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## ***Four Essential Attitudes for a Healthy Christian Community***

### **An Attitude of Protection**

**Matthew 18:15-20**

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Imagine that you had a child and you took that child to a daycare center to be well cared for. A period of months passed and you received the disturbing news that your child was being molested there at the daycare. Obviously you'd be very upset and you would confront the daycare director. Suppose that while you were there, you learned something far more disturbing. You found out that literally all of the workers at the daycare knew this had been going on for some time, but they did nothing to stop it. You would be extremely upset and you would confront those people and say, "You people knew this was going on. Why didn't someone do something to stop it?" And they would reply to you, "We had a meeting and we all talked about it, but we felt like it would be too judgmental for us to get involved. We really don't have a right to judge somebody else's behavior; that would be completely intolerant and unloving. So we thought the most loving thing we could do was to just ignore it and hope it went away."

How would you respond to that? Would you respond by saying, "I want you to know that is extremely loving and I completely understand that. As a matter of fact, the reason I brought my child to this place is because you are so loving and compassionate. Now I know all the more that you are loving, and I'm going to invite all my friends and neighbors to bring their children to your daycare as well." Would you respond that way? No, of course not! You would be very upset because that was completely irresponsible behavior. You had a right to expect that your child would be carefully nurtured and cared for in that environment.

The same thing could be said of the Christian family, as God brings His spiritual babies and gives them to us as His church to raise them. We're all responsible to create an environment that is healthy, and to provide the protection that is necessary in order for them to grow to maturity. There are a lot of people who believe that the church is supposed to be about love and grace and mercy and forgiveness, that basically we should just tolerate anything. Some people believe that "anything goes" and anything less is judgmentalism. Some even believe the idea that love means letting people do whatever they want and never judging them for their behavior.

We need to understand that isn't love at all – that's just irresponsibility. We do have a biblical responsibility to protect the family of God. We need to protect the spiritual children among us, but we also need to protect those who are going astray, in a sense from themselves, because they are headed down the path of destruction. So we, as the church, do have a significant responsibility. The question is: How do we do this?

Jesus outlines that quite clearly in Matthew 18. We've been talking about essential attitudes for creating a healthy Christian community. We've talked about the attitude of humility where we remember that we all entered the family of God as spiritual infants, and someone cared for us, nurtured us, and parented us spiritually. Therefore, we should humble ourselves and do the same – accept the responsibility for the spiritual infants among us and raise them to maturity.

Then we talked about an attitude of holiness. One of the things that new believers need is a pattern to follow. They don't understand how to take faith and translate it into real life. They need to see it in our lives, because God has made us in such a way that that is how we learn. Therefore, it becomes essential that we accurately portray to others what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Jesus uses very strong terminology to tell us to do whatever is necessary to deal with those sins in our lives in order that we do model right behavior before these people.

The question then arises: What do we do if someone is unwilling to deal with their sin? Jesus said that each of us has a responsibility to examine our own hearts and deal with our own sin. But what if someone chooses not to do that? What if someone is living in sin and has simply refused to deal with that sin and it's affecting the people around them?

We, then, get into the third attitude – which is an attitude of protection – the need to protect the little spiritual infants. We need to protect the family itself and even protect that person, lest they suffer severe consequences for their behavior. Jesus outlines what we're supposed to do and how we are to do it in a three-step process.

The first step is outlined in Matthew 18:15: "If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother." Some translations say, "if your brother sins against you" or that may be footnoted in your Bible. There's some discussion as to whether "against you" is actually in the translation or not. I think the point that's being made is more obvious in the phrase "in private." As we go through these three steps, we'll find that the strategy is to keep the circle as small as possible, because that is the best way to resolve these situations.

In the first case, if someone sins, or specifically sins against me, the only people who would know that would be me and that person. Therefore, that's the smallest circle possible. If I respond correctly, then I go to that person and let them know what has happened, and I seek to point it out to them so that they might confess it and resolve this issue. It's important that I try to keep that circle as small as possible. If we can bring about resolution, then we're the only two who need to know about it and we go on from there.

To use a metaphor, we're talking about going down this path of following Christ. A person may be starting to stray off the path, but they're not very far off the path. If someone will gently come alongside them, bring them back into alignment, then we go on and nobody else needs to know. So I don't think the sins are limited to sins against us – it's just that we say those would be the most private of all.

