

Living for heaven on earth 2: Do Justly

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to Matthew chapter 18. And it's the second week we've spent in this chapter where Jesus is teaching us about living on earth for heaven.
- And we can sum it up today, these verses from 15 to 20, in two words, do justly. In this chapter of Matthew 18, we saw last time that Jesus is teaching his followers about the life of his heavenly household, his family, whose true home is in the glory of heaven, but who meantime must live for heaven on earth.
- And the teaching is provoked by the question in verse 1, do you see it there, who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? In the light, that is, of the glorious picture Jesus has painted at the end of chapter 17, of all his followers being true sons and daughters of the king, rulers in the cosmos, exempt from all earthly rulers and taxes even.
- In the light of that, who's the greatest in the kingdom? It's amazing how talk of no taxes seems to get people very excited all the time, and that's rather what's happening to Jesus' followers here.
- Well, if this is true of us, who's the greatest of us then? But Jesus wrong-foots them totally, doesn't he? From this point, he points us that the first thing we need to grasp in the path to true greatness in the kingdom is to walk humbly.
- [1 : 4 3] That is, as we saw last time, to receive Jesus. To receive him as one who knows that in reality we ourselves are nothing except for what we receive from him.
- Except for being totally dependent on him like a little child. It's a very hard thing to swallow. Death to all of our personal pride and self-opinion.
- But Jesus points out, remember, that it'll be obvious if we have died to that in the way that we treat one another. If we receive brothers and sisters in Christ just as freely and with such greater welcome as Jesus has received us.
- That we'll not be rejecters of our brothers and sisters. That we'll see them as precious, cherished by God, never doing anything to risk their ruin by putting a stumbling block before them.
- And so, instead, we reflect the heart of our Father in heaven. The Father who leaves the fold of sheep to go and search for the one who's going astray.
- [2 : 5 1] We'll be people who give everything to restore the wanderer. And now Jesus continues in verse 15, continues speaking about these relationships within the Christian family, especially in terms of rupture and restoration of relationships.
- Now, in the Bible, we've often said that righteousness or justice primarily means right relationships. The essence of sin is the rupture of relationships between humans and God and between human beings and one another.
- And the essence of God's redemption, his restoration, restoration is restoring right relationships between man and God and therefore between men and women and one another.

That's why Peter, in his second letter, calls the kingdom of heaven the home of righteousness. The kingdom of heaven, the family home of Christ's church, is the place where right relationships rule.

And if the church is living on earth for heaven, if the church is the place where we pray, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, then the church must be a place where right relationships flourish, where righteousness flourishes.

[4 : 14] Remember, righteousness is Jesus' great concern for his people. Remember the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 to 7? It's all about living the life of righteousness. It's primarily described there in terms of right relationships.

And here in Matthew chapter 18, it's the same thing, but the focus is on the corporate life, the family life, the life of the community, the church, heaven's enclave on earth. That's what the church is.

The church is the show house of heaven. We're a light on the hill, Jesus said. We can't be hidden. Our light is to shine so that others see it and are pointed to heaven.

And in verses 15 to 20, Jesus' point is very clear. Because we are not yet home in the glory of heaven, because we're still living in earth for heaven, sin is going to be a problem for the church.

And therefore sin must be fought and overcome in the relationships in the church. Do you realize that?

[5 : 21] I don't think we're nearly as open and realistic as we need to be about this fact, that we have to fight for the relationships in the church. Recently I was looking at the website of Woodland Presbyterian Church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where my good friend Ralph Davis is the pastor.

Many of you I know have read his excellent commentaries on the Old Testament. And if you have, you'll not be surprised to read the kind of comment that he has on the front of their website for their church home page.

There's a notice to prospective members. It says this, If you're looking for a church home, we invite you to come to Woodland Presbyterian Church. We won't plead, hassle, or bug you.

We won't twist your arm to become members. We're not out to run up statistics. Isn't that refreshing? But he goes on to say this, I must warn you, This church is full of sinners.

