

Sometimes, the Most Loving Thing to Do

In late 2020, comedian John Mulaney found himself on the receiving end of an intervention. He recounted the whole ordeal in his appearance on Seth Meyer's talk show last year.¹ If you have a chance to watch the interview, it's actually pretty funny for multiple reasons. One, because he's on the other side of it all now and is doing much better. Two, because he's a *comedian*, which means he's quite good at cracking jokes about it. But three, because Seth Meyers, who is doing the interview, was actually one of the friends who *staged* the intervention and was there for it. And let me tell you: hearing two people describe an intervention from two *very* different vantage points is quite the experience. Apparently it was John Mulaney, Seth Meyers, Fred Armieson, and a few other comedians there—so basically, half of an SNL cast. ~~And likely just as awkward as a bad SNL skit.~~ In John Mulaney's own words, "as soon as I opened the door (and saw all my friends there), I knew it was an intervention. That's how much of a drug problem I had."

But to me, the most fascinating part of the interview came at the very end. After making as many jokes about the intervention as they possibly could, there's a moment that got very serious. Seth Meyers, who evidently has known John Mulaney for a while, says to him, "I love you very much, and I'm glad to be in your presence...and I'm glad that you're doing well." And you can tell they're both uncomfortable saying it, but because I've been in similar situations before, I think I know what Seth Meyers was saying. What he meant was that there for a while, he didn't know if his friend was gonna make it. He saw a trajectory in John's life that, if it wasn't stopped, was gonna end really, really badly. Hence the intervention.

And the reason I find that so interesting is because it reveals a belief that pretty much all of us *share* as human beings. Pretty much all of us—followers of Jesus or not—understand that **there are times where someone's actions and behavior are so destructive that the only rational response as their friend is to *insist* that they change.** That's what interventions are *for*, right? And I know sometimes we think that interventions as limited to things like drug and alcohol addiction. But I've heard of people staging intervention-type scenarios for much less: to confront friends who are *dating* horrible people, friends whose *spending* habits or *eating* habits have gotten out of control, and plenty of other things.

But all of these are expressions of *love* for a person whose actions are harming themselves and hurting others. And most people would agree that sometimes, that is

¹ [John Mulaney Tells Seth About His Eventful Year](#)

what *love has* to look like in practice: essentially, saving a person from *themselves*. So for all our society's talk of "you do you," and "do whatever makes you happy" and "don't let anybody else tell you how to live," we actually do realize that at *times*, letting people "do whatever they want" might be the worst *possible* thing we could do. **Sometimes love looks like insisting that a person change.**

And **as we dive into our passage** this morning, I'd ask that you do your best to keep *that* framework in mind. Because as we work through the text, there are likely to be moments where some of us wrestle mightily with what is being said, and the type of actions it's prescribing that we take. But at the very heart of everything being said is the singular mindset we just mentioned: that in certain situations, the most loving thing you can possibly do for a person is to insist that they change.

So **turn with me** in your bibles, if you have one, to **Matthew 18**. If you're new to City Church, last week we jumped back into a multi-year study we've been in through the book of Matthew. And in this section of the book, Jesus sets his focus on *relationships*: how followers of Jesus interact with and care for one another. **Last week Jesus talked about how to not cause other believers to sin; this week he's gonna talk about what to do if they do sin.** And to do that, he's going to talk specifically about what many people have called "church discipline." Now, I could not care less whether or not you use that term, because it's not a term found anywhere in the bible. Take it or leave it.

But **church discipline is just the term some people use to describe addressing sin in another Christian's life.** And what Jesus is going to do in this passage is lay out a process for doing that while being loving, clear, and even *honoring* to the other person. And I think what you'll find is that **even if this process makes some of us terribly uncomfortable, the logic and intentionality behind it actually make a surprising amount of sense.** So let's take a look and see what we can learn. We're actually going to start in v. 15, and then circle back to the first few verses towards the end. Verse 15:

[15] "If your **brother or sister sins**, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you.

Let's **pause for a second** before we even finish that verse. There are **three very important things** Jesus just said that you *must* notice. Because if you miss them, you actually miss the whole point of the passage. First, notice the phrase "**...brother or sister...**" So this is not a passage about confronting anyone and everyone in the world who sins. It's about engaging another *follower of Jesus* on their sin—and ideally, one you have a particularly close relationship to.