"If your brother sins (*which is a believer ...*) go and reprove them." That word "reprove" means to correct or point out the sin. It's going to this person and pointing out the fact that they're getting off the path and trying to lovingly bring them back onto the path. In Galatians 6:1 there is a wonderful term that I think is very helpful in understanding the attitude in which we go. Paul is talking about the whole topic of discipline when he says, "Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass {*or sin*} you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness ..." That word "restore" is a very interesting word because it's a medical term that means to set a broken bone. It tells us that when we approach these people, it's not an all-out confrontation. It's not sticking your finger in their nose; it's not yelling and screaming at them. But rather, it's with love and kindness and compassion that we're sharing a concern. Our concern is that it seems they are straying off the path, and we want to lovingly try to influence them back on the path.

Imagine you were a doctor and someone came to you with a broken leg. You wouldn't grab that leg by the ankle and start yanking that leg around, saying, "Boy, I see you have a broken leg here. We think we can fix that." The whole idea of reprove is the idea that to set a broken bone you would do it gently, kindly and with compassion. You would realize that it is a very painful thing. That's the same attitude which is being portrayed in how we go about this.

In Matthew 18:15 we notice the goal of what we're doing in the latter part of the verse: "...if he listens to you, you have won a brother." That word "win" is the same word that's used when it talks about winning the lost to Jesus. You have influenced them back into alignment – back into right behavior before God. That's what we're trying to accomplish here, and it would take place in a very private setting. This means that if somebody sins against you or you are aware of some sin, you don't go to your Growth Group and say, "You know, I'm thinking about confronting so and so. What do you all think about that?" You don't stand up in your class and say, "I have a prayer request. I'm thinking about confronting so and so and I'm just wondering if you'd pray with me about that." The whole point is that the circle needs to be kept as tight as possible so it's between you, them, and God. And if they respond, then those are the only people who need to know about it.

One of the principles we need to understand is that the closer that person is to the right path (if they haven't yet strayed very far) the potential of bringing them back onto the right path is very, very high. Most people will respond very well. When you say, "You know, I'm very concerned about this. I've seen this in your life and I thought maybe we could talk about it," most people will thank you for caring enough to talk to them. They will usually say they do need to deal with that area and will come right back on that path. But the farther they get off the path, the harder it is to deal with them. And so, that's part of the strategy –to get to them early, before they get too far down the wrong path.

What are we talking about when it mentions sin in verse 15? Obviously, all of us have sin in our lives that we're dealing with, as we wrestle through changes and try to become more like Christ. Does that mean that we're constantly poking our noses into everyone else's business, trying to straighten them out? The answer would be, "Of course not."

What Jesus is talking about is: 1) sins that are public. He is going to talk about the potential of those sins infecting others as it begins to spread and it becomes known. This is talking about, first of all, sins that are public and sins that are clearly defined. It is not talking about a difference of opinion. But it's also talking about sins that other people are unwilling to deal with. As long as you know something is wrong and you're confessing it and dealing with it, you seem to be on track. But this is someone who is unwilling to deal with their own sin. Either they're not aware of it or they're unwilling to re-examine their own heart. It's an area that is being completely ignored by them. Therefore, it is necessary to deal with it.

It is my opinion that verse 15 ought to be happening in the church all the time. We all need someone in our life who's willing to come alongside us, who cares about us, and who has a relationship with us. They would be the first one to know that we're veering off the path and they would lovingly say, "I'm concerned about this and I'd really like to be a part of helping you get back on track." We all need to know that these people are there, so that we don't get too far astray. That should really be happening on a regular basis and it makes it essential that we have relationships with one another. We need to know one another and be involved in one another's life – it's called community.

But if that person does not respond correctly, then we must move on to Step #2 which is outlined in verse 16: “But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.” So we go back a second time, this time with two or three witnesses, in order to, again, keep the circle very small. We’re still talking about maybe three or four people, so it’s a very small circle. It means that person hasn’t strayed all that far off the path and the potential for restoration is still very high.

