

Matthew 16:15-20

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[0 : 00] Do open your Bible to Matthew chapter 16, which is on page 823.

! And verses 15 to 20, but the whole chapter in lots of ways. There's no introduction, I've got three points.

And my two points are, we need to love the church as Jesus does. We need to see the church as Jesus does. And number three, we need to treat the church as Jesus does.

So first of all, we need to love the church as Jesus does. Look at verse 15. That's the kind of language it uses. How does it begin? It begins, if your brother.

If we translated if your brother or sister in that way. If your brother, so that church is a family. It is a family of believers, of brothers and sisters, and mothers and fathers, who are brought together in this great assembly.

[1 : 17] In other words, what Jesus is saying is, if you want to live as a Christian, that the business of the Christian life is not isolated individualism. It's not about doing church on your own.

It's not about you being able to listen to a sermon online so you can save a bit of time on Sundays. It's about people. It's about knowing God with others.

It's not about you getting along in your Christian life on your own. It's about a community. And you can see, and I want to try and show you, that this is the big idea of the chapter.

So look at verse 2. Jesus calls him to bring a little child and put him in the middle of them. And he speaks about the presence of God and the community life of the people of God.

He says these people, they belong here. They have relationships within the church. And he illustrates that. He illustrates from this child what it means to be inside the kingdom of God but what it means to be outside the kingdom of God, the church.

[2 : 24] And so he puts this child in the middle of his disciples. And it's one of the number of occasions when Jesus did this in his day. And it well indicates the culture.

And so at that point, in this point of history, children had no status, no rank, no rights. They were to be seen and not heard. Or maybe even not seen and not heard.

They didn't factor in. Children were disposable. Children were even dispensable. You can read horrific accounts in Roman history. And so here is Jesus teaching his name.

That children are not dispensable to Christ's church. Children are part of the fellowship of the people of God.

That's why we love them being in here. Even when there's a little bit of background noise.

Occasionally. Children are part of the fellowship of God. And this little one, he represents, doesn't he?

[3 : 23] Actually, all Christians. In fact, he says, adult believers, grown-ups, so-called men and women are to become like this little child. They're to become like this little child, both in their utter dependence upon the Lord Jesus, and I think what Jesus is teaching here is exactly what Peter is teaching at Pentecost.

That the membership of his church is made up of believers and their children. And the presence of children in the fellowship of the church is to be a constant reminder of what Jesus is doing.

A constant reminder to us, in a sense, that spiritually we should never grow up. We should never grow up beyond that state. We never get beyond the status of a child.

We should all be as unselfconscious and trusting as little children. As absolutely dependent on God and his grace. You see, there is no place in the church for people asserting their rights.

For people pushing others around. Always rubbishing others. For people claiming priority. We are to be humble like little children. Unselfconscious.

[4 : 37] Standing there in the midst of the disciples. And so let the children, as we gather Sunday by Sunday, be a constant reminder of Jesus' words. And this childlike faith is to be a feature of the whole life of the believer.

It's not just you've got to humble yourself in order to get into the Christian life. No. The whole of the Christian life is about humbling yourself before, under the mighty hand of God. And if it's a Samsonite, there is nothing more terrifying than to cause one of these little ones to sin.

There's no doubt, is there, that people will sin. Temptations will come upon everybody, whatever age you are, or whatever stage you're at in your life.

But what Jesus says is, Woe to the one by whom the temptation comes. And you make sure that though people are being tempted and falling into sin, you're not the cause of that. You're not the one who's tripping them out.

You're not the one who is leading them into sinful behaviour, because that is a terrifying thing to do. And then in verses 10 to 14, he says, Don't despise the little children, both physically and spiritually.

[5 : 46] Verse 10, See that you don't despise one of these little ones. Jesus is teaching us to need to follow people. Whatever their age, he illustrates it.

He illustrates it from what the Father does. What does the Father do? Well, when one of these little ones goes astray, one of his believing ones goes astray, the Father leaves everything, and he goes out to look for his lost sheep.

