Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Discipline of God's Children, Part 3
Scripture: Matthew 18:18-20
Code: 2332

This morning we return in our study to Matthew 18. I notice in the bulletin that it says the subject is "Learning To Forgive." And I am going to teach on that subject, but not today. That's next week, because if you remember from two weeks ago, we didn't quite finish the passage in verses 15-20. And I want to go back to that passage and not only complete the passage, but express my heart on some matters that I've been thinking and praying about over the last couple of weeks.

Let's look together at Matthew 18:15 and I'll read as you follow in your Bible. "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear *thee, then* take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell *it* unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a tax collector. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

"Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father who is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Now, this particular passage speaks of the Lord's command for the holiness of His church. I believe that Jesus Christ desires that the church be pure, and herein is His instruction as to our part in that purity. In Revelation Chapter 1, we see an interesting picture of Christ. He's moving in verse 12 and 13 among the seven lamp stands, which represent the seven churches, which represent all the church. And He is clothed with the garment of the priest and the king and prophet. He's there in His full glory.

Verse 14 says "His head and *His* hair *were* white like wool, and white as snow; - " and that speaks of His purity " - and then His eyes like a flame of fire; - " His searching out to find any blemish or any unholiness " - And His feet like fine bronze, as if they burned in a furnace; and His voice is that of many waters." Now you see Him in judgment character, ready to trample out sin and speak a word of judgment that goes forth - as it says later in Revelation - like a two-edged sword. So you see the Lord moving in His church and He is marked out as pure by His whiteness. And His eyes are penetrating, looking for sin, and that sin is to be dealt with.

How does the Lord deal with sin in His church? That's a picture in Revelation 1, but how does He actually do that? I think there are three elements. Element number one is the ministry of the Word. The Word is an instrument of holiness. Ephesians 5 talks about being washed by the water of the Word. It is a purifier.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit, Romans 1:4, is called "the Spirit of holiness." And the ministry of the Spirit is essential to the holiness of the church. So the ministry of the Word and the ministry of the Spirit.

But thirdly, I believe you must link up Revelation 1 to Matthew 18. And I think the Lord is moving in His church with purity in mind, penetrating, searching out sin, and ready to deal with it, not only through the ministry of the Word and the ministry of the Spirit, but the ministry of the people.

I think the outworking of Revelation 1 is in Matthew 18 as Christ is involved in the purging of His church through the instrumentation of those who represent Him in the world. And that's why at the close of the passage He says when you're "gathered together in my name, I'm there in the midst of you." In other words, when the church is moving to seek its purity, Christ is there in the midst moving among the candlesticks, doing His purifying work.

Let me make a statement and then I'm going to say it again later on. Never, never is the church more like Jesus Christ than when it is engaged in dealing with sin. Never are you as an individual more like Jesus Christ than when you are seeking the purity of His church. And yet, on a wide scale, in the church across our land today, this is not in the thinking of the people. And I'm amazed at that.

When I left two weeks ago, I had to go to Chicago and then had to be driven to another city for a Bible conference. I had to be driven because I have been writing a book for nearly a year and I've been collecting the thoughts for ten years, but I've been writing a book on worship called *The Ultimate Priority*. And it really is the expression of my heart about the matter of worship. And I have been writing it in bits and pieces.

When you write a book, you write a chapter and you send it to be edited, and you get it back, and you edit it, and you send it back, and then you do another chapter, and you send it, and it gets switched around, and Chapter two becomes Chapter seven, and Chapter eight becomes Chapter three, and I really had written it, and sent it, and edited it so long that I really couldn't put it all together in my mind and I had lost the sense of what the whole thing said.

But before the book could go to the printer to be released June 1, the publisher insisted that I sit down and read through every word of every page at one full sitting and make all the final corrections. And so they said graciously that they would drive me the seven hours I needed rather than have me fly so that I could sit there the whole time and go through this. And that is exactly what I did for seven hours,

broken up only by one hot chocolate, and it was one degree. It was cold outside.

And it was a very soul-searching experience. Very often when you write something, you sort of set it aside and you never want to see it again because it's sort of have been a burden for a long time. But I found myself dragging my own soul through all of the biblical data regarding worship, and it was a very profound experience for me. In fact, I sort of wondered at what the man who was driving me thought about my reactions to my own book. But it wasn't really my reaction to me as much as it was my reaction to God. And I was brought face to face with the holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin. Then there was just a very soul searching time in the quietness of that ride.

