

Introduction

The story of Peter Pan was also originally titled, *The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*. The story tells of an imaginary island called Neverland where the children remain children. It is a place of imagination where a person enjoys the delights of childhood perpetually. Meanwhile, there is nothing imaginary about the kingdom of heaven; it is a reality. And in this reality there is a real sense in which every citizen is a child, and the children never grow up. The disciples come to Jesus discussing who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus places a child in their midst and instructs that no one can enter the kingdom without becoming like one of these, and the greatest in the kingdom is one who humbles himself like a child.

Christ-followers are not to be content with immaturity; we are children but we are not to be childish. So there is one sense in which we definitely are supposed to grow up. But in another sense, and blessedly so, we will always be children. Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us that we should be called CHILDREN of God. Figuratively speaking, the kingdom of heaven is full of children. The whole of Matthew 18 deals with God's children and sin. Those who cause the children of God to sin are threatened with God's severe wrath. The children are taught to take the most desperate measures in order to keep sin out of their lives. But they are also assured that the Lord will pursue his children who wander. We would well ask the question how does he do it? In a practical way how does God go after the rambler to bring him or her home? He does it in part through the children themselves as the minister properly to one another. We are not to tempt one another and we are not to mistreat one another. So how should we deal with one another when there is sin among the children? These are the questions Jesus deals with in this morning's text.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

So in this text Jesus sets forth the responsibility of the family of God towards each child who gets entangled in sin. When someone offends us or when we notice them sinning, our temptation is to talk to anybody and everybody who will listen—especially anybody and everybody OTHER than the one who offended us. Giving in to that temptation is just wrong.

Colossians 3:8 and Ephesians 4:31 say basically the same thing about slander. Put it away from you. Giving vent to the offenses of others is wrong. It is also selfish and destructive. Me, me, me, says the slanderer; I have been hurt and I am a victim. Someone has done wrong to me. And they are bad, bad, bad.

The destruction affects more than just the offender. Proverbs 26:20 says this, "For lack of wood a fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases." Slander is kindling for a fire of discord. It spills over into the body as a whole and brings destruction to many.

God has put into the life of the church a procedure for dealing with offenses and sin that will avoid the selfishness and destruction and discord and roots of bitterness that come when we give in to the temptation to spread it. If we would just listen and follow the clear teaching of Jesus in this regard, we would do what is right and glorify God and build up rather than tearing down the body. And we would do what is best for those who persist unrepentantly in sin. What is that process of bringing the rambler home? It has been spelled out for us right here in Matthew 18. There are four steps to follow. There is authority which undergirds the steps. And there is motivation for carrying out the steps.

I. The Four Steps of Bringing the Rambler Home

A. Step One. Confront your offending brother or sister. Verse 15 says, "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."

1. This principle is not telling us to be overly sensitive. It is not telling us we have a right not to be treated a certain way. It is not telling us the world owes us an apology. This is a serious enough offense that the person's refusing to repent ultimately means being put out of the church.

Paul says in Ephesians 4 that we are to live "with humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit." He demonstrates that we should not be running around looking for reasons to confront one another. So do not think this teaching of Jesus means you need to sit down and think of all the people who have offended

you and make a list and check it twice and start going to all these people. These are not the offenses you can easily forget but the ones you can't.

And the principle applies not only for personal offenses but also when you are aware of serious, persistent, unrepentant sins of a brother in the Lord.

2. The principle of confrontation does not relieve you, the offended, from the responsibility of approaching your brother properly. A proper approach is gentle, humble, careful, and open. A gentle approach demonstrates that this is not fundamentally about me and it is not about vengeance but restoration. A humble approach is one that recognizes that the offender and I are cut out of the same piece of cloth. I am not without sin and I am not without the propensity to do the very same thing this person did.

A careful approach is one that has looked in the mirror to make sure to the best of one's ability that the problem is not with them, that they are not coming to get a splinter out of the eye of another when a plank is sticking out of their own. A careful approach is also one that has taken the time to engage in earnest prayer about the situation. To come with openness means that you are open to the fact that you may have misread or misunderstood or not seen the whole picture in the conclusion to which you have come.

