Two Gather - Part One

Relentless Grace

## (Matthew 18:15-20)

I am so glad to have all of you with us here today as we begin a brand-new message series entitled “Two Gather.” In our culture today, so many people try to do it on their own, trying to make it by themselves, because honestly, I think many people are just tired of being hurt. In fact, I wonder if any of you have noticed how easily people are offended today? And it seems like Christians can be the most easily offended people of all. And maybe I just offended you, but it seems like so many of us as followers of Jesus feel like it is our responsibility to take offense at our culture. And so, we join our voices with all the other people around us who are offended, because we are offended by that other political party, by so-and-so’s social media post, by the next-door neighbors’ kids, and maybe even our own kids.

I want to talk to you today about God’s Relentless Grace as we are in this Lenten season of reflection. I thought it would be good with so many offended people around us to look at what Jesus said about doing life together. In fact, the Scripture I’m about to share with you is an important teaching for the church, because it is one of only two places in all four Gospels where Jesus mentions the church. And this is the only place where Jesus specifically directs a teaching toward the church and so I believe we would be wise to give this priority in our lives.

The Scripture I want to share with you comes from Matthew chapter 18, and so let’s dig in and discover what Jesus has to say to the church. Reading from verse 15, Jesus says,

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:15-20).

And so, the context behind two or three gathered together in my name is in regard to church discipline of a wayward believer. Verse 20 is the theme for this series, and many of you are familiar with that verse, but maybe what you didn’t know, is that this verse doesn’t have anything to do with a prayer meeting.

Jesus tells his disciples, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20).

And so, even out of context the principle is true, but how many people does it take for God to show up at a prayer meeting? Is it two or three? Or maybe, just maybe, it’s one, because Jesus told his disciples that the Father would send the Holy Spirit to what? “To be with you forever,” right? And so, he says,

“You know him, because he lives with you and will be in you” (John 14:16-17).

So, obviously the promise, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them,” doesn’t have anything to do with a prayer meeting or even gathering together for worship. Because Jesus said in Matthew chapter 28,

“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

And so, Jesus is always with us, because as believers we are filled with his Spirit, but here in Matthew chapter 18 he’s talking about church discipline.

Jesus says, “If your brother sins against you,” or in other words, if your brother offends you, go and confront him, show him his fault, speak honestly to one another in the church. And so, he is describing being concerned enough about another brother or sister in Christ to confront them about their sin and lovingly attempt to restore them.

And then Jesus tells us, if that doesn’t work, then the allegations of misconduct should be confirmed by one or two others. And so, you get a couple of believers, and you go back and have this conversation again making sure that all the information is correct. You call that person back to repentance and restoration, and you do it together with the hope that they will listen, that they will turn, and your brother or sister will be restored to fellowship.

But Jesus goes on to say, if they refuse to listen to the two or three, if they still refuse to repent, he says, then go and tell it to the whole church. Now, he’s not saying to gossip about them, he’s talking about calling them out, declaring the truth before the whole church, because “a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.” And so, he says,

“Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast…” (1 Corinthians 5:6).

In other words, if they refuse to repent, you can’t allow that sinful influence, that unrepentant sinner to remain in the church.

That’s why the apostle Paul tells the church in Corinth, “You should be filled with grief” or James takes it up another level and says,

“Grieve, mourn and wail, change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom, humble yourselves before the Lord” (James 4:9-10).

And so, Jesus expects us to remove the yeast, the sin from the church, or as the apostle Paul encouraged the church,

“Put out of your fellowship the man who did this?” (1 Corinthians 5:2).

This is a hard word to preach and it’s even tougher to receive because confrontation is difficult. But what I find interesting is that in a culture where everybody is openly declaring what they believe, sharing their opinions without regard to others feelings, the one place where Jesus tells us to declare the truth is the place where we are least likely to do it. In fact, I only know one pastor who has ever called out an unrepentant church member in front of the congregation.