Everyone who comes here is one. You'll need to remember that if you associate with us, or you may be unnecessarily disappointed. Well, that's typical Ralph Davis, and it's typical of his biblical realism.

[6 : 36] Sin must be constantly fought and overcome in church life. Even in this church, would you believe? And Jesus' point here is very clear.

Sinning, and being sinned against in particular, can lead to rupture of relationships in the church. It's a deadly serious issue. It can lead to brothers and sisters in Christ going astray.

That word that he used three times in verses 10 to 14. And if they go astray and are not restored, as verse 14 makes clear, they may indeed perish, be utterly lost.

But on the other hand, Jesus tells us in these verses, that these situations may be turned around by God's grace and mercy at work through his people, and leading to strengthening of the whole body.

Not loss of a brother, but verse 15, gain, winning the brother back to his true destiny in God's family. And it all depends, says Jesus, it all depends on how we deal with Christians who sin against us.

[7 : 52] And Jesus says, we are to deal with them by doing justly. That is, we are to let heaven's redeeming righteousness flourish among us and be the characteristic feature of the way we deal with these situations.

We are to do justly. And he says that that means in practice, not just, as verses 6 to 9 told us last time, not just not leading others into sin or driving them away from us in sin, but rather when they do sin, as they will do, because he tells us that stumbling blocks and causes to sin will be there right till the end.

And when they do sin, and when we in particular are personally sinned against, we are to react with righteousness, with the merciful justice of God.

The justice, the righteousness, that bears the cost of forgiveness in ourselves in order to bring reconciliation and restoration.

And that's what these verses are explaining to us in very practical terms. When that happens, Jesus says, when we are sinned against in the fellowship, as we will be, brothers and sisters, don't be of any doubt about that.

[9 : 12] When we are sinned against, we must see three things. First, that we have a responsibility from heaven that we mustn't shirk. Secondly, that we have the authority of heaven that we mustn't shrink from.

And thirdly, that we have the presence and power of heaven that we must never forget. So first then, we have a responsibility from heaven.

Look at verses 15 to 17. Jesus says, we must not fail in our duty to show persistent and costly redeeming love that seeks to restore someone when they've sinned, even if it's against us personally.

Rather, we're to go to great lengths and to great cost to restore them, to bring them back into right relationship with us and, more importantly than that, into right relationship with God himself.

Now we need to look carefully at these verses because it's easy to misconstrue Jesus' teaching. In verse 15, when Jesus says, if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between the two of you alone, privately, he's not just giving us practical advice about the right and proper way to go about the process of law.

[10 : 30] He's not just teaching us the right way to gain an apology. He's not trying to tell us the best and most quiet way to go about getting reparation for our damage without causing a lot of stress and fuss.

That's not what he's speaking about. Now the aim here is not justice for us. The aim is not punishment of the sinner or reparation for ourselves.

It's not about people handling skills and the best way to get an apology. No, look at verse 15. What is the aim? The aim is to gain your brother.

Or as the NIV puts it, to win your brother. It's the very same language that Paul, the apostle, uses in 1 Corinthians 9 when he talks about making himself a servant to all so as to win some for Christ.

I've been all things to all people so as by some means I might save some. That's what Jesus is talking about here.

[11 : 33] It's much, much more than just winning back a good relationship between me and my brother who sinned against me. That is very precious. It's important to do that, to want to do that.

But to gain your brother here, to win your brother here, is to win back someone who otherwise is at risk of going astray. And if he's not won back, is at risk, as verse 14 says, of perishing.

And we're told the Father's will is that this should never happen. And therefore, we have this responsibility laid upon us from heaven to do everything that is in our power to win him back, that he should not perish.

You see, the stakes are very high. Verse 15 is very clear. This situation is to do with a brother's sin. It's if your brother sins against you. He's not just talking about if your brother irritates you.

It's not just a trivial thing. It's not a license to start confronting one another willy-nilly about all sorts of things. Brother, I have to tell you, I find that offensive haircut of yours deeply hurtful.

[12 : 45] If that was the case, I'd be having to go around all over the place here with all these convicts getting their heads shaved. I had to take Johnny Keefe aside on Thursday evening and rebuke him for his haircut.