I arrived at this particular place where I was to speak at the Bible conference and I had prepared a message and I was all set to speak that night, and faculty member called me and said, "I don't know what you're giving tonight, but could you give a message on the holiness of God?" I said, "Could I ever." He said, "This is what we need." And he said, "I've been praying for a long time that God would put that on your heart and I just thought I'd call and suggest that."

Before I got out of the hotel room, I got a second phone call. Another man called and said, "What in the world are you doing in a place like this? Don't you know such, and such, and such, and such about this place where you're going?" And he got done describing and I said, "It sounds exactly like a place I ought to be." I said, "Long ago, I decided I wasn't going to spend my whole life saying things to people that already believed Him. But I was going to say them to the people that maybe needed to hear them."

And I explained to him that I had been asked to speak on this issue and I said I'm going to trust that the Lord has me here for a purpose. So I did. And I really didn't have any notes, I just took my Bible and I had my head full of all those other things about worship and about the holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin, and I just poured out my heart in this regard. And it was very quiet. I don't know, 4,000 or 5,000 people maybe, or something like that. Very quiet. And it was the quietness of - I think the quietness of conviction, to some extent. It may have been somewhat the quietness of where did this guy drop in? You know, I don't know that they were too used to that approach. But it was very interesting.

I poured out my heart on the matter of the holiness of God, the sinfulness of sin, and talked about if ever there was to be a real renewal, if ever there was to be a real revival in the church, it would be when we again saw the holiness of God, the sinfulness of sin, and in brokenness fell before a holy God to worship Him. And I finished and it took me about an hour and 15 minutes to get to the door, because we had time to talk with so many, many people.

And finally there was one final person waiting and this person came up and said, "I'm a student in seminary, a senior, and I just have to tell you that I did not appreciate your message at all. You were

totally off base." And I said, "Why do you say that?" "Well, because you lacked love. Our message is love and I didn't find any love at all in your message."

Well, it grieved my heart. So I said to this student, I said, "Did you understand what passages I was teaching?" "Yes." "Were those passages about love?" "Well, no." "Is it legitimate to teach a Bible passage and just teach it the way God wrote it, or do we have to read into every passage the message of love? I mean, if we do that, then we're not really being fair to the Word of God, are we? And maybe the fact that you felt that way is only a demonstration of the over-balance or the lack of balance in your own understanding of God's holiness as over against His love." I said, "I think that you probably needed this message and that's evident by your response to it."

Well, I tried to be as loving as I could in saying that, but I confess it was only a sort of a sad moment because later on a faculty member was asking me what the conversation was. Saw it going on I guess and I said well, I repeated some of the conversation, and his reply was, "Well, you see the real issue wasn't that you didn't have enough love in your message. The real issue was that, from that student's viewpoint you didn't have all love in your message, because there's no room for anything else."

Love. Nothing wrong with love. And I'm the first person to be thankful for it, aren't you also? Thankful for God's love? But I think the kind of love that some people have in mind isn't even the holy love of God. I'm not sure what kind of love it is. And I really fear that if seminaries produce people and all they want to talk about is love that there never will be in the church the work of Jesus Christ and the way He wants to do it.

And I'm also interested to note that so many of the people who are like this student and like this, maybe some of the influences of that institution, they all may not be like that by any means, either that institution or others. But it's interesting to me that the same people who are always talking about this are always talking seemingly about revival, and renewal, and restoration in the church.

And they live under an illusion that to renew the church, and to revitalize the church, and restore the church, and bring revival, and really win the lost, we just have to talk about love, and love, and love, and love all the time, on the some kind of sentimental level. And we're all talking about renewal and all of this that is wanted in the church, but it just - they don't understand that you're never going to have revival, and renewal, and restoration until you have a sense of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man, out of which true brokenness comes and true revival. Tolerant kind of sentimentalism is never going to renew the church and all the message of love, love, love, you know, isn't going to do that.

You know, you can go back to the great awakening in the 1700s, particularly under the ministry of Jonathan Edwards, and you will find characteristic of the revival - the first great awakening was a

great revival - and every other revival, whether biblical or after biblical times, and you will find that two things characterize those revivals, including the great awakening in 1700s. One was a powerful preaching on the holiness of God, and two was powerful preaching on the sinfulness of sin. In fact, invitations hadn't even been invented in the time of Jonathan Edwards. They didn't come until Finney later, and I don't think we have a great sense of debt to what Finney did in sort of manipulating people through his invitation system.

