MATTHEW 18:15–20. (EHV)

> "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his sin just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses' [Deut. 19:15]. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And, if he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as an unbeliever or a tax collector. Amen I tell you: Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Amen I tell you again: If two of you on earth agree to ask for anything, it will be done for them by my Father who is in heaven. In fact where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am among them."

"Tough love" is a relatively new phrase that seems to date back to a 1968 book by the same name. It is used especially with habitually unruly children, substance abusers, and other difficult situations where permissiveness has enabled harmful and unacceptable behavior. "Tough love" means communicating to people that they cannot continue to get away with their harmful and unacceptable behavior. It means laying down the law and associating a consequence with unacceptable actions.

It's called "tough" love, for two reasons: First, because the reaction from the person being shown tough love is often less than pleasant. There might be yelling, name-calling, or even threats as the person in question comes to grips with the changes he or she is being asked to make. And it's called "tough" love, second, because it requires action and effort on the part of those showing this kind of love. They aren't just watching and shaking their heads anymore. They're confronting the issue and enforcing consequences. It requires conviction, dedication, emotional energy, and sometimes even considerable financial commitment. "Tough love" is a shorthand way of saying that showing real love, that is, doing what is best for others, isn't always easy.

Even though that phrase "tough love" may be relatively new, the concept is as old as love itself, especially ever since the fall into sin. This morning Jesus talks about showing tough love when we encounter sin among our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Remember when we were considering the keys of the kingdom of heaven a couple weeks ago? I said then that if we were interpreting Jesus's words as if he were giving the keys only to Peter and his successors, then we were interpreting them incorrectly, because later on Jesus made it clear that he was giving the keys of the kingdom of heaven to all of his disciples. Here in Matthew 18 is the "later on." Jesus is addressing all of his disciples in this chapter, he's talking about the keys again, and he does not single out Peter at all this time.

He begins by saying, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his sin just between the two of you." First, notice whom we're talking about—brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow believers. Jesus does not say, "If your neighbor sins," but, "If your brother sins." It isn't that we shouldn't be concerned about the sins of those outside the church. It's just that we're first going to need to get on the same page with them about sin and grace before we can even have that conversation. Unbelievers might not even think there is such a thing as sin in the biblical

sense. They might not have any idea about the God whom they've sinned against. So our approach with them is going to be different in every case.

Jesus is talking about our brothers and sisters in Christ here. And he is talking about when they sin against you. That could be a sin directly against you, such as if they punch you or slander you. But it doesn't have to be a sin directly against you. For instance, if I'm at the store and I just so happen to see my fellow believer slip some items into his pocket and then walk out without paying for them, I can't use the excuse, "Well, he didn't sin against *me*." True, he did not sin *directly* against me, but he still sinned against me by setting me a bad example whether he intended to or not, and by giving me the false impression that what we hear in church on Sunday we can simply ignore during the week. Not to mention that if we continue in any sin without repentance, that sin will lead us to hell, and we cannot in good conscience let him wander off the heavenly road without attempting to bring him back. That's not love.

I also probably shouldn't pass over the fact that Jesus says, "If your brother *sins*." He doesn't say, "If they do something that bothers *you*," or, "If they don't do something the way *you* were taught." No, he's talking about when they do something that bothers God. If it bothers you, and you can't find anywhere in God's word where God says it bothers him, then the problem is yours, not his or hers.

So when you're aware of a sin that your fellow believer has committed and you are reasonably certain that there has not been repentance, Jesus says, "go and show him his sin just between the two of you." Go. Jesus prefers in-person contact to all other contact. Sure, maybe in some cases in-person contact is not possible, or you're only able to talk with him or her in person if you first email, text, or message him or her. Fine. But reading cold, lifeless words on a screen isn't the same as talking in person. Even talking with the person on the phone isn't the same as face-to-face communication.

"Go and show him his sin." Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount that we should first make sure we take the plank out of our own eye, that we first acknowledge the mountain of our own sin that he needed to melt away with his blood. Then I will go to my brother or sister not with an air of pride, self-righteousness, and condescension, nor with absolute disbelief and horror, saying, "How could you do such a thing?!" I will go with an air of gentleness and humility. I will go realizing that I am infected with the same sinful condition that led to their sin. I'm going to go with the realization that it very well might be they who need to come and confront me about my sin tomorrow, even as I go and confront them in love today.

"Go and show him his sin just between the two of you." Please etch this indelibly on your hearts, minds, and memories: Go and show him his sin *just between the two of you*. Jesus does not say, "If your brother sins against you, complain about it to your family and friends when you get home," or, "complain about it to your fellow church members when you go out for lunch." And he doesn't say, "Go, tell your pastor about it." I don't come in until the third step, or possibly the second. Sure, if you need to ask me in confidence for advice about confronting a sin, I'll be happy to help you as best I can. But if you tell it to me with the idea that I'll take care of it instead of you, I'm going to follow Jesus's word and put it right back on you. And if you're disappointed with that and walk out and I happen to learn later that the issue is still unresolved, now I have a duty not to confront that believer with his sin—because that hasn't yet been established by two or three witnesses, but only by you—but I have a duty to come and find you

and to confront you with your sin of not talking to that believer, because that's the sin I know about personally.