He did apologize. He said, I know, it's getting very long, isn't it? I'll have to do something about it. Keep telling him, you'll frighten the ladies in the hospital when he visits them. It's not about that sort of nonsense.

It's not about even confronting one another when we have a difference of opinion. No, that's the very opposite of the whole spirit of this. That kind of nitpicking, that kind of confronting one another just creates bust-ups.

No, what he's talking about here is a serious matter. It's real sin. And it may be outwardly against me personally. But the point is, at heart, it's against God.

And that's why we're called not to ignore it. That's why we must act. Not because our reputation is in danger, but it's our brother's well-being.

[13 : 51] That is in danger and that is something that we must have regard for. Now in verse 15 here where it says, if your brother sins against you, some of the best manuscripts omit those two words against you.

And it's a bit difficult to know exactly what is the correct reading. But in a sense, if those words are omitted, it makes it perhaps even clearer because it's the sin that's being focused on.

But in any case, the context makes clear that this is something that at least at first only involves you. And what you're not to do is to say, oh well, let's just let sleeping dogs lie.

No, you've got a responsibility to act because your brother's future is at stake. And when we see it like that, we see that this is the very antithesis of the kind of interfering busybody approach.

This is not nitpicking. It's not the sanctimonious hypocrite looking at specks in other people's eyes and ignoring the logs in your own eye. Now this kind of intervention is very costly.

[14 : 56] It's very hard. And it's only a certain kind of person who can act in this restoring way. That's why the order of Jesus' teaching in this chapter is so important.

This passage, you see, is all about mutual discipline. It's all about care of one another. And that can only happen if first we have embraced an understanding of self-discipline.

Only those who are truly great in the kingdom of heaven can show this kind of restoring grace. Only those, that is, who have learned the lessons of verses 1 to 14, of walking humbly.

Only those who are aware of their own sin and their own total reliance on the grace of God. Only such a person who fears their own sin and who's embraced the reality of verses 8 and 9 in a ruthless personal discipline.

Only those kind of persons who have shared the heart of the Father who desires to restore the wanderer. Only that kind of person can even begin to do what Jesus says here in verse 15.

[16 : 09] So you see, with that kind of person, mutual discipline, as viewed here, can never be harsh and disciplinarian.

Rather, it will be full of grace and of love. It will be aimed at restoration. It will be powered by a heart overflowing with forgiveness that reflects the heart of our Father in heaven.

And that's why immediately after this section comes Jesus teaching in the parable about forgiveness. It's all bound up together, you see, because we need to see that not only is judgment severe and real for the brother who sins and will not repent, also, Jesus says, it's severe and real for the one who sinned against but will not have a forgiving spirit.

Look at verse 34. So also, my heavenly Father, will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart. Talking about judgment.

It's only when we've really got to grips with the desperate seriousness of sin in others and especially in ourselves and the true wonder of the grace of God especially to us, even when we've begun to grasp that, we're only just beginning to be able to understand what it means to bear the responsibility for our brother, for those within the household of faith.

[17 : 38] But when we do grasp that, well, our priorities become clear. When a brother or sister is enmeshed in sin, even sin that has badly hurt us personally, only one thing is important and that is that they should be won back to the place of repentance.

Won back to their place in the Father's house. Whatever additional cost that is to us. And the cost may be very great. Look how Jesus tells us practically we're to deal with this.

Notice three things about the process that he gives us. First of all, he says it's to be persistent. If he listens, you have gained, you've won your brother.

But verse 16, if he doesn't listen, well, you've had your say, you've done your bit, don't waste any more time on him. No. Don't give up.

Go on with the process even if it involves personal cost, if it involves time and embarrassment. This is costly for the believer to pursue, isn't it?

[18 : 50] Especially if we've been badly hurt and wronged, it's very hard. It's very hard. Maybe a great battle to get the offending brother to listen, to repent.

But there's a great battle also in ourselves, isn't there? A battle for forgiveness. A battle to persist in willing to try and restore him. See, in a relationship breakdown, there are two sides always, aren't there?