3. This principle of confrontation is telling us to guard the reputation of the offending brother or sister. Guard the reputation of the offending brother. This is to be done in private. No one else should know that you are confronting. And if the situation is resolved, no one needs to know it was ever an issue. "In private" means everyone else is shut out.

So what should you do if someone comes to you to talk about someone else's sin against them? The first thing is to ask this question: "Have you talked to them?" If not, the next question is this, "why are you talking to me?" Remind them of Jesus' instruction to go privately.

4. The principle of private confrontation provides the condition for a restored relationship and one that is stronger than before. "If he listens to you, you have GAINED your brother." He listens. He accepts the fact of his

sin and repents of it. He asks your forgiveness and you grant it. And you grant it genuinely. That or you get a fuller understanding of the situation and you thank him for the clarification. You have been open with one another. You have repented and forgiven. You have won your brother. You have protected your brother from further sin. You have prevented discord and destruction in the body. The occasion is one for great rejoicing.

B. Step Two. If the brother or sister does not "listen," then the situation calls for a second step. Jesus says, "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."

Everything in step one applies here except the involvement of one to two others. Still a minimum of people are brought into awareness of the situation. The attitudes and care of step one are just as needful in this step.

If someone comes to you and they want you to be a witness, you need to be prayerful and careful. Understand that whenever there is more than one person there is more than one story. Do not be on one side or another. Be on the side of truth, clarity, understanding, honesty, and humility.

If the brother or sister listens and repents or misunderstandings are resolved, you have won your brother. Rejoice and enjoy the blessing of renewed fellowship. But if the brother will not listen, there remains another step.

C. Step Three. Verse 17. Jesus says, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." By these witnesses the matter is brought to the body, the assembly. The church hears and the church speaks. The church speaks as one to the offender. The offender has this last opportunity to repent. You see how the matter is guarded carefully until this step. At this point the entire body is informed and joins together to present a unified and compelling case to the sinner that their rebellion is deadly serious. This is now the sinner's third experience of being lovingly wounded by his truest friends. If he or she still won't turn there is one final step.

D. Step Four. If the offender still refuses to repent, he or she is to be put out of the fellowship. They are excommunicated. They are to be as a Gentile or a Tax-collector. And that means an outcast. They are to be shown no welcome. If nothing else was effective in producing repentance, then it is hoped this final step will be used of God to finally do so.

If the brother or sister subsequently repents, then to the glory and praise of God, they should be restored again. That is the procedure. If followed, peace will permeate the body. Holiness will be cultivated. And joy will be real whenever a sinner repents. The children share in the joy of the Father bringing the rambler home.

II. The Authority to Bring the Rambler Home

A. Verses 18-20 are sobering ones indeed. "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."

B. Church discipline is authorized by God and what is done by His church (not by those who parade as His church but by His church) is done by heaven. If a local church of the Lord Jesus Christ enacts discipline, Jesus Christ himself enacts discipline. And if that local church restores a disciplined brother or sister, heaven restores that brother or sister. Jesus Christ is in the very midst of the church when these things are taking place as he is in the midst of two or three who are gathered in his name.

Let's pause for just a minute to soak it in. When even two or three are gathered in the name of Christ Jesus, he is in the midst of them. This is true whether they are praying or enacting discipline or sharing fellowship together. When even two or three are gathered in his name, he is there. That means Christ is right here this morning. In a mystical sense even though we are spatially separated, Christ is in our midst. We have gathered in his name and he is present. Do not miss that! This is a joyous reality for worship. It is a compelling reality for preaching the word. But it is a most solemn reality when there must be confrontation and pleading for

repentance of sin and when consequences must be carried out when there is no repentance.