But in Edwards' time they said that he preached, and he would preach on the holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin, and not only did not have to invite people to do anything, but in the middle of his sermons people would be screaming and crying for him to stop because they'd be under so much conviction. And a real revival happened. Now, it may have had some excesses and maybe it was a little too harsh and some extremes, and there was a move away as you go from the 18th Century into the 19th Century, there was a drift away from the firmness and the rigidity and the power of preaching about the holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin. And people began to talk more about love, and they began to sort of want to mitigate that, and sort of ease off of that because they feared some of the extremes.

Richard Lovelace from Gordon-Conwell writes, "The whole church was avoiding the biblical portrait of the sovereign and holy God who was angry with the wicked every day and whose anger remains upon those who will not receive His Son. Walling off this image into an unvisited corner of its consciousness, the church substituted a new God who was the projection of grandmotherly kindness, mixed with a gentleness and winsomeness of a Jesus who hardly needed to die for our sins. And many American congregations were, in effect, paying their ministers to protect them from the real God."

And then He insightfully says, "It is partially responsible not only for the general spiritual collapse of the church in this century, but also for a great deal of evangelistic weakness. For in a world in which the sovereign holy God regularly employs plagues, famines, wars, disease, and death as instruments to punish sin and bring mankind to repentance, the idolatrous image of God as pure benevolence and love cannot really be believed, let alone feared and worshiped in the manner prescribed by both the Old Testament and New Testament."

Now what he's saying is this. When you just have this sort of sentimental view of love, one, it'll never renew the church, because it never really causes people to face their sin. It'll never really renew the church. Two, it'll never evangelize, and that is the worst delusion of all. People think if you just talk about love, and God's love, and how God loves everybody, you're going to evangelize. But apologetically, you have a tremendous problem, because on the one hand, you're proclaiming a God who is all love, and then on the other hand, you are stuck trying to define to people how such a God can allow plagues, and disease, and disaster, and war, and famine, and horror to exist.

And that is why we must proclaim a holy God who has a holy hatred of sin so that all of that stuff makes sense. Do you understand? And unless the church comes back to a message of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin, it will never be renewed, and its evangelism will be shallow, and ineffective, and unable to explain what is patently obvious. To an unbeliever who hears only a message of love how can a loving God allow what He allows? Removing God's holy hatred of sin literally emasculates the church and hinders rather than helps evangelism.

Now, there, I think, are a lot of people who think there's revival when it may be little else than emotion. Jonathan Edwards was well aware of this. In a treatise concerning religious affections which he wrote in 1746, he was very concerned to make it known that fallen human nature is fertile ground for a fleshly religiosity which is impiously spiritual, but ultimately rooted in self love.

"High emotional experiences," he said, "effusive, gushy religious talk, even praising God and experiencing love for God and man can be self-centered and self motivated. In contrast of this, experiences of genuine renewal from the Holy Spirit are God-centered in character, based on worship, have an appreciation of God's worth and grandeur divorced from self interest." And Edwards wanted to point out that such genuine experiences create humility in the convert rather than pride, and they issue in a new creation and a new spirit of meekness, gentleness, forgiveness, and mercy. They leave the believer hungering and thirsting for righteousness, instead of being satisfied with self-congratulation.

In other words, true revival isn't people saying, "We've arrived spiritually." It's people being broken over the sense that they have not arrived. So when you look at what we're seeing in our culture and you ask yourself the question is this a genuine revival? You can ask some further questions. Does it mark itself by an overwhelming sense of the holiness of God? By a comprehensive sense of the depth of sin? And by a kind of spiritual experience that results in brokenness rather than self-congratulation? That's the stuff that makes for true revival.

And when you have like you do in the church today, this incessant talk about love, and acceptance, and tolerance; this desire for self-esteem, and to feel good about yourselves; and God wants you healthy, wealthy, happy, and all of this; you are really at the very opposite pole from the elements of genuine revival.

And the reason being because the church not understanding the holiness of God doesn't deal with the sinfulness of sin, and it never in effect purges itself. And as I said in the very beginning that's what Christ wants to do in His church. Never is the church more like Jesus Christ than when it's acting out Matthew 18:15-20 dealing with sin.

