

Rescue
Matthew 18:15-20

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Good morning! For those of you who are relatively new, my name is Justin Morris, and I'm the Youth Pastor here at SVBC, and I'm going to pick up in Matthew where Tom left off last week. Today's passage is hard. It's not confusing, but it's hard to actually live out. And I've been on both sides of this one. It's about dealing with conflict and rescuing another believer from their mistakes.

Conflict is so easy to come across. A simple miscommunication or misunderstanding can cause a lot of trouble. I was thinking about times where someone communicated to me and I misunderstood, and I had to share this story.

When I was just out of high school, I had moved to the big city of Edmonton. I had recently broken up with a long term relationship and was just ready to start finding my own style again. I was kind of thinking about getting some new clothes, a haircut, some new cologne. Like a little make over. So one day I decided to look for a new cologne for myself. Now where I came from we had one small department store and there wasn't really much selection. So I headed off to the Bay. I was standing in front of a big wall of different options and was already overwhelmed by the choices, the waft of potent smell in the perfume department, and I just started to pick them up and smell them. As I was trying to distinguish their scents, I noticed that along the wall there were these little trays of coffee beans. I was pretty curious as to why they were there, and I like to ask questions, so I saw an employee putting something on the shelf so I asked her what the coffee beans were for. She replied that they were for in-between smelling colognes, and she said it helps clear you so you can smell each new scent. – **now-** this was the time when the fad in our small town was when those chocolate covered coffee beans were all the rage. We would eat them by the handfuls. So here I am, and she says they are for in between smells, and I think that's a little gross because everyone puts their fingers in there, but I shrugged and thought 'hey I'm in the big city now, let's try this' I reached in, grabbed a bunch and tossed them in my mouth and started to chew. Well I'll tell you, those coffee beans were so stale, my mouth instantly became a coffee grinder. It was like eating dirt; My mouth was full of grinds. It tasted like stale coffee. Had that lady still been standing there, I'm sure the look on my face would have given away my disgust. As I tried to swallow the absurd amount of grinds in my mouth, I picked up another bottle of cologne and tried to smell it. It smelled like stale coffee. I tried a couple of others but just had to leave because everything smelled like coffee. ---- It was years later when I was hanging around with some friends and it came up in conversation. People started talking about chocolate covered coffee beans and it reminded me of those horrible beans in the department store. I told the group how awful

those coffee beans were and that they didn't even help. And with a perplexed look on their face, one of them informed me that I was not supposed to eat the coffee beans, I was supposed to SMELL them between smells. Well the room erupted in laughter. The woman at the department store had told me what they were for, but my interpretation of what she meant led me down the wrong path. A clear misunderstanding.

Communication is not easy. Sometimes just the tone of what you say changes the entire meaning. Like when Andrea comes out and is wearing a new dress, If I say "Nice dress!" that's very different than if I say "Nice dress." One of those will not go over well. Other times we don't mean to hurt people but we do. We don't think they should be offended by what we said; we think they are overreacting, but in reality they were hurt by it and it damages the relationship.

Then there are other times where we just hurt people. We gossip or say something insensitive or rude. We sin against another person. And this happens more the closer we live in proximity with someone. When you think about the church, people in the church hurt each other all the time. That's just what happens when you get a bunch of imperfect people and put them together in a community. The expectations are for perfection, but the reality is that we are a bunch of broken people. It's been said that the church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum of the saints. But in the same way that your family isn't free of conflict (in fact there is probably more conflict in your home than anywhere else you spend your time), there is also going to be a certain amount of conflict in your church family.

Our reaction to conflict is important. It's unfortunate but our natural reaction to conflict is either to fight back or to hide from it. Many people when faced with the decision to confront conflict and sin, they choose to just leave the church. They will justify it a million different ways; heap on excuses why they shouldn't bother dealing with the sin and conflict. And they just leave and go to the next church down the road. When people are confronted about their own sin their reactions are the same: they fight back, or they clam up. Then, more often than not, they will leave the church rather than deal with their sin.