Because he is the shepherd, and he cares for, and he loves his people, his sheep, his church. And Jesus is saying to us, You and I should love the church the way the Father does.

And the way that the Son does. And again, this picks up, doesn't it, a language or a thread that runs right the way through the Bible? That God is the shepherd of his people.

And to Psalm 100, We are the sheep of his pasture. Psalm 23, The Lord is my shepherd. Psalm 40, Tends his flock like a shepherd.

[6 : 53] He gathers the lambs to his heart, and he carries them close. So whether you're a young lamb, or an old sheep, the Lord is the shepherd of Israel. Matthew 2, you see it.

He will shepherd his people Israel. The Lord Jesus says, I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. And all this language is pointing you and I to value Jesus' people.

So I ask you, do you love the church? Do you love Jesus' people? How do I love them? Not by setting myself over them as if I'm superior.

Not by comparing myself to others as if they were kind of my Lord. Or they were the ones that I was meant to be following. I love others not by injuring or abusing or leading them into sin.

Whether that's theological error or morally wrong. I love others not by ignoring them or showing a blind eye to those who've gone astray. But rather, like the good shepherd, I do what he does.

[8 : 01] And so I have to love the church and I have to give myself for it. And that takes commitment, doesn't it? And that takes effort. And that takes making it a priority.

Secondly, I need to see the church the way that Jesus sees the church. Can we come again to verse 15? If your brother sins against you.

So if your brother or sister and that is somebody who goes to the same church family as you do, if they sin against you, Jesus is presuming, isn't he, that in his church it will be marked this side of heaven, this side of glory by sin and by weakness.

And so Jesus does not expect the perfect church to those who do. Martin Luther had a saying, he said, the face of the church is the face of a sinner. The Western Confession of Faith and our Confession of Faith says the purest of churches, the best of churches under heaven are subject to both mixture and error.

And some are so degenerated to become as no churches of Christ but synagogues of Satan.

Churches are not perfect. And again, that's been a theme in Matthew's Gospel. There are weeds as well as wheat.

[9 : 24] There are goats as well as sheep. There are some in the church who are wolves in sheep's clothing. The church is not perfect. And some of the problems that we have with churches and some of the problems we have with other Christians is that we are practical perfectionists.

And sometimes it's just that we've not looked in the mirror and see how imperfect we are. We see the imperfections of everyone else, don't we? And so you go to Revelation and the last book of the Bible, chapter 2 and chapter 3 and we are given an overview of the church.

A perfect picture of the church. It's a complete picture of the church. It's a seven-fold picture. It's a picture of completeness of what Jesus sees in his church.

And there it is. And you read those seven churches and you find out that the five of the seven churches were seriously screwed up. And two of the seven are going right down the road where Jesus said I'm tempted just to extinguish the light of you, the stuff you want.

Altogether, you've got so bad. And we need to see the church the way that Jesus does a sinful congregation. There is coming a day, and it's going to be a wonderful day when the Lord Jesus Christ comes again and he will present his church without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.

[10:51] But today, as I look around, there are a fair few wrinkles out there and a fair few spots. And IPC is an ace and imperfect church.

And so is every true church. And so the first thing that strikes you in verse 15 is if your brother sins. He's not suggesting that that is impossible.

He's suggesting that this will happen. It will happen. There's two ways of reading this verse.

Whether he's speaking generally, whether he's saying if your brother sins in his tenth period, or if your brother sins in his tenth period, it means you.

And we need to know what's going to happen. So it's illustrated in this chapter. Again, look at verse 1. The chapter has got two questions. And this illustration of a kind of simple message.

There's a verse 1. The disciples ask, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And that is not a statement about Christology. That is not a statement where they're expecting Jesus to speak about himself.

[11:59] They are expecting him to say, well, of course, you are John or you are Jesus. And the disciples, they are the ones that are jockeying for position and place and prestige.

In other words, that's what church is like. Sinful people, fallen people. And these are the apostles. Top guys.