Lovelace also says, “Most congregations of professing Christians today are saturated with a kind of dead goodness and ethical respectability which has its motivational roots in the flesh rather than in the Holy Spirit. Surface righteousness which does not spring from faith and the Spirit’s renewing action, but from religious pride and condition conformity to tradition as a form of godliness which denies its power.” He goes on to call it counterfeit piety.

We have to get back to the true elements of revival. John Owens said, “The vigour and power of the spiritual life depends on the mortification of sin. Sin has to be faced, exposed, dealt with.” Now, I believe this is what Christ wants to do in His church. I believe Christ came into the world to do one thing. He says that in John 5:19, 5:30, 6:38, 7:16, and elsewhere and that is He said “I came to do not my will, but - ” what? “ - the will of Him that sent me. The will of my Father.” He says that over and over again, and the will of the Father can be reduced to one statement. Come to 1 Peter 1. 1 Peter 1, “But as he who called you his holy, so be ye holy in all your manner of life,” and everything you be holy. And here’s why, and he quotes out of Leviticus 11, “Be ye holy for I am holy.”

Now, if you want to take all the will of God at its broadest possible point and condense it to one statement, that’s it. God wants His people holy. That’s the message. And that’s why Christ is moving in His church with searching eyes, with a holy presence, with judgment ready to purge and to cleanse. In the kingdom, Isaiah 35:8 says that, “God is preparing a path and the path is the way of holiness.”

In James 4:8, you remember where he says, “draw nearer to God and He’ll draw nearer to you. Cleanse *your* hands, *you* sinners. Purify *your* hearts *you* double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and *your* joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He’ll exalt you.”

God is calling for a purging and purifying. The will of the Father is that His people be holy. That is the work of Christ in the church. He does it through the Word, the Spirit, and the work of the people. The Word does its part as it’s proclaimed. The Spirit does His part as He moves in the heart. But we are to join the Word and the Spirit in human flesh and we are to act on behalf of Christ in the presence of His church to seek its purity. And the prescription for that is in verses 15-20. We are to be Christ moving in His church.

Now let’s find out how again. The place of discipline - let’s go back to the text. The place of discipline in verse 17, the church. It says it there. “Tell it to the church ... hear the church.” The church is the place. What does that mean? The assembly of God’s redeemed people. That’s the place of discipline. That’s where the Lord is moving to cleanse.

Second, the purpose. The end of verse 15. “If He shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.” Restoration. One who sins is lost to the fellowship. He’s lost to the ministry there and he needs to be

regained as a treasure that was lost.

The person of discipline. Who is to be involved? Verse 15 again. “Your brother trespasses against you, you go, you tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you’ve gained your brother.” It’s you. It’s you and me and all believers. We’re all responsible. We are all to be ministers of holiness. Galatians 6:1, “You that are spiritual, go and restore such in one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” Hebrews 10, “You come together to stimulate love and good works among the brothers and sisters.” So we need those who are willing to be obedient to that, who have a holy zeal for God’s name, and who have purified their own hearts so they can do this work. We need ministers of holiness.

And I made a big point of that. I just want to emphasize it without belaboring it. We need in the church ministers of holiness who do the work of Christ, which is the work of keeping the church pure, which means to confront and deal with sin.

So the place of discipline, the church; the purpose, to gain your brother; the person, you; the provocation of discipline, when do we do it? Verse 15. “If your brother trespasses.” And every sin is a sin against us, either directly or indirectly, as we saw in our prior studies.

So whenever there’s an unconfessed unrepented sin, whenever there’s a continuing sin, whatever the sin, that’s a provocation for discipline. The process of discipline, then, we saw in verse 15-17. Four steps. Step one, go and tell him his sin alone, privately. If he responds, that’s the end of the process. If he doesn’t, step two, verse 16, take one or two with you that his attitude and his response might be confirmed by two or three witnesses, which according to Deuteronomic law was the standard of legality.

Now if he doesn’t respond in that setting, then three, verse 17, tell the whole church, and that means the whole church then goes to try to restore him. The whole church then goes to try to draw him back. One has been unsuccessful, two and three have been unsuccessful, now everybody goes. Now, the extent to which the church has been told may vary. You may want to tell the whole church. You may want to tell a group of the church or the church as constituted in its leaders. But in other words, you’re to widen the circle of people who are pursuing the sinning brother or sister to bring them back, to bring them to repentance, confession, turning from sin back to purity.