This hurts. When people leave the church it hurts. I was in an elders meeting a couple of months ago, and one of our elders made the comment about how much it hurt him to see people leave the church. And I could see that it truly and genuinely grieved him. He talked about how we are a family and how sad it is that so many Christians see church as a consumerist product rather than a family. People feel like they can just shop around for the best product that suits their needs. If they don't like the music, or the children's programs, or the youth group isn't flashy enough; or someone hurts their feelings, then they just head on over to the next option until of course that church does something they don't like. Some people move churches every 5-6 years. That's not how

family works. That's not what the disciples had in mind when traveled around establishing the early church. It's supposed to be family! Family doesn't operate that way. Family is supposed to stick through the hard times. They communicate. You have more conflict in your homes than you do at work or with friends. It's probably not as dramatic at home because you are dealing with things sooner, but every day there are a bunch of things going on, "You left your coat on the floor, throw your garbage out, do your chores, you forgot to put my stuff back". Also in a home that's not dysfunctional, the reason that parents don't throw their kids out, and people don't just leave, is because they have a heart for the others in their family that motivates them to fix the problem. They also don't want to see them harming themselves or others in the family, so they confront and communicate with each other. **In the church, when we are sinned against, when we see someone sinning, or when we are confronted with our sin, we must get away from running and instead have a heart for each other and communicate.**

So let's go in our Bibles to Matthew chapter 18. This is a fairly well known passage for when your brother sins against you. It's not complicated, but it can be difficult. So let's read Matthew chapter 18, verse 15-20.

¹⁵ "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.¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed^[1] in heaven. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

Now before we look specifically at the three clear steps we are given, I want us to note a couple of things. First, is the heart and love that is in this passage. Notice in verse 15 it says that if your brother listens to you, you have gained your brother. You have won them from evil, you have rescued them. This is not you gaining someone to your point of view or winning an argument, think of it like a rescue. It's this love that is the motivating factor that will encourage you to seek them out and confront them of their sin. You want them to be free from that sin.

The second thing to note here is that some of your Bibles will have a foot note in verse 15 that says that some manuscripts don't have the words "against you". So the passage reads "'If your brother sins, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.'" This could mean that the original intention of this verse was not only if the sin was against you, but if someone was in danger of being lost because of their sin, then this would be

an appropriate way to talk to them about it, to win them back. It would be like if a parent had a son or daughter who decided to live with their girlfriend or boyfriend before they got married. The parent, knowing the dangers of doing that :it hurts the relationship – stats Canada showed that these relationships have a low chance of long term survival, there's the danger of living in sin, turning your back to God, and ultimately being obstinate against being obedient to God's word, – it places you in a very dangerous place with your faith. So a parent in that situation, who loves their child and wants the best for them, needs to confront their child, not to tell them that it's a sin – they already know that – but to try to win them over with a compassionate heart. And we cannot neglect that compassionate heart, because otherwise the church will swing to a place of condemnation declaring everyone's sin and casting people out of relationship (like that will win anyone over).

The nice thing is, no matter if someone has sinned against you, or if they are just dabbling with the dangers of sin, once your heart is right, we are given these three steps: Talk with them about it one on one; if that doesn't win them over, bring one or two others to add credence to the claims, and if they are still refusing to listen, then the church can help by bringing some authority to the accountability. And if they still refuse help, then we are told to treat them like a gentile or tax collector.

The first step is the hardest to initiate. It's not a black and white thing to just talk to someone about their sin. You are constantly wondering how they will react and what they will say, and how you should respond. You tell yourself stories of how it will play out, you make excuses and on and on. If they have sinned against you, there's probably a big chance that you also sinned against them, maybe beforehand which sparked a hurtful comment from them or maybe you sinned against them afterwards by gossiping to others about how they hurt you, or slandering them because of what they did. But you justify it because you "need prayer for wisdom on what to do" or you are seeking some sort of affirmation from others that you have a right to be upset. No put all that away. That sort of drama should be reserved for High School. **If you have an issue with someone – talk to them directly. One on one, with a heart of compassion to try and rescue them.** Most often this is all it takes. The stories about how we thought they would react are most often untrue. There are actually studies that have shown that the stories we tell ourselves about how conversations will go are usually untrue. Dr. Henry Cloud talks about that when he talks about the 'spiral of death' and how what we think about how people will react is wrong over 90% of the time.

