

## The King Who Loves his Church

Matthew 18:15-20

The recent film, *The Monuments Men*, tells the true story of small band of unlikely soldiers—artists, museum curators, and historians—who enlist toward the end of World War II with the specific charge to protect, recover, and restore historic buildings and bridges, along with hundreds of thousands of priceless works of art that had been stolen by the Nazis during their campaign.

It's an interesting story for several reasons—first, because until recently it was a relatively unknown story. But it's also interesting in what it says about the remarkable value of art, and *the lengths to which one will go to protect, recover, and restore what is valuable*. Of all the impending threats and atrocities of that war, why even stop to think about art, let alone establish the “Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas,” as President Roosevelt did in 1943?<sup>1</sup> The only explanation is that there is something incredibly valuable about those historic works—the beauty they display, the stories they tell, their cultural significance, the honor they bring to their makers.

If something is really that valuable, then you're going to do what you must to *protect* it. The *Mona Lisa* was moved by the French 6 times during the war to keep it from being stolen.<sup>2</sup> Michelangelo's statue of *David* had a brick wall built around it because it was too big to move.<sup>3</sup> The Monuments Men provided maps for pilots to avoid bombing certain historic buildings.

You're also going to do everything necessary to track down and *recover* lost or stolen pieces. One of the museums that the Nazis used to collect and redistribute their stolen art was the Jeu de Paume in Paris. Little did they know that the curator they allowed to continue working there knew German, and took careful notes about what pieces were being trafficked, where they came from and where they were going. Her notes were responsible for the recovery of 60,000 works of art after the war.<sup>4</sup> One of the greatest art recoveries came from the Altaussee salt mine near Salzburg, where Hitler kept his treasure trove of pieces he planned to display at the Fuhrermuseum he wanted to build in his hometown of Linz. From there the Monuments Men removed “80 truckloads, 1,850 paintings, 1,441 cases of paintings and sculpture, 11 sculptures,

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn H. Nichols, “What the Monuments Men Wrought,” *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 28, 2014. Available at: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304691904579345290918052568>.

<sup>2</sup> “How the French Hid the Louvre's Masterpieces During WWII,” *TwistedSifter.com*, May 16, 2013. Available at: <http://twistedsifter.com/2013/05/louvre-and-mona-lisa-world-war-2/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ilaria Dagnini Brey, “How Monuments Men Saved Italy's Treasures,” *Smithsonian.com*, Jan. 2014. Available at: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-monuments-men-saved-italys-treasures-180948005/>.

<sup>4</sup> Nichols, “What the Monuments Men Wrought.”

30 pieces of furniture and 34 large packages of textiles,”<sup>5</sup> including fifteenth- and sixteenth-century works by Michelangelo, Jan van Eyck, and Johannes Vermeer.

Third, if something is that valuable, you’re going to handle it with care, and *restore* any damage done to it with great patience. For the Monuments Men, there were obviously limited in what materials they could use to protect their recovered paintings and sculptures, but did the best they could, using German sheepskin coats and gas masks as packing materials to transport what they found in the mines.<sup>6</sup>

And finally, if something is truly that valuable, then you’re going to be careful to *distinguish* the real thing from fakes and forgeries. Among the recovered pieces, the favorite piece of looting mastermind Hermann Goering was later discovered to be a forgery.<sup>7</sup>

Preserving the integrity and value of something precious is hard work. But it’s a labor of *love*—which is hardly work for those who value it so deeply. In fact, to neglect such care would be entirely unloving. What kind of curator would sit back and watch someone deface a Rembrandt with a can of spray paint? Or walk off with a Monet under their jacket? Or pass off their child’s finger-painting as a Picasso? Love *moves* them to action—they *must* protect, recover, restore, and distinguish. The artwork is that precious to them.

And yet there is a work of art on earth far more precious than anything the Nazis confiscated during World War II. More precious than *any* painting or sculpture or landmark; in fact, greater than the value of all those works combined. It was designed before the foundation of the world, crafted by God himself, and paid for with Christ’s own blood (1 Pet. 1:18-21; 2:4-5). It is the church. In Ephesians 2 Paul tells us that we, the church, “are [God’s] *workmanship*, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (2:10). It’s through the church that God displays his glory and beauty not only to the nations, but to the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10). The church is Christ’s greatest work of art—not the buildings, but the people. And he *loves* his church.

