

**Matthew 18:15-20**  
**Searching for the straying sheep**

**Handle the hurt of sin in godly ways**

The **baddies** have been beaten. The **heroes** have been rewarded. Life starts to settle down again. The music starts to swell. The **sun** starts to set over the sea. And the message - perhaps even written on the screen - is that

**“They all lived happily ever after”**

Only please don't use that as the finishing line to your testimony - by which I mean “a description of how you became a Christian”. It is absolutely *not* the case that all the excitement and fun come during the days when you are resisting the call of God, out in “the world”, but that when you finally receive Jesus as your Saviour and your Lord, everything calms down and becomes just nice forever afterwards.

The reality is that, in some ways, that's when your troubles *start*. There are new privileges and new expectations, and it's not something that your previous life will have prepared you for in the slightest.

Just think how it is with **marriage**. At least the traditional sort, that sadly does seem to be rather rare nowadays, when the couple *haven't* lived together for months or years beforehand. In *that* scenario, the wedding day isn't the end of the story, but the beginning of a whole new one.

Only it is *not* going to be **plain sailing** all the way home. There are going to be times when those two different people find it difficult to become *one* new person together. Even with the best will in the world, and an enormous infusion of the grace of God, there will be times of hurt and disagreement. And a new couple would do well to recognise that - and possibly consider some plans to handle the eventuality - *before* they **tie the knot**.

And this, to some extent, is what Jesus is giving us in these verses we've just read. There are times when Christian believers will not see eye to eye. There are times when they will hurt or offend one another. The Christian life is not at all a **rose garden**, with everything “sweetness and light”. So what do you do, when things go wrong between believers?

This passage is one of the key ones in the NT giving us answers to this key question.  
**Jesus teaches gracious assertiveness as a response to the affronts of sin**

You might have thought, though, that I had got my wires crossed with the **title** I've given today's sermon. That thing about the **lost sheep** ... wasn't that last week?

And yes, it's entirely fair to say that. That is precisely what the preceding passage was about.

***What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?***

(Matthew 18:12)

We didn't go into the details of that little word picture last week, but did you notice the “if” in the middle of it?

***“And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the***

***ninety-nine that never went astray.”***

(Matthew 18:13)

That's there because of the sad reality that, in that situation, not every search would be successful. The wandering sheep might have wandered too successfully, and just not be locatable. Or it might have fallen off a cliff. So it's an *“and if”*. And there is quite a few if's in the section of teaching that Matthew records here directly afterwards, too.

*If they don't live happily ever after ... what should they do?*

*If things at church aren't as great as you would like ... what should you do?*

***“If your brother sins against you, ...”***

(Matthew 18:15)

... what should you do?

You see, the temptation will probably be at times to just walk away. There must be so many people around who *used* to be connected with some church or other, but aren't, any more, because of precisely this kind of problem. And the main problem is not the original sin that was committed - or maybe was *perceived* as having been committed - but the refusal to handle things the way that *Jesus* says they should be.

Sins should be *forgiven*, you see. It is very much the natural flow that you'll see in this chapter, as the very next section starts with Peter asking Jesus the question ...

***“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?”***

(Matthew 18:21)

The huge danger in running away because you have been affronted by something is that it means that forgiveness is made impossible. The circuit-breaker is removed, and the ill-feelings, all that now self-righteous victimhood, just festers and congeals into a frighteningly cold heart.

Folks, I don't know if you have ever been tempted by something that has happened here, or in some other church, to just leave, and slam the door behind you and *never come back* ... well, this passage is for you.

And if you haven't, well, this passage is for you too, because it might just happen to you in the future. Any one of us might be on *either* end of the kind of thing Jesus is talking about here, as - we at least feel - the victim, or as - we might have to admit - the sinner.