One of the questions that arises is: Who are these witnesses? Many people believe these witnesses are witnesses to the confrontation. In other words, you take two or three people and they go with you to confront this person. But I don’t think that is what He’s talking about, and my main reason for thinking that would come from the text itself. There’s always a danger when I go to somebody else, and seek to restore them or confront them about some area that maybe there is something wrong in my perspective. Maybe I’m seeing something incorrectly. What I need is to make sure that I’m seeing this correctly, so I don’t necessarily need people to witness our confrontation, but rather I need people to witness the behavior. I need others’ input to know if I’m seeing this correctly and to help decide if this is an area that we need to be dealing with.

Verse 16 in your Bible is probably in all capital letters, which means that it’s an Old Testament quotation. It’s actually a quotation from Deuteronomy 19:15: “A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.” The statement in the Law in Deuteronomy is that one person could not promote this personal agenda and say, “I’ve got something against this guy” and bring it before the court. But, rather, there would have to be two or three witnesses who would affirm, “Yes, we, too, have seen this behavior and we know that it is going on,” before that matter would be dealt with. That’s what Jesus is quoting in Matthew 18. Jesus is saying it needs to be two or three witnesses to the sin – to the behavior. It’s not one person’s agenda. It’s not one person with a grudge against somebody else. With two or three witnesses, there’s input for me to decide if I am seeing this right. There are multiple witnesses to help decide: Is this really a sin? Is this something we need to be dealing with? But still, the circle is very small. In verse 16 it even says “that every fact may be confirmed.”

I have found that almost every time you go to someone one-on-one and they don’t respond well {which I still find to be unusual and the exception}, it’s typically because they deny that the sin is happening. They say, “You’re just not seeing that right,” or “I’d didn’t do that.” There’s nothing you can really do because you say “I saw it” and they say “You didn’t” and you are stuck. What happens with two or three is that now you have two or three people who say, “We’ve seen it, too.” Now there are multiple witnesses and that person will typically say, “You know, you’re right. That is true. That is happening.” And hopefully they will deal with the sin. Or sometimes they just dig their heels in, but at least there’s a confirmation that there really is a problem.

Verse 16 is the second step in the process, where the circle still remains very, very small, and there are only a few people who know about this. I think one of the advantages of waiting until you have multiple witnesses is that it creates this God-ordained timing. One of the things that is always a struggle is how quickly do we take these steps? If I come to you and talk to you about something, and you respond poorly, I can turn right around tomorrow and come with multiple witnesses. But typically that doesn’t work out very well. Rather, it’s better

with a God-ordained timing, where I've talked to you about something and you don't respond very well. Then I continue to pray about it; I continue to be involved in your life; and I continue to share my concern with you. But basically I'm going to wait until two or three other people know about it. That may be a day ... or a week ... a month ... or longer. I have had a situation that went up to a year, where I knew something was happening because I had witnessed it myself. But I waited until two or three other people became aware of it and we went back together.

The principle, as I understand it outlined by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5, is the concern that, when we're dealing with discipline, we don't want the infection to spread to the whole body. We're trying to prevent that, and if necessary, we even have to pull that person out to prevent it from spreading. But if the only person who knows it is me, then the thing isn't spreading – it's basically contained. So there is concern, but we're watching it. It cannot spread to the body without two or three witnesses knowing about it. When two or three witnesses know about it, it still would be very small and contained, and the possibility of dealing with it and having a good response is still very high.

The third step is when the person doesn't respond. Two or three witnesses go and say, "We've all seen this and we're very concerned." Again, the motive is to win that person back into a relationship with Christ, but that person is digging their heels in and saying, "I just don't want to deal with it. Leave me alone." Then you move on to step three, which is verse 17: "And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church..." What does he mean by that? Does that mean someone stands up before the church and says, "By the way, I have an announcement to make. I've confronted so and so, and they're not responding well." No, that's not what he means at all. He doesn't mean that you stand up before a Sunday School class or put an announcement in the newsletter.

Up until this point, it has been a very private thing. The circle has been very, very small. I have first talked to the person and they didn't respond. Now three of us have talked to this person and they still didn't respond. That's still a very small circle – maybe four or five people knew. But at that point, it goes from that small circle to the authority of the church, which would be the Elder Board. It goes before the Elder Board and now it's gone from something very private, to private witnesses. Those witnesses come, in a sense, before the court (Elder Board) and say, "This is our concern. This is what is happening." And now it falls under the umbrella of the authority of the church to deal with that, because you're now at risk that this is going to influence those spiritual children. The potential that they will be "spiritually molested" is there, and we certainly want to prevent that. But there is also a need to protect that person and help stop them from going down the path of destruction. So, out of love and compassion, it's now the responsibility of the church to get involved.