Have you ever watched a movie, and the only reason that there is a movie plot in the first place is because of a lack of communication. Someone recently noted that the movie Batman versus Superman was like that. The only reason they are fighting is that one of them doesn't want to talk to the other. There's a communication breakdown, one of them ends up looking really silly, but then they talk and become BFF's. The entire

Batman vs Superman conflict is because they choose to not talk to each other. Sometimes movies like that are just painful to watch. Unfortunately it's also painful to watch that happen in real life. So we have to try and avoid that have to have those difficult conversations. Like I said, it's not complicated, but it is hard. The good news is that if your heart is right, you will probably win your brother or sister over.

But if they refuse to listen, then bring one or two more people in as witnesses. Not as witnesses who actually witnessed the event, but who can lend persuasion. No one is on trial. Hopefully this will help someone realize they have sinned, and sometimes will help the confronting person do so with a cooler head and the right heart.

Of course they may still not listen, and the church needs to be involved. Again, no one is on trial. The church isn't brought in to pronounce a judgement or verdict, but rather, they are brought in as what one commentator called "Pastoral appeal". If a person feels they are not in the wrong, or have justified their sin, or some other thing, there is a last attempt to try and rescue your brother or sister. Together and with unity, the hand of grace and forgiveness can be stretched out in love and with compassion. Hopefully this will win them over to repentance and position them to begin the journey to repair any damage that may have been caused.

Now, unfortunately the lure of sin is strong. And some will continue to live obstinately against the will of God. In this case, when all appeal has gone rejected, we then are told to treat them like a gentile and tax collector. Verse 17 says, ¹⁷ [If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.](#) Some churches will take this to mean they should cast them out of fellowship and have nothing to do with them. I struggle with this. On one hand, we know that Matthew was writing specifically to a Jewish audience. His audience would have known exactly how to treat a gentile or tax collector – keep your distance. They are not allowed to fellowship with you. This understanding is the context that this was written in and would have been their immediate understanding. However, we must also remember that these are Jesus' words. And how did Jesus treat unbelieving tax collectors and gentiles? He loved them and ministered to them – and won many of them over in the process; Matthew, the author, being a key example and fruit of that love. So what does this mean? How do we love them? Do we cast them out of fellowship or keep them in fellowship to love them? Well it's a bit of both. We continue to love them and be in relationship with them. We continue to treat them as Jesus did – as a ministry. They aren't going to be your mentors or accountability partner, but if your heart is for them to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, then they need to be in a healthy environment where they can hear the hard truths preached. If anything, once confronted with their sin, they are going to want to run away and we should make sure they are still within reach so we can pray for them and with them and continue to try to win them from their destructive path. But, on the flip side, these unrepentant individuals are not going

to be allowed to lead a ministry, or be a worship leader, a bible study leader, or an elder. They are not going to enter into membership with an obstinate heart towards God. So the fellowship has boundaries. They aren't cast away and shunned, but they also aren't ignored either, they are held accountable, and consequences are laid out if needed. Instead they should be loved and constantly invited to repent and return to a complete fellowship in the family. There are of course times where more extreme measures need to be taken, and people will need to be removed from fellowship like in first Corinthians, but that is not the focus here.

After these steps we are given this other bit of information in verses 18-20 ¹⁸Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed^[f] in heaven. ¹⁹Again 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. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." Verse 18 is passing authority to the body of believers. This is not the only time this is used in scripture, but it's saying that the churches united conviction against sin carries with it a divine authority, and with it, also the divine authority to forgive. And the last two verses remind us to pray: ¹⁹Again 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. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them". As a church we must pray for those who reject this accountability. We pray that they would come home and seek forgiveness (which we will talk about more in a couple of weeks). And as individuals we pray for them and pray for their souls. But we also pray for ourselves. Conflict is often a two way street. And we are SO good at feeling like we are blameless. "What's their problem, I said it was a 'nice dress'." We really need to invite the Holy Spirit to change our own hearts too. We need to gather together with the people that have offended us and pray. And if they won't join in, then we, together, need to pray. The rescue mission isn't over, the battle on our knees is just beginning. Because we are family. We don't leave because someone forgot about us. We don't leave because we made a mistake. We don't leave because things don't go our way. We work together, pray together, we fight on our knees together, we forgive often, and like it says in proverbs, Love will cover a multitude of sins".

Let's pray together.