So it is that he commands his followers in our passage this morning to *protect* his church. To *pursue* and *recover* those who wander from it—the lost pieces, which are precious and valuable in his sight. To *restore* those pieces with gentleness and care. And to *distinguish* between those works of art that are truly part of his collection, and those that are fakes or forgeries. We’re talking about what’s called “church discipline.”

Ironically, and sadly, while people recognize the necessity of such care with human art, when we talk about or exercises that same care in the church, it’s often viewed with scorn. It’s about as popular as public spanking<sup>8</sup>—so much so that many churches have simply given up the practice. That someone would be corrected, or if necessary, excommunicated, is seen as mean-spirited and judgmental, divisive, even abusive. Now the sad reality is that are too many examples of church discipline being handled in ungodly ways; perhaps some of you have been on the receiving end

<sup>5</sup> Jim Morrison, “The True Story of the Monuments Men,” *Smithsonian.com*, Feb. 7, 2014. Available at: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-story-monuments-men-180949569/>.

<sup>6</sup> Morrison, “The True Story of the Monuments Men.”

<sup>7</sup> Henriette Kets de Vries, “Smith’s Monuments (Wo)Men,” *Paper + People Blog*, Feb. 12, 2014. Available at: <http://scma.smith.edu/artmuseum/Collections/Cunningham-Center/Blog-paper-people/Smith-Monuments-Wo-Men>.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas O’Donnell, *Matthew* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 510.

of that kind of mishandling, and still carry in yourselves the scars of spiritual abuse. If that's you, you need to know that that's not what Christ is talking about here. In fact, the kind of strong-arming and bullying that uses church discipline as a means of silencing the opposition is actually part of the sin that Christ is seeking to correct here.

Yet the *possibility* of abuse is not itself an argument for *disuse*—especially when Christ commands this. We cannot forget to whom the church belongs—not us, but Jesus—and that he created it with a specific purpose in mind, to display his glory, to be a light in a dark world. We cannot forget the gospel which stands at the center of the church—that sin really is sinful and not to be winked at, because God really is holy, and that grace really is sufficient to deal with that sin, because Christ's blood on the cross was enough. And we must always keep in mind that it's his *love* for the church—the incredible value he has for it—that moves Jesus to protect and preserve the church's integrity and witness. We're going to see that in our passage this morning—that church discipline flows out of Christ's love for his church and his commitment to protect his flock and pursue those who wander. We're also going to see how he accomplishes this by including us, his people, in that protecting, recovering, and restoring work. He shows us the method, and he reminds us of the basis of why we're able to serve him in this way.

### **The Context of Church Discipline: The Love of Christ for his Children (18:1-14)**

Before we look at the method, I want to remind us of the immediate context of this passage—of what Pastor Bruce walked us through last week in vv. 1-14. We need to understand that if we're going to make proper sense of what Jesus is saying here.

Last week Pastor Bruce talked about how Jesus turns the world's categories and expectations upside down. What the world looked on with scorn—the humble, the weak, the dependent—Christ looks on with favor. In fact, he says in 18:3, “unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” It's those who in their humility and weakness come totally and utterly dependent on Christ that are the greatest in his kingdom. And his care for them is such that he wants to protect them from sin. By “sin” we mean rebellion against God, disobedience to God and his ways. We're rather unimpressed by the idea of sin today; it doesn't seem like that big a deal (because frankly, God doesn't seem like that big a deal to many of us), but Jesus warns us how serious and deadly sin is with a little hyperbole back in vv. 8-9: “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. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.”

Those are harsh and dramatic words, but you get the point. Sin is dangerous; you don't mess around. It's deadly for the one caught in it, and dangerous in the influence it can have on others. So dangerous is the threat, and so passionate is Jesus's love for his children, that he says in v. 6, “whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

Moreover, Christ is so passionate about his children that he is committed to pursuing any who would wander away from him in sin. He says in vv. 12-14: “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. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

It’s because of his love for these “little ones who believe in him,” these dependent children—his people—that he takes sin so seriously, and that he’s not willing to let one of them perish. Each one is a priceless work of art. That’s the context for which he gives instructions about church discipline in vv. 15-20—it flows out of his love for his church and his commitment to protecting his flock and pursuing those who wander. Just as our own discipline as parents toward our children comes out of love. As Hebrews 12 says, “‘For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’ . . . we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (12:6, 9-11).