This is the way the process should work: One person who has a relationship with the person who is sinning becomes aware of it and, out of love and compassion, they sit down and say, "You know, I'm very concerned about this." But that person chooses not to listen – maybe even denies that the behavior is happening. So, a period of time passes and two or three other people now witness that same behavior. It has spread a little bit, and so those people go and tell the person they are very concerned and that it needs to be dealt with. But if they still choose not to listen, then those witnesses go before the Board of Elders and say, "This is our concern. This is what we've done."

As I was going through this passage this week, it was interesting to me that in the 17 years that I have been a pastor, I've never seen this carried out correctly one time. Not one time. In every discipline issue I've ever been involved in, it was because eventually a pastor or elder became aware of something and then sought to try to deal with it, and it ultimately ended up in a discipline issue. But how widespread, typically, do those things get by the time the leadership becomes aware of them? Usually that person isn't just a little ways off the path – they are way off the path. By then, dozens of people know, and it's become a huge mess. What I hear people saying is: "When are the Elders ever going to do something?" And what goes through my mind is: Why wasn't somebody who loved this person doing something when that person was just a little ways off the path? And then just a little bit farther off the path? The problem isn't that the Elders aren't doing anything. The problem is that the people closest to that person didn't care enough to sit down and say, "I see a problem." Because when the situation is such a mess by the time it gets to the Elders, the chance for restoration and reconciliation is very, very slight. In fact, often by that time, the person is not even attending the church any more.

We need to understand that, in a church of 3,000 people, there is no way the Elders are going to know what's going on in the private lives of the people in the congregation. It's the responsibility of each one of us, as family members, to be responsible to those people that we know and have a relationship with. We need to get involved when we see someone going off the path and take the necessary steps to deal with it. In almost every case, it can be dealt with effectively if the person is only a little ways off the path. But when we choose not to do that, the person gets way off the path, and it is then much harder to resolve.

Lets' say that the process has been carried out correctly and it comes before the church. The Elders sit down and talk with the person, but the person absolutely refuses to deal with the sin. Jesus says in the second half of verse 17: "...if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer (*or some translations say a sinner, a tax collector*). What does that mean? I think Jesus is saying that, since they are choosing to live like an unbeliever, then treat them as an unbeliever – treat them as a sinner and a tax collector. When you read through the various passages in the New Testament about discipline, it uses phrases like "don't associate with ... don't eat with ... put out of." But if you study the context of those passages, what it is talking about is the life of the church. It's saying that since they're living that way, then they are not really a part of the life of the church. So they are not put in positions of leadership and they aren't asked to serve anywhere. It's communicated to the members of the church that this person is under discipline, and because they are living like an unbeliever, it is an alert to treat them that way.

It doesn't mean, though, that they cannot come into the building. The church isn't the building; the church is the people. Sinners and tax collectors are welcome to come to a worship service and to sit under the teaching of the Word, and maybe God will use that to convict their hearts. It doesn't mean that if we see them at the grocery store that we turn away from them, or we shun them, or we treat them in a way that is unloving. If they are my neighbor, it doesn't mean that I don't talk to them or that I can't have anything to do with them. But, rather, like what we would do with a sinner and a tax collector – like we would do with an unbeliever – we seek to love them and win them back into relationship with God. But they do need to understand that they cannot really be treated like part of the family until they are willing to deal with their sin.

So there is a protection for those spiritual infants where we communicate to them that this person is really not living like a follower of Jesus, and they need to know that. There is protection for the greater family, but there's also protection for that person. We need to make sure that person understands that they cannot be a part of this family until they choose to deal with that behavior. We need to let them know that, for their sake, they need to deal with the sin. That is what Jesus is talking about in verse 17.

In verses 18-20, I think Jesus is establishing the authority of the church and trying to help us understand that this is not just a decision that a local church makes. It does not mean that the person can choose to go down the street and attend another church and that's the end of it. Typically that's what happens. They drop out of the church, go down the street to another church and feel that they've basically by-passed the discipline. What Jesus is going to say is that it doesn't work that way. Because what is happening is not just a local church making a decision, but rather it is acting in Jesus' stead on earth with the authority of Jesus. It's a decision meaning they are now outside of the church (not the church building) – but the church as a body. That is the affirmation in heaven, as well as on earth, and so they can go into any building in town they want to enter, but they will no longer be under the protective umbrella of the church until they repent of that sin and make it right.

