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Sermon Notes

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Dealing with Sin in the Church, Part 1

Matthew 18:15-20

I. The Central Attribute and Calling of God: Holiness

A. God's Most Noteworthy Attribute: Holiness

The Apostle John testified to this quite plainly:

Revelation 4:8 Day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative": God has appeared to me a glorious and lovely Being, chiefly on account of his holiness. The holiness of God has always appeared to me the most lovely of all his attributes.

B. Our Greatest Possible Happiness: Holiness

Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative": Holiness, as I then wrote down some of my contemplations on it, appeared to me to be of a sweet, pleasant, charming, serene, calm nature; which brought an inexpressible purity, brightness, peacefulness and rapture to the soul. In other words, that it made the soul like a field or garden of God, with all manner of pleasant flowers; all pleasant, delightful, and undisturbed: enjoying a sweet calm. and the gently vivifying beams of the sun.

C. The Characteristic Attribute of that Heaven to Which We Are Going: Holiness

Fifteen times the word "holy" is used in the Book of Revelation... the last six refer to the holiness of the people of God and of the Perfect City where they will dwell with God forever:

Revelation 21:2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

Edwards: The heaven I desired was a heaven of holiness; to be with God, and to spend my eternity in divine love, and holy communion with Christ. My mind was very much taken up with contemplations on heaven, and the enjoyments there; and living there in perfect holiness, humility and love: And it used at that time to appear a great part of the happiness of heaven, that there the saints could express their love to Christ.

D. God's Prevailing Call over the Church: Holiness

Leviticus 19:2 "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.

Holiness = being set apart, especially as created beings being set apart unto God... as His precious possession, and especially being set apart from the world of wickedness and evil that surrounds us... that we should be pure as light in a dark world

The word "Holy" is first used in Genesis 2:3 concerning the seventh day

Secondly, it is used in the burning bush account, and the call of Moses:

Exodus 3:5 "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

Thirdly: in the Song of Moses after the Exodus and the defeat of Pharaoh's forces at the amazing Red Sea Crossing:

Exodus 15:13 In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.

Soon after, God called His people to be holy unto Him:

Exodus 19:5-6 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

Friends, holiness is of the central essence of God Himself in His person, of God's stance toward His creation, of the approaching of God in His dwelling, and of God's calling of His people out of a world of sin to be His special possession

The New Testament applies this directly to the calling of the Church of Jesus Christ:

1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

The point of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is transformation of a people from dead in transgressions and sins to perfectly holy in God's sight

One of the greatest forces for that ongoing transformation is a well-ordered church... a church that takes holiness seriously

One of the greatest weapons in such a holy church is the zeal brothers and sisters have to watch over one another in brotherly love... and today's passage shows us that love in action in the issue of sin

This passage commands us to confront sin directly, to address it courageously and wisely and to seek to have it out of the church

The end of the passage is the topic of church discipline

So, for two weeks, we're going to talk about addressing sin in the Body of Christ... even to the point of church discipline

This week, we'll focus on Matthew 18:15-20, and next week we'll also look at 1 Corinthians 5

II. Christ's Clear Steps for Dealing with Sin

A. The Context of Matthew 18

1. dispute over who is the greatest
2. Christ calls a little child and presents a picture of humility for leaders
3. Christ also warns against the danger of sin...
4. he presents the Father as a shepherd who seeks to rescue wandering sheep
5. therefore, one of the great purposes of church leadership is restoring wandering Christians who have fallen into sin

B. Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5

1. two key passages on church discipline
2. both essential in understanding Christ's will for dealing with sin in the Body of Christ
3. however, slightly different focus
 - a. Matthew 18 focuses more on inter-personal sins... sins from one individual to the next... so the matter can be resolved quickly and privately if the person repents
 - b. 1 Corinthians 5 focuses more on scandalous sins that affect the whole church immediately... there the issue is brought directly to the elders of the church to be dealt with publicly

C. Step #1: Your Brother Sins Against You

Matthew 18:15 If your brother sins against you..