Yes, it could happen here. Perhaps we should be surprised if it doesn't. The number of cases that get escalated to Jesus' final level, “telling it to the church”, should be relatively few, if what we read here works as it is supposed to. But it could be that if we find ourselves going home - or nowadays just logging off, I suppose - and unhappy about something that has been said or done, then we should be facing the challenge of those opening words here. If you seriously feel that ...

***“If your brother sins against you, ...”***

(Matthew 18:15)

applies ... then you (or someone at home with you) need to read on, and do what Jesus says you're to do about this. We might prefer to rant and rage. We might prefer to feel and hold onto a grievance. But remember where we started this chapter, that question about

***At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"***

(Matthew 18:1)

And Jesus puts a little kid in front of the disciples, and answers ....

***"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."***

(Matthew 18:4)

And we have to face the possibility that those self-righteous feelings of *I have been wronged* are actually pride, concerning which we must humble ourselves. And we are to do that primarily by obeying Jesus' teaching about what to do in these actually quite routine circumstances.

I want to give you two general principles for the whole of this section, first of all, followed by some more specific thoughts.

- First: **It's the straying sheep over again**

Go back to the previous section in Matthew's Gospel, and that mini-parable of the Lost Sheep:

***"What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray."***

(Matthew 18:12-13)

I think I see a very close similarity between this and today's passage. One sheep has wandered off. Or one person has wandered off by (possibly - I'll put this in brackets, and we'll come back to this later - *possibly*) committing a sin that introduces some kind of distance into relationships. The person who has wandered off is in danger. Someone needs to go and find them, and bring them back home. And, we would hope, there is rejoicing when that straying someone is restored to fellowship, just like they celebrate the lost sheep being brought home.

And I think there's also an implied link with the previous section when Jesus reminds his disciples about the seriousness of sin:

***"And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire."***

(Matthew 18:8)

So don't think that if the matter we're talking about is *sin* ...

***"If your brother sins against you, ..."***

(Matthew 18:15)

... then don't think that this is trivial. It is why Jesus says something *has* to be done about it. Sin needs drastic action. And in this individualistic society in which we live nowadays, daring to raise the matter of sin between even two *believers* is seen as pretty drastic.

So, remember: **It is the straying sheep over again**

- But notice some guiding words for this whole section: **listen and gain**

You imagine **confrontation** and you will normally think about something that is loud and shouty. Tempers rise, and so do temperature and volume. But Jesus repeatedly uses the word “listen” or “hear”:

***“If he listens to you, ... But if he does not listen, ... If he refuses to listen to them, ... And if he refuses to listen even to the church, ...”***

(Matthew 18:15-17)

Folks, if something like this happens, it is so tempting to insist on being heard, of *our* side of things being made public. Consciously or not, we will all put our own spin on things, which will show us in a better light. But Jesus says we are to put the focus on the other side, *listening*.

And the reason for that, I would guess, is the other key word. Remember there is a wandering sheep to be sought and found and reclaimed. So it is not all about giving you or me a chance to sound off our maybe (just maybe) righteous anger. It is about *gaining* that brother (or sister) who has sinned.

***“If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”***

(Matthew 18:15)

That’s a market-place, profit-and-loss word. Or actually, it’s the *profit* word. If that person listens - and repents, we must take it, the way it’s said - *you both win*. They might even admit their sin before we have our full rant ... which we then do not need to state for the record ... but we *win*. We win not the argument, but something far better: that brother or sister. And - not trivially - we also win by not having to fight against the sin that so easily entangles and mixes in with what we like to call “righteous anger”, but which mostly isn’t.

So, before we move onto some smaller specifics here, get those main principles firmly in your minds.

***It’s the straying sheep over again!***

***Listen!***

***Gain! (Win!)***

So, let’s go back to our starting question, from the passage - but tacking on the end of the previous section. Remember the straying sheep. And now this.

***“So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”***

(Matthew 18:14)

See that context. The Father’s desire that his people do not perish. So, here, immediately following, is a situation in which perishing is possible. Sin is involved, and sin is serious. So action, serious action, is needed.