Gossiping and slandering solve nothing. On the other hand, if I had to guess, I would say that going and talking to the person just between the two of you would and does probably solve at least 80% of the problems that arise in the church.

I remember getting an anonymous note in the mail once at one of my former churches, saying how horrible and rude it was that for one of our Christmas services, someone had come in late, and some of my members wouldn't move in their pew to give them an easy place to sit in the back. Well, you tell me what's worse—not making room for someone in church, or gossiping and possibly slandering behind someone's back without even having the decency to own up to it with your name. If you are unwilling to go and show the person his sin just between the two of you, then you have a problem just as bad, if not worse, than theirs.

These are your brothers and sisters in Christ. Love them enough to confront them with their sin. Love them enough to do it in such a way as to preserve their reputation as much as possible.

"If he listens to you," Jesus says, "you have regained your brother." Notice: This is the goal. Not shame. Not disgrace. Not condescension and puffing oneself up. The goal is to reclaim the brother from the dangerous path he was on. Elsewhere Jesus says, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him." That's what we Christians live for—pronouncing forgiveness. We love to share what we ourselves have been freely given for Jesus's sake.

Now because we all tend to be self-righteous by nature, I'm guessing that at this point we're all imagining ourselves on the outside of the door, so to speak, looking in at the person we're potentially confronting. But may I ask you to imagine yourself on the inside of the door? Is it so unthinkable to assume that, at least once in our lives, we may say or do something at variance with God and his word in front of a fellow believer—whether out of ignorance or weakness? If you have a fellow believer who comes to talk to you about a sin he is convinced you committed, do not think that is an easy task for him or her. Do not automatically bristle at the thought that you might have done something wrong. Solomon says that it is a friend who is willing to inflict wounds on occasion. The person who multiplies kisses, who only says good things about you and always stands up for everything you say and do, is your enemy, he says (Proverbs 27:6). Not to mention, how hard is it simply to say, "I'm sorry"? And if you are a person with a nature that tends to bristle and be on edge when someone suggests you have done something wrong, then at least be honest about that trait with yourself, and have the decency to take a deep breath and say, "I appreciate your willingness to talk to me about this, but I'm just going to need a few days to process what you've said."

We've spent a lot of time on the first step of tough love, because once we understand that step, the others, which deal with what happens if the person does not listen and repent, are a lot easier to understand.

"But if he will not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'" Pretty straightforward. Rinse and repeat, only this time bring along one or two other Christians. Jesus commands this for two reasons. For one, this is peer pressure used in a good way. If I come and talk to you by myself,

you could perhaps react by saying to yourself, “Well, that’s just Pastor Biebert’s opinion that I sinned. It isn’t actually that serious.” But if I bring along one or two other respected Christians, and they agree, then my claims are more difficult to dismiss. And the second reason is to prevent anyone from getting false impressions or making false accusations with regard to the confrontation. Matters are established and made more certain by multiple witnesses.

But “if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.” Here is where you finally get the representatives of the church officially involved. And they will probably repeat step number two, but with different people. Note how with each step, the sin is being treated with escalating seriousness, so as to make it clear to the person who has committed the sin how serious a situation he is in.

And finally, “if he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as an unbeliever or a tax collector.” This is what we call excommunication—where we formally declare to the person that we no longer have anything in common with them. The apostle Paul calls it handing someone over to Satan. Jesus goes on to say, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.” In other words, the person who has been formally excommunicated should not just think he can go to a different church and join there, and he will be fine on Judgment Day. He may be able to go to another church and participate in church life there, especially in the modern American church scene, but if he does not reconcile with the group that excommunicated him in accordance with Jesus’s own steps of church discipline, or does not deal seriously with that excommunication in some other way, if reconciling with that group is no longer possible, he continues to be shut out from heaven itself.

But note that even here, the goal isn’t simply to kick the person out so that we can dust off our hands and be done with him. It is the final act of tough love we perform, in the hopes that the person will finally wake up and say, “O my goodness, this entire congregation of believers has agreed that by my words or actions I have left the road to heaven and am on the road to hell. What am I doing?” And if he or she comes back and repents after being excommunicated, we are to welcome him or her with open arms and forgive them gladly.

And now is when Jesus talks about the keys again: “Amen I tell you: Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Amen I tell you again: If two of you on earth agree to ask for anything, it will be done for them by my Father who is in heaven. In fact where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am among them.”

Here is why the church works and the church matters. When two or more gather together in Jesus’s name and speak and act and make decisions in harmony with Jesus’s word, he is with them in a special way that he is not with them individually, and he stands behind what they do and speaks and acts right along with them.

This is tough love. It’s not easy. But it is considerably less tough, considerably easier, when we remember Jesus’s tough love for us, when we remember how he keeps patiently calling us to repentance and forgiving us each day, when we remember how he not only shed his blood for us, but for all our fellow believers, when we remember that he wants them in heaven just as much as he wants us in heaven, when we remember that showing this kind of tough love is pleasing to him, and when we remember that he is with us to support and help us.

May Jesus ever help us to show love, even when it's tough, to our fellow believers, to his glory and for their salvation. Amen.