1. in one sense, all sin is ultimately sin against God and God alone

Psalm 51:4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight

- a. in the next passage, this is the 10,000 talents we owe

- b. sin against the infinite majesty of God is infinitely more serious than any sin against another human being
- 2. however, we do sin against other people... sin is horizontal as well as vertical
- 3. in this case, we are the offended person
- 4. “Brother”... probably should be taken in the Christian sense... someone who is in the church, claiming to be in the family of God
- 5. so, someone claiming to be a Christian has sinned against us
 - a. Christ doesn’t say what the sin is, or how serious
 - b. Now there are some things we simply must bear without mention

Colossians 3:13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

ESV 1 Corinthians 13:7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Some things might simply be annoying, or minor... a quick comment, or a look, or something not quite loving...

Illus. Metal detector in Poland set to go off at a gum wrapper

- c. But some things have to be dealt with... the Holy Spirit can give you insight to know which things to bring up

D. Step #2: Go in Private and Show Him His Sin

- 1. burden to go is here on person who is sinned AGAINST
 - a. amazing, for in Matthew 5, the burden is on the one who SINS!!

Matthew 5:23-24 Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

- b. thus Christ has it addressed on BOTH ENDS of the equation... sin festers where the people do not come together and work it out
- c. Satan is always seeking to shove the thing down deep inside where it can do the most damage
- d. Matthew 5 implies QUICK action... don’t wait too long, or let it fester

2. so, this is an ACTIVE step... a bold step! It takes courage, it takes love

a. Matthew 7 tells us first to take the plank out of our own eye

Matthew 7:3-5 Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴ How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

b. I take this to mean that we should recognize our own sinfulness, and go humbly

c. Jesus likens it to removing a speck from a brother's eye... and this is a very delicate operation

d. So we also go with GENTLENESS and with HUMILITY... Galatians 6:1 captures both of these very well

Galatians 6:1 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.

3. notice also the aggrieved person goes IN PRIVATE, just between the two of them

a. the final step of public exposure is so momentous that Christ reserves it for the greatest hardness of heart

b. this quiet step of person to person encounter should solve most sin issues quickly and quietly

4. "SHOW HIM HIS FAULT"

a. the Greek word implies a careful work of presenting evidence of sin, of persuading the person to see the weightiness of it

b. it involves going over the history of the sin... what happened

c. it also involves bringing Scripture up, seeing the act in light of Biblical truth

d. the goal is to bring genuine repentance, which involves brokenness over sin, dealing with it before God and man... seeing it in light of eternity

e. most of the deep aspects of this work of repentance can only be done by the Holy Spirit... but the Spirit uses human beings to begin the matter

5. Happy Early Resolution:

Matthew 18:15 If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

- a. This is the goal... genuine repentance, and reconciliation
- b. “won your brother over” means you have to some degree rescued him from the sin that was starting to imprison his heart
- c. thus is HUMILITY essential to Christian progress... a willingness to hear a loving rebuke from another Christian

Psalm 141:5 Let a righteous man strike me-- it is a kindness; let him rebuke me-- it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it.

One of the key differences between a Christian and a non-Christian is the humility willing to listen to a genuine rebuke and quickly to repent and seek forgiveness... the mature Christian is well aware how much sin still dwells within his heart, and how many BLIND SPOTS he has... so he is eager to have someone help him grow:

Here’s where the fool and the wise man part company:

Proverbs 9:8 Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you.

Proverbs 12:1 Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid.

It takes HUMILITY to repent quickly when someone shows you your fault:

CJ Mahaney’s book on humility carries with it this account showing how we have BLIND SPOTS and we need loving correction so we can be our best:

As I sat with my family at a local breakfast establishment, I noticed a finely dressed man at an adjacent table: His Armani suit and stiffly pressed shirt coordinated perfectly with a power tie. His wing-tip shoes sparkled from a recent shine, every hair was in place, including his perfectly groomed moustache. The man sat alone eating a bagel as he prepared for a meeting. As he reviewed the papers before him, he appeared nervous, glancing frequently at his Rolex watch. It was obvious he had an important meeting ahead. The man stood up and I watched as he straightened his tie and prepared to leave. Immediately I noticed a blob of **cream cheese** attached to his finely groomed moustache. He was about to go into the world, dressed in his finest, with **cream cheese** on his face. I thought of the business meeting he was about to attend. Who would tell him? Should I? What if no one did?