***“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”***

(Matthew 18:15)

But hold on a moment. Is this Jesus saying that *everything* we might consider a sin

warrants this kind of action? You could construe it that way, but I can't see it really makes sense to mandate this as the only possible response to any and every minor slight. My suspicion is that there is another option relating to what we might call "lower-level" offence:

***Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.***

(1 Peter 4:8)

There, I think, is another option. And it's from the pen of Peter, who was involved in the original conversation we're looking at. That might be significant.

The alternative is to simply "cover" the sin. To choose to forgive freely. Perhaps because you know it's really something pretty minor. Perhaps because you understand that the other person was under some particular stress at the time. Or perhaps some other reason.

But my suggestion would be this. If that sin doesn't stay "covered" ... if it keeps on coming back to your mind over and over, then you have a further choice. You let it congeal into a grudge, and you know what I have often said about grudges: you do not hold grudges ... over time, *they* hold *you*. You either settle for that - which I think is most likely a sin in itself - or you start on the procedure Jesus has laid out here.

No, it's not easy or comfortable, but it's a question of obedience to Jesus, if you are claiming to be a disciple of his. Don't talk about "keeping short accounts with God", if you're happy to keep *long* accounts with your brothers and sisters.

So, we "cover" it (we'll return to this idea next week in more detail). Or - and maybe this is why we fight shy of obeying this command from Jesus, if we can't - we have to *humble* ourselves by taking the initiative, and going to that other person. We probably feel it is *they* who should be approaching *us*, *them* owning up, *them* taking the initiative, *them* coming all meekly ... maybe even grovelling. It is not *my* job to go out of *my* way to chase *them*.

But ... this is Jesus' straying sheep that we are being commissioned to search out and bring back home.

And one other little perhaps quibble before we get into this. In the verse as we have it in the ESV, as I've already shown you a few times already ...

***"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."***

(Matthew 18:15)

The "against you" is a bit questionable. The commentaries I've read generally come down to concluding that those two words weren't in Matthew's original writing. But it's a much closer call than some of the other uncertainties about the original texts that we've met in recent weeks.

But Peter certainly carries on in v21 as if this is how it came over to *him*, on that original occasion.

***"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?"***

(Matthew 18:21)

So, if Matthew didn't originally intend this "against me" to be there, and it's just "if

your brother sins”, we need to mentally insert a warning to guard against self-appointed sin-hunters, people who will possibly even take rather too much glee in going around and calling all and sundry to account for whatever kind of misdemeanours they are particularly sensitive to. We’re not to hide behind Jesus’ words to excuse our own little crusades self-righteously riding our own hobby-horses.

But if we include this “against me” in our thinking, it doesn’t mean that we must remain silent and, in effect, collude with a sinning brother simply because their sin wasn’t directed against *us*.

What if you see them entering a brothel? Doesn’t that need to be challenged? What if you see them shop-lifting, or learn that they have become an alcoholic, or claiming State benefits to which they’re clearly not entitled? If sin is damaging to the person committing it, as well, how is it an expression of love to just “pass by on the other side”, claiming that Jesus didn’t give you specific authority to say a word *unless it’s directed against you personally*?

I’d also like to say that I don’t think what Jesus says here is

- **(not) precisely prescriptive.**

There is escalation here, as we read through the verses:

***“If your brother sins against you,  
go and tell him his fault ...  
But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, ...  
If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.  
And if he refuses to listen even to the church, ...***

(Matthew 18:15-17)

That kind of eventual, long-term pressure is needed. The sinning brother cannot be allowed to stall the process indefinitely. But we do not have the right to push the process too quickly because we might still feel mightily aggrieved. We’re not given a precise time-scale here. How long, or how many visits, they are given before it has to be accepted that they are not listening, and the next level kicks in ... that’s a decision that needs grace and wisdom.