And if they still do not hear, then step four, treat them as heathen or a tax collector. And we pointed out that those were two people who identified or symbolized the idea of being an outcast. Treat them like you would somebody on the outside of your group. Put them out. We went through some scripture on that. Put them out. Don’t let them join the fellowship. Don’t let them associate. Don’t let them feel at home. Make them miserable. Turn them over to Satan, as Paul called it. But the second point was what? Put them out. Call them back. Call them back.

So the place of discipline, the church; the purpose, to gain your brother; the person, you; the provocation, any sin; the process, four steps. Now we come to just the last part. The power of discipline, the power. If you want to use another word, use the word authority.

You know, when you come to the end of verse 17, you always sort of face the fact that there's that sense of inadequacy about this. If you're like I am, you say, "Well, who in the world am I to go to somebody else and confront them with their sin?" I mean, this is a private world and everybody is sort of a private person. You just can't go blasting into someone's life and say, "You are sinning." I mean, what right do we have? I'm not an apostle. I'm not perfect. And then people want to misinterpret Matthew 7, "Judge not lest ye be judged." What right do we have to do that? How can we possibly publicize people's sin to the whole church and send everybody out after them? And how can we put people out of the church publicly? I mean, doesn't this seem like we're going way beyond the bounds that would be permissible to us who are ourselves weak and failing sinners?

What is our authority? By what power do we do this? By what right do we do this? And that we find in verses 18-20, and this is the absolute climax of this text. It's hard to do this. It's a difficult work to do, but it must be done. And beloved, it must be done if ever the church is to know real revival and real renewal. And all the effort to have renewal without ever confronting sin, and without ever proclaiming the holiness and the fear of God is just absolutely wasted effort. We must do this though it's difficult. But what is our authority?

Two reasons why we have authority. Two reasons. Number one, the Father in heaven acts with us. Did you get that? You ought to write that in the margin of your Bible somewhere. The Father in heaven acts with us.

I just sat back when I came to this part of my study and just thought on this. I know I can't put into words what my heart feels. It is beyond conception that I could be acting in concert with the infinite holy God. But that's what it's saying. Look at verse 18. "Truly I say to you - " it's a good thing He put the word "truly" there because it's so hard to believe, truly " - whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven. Whatsoever you shall loose on earth, shall have been loosed in heaven."

Now that may seem at first obscure to you, but we've studied the same terms in Matthew 16:19 and in John 20:23 some years ago, because they appear there. These are rabbinical terms, very familiar to the Jewish audience, very common terms to Matthew and to our Lord living in that time. They simply refer to the rabbis either binding someone's sins on them or loosing their sins from them. And it basically is the idea that you're either saying to someone, "Your sins are bound you," or "Your sins are loosed from you." In other words, you're still under the bondage of sin or you're free from sin.

And the verse says that “whatever you bind on earth - ” in other words, when on earth you say to someone, “You are still bound with sin.” When you say that on earth, it’ll already have been bound in heaven. Now on earth when you say to someone, “Your sins are loosed - ” in other words, freed, you’re freed from them, heaven will already have done that, as well. That’s a perfect passive form, which means it’s already been done with continuing results.

In other words, when the church finally gets around to saying your sins are bound on you or your sins are loosed from you, the church is then beginning to act in accord with the Father who is in heaven, who’s already said either their loosed or their bound based upon whether the person responded to the conviction of sin or not.

Now the point is this, a very simple point, heaven ratifies what is done on earth when the church follows this process of discipline. That’s exactly what it means. Now that’s authority. Listen. If you’re a sinning person in the church and somebody goes to you and you don’t repent, and two or three go to you and you don’t repent, and the whole church is pursuing you and you don’t repent, we can say your sins are bound on you and we can say that because we’ve gone through the process to determine that based upon the revelation of the Word of God, and when we say that, we are simply saying what the Father has already said in heaven. In other words, the church is acting in the behalf of the will of God. The Father in heaven is acting with us. What a tremendous thought.

On the other hand, if you’re in sin and we go to you and say you don’t repent the first time, and two or three go and you do repent, and your heart is broken, and you grieve, and you turn from your sin, and we say, “Your sins are loosed. Welcome into the fullness of the fellowship.” We are merely doing on earth what has already been done in heaven. So the authority then is that we are acting in behalf of the Father in heaven, who’s already done what is right to do in your case.