As you and I walk through life, no matter how closely we watch ourselves, we are all getting fresh blobs of **cream cheese** on our faces. We all have **cream cheese** moments

The question is, do you have anyone in your life who loves you enough to tell you the truth? Are you willing to be that kind of person for someone else?

E. Step #3 (If Needed!!): Take Witnesses and Try Again

Matthew 18:16 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.'

1. But suppose the person will not repent? Suppose he or she hardens their hearts and dig in their heels and refuse to deal with the sin?
2. Christ commanded we go to the next level... bring in some witnesses
 - a. Notice the price of stubbornness and pride... the cost of reconciliation keeps going up and up
 - b. The embarrassment factor gets more and more acute
 - c. Here it takes on a legal side as well as a practical side
 - i) Legally, in the Law of Moses, no one could be condemned without two or three witnesses... therefore, this step is preparation for the final trial before the church
 - ii) Christ is directly quoting Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 19:15 One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

- iii) Practically, these other two witnesses can help bring wisdom and perspective to the individual
 - d. Remember, the goal is still the repentance of the sinner and his restoration

F. Step #4 (If Needed!!): Tell It to the Church, Still Trying to Win Him

Matthew 18:17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church

1. Again, the next level happens only if the person WILL NOT LISTEN
2. the failure to listen displays a stubbornness and unrepentance that betrays a deeper heart issue
3. TELL IT TO THE CHURCH
 - a. One of only two references Christ made to the church in the Gospels
 - b. Here Christ clearly means the local church of which this sinner is a member

c. Here we see clearly the authority of the congregation... the elders may well lead this process, but it is the church that makes the final decision about their case

4. notice the goal is still persuasion... the church is assembled, hearing the case, and still seeks to win the sinner over to repentance... we know this because the final step comes only if he will not listen to the church

G. Step #5 (If Needed!!): Treat Him as a Pagan or Tax Collector

Matthew 18:17 if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

1. this is the final step of church discipline: expulsion from membership in the church

1 Corinthians 5:4-5 When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, ⁵ hand this man over to Satan

1 Corinthians 5:13 "Expel the wicked man from among you."

2. this is a devastating step... the local church in effect saying to the sinner, "We think you are a non-Christian."

3. since repentance and faith are the essence of true salvation, and since this individual stubbornly refuses repentance, the indication is that they are unregenerate

4. again, notice that the medieval practice of burning heretics is completely rejected here... there is no indication of any further punishment than expulsion from the Body of Christ

5. Again, the Presbyterian model of a court of appeals higher than the local church finds no support in this passage

6. The action is taken by a vote of the congregation

2 Corinthians 2:6 The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him.

7. "TREAT HIM AS YOU WOULD A TAX-COLLECTOR or a PAGAN

a. consider him unregenerate

b. do not associate intimately with him

c. YET still seek his repentance and restoration

d. 2 Corinthians 2 implies that the sinner of 1 Corinthians 5 repented and was restored eventually to the Body of Christ

H. The Whole Time: Prayer, Prayer, Prayer... (More in a Moment)

1. at every step in the journey, those who know about the situation should be in fervent prayer for the individual
2. only God can grant repentance and restore the sinning person

III. The Authority of the Church

A. "Who Appointed You Judge...?"

1. this is what the Jews who were fighting each other said to Moses
2. human pride becomes easily incensed when someone begins to meddle in their sin life
3. they will soon ask questions like this: "What gives you the right to judge me?"
4. Christ establishes the authority of the church to exercise discipline in His name

B. The Authority of the Church to Discipline

Matthew 18:18 "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."