And actually, I think I’d also say that the whole process is

- ***designed to take time.***

It *can’t* be just whisked through in a week. Sometimes it is just the plain human weakness of needing to take time to cool down. If you’ve had a blazing row, the adrenalin will still be pumping around your body, and you just *can’t* suddenly be calm and courteous.

I’m not saying that Jenny and I row often or seriously, but I can remember times when I’ve said to her that I know I’m in the wrong, but I can’t yet express that in the way that I should. I just need a bit more time until that whatever-it-is has drained from my system. At least once that has been the next morning.

It’s realising our difficulties and limitations when it comes to that seriously taxing requirement to *humble ourselves*. It still doesn’t come easily, quickly or automatically.

Folks, do we really

- **trust that the Holy Spirit**

is able to work to change people's hearts? To grant insight, to produce humility in a person ... that we would not have thought them naturally capable of showing? We had a few rough months earlier on in my time here. But I think we did see God answering prayers for just that kind of thing, back then, responses that surprised us all.

And yet Jesus is amazingly practical here too. *Of course* we must recognise the part of the Holy Spirit in bringing change and growth and grace among the people of God. But people like you and me also have a part to play in this process, too. This thing about

- **Witnesses**

cuts both ways.

***“But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”***

(Matthew 18:16)

You know, having to state your grievance in the presence of one or two other believers might just possibly help you to realise that you are making a **mountain out of a molehill**. Yes, you're angry at that person - even angry enough to go and speak to them - but if you have to let other people see what it is you're raging about, you know it's well over the top. So there we are again, back to that thought of

***“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”***

(Matthew 18:4)

You know, underneath it all, that you are over-reacting, and you just have to humble yourself, and let it *drop*. Let the grace of God cover that affront. And *help me, Lord, to just stop whining like a little baby. Just let me be humble like a little child instead!*

And it's also possible that those witnesses will not be convinced by your understanding of things. They might push back. They might offer an alternative explanation that you hadn't considered - and of which you would otherwise have remained in not blissful, but self-righteous ignorance ... if you hadn't done this the way Jesus says to.

So the involvement of these “one or two others” may help *either* party to see sense, and move towards that godly step of humbling yourself, confessing your mistake or your sin. It could be that *you* are the once changed: you had only *perceived* sin, that you had taken unnecessary offence. Or it could be that *they* will now realise that they had *given* offence that was unintended ... or accept that they need to repent, retract, apologise ... whatever.

But whichever happens, if there is still no resolution, those solid people who were present during that further attempt to resolve things will be able to give a more objective account of what is going on. It will not be a question of simply one person's word against another's.

***“... that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”***

(Matthew 18:16)

It's a useful general point to make here, though, as well. Remember that there are *always* at least two sides to any story. That's why that general point about listening, at all

stages through this procedure, is so important. And ... are you humble enough to modify your point of view, based on what you hear? Are you prepared to admit - even admit *publicly* - that you didn't get it exactly 100% right, straight off? And ... are you prepared to let someone you are disagreeing with *graciously* change their mind, reconsider their position, retract their statement, offer apology, ask for forgiveness?

- **The individual and the church**

A quickie here before we start to wrap it up. Notice how Jesus does not envisage his disciples being disengaged in his church. The word "church" here doesn't mean entirely what we would call "church" nowadays, but it at least means a meeting together of people. It was the standard word in usage at that time for an *assembly*.

But although that *assembly* may ultimately need to become involved, as a sad final step, you can't just conveniently or routinely dump this sort of thing onto "the church" or its leaders or officers.

Many years ago, one of the older ladies at our previous church came up to speak to me. One of the young mums was feeding her new baby ... *nursing*, I mean ... at church. In public! Couldn't she at least sit at the back if she really has to do it? There was quite a big space at "the back", with a seat against the most distant wall, so it really was *way* back.

