**Year A – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Matthew 18:15-20**

**September 24, 2017**

**What Does Christian Love Do for the Sinner?**

1. **It corrects the sinner using God’s law**
2. **It heaps God’s forgiveness upon the sinner**

I want us all to imagine this scenario for just a moment. You woke up this morning and couldn’t help but feel excited about today. And that’s because, today, you know you will have the chance to see your closest loved one. Perhaps it is a sibling, a parent, a friend, a relative. You have made plans after worship today to go visit the person and have lunch with that loved one. You can hardly wait.

After you leave worship today, you drive to the person’s house. But upon arrival, you see a devastating sight. His car is in the front driveway, so you know he is home, that is fine, but that isn’t what catches your attention. What catches your attention are the giant flames and billows of smoke which are rising to the sky, burning his house. And they will burn it to the ground if they aren’t put out. You look through the smoke and flames into his bedroom window, and you see that person laying on the bed, passed out from the smoke. He is still breathing, but you must move quickly. Time is of the essence if he is going to survive.

Of course your reaction is a quick one. You call 911. You perhaps look for a safe entrance to the house, so you can rescue him. The very last thought that would cross your mind at the moment would be to simply walk away, let that loved one die, and go about your day. Because you have better things to do. Because you don’t want to bother that person. Because you just don’t care enough to help. This of course would be cowardly, selfish, and shameful behavior.

But yet so often this is the behavior we choose, friends. All around us souls are dying. They are indulging in sin so deeply that they are unconscious, completely unaware of the flames which are rising around them. And these flames of hell will consume them for eternity if we do not do everything we can to pull them from the eternal fire. Yet so often we say we have better things to do. Or we don’t want to bother that person, or appear “judgmental”. Or we just flat-out don’t care enough to help.

So how do we rescue them? Today we take a deep look at what Christian love truly looks like. We will see that to save our loved ones from the flames which are surrounding them, threatening to bring them to eternal destruction, true Christian love warns them. We uphold the law of God, and we bring them God’s forgiveness.

Setting the scene

We are again a few months from Jesus’ crucifixion here, and he is preparing his disciples for their lives of ministry. But he is also teaching them how they are to act—simply as God’s people.

He teaches them that they must avoid sin at all costs. That they must seek to save those who may be wandering. And today he gives them—and us—specific instructions on how to deal with these wandering sheep. He lays it out in steps.

Part 1: It corrects the sinner using God’s law

Jesus begins in today’s first verse, quite explicitly saying, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.”

A very simple, very practical command from Jesus here. If someone sins, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. And the Greek *eis se* here, which translated is “against you”, may even be a bit redundant. Yes you are to approach a brother who has sinned against you. But every sin by a Christian is a sin against God’s people. Every sin by a Christian is damaging to us who bear the name of Christ. Because it can tempt other Christians to follow the leader and indulge in that same sin. Also, a sin by an individual Christian can cause all Christians to be viewed as hypocrites by the unbelieving world. A sin by an individual Christian can disappoint or even damage the faith of another Christian, as they see the dear brother or sister in Christ indulging in such a way.

And we are not to ignore the sin. But neither are we to gossip about the sin or spread rumors about it. We are to go directly to the person and “show him his fault, just between the two of us.” The first thing we want is to for the person to see his sin and repent. The last thing we want is for the reputation of the person to be harmed.

If you have lived in any community, attended any school, or been a part of any organization for an amount of time, you know how the rumor mill works. An event occurs, perhaps even a sinful event. Sinful people talk about the sinful event. Every account of the event is an attempt to outdo or give a more shocking account than the last person did. And before you know it, the rumor is out there, and it is ugly. And it damages all the people involved—both the person at the center of it and the people who have perpetuated it. Even if it is completely false, only partially true, or completely true. And if you have been the victim of a nasty rumor, you know how painful it is.

If only the world would take a Christian view of how to handle rumors! If only Christians would take a Christian view of how to handle sin and rumor! All of this could have been avoided! And the rule is simple. Go and show the person his fault, just between the two of you. If his sin is true, and he listens to you and repents, turning to Jesus alone for forgiveness, it is over! Problem solved, no one’s reputations damaged, another person rescued from the flames of sin and brought to the cool waters of repentance and forgiveness.

When Christians act in love using the law of God, the world is a much nicer place, isn’t it?

And after this comes the fun part. You have the opportunity to proclaim the free and full forgiveness of Jesus to the sinner.

Part 2: It heaps God’s forgiveness upon the sinner

In fact, Jesus says in the second half of the verse, “If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.” If we take a proactive stance to help a sinning brother or sister in the faith, and we approach them in a Christian, private, God-pleasing manner, we have a great chance to win our brothers and sisters over. Because we have brought them God’s law. But as we win them over, we also bring them the gospel.

As Jesus says, “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.” This is the second time that Jesus has said this in just a few chapters of Matthew. His point is clear: the actions of concerned individual Christians or the church itself are backed by heaven itself. As we proclaim forgiveness at the beginning of our church services, saying, “As a called servant of Christ and by his authority alone, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” we aren’t just saying these things to be fluffy and nice. We are proclaiming heaven-backed truth. Every last sin is forgiven, and the Triune God backs it up. As you proclaim to the person whose sin has been repented of, that that person is forgiven, all the forces of heaven back you. It isn’t you fabricating shallow comfort for the person; it is heaven itself backing you!

And as we forgive, as approaching an sinning brother or sister in a God-pleasing manner with forgiveness on our minds, this opens the door to all sorts of spiritual blessings. Jesus says in the closing verses of the day, “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.”

When Christian brothers and sisters rise above the worldly way of rumor and gossip and rather approach each other directly and privately, both to admonish and to proclaim forgiveness, the result is that we enjoy warm, true Christian fellowship. And we gather around the Word of God, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and He himself is with us! He hears our prayers as we pray for the success of the Word, prayers of intercession on behalf of sick and suffering brothers and sisters, prayers of thanksgiving on behalf of rejoicing brothers and sisters.

Do you see how, when brotherly admonition is neglected, the church becomes a haven for unrepentant sinners, but when brotherly admonition is practiced in a God-pleasing manner, it becomes a hospital for sinners? A hospital where they get well, and stronger, and continue to enjoy the fellowship and strengthening of their brothers and sisters? And that is what we always want the community of saints to be. A hospital for sinners, not a haven for sinful action which results in the flames of hell eventually consuming us.

So, dear friends, do you part. Save a brother and sister from the flames of hell by pointing out their sin, their blind spot, to them, privately and lovingly. Pull them from the burning building of the world, the temptations of which Satan uses in his attempt to bring them to hell forever, and heap God’s forgiveness upon the sinner when he repents. This is what Christian love truly looks like. And as Christians, we do Christian love here. Amen.