Two sources of sin. Two needs for discipline. There's the offender. Yes, he must be brought to repentance or else he is at risk of perishing.

But in the offended party, we also must be penitent. We also must not harbor bitterness and grudges.

We mustn't react to the sinner's resistance by becoming hard and unforgiving ourselves. No, we must continue to forgive from the heart. And that's desperately hard, isn't it?

[19 : 51] Desperately hard. Especially if you've graciously and generously tried to forgive somebody, but that forgiveness isn't welcomed. It's not received. It's scorned.

Maybe somebody refuses to see that they've done wrong at all. Very, very hard. Because the reality is that forgiveness isn't something that can be forced on people, is it?

It has to be received. It can only be received by a penitent person. Otherwise, they don't see any need for forgiveness. Forgiveness can only work restoration and salvation in the offender if he will receive it.

I remember Dick Lucas after the bombing of St. Helens Church with the IRA bomb in the late, in the early 1990s. And somebody said to him, have you forgiven the IRA? And he said, well, they haven't asked for forgiveness.

forgiveness. You see, forgiveness has to be received. But likewise, forgiveness will only work mercy and salvation in the offended person, in the giver, if he also continues to offer it freely from the heart.

[21 : 04] And that's what Jesus tells us we have to do. We have to be persistent in our offer of forgiveness, in our attempts at restoration. However hard it is, and it will get harder and harder as this process goes on.

If we have to involve others, if it even has to go public, we've got to go on with it. Not because we want personal vindication, but only because we want to spiritually restore our beloved brother.

And that spirit will mean that we're very, very careful at every step of the process. It's persistent, but secondly, it's to be protective. Firstly, to the brother that we're seeking to restore.

We don't go public straight away. In fact, we only involve others at all if we absolutely must. And only if every discretion fails must it become more public, verse 17, taken up with the whole church, with the local congregation, however that process may be managed.

Because we want to protect our brother, we don't want to humiliate him. But of course, the other side of this process is that Jesus says once it's begun, you've got to be willing to go through it to the end.

[22 : 23] And that's protective too, isn't it? Before we even begin to think about taking something up in controversy with a brother or sister, we've got to say, am I prepared to go the whole way?

Am I prepared for this to be public? Am I willing to be exposed before the whole church for what I'm doing? That will be a great guard, won't it? To stop us making a mountain out of a molehill with a brother's sin.

But it's also protective for ourselves, Jesus says. If we involve one or two others, we'll have support from other wise heads. We'll have them with us if the situation escalates.

They'll be able to show that, in fact, we've acted rightly. We've tried to do everything we can to sort out the situation, that this is not a matter of petty vindictiveness. The whole process, you see, is protective of sinners, both the offender and the offended person who also is a sinner, who also is likely to have mixed motives.

So it must be persistent, but it must be done in a protective way. But thirdly, do you notice verses 19 and 20? It must be prayerful. These two verses are closely linked with the whole process of discipline.

[23 : 38] 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, for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. Jesus is saying, this is not something you're just left to yourselves to sort out.

We often take these verses as an encouragement to corporate prayer, of the assurance that Jesus is present to hear us, and that certainly is true. There is a wider application.

Verse 19 talks about anything that you ask in my name, but here the prayer is specifically related to this whole process of restorative discipline. And what Jesus is saying is this can't be something cold and calculated.

Now it must be something that's surrounded by prayer right from the start, your own prayers, but all the more as the thing goes on. If you've had to involve one or two others, well, you're not on your own.

Two or three of you can pray about this and you have the promise of Christ in the midst to help you, to guide you. You'll be praying that you do have a right attitude in your heart, full of forgiveness.

[24 : 50] You'll be praying knowing God's grace towards you, a humble sinner, knowing God's forgiveness of you and asking that that would characterize your attitude to them.

You'll be praying knowing that it's God's will that none should perish but that every wanderer should be restored. So you see, when a brother sins against us, what are we to do?

Well, first, we're to see that what matters most is that his sin is against God, not against us. And second, we're to see that the most urgent need is for his restoration to be with God, not for our satisfaction, not for justice for us.