Verse 18: “Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” What does He mean by the binding and loosing? Some people think it means that “to bind” is that which was acceptable and “to loose” is that which was unacceptable. What would be said here is that God in heaven has determined what is acceptable and unacceptable, so the church isn't acting on some subjective, arbitrary standard. But God has determined what is acceptable and what is unacceptable; the church is merely affirming that. Therefore God in heaven says the person is under discipline and the church is simply carrying that out.

I go in a little bit different direction on verse 18. The language “bind” and “loose” is also used in marriages in the New Testament. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7, says that if your partner dies you are no longer bound and you are loose to remarry. I think that is the language of the verse – that whatever is bound together as the family of God, the church of Jesus Christ on earth, is acknowledged in heaven. Because the church is acting under the authority of Jesus. Whatever is loosed on earth {meaning they are basically put out of the protective umbrella of the church} then that is also affirmed in the heavens, because the church is acting under the authority of Jesus.

Let me give you an example of that. In 1 Corinthians 5:5 the apostle Paul is talking about a discipline situation when he says: “I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” That is a very strong statement. First of all, notice that this person is not losing his salvation. Paul says the exact opposite – this person's spirit will be saved. But, because of his behavior, he says that he is turning him over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh. Another way of saying that is: “I am loosing them from the protective umbrella of the church and now they are out on their own and the enemy will destroy them.”

I think that is what Jesus is saying in Matthew 18, and that is true of the church. It doesn't have anything to do with the church building. They can go in any building in town that they want to, but the church is the church and that's affirmed in heaven, so until they choose to

repent of that sin, they cannot come back under the protective umbrella of the grace of the church. It is a very serious thing.

In Matthew 18:19, Jesus says, “Again I say to you ...” The word “again” is important, because He’s saying that He is going to say it a second time. What He is saying for the second time is that the church has the authority to act on behalf of Jesus.

V. 19: “Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.”

For a long time I wondered what that meant. When I trust Jesus as Savior the Holy Spirit indwells me, so wherever I am by myself, the presence of God is there. So why does He say that when two or three gather, there the presence of God is? He is saying that when I am by myself, I am not the church. It is only when we gather together as the children of God that we become the church. So He is saying, “When two or three are gathered in My name, there I am in your midst,” meaning: “there you act in behalf of Me. You have My authority to carry out what I’ve called you to carry out.” He is really saying that what happens on earth is affirmed in the heavens because the church is acting on His authority. When we come together as His people, we are the church. So there is an establishment of the authority of the church to do what Jesus has called us to do.

Church discipline is a very sobering thing – to realize that someone is being put outside the protective umbrella of the church, as Paul says, for the destruction of their flesh. That will affect their spouse, their children, the people around them, so it is a very serious thing. But it is an act of love. It is loving toward the spiritual infants who need to be protected and not molested spiritually. It is an act of love for the family of God to maintain a healthy environment for growth and maturity. But it’s also an act of love for that very person, because somehow that person needs to realize they are heading down a path of destruction. And if they don’t change they are going to suffer very serious consequences. So, in love, that person needs to be made aware of the sin.

If you were to take your child to that daycare center and your child were to be molested, while there were people around who knew it was happening, you would be very upset. How must God feel when He takes His spiritual children, places them in His “daycare center” and Christians stand by and watch while they are led astray, while nobody does anything to stop it? Let’s imagine that your son or daughter graduated from high school and now goes off to college and begins attending a good Bible-teaching church. But while they are there, they develop a relationship with one of the leaders in that church, and that leader was involved in all kinds of immoral behavior. And before you know it, your child has been lured away from that church and becomes involved in things that are very offensive to God. What if you would find out that there were many people in that church who knew what was going on, but they simply stood by and watched it happen? How would you feel about that?

We have a responsibility to the believers among us to do what is necessary to prevent that from happening, as privately as possible, and as compassionately as possible. But if it becomes necessary, then we must deal with that person. We must loose them, in a sense, from the body in order to protect the body and to make a point to them. We must do that in order for the church to be what Jesus has called the church to be.