C. Thus the church must take of the utmost seriousness the authority and gravity of church discipline. It should not fail to perform discipline where Scripture calls for it. And it must discipline with the gravity of Jesus Christ Himself in the midst. And those who are disciplined thusly must understand the implications for themselves. You take the elders' instruction lightly and you take the action of the church lightly, you are taking God Himself lightly. You do not get any more dangerous than that!

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D. These provisions cannot be carried out without there being a church. The instruction Jesus gives here is dependent upon the existence of an assembly of believers who are committed to one another as an identifiable body. Herein church membership is implied. You will not find a command in the Bible that says, "You must be a member of a local church," but you cannot carry out the commands that are here without there being such a body. And that brings me to reiterate this thing of church membership. A church is not a building, and it is not an unidentifiable nebulous group of people who move in and out of a group like shoppers choosing to make their purchases at Walmart this week, Target next week and Pick n Save the week after that. No, this is why we have classes on church membership and why we have a covenant and why to serve in key roles in this body you must be a member. Your membership is covenantal in nature. There is commitment, and there is accountability. It may be out of vogue in today's consumer culture, but it is very much a part of the biblical portrait of Christians united in the name of Christ to fulfill his purposes and display his glory in the midst of a dark and perverse generation.

III. The Reason for Bringing the Rambler Home

A. I remind you now of the parable Jesus gave of the man who owns a hundred sheep. One goes astray. So he leaves the 99 and pursues the wanderer. He goes after the rambler. And if he finds it, what does he do?

He rejoices! He celebrates. This is the reason for seeking the wandering sheep: to return him to the fold! This is a joyful conclusion.

B. Jesus died for God's children. The gospel is that God so loved that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him might NOT PERISH. It is not the will of God the Father that any one of his little ones should perish. It is not the will of God that any of his sheep should ultimately be lost. For this reason he appointed his Son to live among us as one of us and undergo the excruciation of the cross and to pour his own wrath upon him for us. So Jesus performed this work. He suffered and died and was raised. And he kept every single one of God's sheep. He made this point forcefully clear as Jesus prayed to the Father before his crucifixion. A key aspect of the work he accomplished was this, that he not lose one. In John 17, Jesus prayed, "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me ... While I was with them, I kept them in your name . . . I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost."

Jesus came and died so that he might GAIN and KEEP God's children. He died to provide right standing with God by faith in him. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified as a gift to be received by faith. In the middle of this talk of how the children are to keep one another from sin, I would take this moment to point my words directly at you who need to be converted and forgiven of your sin. God made Christ who knew no sin to be sin in our behalf so that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God by faith. If you have not repented of your sin and trusted in Christ or the forgiveness and righteousness of God, there is no better time than now to do just that.

Jesus came and died to provide cleansing to wash away sin both judicially and actually, to produce children who would yearn for and pursue holiness.

C. So the reason for bringing the rambles home is that it is the will of God that none of his children be lost. The little ones are God's children we whose faith is in Christ. He cares deeply for us. DEEPLY. He will not lose them. How does he keep them? Through discipline! Loving discipline! It is in light of the fact that he loves them and will pursue them that Jesus provides this process of discipline in the life of the church. Discipline is the

loving provision of God to preserve and protect and keep His children unto himself.

Our generation despises discipline. It despises righteousness as well. The two go hand in hand. God loves His people and He prizes righteousness in his people; therefore, he disciplines. This is precisely what the writer of Hebrews communicates in chapter 12. He reminds of the exhortation that address his people as sons:

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.
For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, 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.

God, who loves his elect so much he gave his own Son for their forgiveness, is not going to let them wander off into sin and perish. He will pursue them through discipline. Love disciplines. You know I used to hate it when my parents pulled out the board of education, but the older I get the more I thank God and them for it and the more I appreciate God's own discipline in my life. It is not an indicator that he despises me but that he loves me.

Conclusion

So look when someone sins or someone sins against you, do not gossip or slander. Rather, love them enough, love Christ enough, and love the church enough to follow Christ's process of dealing here. It is a process

that demonstrates his mercy, provides opportunity for forgiveness, and models Christ to the world.