We're to be persistent in pursuing that restoration. We're to be protective all the way of his reputation and of our motivations. And above all, we're to be prayerful in imploring God himself to be at work to redeem and restore.

That's our responsibility from heaven as the church of Jesus Christ on earth. Well, is that what we do? Does that describe us?

[26 : 06] Hardly need to answer that question, do I? What we so often do is not, of course, to go to our brother or sister first but is to bleat to others, to whinge and moan about them.

Or if we do go to them, we go to them to confront them, to extract an apology, to get them to make up. We've got our own interest in view, not theirs. Isn't that right? Most likely, we might just break off relationships altogether, not talk to them.

Astonishing how often that happens in a Christian fellowship. People haven't spoken for years, sometimes decades. Where still, sometimes we just go public straight away with gossip, spread poison about somebody, fracture even more relationships along the way.

What's the result? Well, we all know the result, don't we? All too often, the wrongdoer does drift away or even storms away. And the wronged person, well, often we just become bitter and hard and unforgiving.

And if we take Jesus' words here seriously, for both the one who wronged us and ourselves, we stand in fearful judgment, despite perhaps both of us feeling terribly self-righteous about ourselves.

[27 : 30] But if we took Jesus seriously here and our responsibilities in the family seriously, wouldn't the church be utterly transformed out of all present recognition?

no gossip, no backstabbing, no talking about people behind their backs. When someone came to us to bleat about something in a brother or sister, we'd say, no, no, don't tell me about it, you go and pray about it yourself.

And then you go and pray about it with your brother yourself and gently seek to restore him. What do you think? Maybe, just maybe, if we lived more like that as God's people on earth for heaven, then maybe more people would find a way to heaven among us.

Don't you think? We've got a responsibility from heaven to walk this way, Jesus says, when relationships are under threat.

Second, Jesus says, we also have the authority of heaven. Verses 18 and 19 also teach us that we're not to doubt that the New Testament church in the gospel has God's saving truth authoritatively revealed from heaven to us.

[28 : 46] Now that is committed to the church as the supreme rule of faith and life and that we are to stand upon it and apply it in the church today with all the authority of heaven.

Seeking to show the persistent forgiving love of heaven can never be separated from the truth of heaven. That's what Jesus is saying. From the truth of God which must be submitted to otherwise there can't be any forgiveness or restoration.

In other words, we have to love but we have to love in truth. Or as Ephesians 4 puts it, we are to speak the truth, cherish the truth in love. Restoring forgiveness, God's merciful justice is not soft and sentimental.

It's not affirming in sin, rather it's demanding and it transforms from sin. The discipline in the Christian family, in the church, is always aimed at restoration, at winning back the wonder.

It only becomes punitive if it is resisted. But, where it is resisted and where all attempts are exhausted, where there is no response, verse 17, even to the church, then we're not to be naive and sentimental.

[30 : 07] The end of verse 17 says, let him be to you a Gentile or a tax collector. In other words, you have to face the facts and treat the person as an outsider.

There are times that it is very, very hard when we simply must accept the reality of a situation. Even if we're deeply personally involved, we must face up to it.

The you there in verse 17 is singular. You must be realistic about this. People can place themselves in a position where we can only conclude that they've placed themselves outside the family of God because they continue to behave in such a way as shows clearly that they reject the authoritative truth of God, that they refuse to submit to the rule of faith and life laid down by Christ and his apostles.

Notice, what Jesus is not saying is that we as human beings are to look into people's hearts and make judgments, though I don't think he's really saved. No. That's a question for God alone.

But the question for us is much more straightforward. Is there a visible submission to the word and the command of God in your life and your confession?

[31 : 29] Or is there clear and fragrant denial, refusal to submit to God's word, open rejection of it? Because you see, obedience to God's word is binding on disciples of Jesus.

Whether you're a member of the church and have been for years, whether you're a leader in the church, whether you're a bishop or an archbishop or whoever you are, obedience to the word of Christ and his apostles is demanded.