We say in the church we want to do the will of God. We pray. How many churches get up on Sundays and people all stand up say “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name, they kingdom come, thy will be done - ” where? “ - on earth as it is in heaven,” and never do what this passage says? You want to do His will on earth as it is in heaven? Then you do this and heaven will have already done what you did here. This is an answer to that prayer in Matthew 6:9-12, the disciple’s prayer.

And so I say it again. Never, never is the church more like Jesus Christ. Never does the church more fulfill the will of God than when it acts out the principles of this passage. This is taking the kingdom in heaven and bringing it to earth. That’s our authority. Heaven stands with us. You say, “Well how can it be our authority?” Because we’ve followed the biblical pattern. When I go to a person and say, “Your sins are bound to you,” you say, “MacArthur, what right do you have to say that to a person?” Because the person has not repented. On the other hand, if I say to a person, “Your sins are loosed

from you," or if you say it to a person, what right do you have to say that? Because they have repented, right?

Recently, I met a man and he said to me, "Well, you see, I believe that this is what you're supposed to do to get to heaven." And he described this very bizarre thing. And he said, "You know, I've been in this 'Christian organization' for years," and so I just put my finger to him as gently as I could and I said, "My friend, you are lost in your sin." You say, "What gave you - who do you think you are?" Now I had the authority to bind his sins on him, because he didn't meet the biblical conditions of repentance, right? I said, "You're lost. You don't know God. You don't have forgiveness of sins. You don't know Jesus Christ, my friend."

And I explained the gospel to him. Then you have the right to say to a sinning Christian, "You, my friend, are bound in your sin," and the Father in heaven is acting with you when you say that. Isn't that a marvelous thing? I mean, you become the ambassador of heaven on earth. This is why the church must do this. Listen, as I said at the beginning, if the will of God in its extremity could be condensed into one thing, "be ye holy for I am holy," then never are we fulfilling the will of God any more than we are pursuing the holiness of His people, right?

That's what the verse means. God will be doing the same thing. That's very comforting to me, because a lot of times people think, you know, if you go out after this, and you try to be aggressive, and you try to attack sin, and you try to confront sin and call it what it is, that you're being unloving and all of these other things. And what you're really doing is you're really fighting God's battle. You're really lining up with heaven. So hard to convince people of that in this day because whatever this sentimental squashy kind of love thing is has gotten completely out of hand.

There's a second reason, but before we get to that we have to go to verse 19. And verse 19 basically sort of repeats what it said in verse 18, because they're hard to believe. So hard to believe that the Father in heaven is acting with us. So He says "Again, I say to you that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing - " well, what things are we talking about here? What things are we talking about? Discipline, sin. Well, what two are these? Well, that's the lowest number of people who can confirm a person in a sin.

So when you've gone, and you've confirmed the person, and you agree, and you seek God's will on it, it'll be done for them by my Father who's in heaven. In other words, God's acting with you. The two here are the two witnesses who confirm the unrepentant heart or who, on the other hand, confirm the repentant heart. He starts with the lowest possible number. If two of you on up agree. In other words, you confirm the fact that this indeed is true, then God is acting in heaven in accord with that.

That's great authority. We're ambassadors of heaven on earth. Just a glorious, glorious incomprehensible thought. The word agree there is worth noting, *sumphne*, from which we get the

word “symphony.” It means “to produce a sound together.” When all of you who are looking into this person’s life agreed that his sin is still there or his sin is repented of, whatever it is, covering anything, the Father will be agreement with you.

I don’t think this verse is talking about a blank check for prayer and it’s been utterly misused. Just ripped out of its context and these two people just have - most people think just mean any two people, and if you can just get two people to agree, God has to give you what you agreeing for. I’ve heard that said so many times. That isn’t the point.

The two here are the two witnesses in a case of church discipline, a sinning person, and they really want God’s will done, and they really want what’s right, but if they agree over this issue, and the follow the biblical pattern, they can be confident that in their seeking for God’s will they will receive it and God will do what’s right.

And that’s a very important confidence, because when you move into discipline, you can second guess yourself and say, “Boy, I hope I’m doing what’s right. Boy, I just worry, maybe I’m doing the wrong things. Maybe I’m judging.” And I’ve had that feeling. I’ve gone into a situation with a Christian who’s sinning and say, you know - in fact, I’ve talked to Patricia like this sometimes and I said, “You know, maybe I’m just being too harsh. Maybe I’m not being sensitive. Maybe this isn’t right, but I just don’t see the repentance there. I don’t see the brokenness there. I don’t see the contrition there.”