And that's the way they were in that stage of their lives. And so often in the church, you'll find people that have not been able to make much of an impression in their day-to-day vocation, in their work, but in church, they throw their weight about.

And they've got power in their hands and it goes to their heads and they become insufferable. And they become overbearing. Or there are other people and they're influential in their day-jobs and they walk in and they think they can be influential in the church as well.

But that's not the way it's meant to be, is it? In other words, it doesn't really matter if you're doing well or not doing so well in your day-job. That's not what makes for status or position. position in the church.

[13:06] Jesus is at pains to point that out, doesn't he? That in his kingdom, the usual values of the world don't apply in the church. And so nobody acts as if they own the place.

We're all to be humble children. Look at the second question, verse 21. Peter has a question, he comes up and he says to him, Lord, how often should my brother sin against me and I forgive him as many as seven times?

And I think Peter is feeling pretty good about himself in verse 21. He's feeling pretty spiritual. And the religious teachers of the day, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, lay in rules about how often you were to forgive.

And they talk that if somebody sinned against you, just to be gracious and merciful, you could forgive them after three times. Three strikes and you're out. Which is Peter. And Peter says what the Pharisees say three times, but I guess, Jesus, you like the number seven, it's a perfect number, a complete number.

But Peter isn't getting it, is he? Because he doesn't understand the grace of the Lord Jesus yet. There are different values. No, Jesus says, you keep going. Can you see verse 22? I do not say to you seven times, but 77 times.

[14:23] Seven times seven. To infinity and beyond you forgive. There's no end to forgiveness that you want to show one another. Within the body of Christ. And so, within the body of Christ, within the church, be sure of this.

Your brother or your sister will sin against you. Let me say what that sinning against you is.

It is minor irritation. Or annoying behaviour. Or petty complaints. sinning against you is not things that you just don't like.

I've gone to write a list at this point. Of the various things that I think folk get upset about. That aren't sinful and then I realised I'd probably get fired for it. He's not thinking about things that we elevate to really, really important, but the Bible doesn't elevate them.

The Bible tells you what sin is, doesn't it? We don't make up what sins are. And lots and lots of things that people get upset about in church are like, are not sinful.

[15:35] But note the realism of Jesus. Can you see it? He says your brother will sin against you. That is, he'll actually do something, whether that is he'll teach you something wrong, or teach you a wrong practice, or he'll do something to injure you in some way, or despise you in some way.

Love the church as Jesus does. See the church as Jesus does, and thirdly, treat the church as Jesus does. What does God do when his followers go astray?

Look at the context. The whole chapter hangs together. The previous parable is so important. What does God do? He goes out looking for his children. There's a really deliberate connection between each of the stories in this chapter.

And how does God go out looking for lost sheep? The Father goes out looking for them. Your Father in heaven, he doesn't will that any of these little ones should perish.

If your brother sins against you, see the connection? How does the Father go looking for the sinning one? How does the Father find lost sheep? When in this context, it is the family.

[16:51] Jesus uses the power of the lost sheep in two different ways. I think he uses it differently in Luke 15 than he does in Matthew 18. In Luke 15, it's about reaching the outsider.

But here, it is most definitely about reaching the insider. Note the use of little ones in verse 10. How does he find the little one that is lost?

how does God go after his wayward children? Can you see it? Verse 15, you go.

You go, sir. That's a very, very important thing to understand. That God uses us as his people to reach out to offenders.

God exercises the rule of the church and the care of his church through his people. So the people he has sent into your life, you are responsible for.

[18:01] People you know you are responsible for in the body of Christ. And so in Galatians, it says if someone is caught in a sin, you are spiritual should restore him gently. In 5, if one of you should wander from the truth, someone should bring him back from remember this, whoever should turn a sinner from the errors of his ways will save him from death and cover up a multitude of sins.

So you go, you. How am I to go? I'm not going to go heresy hunting. I'm not going to go prying into people's lives.

I'm not going to setting them up for a fall. people. But I am to deal with what comes up in my relationships with them. And if my brother sins against me, I am to go.