Jesus says it's those who do the will of my Father in heaven who are my family, not those who just say Lord, Lord and disobey me. And therefore, exercise of authoritative discipline in the Christian church is exercise of what has been authoritatively given from earth to heaven, of what God has bound in heaven and has revealed to us in his word.

In verse 18 there, you'll notice the footnote tells us that the verbs, like in the same verse in chapter 16 verse 19, is the future perfect. Whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven.

In other words, it's been bound by Christ's word and his commands, by his own mouth and through his apostles. And also in the scriptures that he himself authenticated as authoritative.

[32 : 52] In other words, the church has the authority of heaven because it has God's word. It stands on biblical authority. It acts in line with the authority of scripture.

That's just another way of saying that the Bible tells us what sin is and isn't, not human beings. And when we stand on the Bible's authority and only when we do, the church acts with the authority of heaven on earth.

And hence verse 19 tells us that we wield the sword of heaven. God's hand is at work to vindicate his church when his church is true to the authority of heaven. And the gospel is a double-edged sword.

When we are praying, as he says here, in line with the gospel, God will act in line with his truth. And his truth, as Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 2, is a savor of life unto life if it is received, but equally it's a savor of death to death and judgment if it's rejected.

So you see, it is a very serious matter. Not only is the church living on earth for heaven now to reflect heaven on earth, but the issues of eternity are being decided now on earth forever in people's response to the authority of heaven on earth as proclaimed by the word of God in the hands of the church.

[34 : 30] And that's why we mustn't forget the last thing in verse 20, the presence of the power of heaven. When the church stands true to its responsibility of costly love, and when it witnesses to the authoritative truth of scripture, speaking in the name of Jesus, Jesus says, it is he who is at work in the midst.

It is he who acts both in judgment and in salvation. And what a great relief that is to us. It's not we who are extending physical discipline or wielding earthly power.

Rather, when we witness to the truth, to spiritual truth and spiritual discipline, Christ himself is present and he's at work to restore and to heal and to bring back the wanderer.

Or, if he is resisted, to deal with them faithfully. So there is a real warning in these words. When the church is proclaiming the truth of scripture in the face of sin, the spirit of Jesus is present in power.

Just read 1 Corinthians 5 about a practical outworking of that that Paul speaks about. And the message is clear. Do not mock the truth of God. Do not mock the truth of the scripture revealed from heaven to earth.

[35 : 57] What God has bound forever in heaven and has revealed as binding truth in his scriptures on earth is not to be mocked. For Christ himself is in the midst and is working.

But there is also a huge encouragement too isn't there? Because Christ does work to heal and to restore and to renew relationships.

That's his proper work. That's the work he loves to do. That's the will of his father. That they should not perish but they should be restored. So the message for us in these verses is clear.

Don't shirk our responsibility. It's our duty to love and to restore one another however costly it may be. Don't shrink from the authority of scripture.

It's our duty to speak the truth of scripture in situations of sin however difficult it may be. And don't forget the presence and power of heaven.

[37 : 05] The Lord Jesus Christ in the midst to win brothers and sisters for Christ. If we do justly, if we let heaven's redeeming righteousness flourish among us whatever the cost, then Christ himself will be at work.

And he will be bringing heaven's power to earth. And as he says, it will be done for us by our Father in heaven. For where two or three even are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

We have a responsibility. We bear an authority. But most of all we have his promise of his presence to act.

faith. And if we are faithful, he will be faithful. And heaven's power and glory and mercy and grace will be visible on earth in our midst.

That's what it means, says Jesus, to be his family. Well, let's pray. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, how we see that so often we fall short, that heaven's values and desires and graces and love seem so distant from our own attitudes and actions.

[38 : 45] Humble us, we pray, under your mighty hand, that we might be great. Give us grace, we pray, to love our brothers and sisters with such love that we will bear the cost of restoring and forgiving, that your redeeming love may burn in our hearts and that the results may be tangible and visible to us and to all.

that we may truly be an enclave of heaven on earth and that the way to heaven may be made manifest and plain to all.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.