And so, as I was considering this passage, I was wondering why the Lord would make this his priority concern for the church? You know, typically as Christians we are more concerned about making people feel welcome, but this teaching of Jesus seems to be a great way to keep people from ever coming to the church. But you know what I realized, most confrontation, most church discipline, never goes as far as someone being told to leave the church. You see, the truth of the matter is that this is going on all the time on a one-by-one basis, it’s happening in your family, and among your friends, and so restoration is happening all the time.

You see, Jesus’ objective for this instruction to the church is to make the church’s commitment to holiness crystal clear. In other words, the church is not a country club with a cross on top, and so people who are not committed to following Jesus, who are not committed to holiness, purity, and righteousness won’t show up. And so, Jesus wants people to count the cost before they join, and I know that seems opposite to the modern evangelical movement, but if we go back to the beginning of the chapter, I want you to see this so that we can get a better understanding of his purpose.

In verse two, Jesus called a little child and had him stand among them, before saying to his disciples,

“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:2-4).

And so, Jesus begins by telling us that we must humble ourselves, becoming like little children, and we must remain as little children or we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. In other words, as children we need to be protected, cared for, and yes, in verse 15, even corrected like children. And we can understand that, because children need to be corrected when they do wrong, and even as they are growing up, they still need to be confronted, corrected, and gently restored.

But how do we do this when our brother or sister sins against us? How do we let go of the offense and confront one another with grace? It’s unfortunate that we live in a culture where we don’t have very many positive role models. People are offended about this or that and are quick to share their opinions with abusive outbursts of anger. But ranting and raving about an offense doesn’t make you more like Jesus and it certainly doesn’t point other people to the freedom and joy that is found in a relationship with Jesus. And that’s why he tells us,

“My dear brothers (and sisters), take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for (a man or a woman's) anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1:19-20).

But what often happens is that you and I are offended by this or that injustice, allowing ourselves to become angry about it, and it begins to escalate to the next level. In fact, social media is a breeding ground for offenses about your issue, whatever your issue is, because we all have our issue. And so, for you, it may be that thing that you think everybody should be upset about and that as Christians we should be doing something about it. But that’s why the Holy Spirit tells us to stop and take a deep breathe, to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, because allowing ourselves to become offensively angry isn’t helping bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Jesus tells us to humble ourselves, becoming like little children, and he says,

“Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you” (James 1:21).

He says, accept the word planted in you, because it is our standard of holiness and it’s useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). And so, it’s the word of God that purifies the church by dealing with sin and showing the path of righteousness, obedience, and restoration.

And so, in this passage Jesus expresses his concern for his children, because he cares about the welfare of the church. That’s what he’s talking about is the local church, the Greek word is ecclesia, an assembly of believers who have been called out. We translate it the church and this is a body of believers responsible as the Bible says to…

“Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; (because) without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

It’s holiness that we need and so this is an opportunity to determine as followers of Jesus that we’re not trying to make a point, but we want to make a difference. You see, the thing is that too many people are simply trying to make a point, but we’re not just trying to win an argument, we’re trying to lead people to the grace and goodness of Jesus. And that’s why the Bible says,

“If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Galatians 6:1).

We do that by showing them grace, having some empathy, and surely that is the best way to make a difference in the life of someone who has found their life detoured.

And so, it is in this way that we demonstrate the love of Jesus, and we must because Jesus tells us,

"The things that cause people to sin are bound to come…” (Luke 17:1).

And so, someone is going to let you down, they’re going to betray you, they’re not going to show up, they’re not going to say thank you, they’re not going to call you back, and the temptation is to take offense because you’ve been disappointed. But the truth of the matter is that they’re just like us, because we’ve let people down, we’ve said things we shouldn’t have, and so maybe we shouldn’t expect so much.

In fact, the apostle Paul said let me tell you what people are going to be like in the end times. He said,

"People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Timothy 3:2-4).