I am not to sit down and sulk. I am not to look the other way. I'm not to become passive-aggressive. I'm not to take four months off church.

Or four weeks. I'm not to go home and complain. I'm not to speak to my friends and give off about it. I'm not to bury my head in sand. I'm not to say someone should be doing something about this.

[19:18] Where are the elders in this place? No, if your brother sins against you, you go and tell them. You don't send them a letter.

You don't send them an email. You don't send them a text. You go to them, person to person. You are to go in a childlike, humble, believing, Christian way.

And you have to go with what? You have to go with the heart of God looking for the restoration of the lost. Restoring them. And you have to go to them willing to forgive to infinity.

A forgiving heart. That's how you're wanting to go. Taking the initiative to tell him or her a fault and remembering that you are a sinner and you tell them very gently your fault.

That by the way is fulfilling, isn't it? Leviticus 17 verse 19. That verse says, do not hate your brother in your heart. Repeat your brother frankly so that you will not share in his guilt.

[20:32] how do I hate my brother or sister? I hate my brother or sister if I see him or her in sin and I do nothing. I hate my brother or sister if I don't take responsibility for them.

Well I can help them by speaking to them. So I go to them one to one in one in a private conversation and I allow real dialogue. In terms of normal life, private sin is dealt with privately between people.

And what is the goal? The goal is there in verse 15, is that he listens to you. If he listens to you, you gave your brother, you want him to hear. And that may well mean you've got to listen as well.

But listening is what you want. So that you can restore him or her again. And supposing you go gently and you get round to the subject.

And supposing they don't listen. Well the next step kicks in. You take two or three witnesses. And so witnesses are taken at one level to avoid false accusations and frivolous allegations.

[21 : 50] And there are two or three because the law of Moses tells us that that's what makes a thing official or formal. And the point of two or three witnesses is in verse 16 is that every charge may be established literally made to stand.

And so you go with your witnesses unless suppose they refuse to be reconciled. When you're taken to the church, particularly the elders, the judges of the congregation were appointed to act as judge in these matters.

Peter is speaking to the disciples and he says if they don't listen to the church, we'll treat them like a gentile or a tax collector. Here's the ultimate sacrifice, which is not to neek at them, not to destroy their reputation publicly, but it is to treat them as their behavior, not as a brother or sister.

It is to exclude them from communion and if there's still no repentance, it is to say we have to treat you as somebody who is not following the Lord Jesus. We have to treat you like you're acting.

You're treating them as their behavior. It's the ultimate sanction of the church. And some of you hear this and you think, good grief, this is terrifying. What on earth is going on?

[23 : 11] My faith is my business. Isn't it all about Jesus and me? What has the church got to do with me and my Christian behavior? And the answer, of course, is the church has got everything to do with it.

Because you are brought into the church and you are part of it and you are one of the people of God. And you are a man, just like that child is among the disciples, you belong there.

And it's because Jesus has given authority to the church. Notice the language in verse 18. 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.

The binding and the loosing, we've seen it before, it was given to Peter, wasn't it, chapter 16. And Peter was given the authority to say who was in and wasn't in the church. And you see him exercising that responsibility on the day of Pentecost when he gets up and he preaches the gospel. And he said, Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation, and so if you believe in him you will be saved, and if you don't believe in him you will be excreted and damned. And he sets out who is in and who isn't.

[24 : 20] And the promise he says is for you and your children and for all who are far off. And so here Jesus repeats it to the apostles. Whatever you bind on earth will be found in heaven.

And later on in John's gospel he repeats it again. He says you have the authority to forgive sins. What is this teaching us? It's teaching you and I that the church is the earthly instrument for Christ's heavenly rule.

That Christ has appointed his church on earth, especially the officers of his church, to be the shepherds of his people. To administer his rule in the hearts of his people.

And believers when they join the church they take vows together to submit to his authority. The authority of the church. And to those who have been committed to exercise authority within it, the church has the authority to bind and to loose.