And her simple wisdom, she says, “Well, you know what the Scripture says.” And I say, “Yeah. That if it’s been confirmed and we all are in symphony, and we’re all reading the same signs the same way, and we’re asking for God’s wisdom, we can know the Father is acting in accord with us.” Isn’t that a marvelous confidence? So we don’t fear to do that because we’re carrying out the will of the Father that His people be holy.

Second reason. Not only does the Father in heaven act with us, but the Son on earth acts with us. This is a dual divine authority. The Son on earth acts with us, verse 20. And here’s another verse that gets terribly misapplied. “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Now you’ve probably heard that with a dozen prayer meetings you’ve been at. If we can just get two or three people together, God will be there. Listen, if you’ve just got one person, God’s there, right? I used to worry about that when I was a kid because I heard some people preach on that sermon. “Where two or three are gathered together there am I in the midst.” And I thought, well, what happens when one person prays?

You see, that isn’t what that’s talking about. What are the two or three in this context? Two or three what? Two or three witnesses in the discipline. You see that’s why it’s so important to teach the flow of the Scripture. Two or three witnesses, when you gather in my name, what does that mean? To do My works, Jesus says. What’s Your work? I’m moving among the church. And when you gather

together in My name to reflect My character and My will, there am I in the midst of that.

Isn't that a great confidence? Not only is heaven acting, is the Father acting in heaven with us, but the Son is there on earth with us. Never are you more fulfilling the will of God and the work of the Son than when you're acting in the purging and the purifying of His own church. We all have to be a part of that, beloved, ministers of holiness.

In closing, just a word about the victim in this. We really need to bring that brother back or that sister back, don't we? You can't just let them go. You can't. They need to be brought back.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian of rather liberal persuasion, lived through some of the terrors of Nazi Germany. He wrote a little book that I read many years ago as a seminary student called *Life Together*. In it are some very profound thoughts that might help us with what we're looking at. Listen to what he says.

"Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him. And the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community.

"In confession, the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin is brought into the light. The unexpressed is openly spoken and acknowledged. All that is secret and hidden is made manifest. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted, but God breaks gates of brass and bars of iron." Psalm 107:16.

Listen to this. "Since the confession of sin is made the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders. He gives up all his evil. He gives his heart to God. He finds the forgiveness of all his sin and the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother. The expressed acknowledged sin has lost all its power. It has been revealed and judged as sin. It can no longer tear the fellowship asunder.

"Now the fellowship bears the sin of the brother. He is no longer alone with his evil for he has cast off his sin in confession and it handed it over to God. It has been taken away from him. Now he stands in the fellowship of sinners who live by the grace of God and the cross of Jesus Christ. The sin concealed separated him from the fellowship, made all his apparent fellowship a sham. The sin confessed has helped him to find true fellowship with the brethren in Jesus Christ."

What a ministry, the ministry of restoring the sinning brother. It is the key to purity of the church. It is the key to revival of the church, the renewal of the church, and the reaching of the world through a

renewed church. We must hear these words of our Lord. Let’s bow in prayer.

Father, we ask that You would revive Your church. Oh God, we would seek a renewal, a true restoration of the holy power of Your people. We know that it comes through the message of Your holiness and our sinfulness. May the church be committed to that. And may in seeing the holy God and the sinful man, the church want to be the instruments of holiness. May we be the body of Christ moving among the candlesticks, the lamp stands, allowing the spirit of Christ and the word of Christ to purge the church through us. Make us instruments of righteousness that we may do the will of the Father, that the people of God may be holy as He is holy.

Father, help us to begin with ourselves and even as we gather tonight for the Lord’s Table, may it be a starting place as we cleanse our own hearts, confessing sin, and allowing the Spirit to do the work that only He can do. And then, Lord, may we seek the purity of Your church, not as those who piously set ourselves up, but those who humbly seek the restoration of a brother, considering ourselves knowing we, too, are tempted and sin. Help us, Father, to turn the light on, that sin may not find the isolation it craves and do its deadly work.

We thank You for the clarity with which our Lord has spoken and may the church hear the words and apply them. Our Father, we know now what the Word says to us. The only remaining question is our willingness to respond. We know this is Your desire. May it be ours to fulfill all Your holy purpose in Your church, in love, that the world while seeing a holy God who hates sin will then understand truly the grace and love of forgiveness. Make this a special day for all of us. And we’ll praise You for what You’re going to do in every heart. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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