystal clear that the person's refusal to repent has separated him from Christ, salvation, and any hope of eternal life. He needs to repent of his sin, if he wishes to be saved. This message, while sad and incredibly difficult for us to show towards our family and friends, is nevertheless necessary. We do it out of love: to save his soul from hell.^{ix}

Part Two: *Jesus gives you authority to do it.*

Jesus said: *"Amen I tell you: Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

Jesus has given his Church the keys of heaven. If we, in accordance with Scripture, tell someone their sins are not forgiven, they are not forgiven. If we tell someone, in accordance with Scripture, that their sins are forgiven, Christ himself forgives them.

But what if the congregation abuses its power and does not forgive someone it should? Or what if a person puts on a show of repentance, but isn't truly penitent at heart? In those cases we take comfort in the passage: *Do not be deceived. God is not mocked.*^x If a congregation refuses to forgive a penitent man, that man is nevertheless forgiven by the LORD - and God will hold the congregation accountable for willfully refusing to pronounce the forgiveness he commanded it to pronounce. But what if a man tricks a congregation into forgiving him, when he is in fact impenitent? He has not fooled God! The LORD's wrath remains over him. The only person he has truly fooled is himself!

Amen I tell you again: If two of you on earth agree to ask for anything, it will be done for them by my Father who is in heaven.

God listens to his Church! Whenever we join together in prayer to ask God to help us search out and call back his lost sheep, he hears us and does what we ask. Whenever we ask God to forgive someone who repents, God hears us and forgives them. Why? Because he loves us – a fact demonstrated beyond any shadow of a doubt in Christ.

God loves us so much that he is present with us now. How do I know? Because Jesus himself promised: *In fact, where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am among them.*

Yes, Jesus is here with us now. He is present in our services, Bible classes, Sunday School lessons and congregational meetings. The LORD is with you whenever you use his Word to personally try to call back an erring brother. He is with the Church whenever we, as a congregation, need to practice the tough love of excommunication, due to a person's continual refusal to repent. Make no mistake, even though the Church votes, Jesus himself is the one guiding it - closing heaven to those who refuse to repent. He is also the one opening heaven to all who do repent and look to him alone for salvation.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: the LORD has entrusted each and every one of you with the keys of heaven: the right to forgive and retain sin. He gave you these keys so that we could lovingly keep watch over one another - warning each other whenever one of us is led astray. Therefore, whenever a brother is caught in sin, do not be afraid to talk to him about it. Understand that Jesus both wants you to do this and has shown you how to do it in the Bible. Jesus has also forgiven all your sins so that you can confront an erring brother with a proper attitude, saying, "I too am a sinner, who only deserves God's wrath and damnation, but Christ has mercifully led me to repent of my sins and forgiven them. He is offering you this same forgiveness. So repent, dear brother, of all of your sins. The Lord is faithful and will forgive you. He will restore you to live a new and holy life – all to the glory of his name." Amen.

References

ⁱ *"Stop judging, so that you will not be judged. For with whatever standard you judge, you will be judged, and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you focus on the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not consider the beam that is in your own eye? How will you tell your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye,' when, in fact, you have a beam in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the beam from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:1-5 EHV)*

ⁱⁱ *This saying is trustworthy and worthy of full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," of whom I am the worst. But I was shown mercy for this reason: that in me, the worst sinner, Christ Jesus might demonstrate his unlimited patience as an example for those who are going to believe in him, resulting in eternal life..ⁱⁱ (1 Timothy 1:15-16 EHV)*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, inasmuch as God is making an appeal through us. We urge you, on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:20 EHV)*

^{iv} *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes—to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. (Romans 1:16 EHV) So then, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17 EHV)*

^v *"In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:10 EHV)*

^{vi} James 5:19-20 EHV

^{vii} *"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick, bring out the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.' Then they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:22-24 EHV)*

^{viii} *Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the Lord's body and blood. Instead, let a person examine himself and after doing so, let him eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For if anyone eats and drinks in an unworthy way because he does not recognize the Lord's body, he eats and drinks judgment on himself. (1 Corinthians 11:27-29 EHV)*

^{ix} *In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, and my spirit is there, along with the power of our Lord Jesus, hand such a man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that the spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord Jesus. (1 Corinthians 5:4-5 EHV)*

^x Galatians 6:7 EHV