In other words, sin is going to abound, and people will let you down. In fact, if you’re not Jesus, you’re not perfect either, and you’ll let people down. And I hate to tell you this, but I will let you down, because I’m not perfect either. And so, let’s love one another, forgiving just as we’ve been forgiven, and don’t take offense when someone lets you down, but recognize that none of us are perfect and let’s lower our expectations.

One of the things that I recognize about Jesus is that he was never shocked by people’s behavior. He knew that they weren’t perfect, he knew that they would sin, because he knew they fell short of his righteousness. And so, when he met the woman at the well in John chapter 4, she was surprised that he would even talk to her, but he wasn’t at all surprised by who she was. In fact, he said,

“You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband” (John 4:17-18).

And so, he said, “Yes, you’re shacking up with a guy right now,” but he didn’t judge her, he didn’t reject her, he simply offered her the living water that she needed.

When the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who’s going to be sitting on your right or, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matthew 18:1). Jesus just kept loving them.

When Peter was bragging that he would never deny Jesus, saying, if you need anything I will always be there, I’m your guy, I’ve got your back. Even though Peter lied to Jesus, betrayed him, denied him, and abandoned him in his time of need. Jesus didn’t go on Facebook or Instagram bad mouthing Christians, he didn’t quit going to church, but he kept on loving and he forgave Peter. In fact, he went a step further and restored Peter giving him an assignment to care for the believers.

I wonder what would happen in the church today if we followed Jesus’ example, lowering our expectations of others, refusing to be offended, and instead extending grace because we recognize that we all mess up. I believe we would do well because somebody is going to let you down and the Bible tells us,

“Where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:20-21).

In other words, you were not made right with God because you’re so good. You were not saved because you had it all together. It’s not as if you are so holy and never did anything wrong, but the Bible says, “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more.” And so, it’s by grace, it’s not because of you, it’s by the grace of God, it’s the favor of God.

The Bible tells us in Ephesians chapter 2,

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

And so, we are saved and we gather together to worship, because we have put our faith in what Jesus did on the cross for us. We don’t always get it right, sometimes we need to be corrected, but because of his perfection, his righteousness, his goodness, and his grace that we are made right with God. It’s not our goodness, because we have all sinned, and therefore we need the grace of God for ourselves and for others.

Now, I don’t say this to diminish or minimize any hurt that you may be experiencing right now, because I know that some of you are facing some really deep and significant pains. Some of you have been betrayed, somebody said something unkind about you, spreading false information about you, and so you’ve been hurt and deeply wounded. And I know how that feels, it’s easy for us to take offense, but Jesus shows us a better way, lowering our expectations of others, and raising our expectations for more grace, abundant grace, because God gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

You see, grace is relentless, grace meets someone one-on-one, grace meets someone with one or two others, because it recognizes the value of the person, the value of that relationship, and so grace attempts to bring that person back to repentance and restoration. That’s why the Holy Spirit said,

“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Galatians 6:1).

This is so important, because if you really love a brother or sister, if you really care about a person, you can’t be indifferent to their sin, and your goal is their restoration because we love one another without limits.

In John chapter 8, there was a woman caught in the act of adultery and this group of self-righteous men brought her to Jesus. They were ready to condemn her, and they said to Jesus,

"Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” (John 8:4-5).

But Jesus wasn’t shocked by her behavior, he wasn’t angered, but instead he bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. We don’t know exactly what he wrote, but tradition tells us that he may have been writing the sins of her accusers. Because the Bible says Jesus stood up and said to those who wanted to stone her,

"If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” …at this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there” (John 8:7, 9).

Jesus is calling us to drop our stones, not to judge one another, but to lovingly confront one another with the purpose of reconciliation and restoration. And this is not because of our goodness, but because of his goodness, because we’ve been forgiven so much.

This is what we find modeled for us, Jesus is our example, he was quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. That’s the way that I want to live, because my offense, my anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Let us love one another, following Jesus’ example to this woman who was left standing there alone. Jesus asked her where her accusers were, has no one condemned you? “No one, Sir,” she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:10-11).

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