### **The Method of Church Discipline: From Personal to Public Confrontation (18:15-17)**

So what shape does Christ’s loving protection and pursuit take? This is where he includes us in the process. He involves his church—you and me—in the process of protecting, pursuing, and restoring the integrity and witness of his church. We each have a role to play. And he gives us a simple method for doing so in vv. 15-17, involving four steps, moving from personal to public confrontation.

#### *Step One: Go Privately*

Step one is go privately. Go privately to the person and help them see their fault. Look at v. 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.”

The occasion for confronting someone here is sin. He’s not talking about a disagreement, or a difference of opinion. Nor is he talking about things we may have a problem with that the Bible doesn’t actually consider sinful. I once watched an older gentleman try to confront a young man about his earring, saying that he was offended by it, and he should repent and stop wearing it. To which I wanted to say, “Grow up!” There’s nothing sinful about body piercings. What’s at stake here is what *Scripture* considers sinful, disobedient to God, and therefore deadly to that person and the flock—not our personal preferences.

But the reality is, none of us have arrived, none of us are perfect, and so we’re all going to make mistakes and sin. *When that happens*, when someone sins against you in such a way that you can’t just cancel it or overlook it—sometimes someone does something and you know that didn’t mean to, it’s not a common pattern, and the offense is insignificant enough that you just apply grace and cancel it. We call that forbearance. But when someone sins against you in such a way that it must be dealt with (either because of the nature of it or the way it’s effecting us), or else you become aware that someone you know is walking in unrepentant sin (disobeying God and not turning away from it), the loving thing to do is approach that person and help them see their fault.

As one author explains,

If someone else—another Christian in particular!—has been offensive, aggressive, bullying, dishonest, or immoral, nothing whatever is gained by trying to create ‘reconciliation’ without confronting the real evil that’s been done. Forgiveness doesn’t mean saying ‘it didn’t really happen’ or ‘it didn’t really matter.’ . . . Forgiveness is when it *did* happen, and it *did* matter, and you’re going to deal with it and end up loving and accepting one another again anyway.<sup>9</sup>

But notice how Jesus says to do this “between you and him alone.” Not to go complain to your friends, or tell your pastor, but to *go privately* to that person. Moreover, we should go with humility, not necessarily assuming we know everything, and willing to listen if we share some fault in the matter. Like art restorers we should handle them gently, not abrasively or accusingly. We should go with hearts filled with and directed by the gospel of Jesus—taking sin seriously, and applying serious grace.

There’s another word for this step besides ‘church discipline’; it’s called *friendship*. It’s simply what friends do in helping each other walk with Christ and find our satisfaction in him, our security and identity in him, and not in the things of this world. Discipline is simply the corrective side of discipleship. The goal of both of them is to help each other walk more closely with Jesus.

And if they see their sin and turn from it, then Jesus says “you have gained your brother.” That’s the goal—it’s not about punishment, but restoration. You have helped recover a stolen piece of art from the enemy. The discipline process is over almost as quickly as it’s started, and the only people who know about it are you and the person you’ve talked to (or the person who’s confronted you). And that repentance should be met and embraced with forgiveness and reconciliation; the debt should be cancelled. We’ll talk more about forgiveness next week when we look at the rest of ch. 18.

### *Step Two: Take Someone Along*

But what happens if they don’t respond? If they ignore your plea and continue in their sin? Then you go to step two: take someone along. Verse 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.”

The idea here is not to gang up on someone, but to get help in appealing to that person. If they won’t listen to you, maybe they’ll listen to you and a couple of friends who equally love that person and are aware of their sin. And the same gospel-driven motivation and goals apply here: gentleness, humility, prayer, taking sin seriously and applying serious grace. Moreover, if they continue to ignore you and your friends, and carry on in their sin, and you have to go to step three, Scripture requires that a charge of wrongdoing be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. Jesus is alluding here to the standard laid out in Deuteronomy 19:15, which is designed to protect people from false witnesses trying to take advantage of others.