But do you see the mistake here? "Couldn't she ...?" actually meant *Peter, you have to tell her to do this*. This older lady wasn't prepared to speak to the young mum directly. I know that I didn't exile the young mum to the distant end of the church. And I think that, quite possibly, because I refused to intervene, the older lady just had to work out whether it was a big enough issue for *her* to pursue *herself*. I think she just let it drop.

So don't think that if so-and-so has done such-and-such to you, you just come and report it to me, and I then have to sort it on your behalf. There are a few exceptions to that rule, such as if we're talking about actual safeguarding concerns - in which case it's actually Jenny who is your official first port of call, if she's available.

But, more routinely, if it's a niggle or a disagreement, Jesus says it's down to *you*. Don't try to hide behind the church's officers or employees. Who goes? *You* do.

***"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone."***

(Matthew 18:15)

And go with the intention of promoting healing, rather than venting outrage, so that you may *both* win:

***"If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."***

(Matthew 18:15)

Hatred must *never* come into this. Even that ultimate sanction that the church may be called upon to deliver is not an expression of hatred. It is a recognition, not that the person in question has sinned, but that they have refused to acknowledge and repent of that sin. Folks, this is what disciples of Jesus *do*. This is what *we* do. We still sin. And we then admit the sin, and repent of that sin, even multiple times - we'll come to that next week.

So the church, however you understand the word here, is not just an assembly, but an assembly that seeks to be mutually forgiving, as we all bump against each other, niggle each other, and sometimes downright seriously offend each other.



We've got no right to leave because we have been offended. It's what you should expect, and it's what you sign up to as members. Only we also sign up to handling those disagreements and hurts the way Jesus says we should. You don't *depart from* the church; you *go to* that person whom you reckon offended you, and you seek reconciliation and forgiveness and restoration.

And if, after all this process has been carefully gone through, your complaint has been publicly recognised, and that other person will not concede their fault, then the congregation sadly has to recognise that they are no longer to be regarded as a believer.

Because believers repent. The children of the Kingdom humble themselves like little children. They confess their sin and find forgiveness. That's the way *into* the Kingdom, and *in* the Kingdom. And if someone refuses to walk according to those rules of the Kingdom, the church has to publicly withdraw its recognition of that person as a credible disciple of Jesus Christ.

***“And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”***

(Matthew 18:17)

Not someone to be despised, but just recognised now as an outsider ... to be sought and won for the Gospel just as you would hopefully do for any other Gentile, tax collector, person outside the Kingdom needing a Saviour.

And in this, Jesus says, heaven and earth will be aligned.

- **The prayer and the presence**

***“Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”***

(Matthew 18:18)

Jesus had said very much the same to Peter a while back (16:19), but it's here now spoken more broadly. Not that heaven has to fall into line with what we down here decide, but - the more precise translation is that this *shall have been* bound or loosed in heaven. It is as if we will discover that our decision is the one that heaven has already made ... goodness knows how! Or ... does that mean we have to presume that the Holy Spirit will guide us when we meet together, honestly seeking to do God's will?

So, in this context, does that then mean that when we have arrived, in that frame of mind, at some kind of consensus ... that if the Holy Spirit has guided towards that consensus, we should especially hope that when that consensus is converted into prayer, we should expect to see *such* a prayer answered?

***“Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.”***

(Matthew 18:19)

And that sounds right, because of what Jesus concludes this little section with. Why will the Father answer that kind of prayer? Because Jesus is present amongst his people, and it's therefore pretty much as if he will sign his name to that prayer too. Identifying with his people, and with the humble, godly desires of their hearts.

***For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”***

(Matthew 18:20)

Folks, I have probably hurt or annoyed or got up the noses of you in some way or other over the last 16 years. I haven't had many people come up to me to "tell him his fault". I hope that is because the grace of God is at work in us, and the faults have been small, and you have been willing to cover them with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But I want to urge you to regard this as a very practical passage, telling us how we must **handle the hurt of sin in godly ways**. Walking humbly together.

***And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.***

(Ephesians 4:30-32)