So whenever we preach the gospel, whenever we say believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, we are echoing Jesus' words. We are re-echoing them. Re-speaking them. And whenever the church is sitting judicially and it has to deal with a case of discipline, it is acting on Jesus' behalf.

[25 : 41] And if you are a humble, believing Christian, like this little child of Matthew 18, you will submit to your brothers and sisters. The promise of Sarah in verses 19 and 20 is that 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.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them. It's not a general principle. We love to quote that in general, don't we?

The Bible is a lot of general promises, but this isn't one, it's not actually about prayer at all. The phrase of agreeing is actually a legal term. It's in the context of if you agree on a judicial matter, any matter of this importance, if you agree as the church of God like this, you can be sure that you're agreeing with my Father who is in heaven.

Whenever you gather like this as a church to deal with these kind of difficulties, whenever you're together in this way, seeking the unity of the church, and trying to restore a brother or sister, be sure of this from the end of the age, that whenever you gather in my name, there I'll be.

Let me sum up, and then I'm going to sum up again. We all sin as people of God. And we must know that our sin is going to impact people's lives to a greater or less a degree.

[27 : 12] And so you and I must keep short accounts to people. We must remember how our actions and our choices and our words impact other people. They do. And ask yourself the question, will my actions, will my words, will I air what I think of that person, or the leadership of the church, what effect will that have on the men and the women, and particularly the boys and girls that are hearing it in the family of God, because we are all responsible for one another.

We prepare to serve the church in this way. There's nothing here about saving yourself, is there? It is all about being like your father who is in heaven, and like the Lord Jesus who goes out looking for lost ones so that they may be restored.

And that is the goal in all of this, that we would live happily together in the fellowship of God's church. You might have been a Christian a long time, you might have been in church here for a long time.

Some of us have been in church leadership for a long time. And I think you will be aware, if you have been in leadership for any length of time, that this instruction of the Lord Jesus is more complicated than at first it appears.

And I want to finish here. What sins is the Lord talking about? What sins are we to confront our brother and sister about? After all, you and I are sinning all the time.

[28 : 48] We sin by things we do, don't we? And we sin by things that we shouldn't do. There's a world of sinning in the Christian life. And so in the Christian church, there are times when the New Testament tells us to patiently endure and not to confront.

Paul tells us that there were sins of thought and of life in his churches that he closed his eyes to and he patiently with reflective attention all with them. He was patient.

There was a good bit of his own sinning that as far as we know was never made a point of confronting with believers. When does the sin reach the point that we need to confront it?

And there are judgments that are to be made with the Christian conscience. And then the question comes this, are all situations meant to be handled like this? if you are to read accounts of church discipline and church courts or in cases of church discipline as I have to sometimes this is what I found that over and over again the offender uses this line, uses this excuse.

It's almost a mantra. I was with someone this week that said to me they didn't follow Matthew 18. And Matthew 18 is often a technicality and a loophole.

[30 : 19] And many through the years have used, they didn't follow Matthew 18 as a mantra to escape punishment. They get off on a technicality. You didn't use Matthew 18.

And I think we have to admit this, but it's seen that this isn't as straightforward as sometimes it's played out. If you just applied Matthew 18 it would all be okay. It's more complicated than that. But the fact is this, I think by understanding the context of the chapter we see that Jesus is not dealing here with case law.

He's not giving up an ABC setup. He is talking about helping his little ones. He's talking about recovering those of his sheep who've gone astray, like one sheep in the flock of hundreds.

He's not a lawyer here laying down procedures so that everyone gets the same treatment. He's certainly not enlisting you as a disciple to become an informer on your other disciples.

He is a shepherd wanting to make sure that his sheep learn to care for one another, like he cares for them. Sheep go astray, and what is the best way to find them and bring them back to safety?

[31 : 31] That's Jesus' concern here. And the best way is the gentlest way, the least embarrassing way, the way most considerate of another person's feelings, the way that makes it easiest for a Christian who's stumbled to get back on his feet.

And so if your brother or sister sins against you, go. Go and tell them their fault, but do it with the heart of the Father. On the heart of the Son, let's pray.

Amen.