C. Binding and Loosing

1. this is an expression from the rabbinic leadership over Israel
2. it has to do with authority... the right to make authoritative pronouncements about daily life issues: binding = a restriction in a matter; loosing = liberty in a matter
3. the actual authority of the church is DELEGATED from heaven
 - a. "No one can forgive sins but God alone"
 - b. true... God alone has that right
 - c. but He has given the church the right and responsibility to DECLARE His pronouncement on earth
 - d. the Greek grammar is more like this

“Truly truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be, having already been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth will be, having already been loosed in heaven.”

The church’s authority is to declare forgiveness on earth based on repentance and faith... and to declare NO FORGIVENESS on earth when there is NO REPENTANCE or FAITH

John 20:23 If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

- e. So the church has the right to make this pronouncement based on the word of God

IV. The Effectual Prayer of the Church

This process can be quite difficult... entrenched sin is very difficult to root out, and people’s pride opposes every step of the way

A. Only God Can Transform the Heart

- 1. God alone can change a sinner’s heart
- 2. God alone has the power of repentance to give as a gift

2 Timothy 2:25-26 Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

B. Prevailing Prayer is Essential

- 1. It is essential that people going to a sinning brother or sister do so bathing that encounter in prayer
- 2. So Jesus speaks of prayer quite powerfully here

Matthew 18:19-20 “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. ²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

C. “Two or Three”: Both in Confrontation and in Prayer

- 1. this passage IS about prayer... but it isn’t ONLY about prayer
- 2. first, if the two or three who are going to confront a sinning brother or sister would first humble themselves and bow in prayer, God will hear from heaven and He will move out in grace

3. first, such an action will be instrumental in guaranteeing that the persons go with the right spirit
 - a. Jesus said you should take the plank out of your eye... get rid of the arrogance, the self-righteousness, and go in broken-hearted humility
 - b. Paul said you who are spiritual should restore a sinning brother GENTLY with HUMILITY watching yourselves so that you also aren't tempted into sin
 - c. This prayer time is effective in making sure the two or three that go do so in love, in humility, in gentleness, and with the Scripture

D. A Promise of Effectiveness in Prayer

1. Jesus is promising that God will hear these kinds of prayers
2. As a matter of fact, we would be so bold as to say that everyone who is restored is restored to repentance and purity IN ANSWER TO PRAYER

E. A Claim of Authority

1. Jesus says "Where two or three are gathered, there am I in their midst..."
2. Jesus is also claiming that the two or three that go do so with His authority... they are to be taken absolutely seriously

Next week:

1 Corinthians 5, the motives and purposes of church discipline, and more details about specifics

V. Application

A. Hunger and Thirst for Holiness

1. fill your minds with the purity of God as revealed in Scripture
2. meditate often on the holiness of God... how God is light and in Him there is no darkness
3. allow God to search your own heart and life
4. think often of holiness as the happiest state of existence in which any person can live
5. think as often that sin is therefore the most wicked enemy of our souls, since it deprives us of the happiness of a holy walk with God

B. Think of Love Differently

1. retrain your mind to think of love as more courageous, more willing to confront, more willing to help with the real struggle of sin
2. banish thoughts of this Matthew 18 process as invasive, arrogant, intrusive or unloving
3. desire to be in a church in which these things are practiced as Christ intended

C. yearn for this, pray that God would develop it here at FBC

1. pray for the elders to be bold and loving in leading the church in this striving after holiness
2. pray for proper balance between doing no discipline at all, and becoming some legalistic society in which every little flaw is exposed with sternness and harsh discipline

D. Be Humble if You are Confronted...

1. Be willing to have the cream cheese removed from your face!!
2. Be genuinely thankful if someone has the love to confront you

E. If You Go, Go for the Right Reasons and in the Right Way

1. seek to "win your brother over"... seek to bring him sweetly to repentance... you're trying to take a splinter out of his life... go to help him
2. go as I've said... with deep humility, recognizing that you do the very same things some times, and that you are capable of the same sins
3. go with gentleness... use gentle words, speak in gentle tones
4. go saturated in prayer