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<sup>9</sup> N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two* (Louisville: WJK, 2002, 2004), 35.

### *Step Three: Tell the Church*

But if they will not listen and repent, then you go to step three: tell the church. The beginning of v. 17: “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.” And in general that means bringing the concern to the church leadership, in our case, the pastors and elders, that they might lead the church in appealing to this brother or sister. You might think of it as a family intervention—that’s pretty much what it is. If you have a child or a brother who is addicted to alcohol or gambling, and is living in denial and destroying their life, if you love that person, what you cannot do is sit back and do nothing. Love moves us to action, even if that action is awkward and painful. That person is too precious to just let go.

You’ll notice a trajectory here—from more private to more public confrontation. The more unwilling someone is to turn away from sin, the more public they appeal to repent becomes. I’ve been a part of this level of the process twice in my life, both cases a man having left his wife and family for an adulterous relationship. It’s heart-wrenching—not just watching the devastation in wrings on their family, but to their own soul, to their new lover, to the name of Christ. But what’s the alternative? Christ is not willing that one of his little ones should perish. We cannot do nothing. We must do everything possible to protect, to recover, and to restore that brother or sister to the Lord, and to our family.

### *Step Four: Excommunication*

But what if they do nothing? What if they continue to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to our cries? Then you go to step four, the last but sometimes necessary resort, of excommunication. Continuing in v. 17: “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

What does it mean to let someone be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector? It’s language of covenant exclusion. It is to consider them outside the family of God, outside the church, excommunicated. It’s not to necessarily say, ‘This person is not saved’; only God judges the heart. It is to say, that I can no longer affirm that they are saved, because the direction of their life is contrary to the gospel of Jesus.

Jonathan Leeman helps clarify what’s going on here:

In more specific and formal terms, church discipline is the act of removing an individual from membership and participation in the Lord’s Table. The church is not telling the individual to stop attending its public gatherings. The church wants the person to come and hear God’s Word preached. Rather, the church is saying that it can no longer affirm the person’s profession of faith, and so it refuses to give the Lord’s Supper. It’s excommunicating, or *ex-communication-ing*, the person. . . . He can no longer be regarded as a citizen of God’s kingdom, not when he is living like this.<sup>10</sup>

This sounds harsh and judgmental, and it is rendering a judgment in a sense—which Jesus has given his church authority to do, as we’re going to see in vv. 18-20 in a moment. But remember the context of Christ’s love. Remember the purpose—to protect, recover, and restore. It is a “compassionate warning”—“A church does not enact God’s retribution through discipline.

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership* (9 Marks; Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 109.

Rather it stages a small play that pictures the great judgment to come” if the person does not turn back to Christ.<sup>11</sup> Excommunication is not necessarily a permanent thing—in fact, our desire and prayer is that it would be very short-lived. We want the person to turn from their sin, be reconciled to God and to us.

Excommunication is the most serious warning that can be issued. Unheeded, it also serves as a means of making distinction between counterfeit Christians and the real deal, between genuine believers, in whom the Spirit of God will be at work to bring them back to himself and to the fold, and those who don’t belong to Christ and never really did. And it’s a means of protection for the rest of the flock, and preserving the witness of Christ. Someone who refuses to walk with Christ should not be allowed to have formal influence in the direction and teaching of the church, nor should they be upheld as a representative of the church, if they’re unwilling to submit to Christ. If we love the church as Christ loves the church, we’ll care about its purity and integrity.

When I was in college, I remember one of my mentors telling me that you want to go to a church that’s willing to kick you out. Which was surprising, but it makes sense. If they’re not willing to kick you out for unrepentant sin, then they don’t really love you. Again, not that they’re not welcome to the worship service, but to make clear that you who were once part of this body have cut yourself off from it by refusing to turn from your sin, and we can’t pretend that everything is okay, because you’re no longer representing Christ, you’re an unhealthy influence on others, and your soul is in danger of hell if you do not stop, turn around, and come back to Jesus.

What happens if we don’t do this? What’s at stake? What would have happened if the Monuments Men hadn’t stepped into the danger of an ongoing war to protect, recover, and restore those great works of art? They would have perished. The purpose for which they were made would have been nullified. Beauty would have swallowed up by ugliness of war. Honor turned into shame, significance given over to irrelevance.

And that’s exactly what’s at stake in the proper exercise of church discipline. The beauty of holiness and grace that comes from the gospel of Jesus is swallowed up by the ugliness of selfishness and sin. Instead of bringing honor to God by representing him well, the church brings scorn and shame upon his name. And it becomes irrelevant. If the world can’t tell the difference between those who know and represent Christ, and those who don’t, then what value is the church to the world? The unique contribution of the church—what we have to offer the world, that no one else can give—is the gospel of Jesus—that sin really is sinful because God is holy, but grace really is sufficient because Jesus’ Christ death on the cross was enough to cover our sin. And if we turn from sin and trust in him, there is forgiveness and new life, eternal life with God. There is a meaning, significance, and purpose that outlasts this fallen creation and that outshines the darkness, as God refashions our lives and makes us into a new creation that tells his story, displays his beauty, and gives honor to his name. That is the light we shine; that is the flavor we offer. That is the mission God sent us into the world to advance. But if the gospel no longer shapes our lives and behaviors within the church, then we don’t have much to give the world after all, do we? Nothing they can’t get elsewhere, and probably done better.

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<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Leeman, as summarized by Justin Taylor, “Church Discipline: Principles and Reasons,” *Between Two Worlds* Blog, Mar. 10, 2014. Available at: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2014/03/10/church-discipline-principles-and-reasons/>.

A gospel-centered church is a discipline-practicing church, because Christ cares that much about us.

### **The Basis for Church Discipline: The Authority of Christ among his People (18:18-20)**

One more question we need to ask, but more briefly. What right do we even have to speak into the lives of one another? What right does a church have to exclude someone from membership, or excommunicate someone if necessary? Verses 18-20 remind us of the basis for church discipline, and they do so by echoing what Christ has already said back in ch. 16.

Verse 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 in heaven. 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 am I among them” (18:18-20).

Jesus uses the same imagery here that he used in ch. 16, when he described the role Peter would play in the founding of his church. And the authority he gave Peter in that passage—what he called the “keys of the kingdom of heaven,” which are for “binding” and “loosing”—he now extends to the rest of the apostles, and through them to the entire church.

As we talked about back in ch. 16, binding and loosing has to do with the *affirmation* of those who belong to Christ’s church, who have *entered* into the kingdom, and of those who are *outside*, having rejected Christ. It’s about distinguishing between genuine believers and counterfeits—not on whatever basis we want, but on the basis of the gospel. In accordance with the gospel, Jesus gives his followers the authority to recognize on earth of what God has done in heaven. We are not the judge, but we can warn against and anticipate the judgment that will come for turning away from Christ. That’s why we are able to participate in church discipline.

Jesus’ point here is that when find ourselves having to do this, we have not been left alone in that responsibility. He’s given us a guide, a standard—the gospel, according to Scripture. He’s given us the authority to preserve the integrity of his church according to that standard—to protect, recover, restore, and make distinctions for the sake of the flock. And he promises to be with us by his Spirit whenever we gather for this sake.

We often talk about vv. 19-20 in more general terms of prayer and fellowship, and that’s true as far as it goes, but the context here is church discipline. Jesus is with us in our responsibility. That should make us both humble and bold. Humble, recognizing that the one who will stand in judgment in the end is in our presence as we exercise discipline, and should we be tempted to abuse this process for selfish ambition, it will not escape his notice. And bold, recognizing that the one who will stand in judgment in the end is in our presence, that he loves his church more than we can ever imagine, that he’s not willing that any of his children perish, and that he will be faithful to guide our steps in protecting and pursuing those who belong to him.

The church is God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, that we should walk in them. And Christ loves his church. May we love it enough to be willing to speak into each other’s lives. May we love Christ enough that we’re willing to listen when others speak into ours. And together, may we be faithful to walk with him by the grace he supplies, that the world might see his beauty displayed in us.