Second, the word “sins.” If your brother or sister *sins*.” Not “if they do something that annoys you, or something you don’t like, or something you wish they wouldn’t do. If they *sin*. Meaning, if they participate in some type of behavior, probably on a recurring basis, that the *Scriptures* clearly condemn. If they “sin,” go and point out their fault. And then finally, the word “just.” As in “...go and tell them their fault...*just* between the *two* of *you*.” Notice the *dignity* given to the person struggling. It doesn’t say “go and make sure other people know about the way that they’re sinning.” Not “go and talk *about* their sin to others.” Go and talk to them, *just* the two of you, alone. That’s the *first* step in this whole process.

That’s it. Now, let me just ~~point out: this step happens often~~ in our church. Like ~~real~~ often. And nothing about it is particularly formal in nature. Like, ~~guys in my life don’t email me and go “Hello, it’s Joe, from your LifeGroup. And I’m emailing because I would like to initiate the first step of church discipline with you.” No. They just find a time where it’s just the two of us, and they say, “hey I noticed you’ve been speaking this way. I’ve noticed you’ve been acting this way. I’ve noticed you’ve been treating people this way. That doesn’t seem great—can we talk about it?”~~ That’s what’s being described here. Just us doing what we’ve always been called to do, which is addressing things we notice in each other that aren’t consistent with the *Scriptures*.

And ~~once you do that~~, second half of v. 15...

If they listen to you, you have won them over.

If they listen to you and acknowledge their fault, great! You’ve won them over. You’ve been a great friend to them, and you’ve helped them become a little more like Jesus. Well done. Everybody wins. And I’ll just add: a majority of the time, this is precisely what happens. The person being confronted goes “oh, thanks for telling me. I don’t think I had realized that, but you’re right. That’s *not* an okay way to talk or treat people or act. I’m sorry I’ve been acting that way—will you help me notice it if it happens again?” And everybody’s better off as a result. That’s what we’re always shooting for.

But ~~occasionally, it doesn’t go that way~~. Which is where v. 16 comes in:

[16] But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’

Alright, so if you’ve got a bible translation like mine, you may notice that that last part (“every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses”) is in

quotes. That's because it is a phrase lifted straight out of the Old Testament. The idea is that another person or two should be there to witness you addressing the issue in the other person.

Having a witness there serves as a *safeguard* in at least two directions. **One, it keeps us from lying about the situation.** It keeps *us* from saying "yeah—that person? I confronted them on their sin and they refused to listen" (when we didn't in fact do that, or we *did*, but they *did* in fact listen and repent). So it holds *us* accountable to represent the situation accurately. But it **also provides accountability for the other person.** It keeps *them* from saying, when the situation escalates, that no one ever talked to them about the sin in question. They can't say that in good faith because there was someone else *there* when the conversation happened. So accountability all around. The second step is that you take one or two others with you to have the conversation a *second* time. *Then*, v. 17:

[17] If they *still* refuse to listen, tell it to the *church*—

At this point, you **inform the gathered people of God** about the situation. Now, it's probably worth clarifying here: most churches back *then* weren't a couple hundred people like ours is. And they certainly weren't *thousands* of people like some churches are today. Generally, what they referred to as a "church" was a lot closer in size *and* feel to what you and I would call a *LifeGroup*: a group of 20, 30, *maybe* 50 people who all knew one another pretty well. So when it says "tell it to the church," it likely *doesn't* mean "step up to the mic and spill the details of this person's sin to a bunch of people who don't *know* them."

It means 'let people know why things have been weird with that person lately.' Fill people in on why that person isn't around, and what is being done about it. You're not putting them on blast or raking them over the coals. *But* at the same time, **one of the worst things that can happen in a situation like this is for it to feel like it's shrouded in secrecy.** Because then people start assuming the worst of the person involved, the church as a whole, or both. So Jesus says: bring it out into the open. Tell people what's going on so people don't have to speculate about it. Then, second half of v. 17...

...and if they refuse to listen even to the *church*, treat them as you would a *pagan* or a *tax collector*.

Now, no doubt about it: **this is the most difficult part of the passage** for many of us. Jesus just said that if a person still refuses to repent, his disciples should treat that person like 'a pagan or a tax collector.' So essentially, here is **what Jesus is saying: you should**

begin treating them like they're not a follower of Jesus...because for all intents and purposes, they're *not*. They show no indication of acknowledging the things they do that grieve God, hurt themselves, or harm other people...even when you bring it to their attention clearly and repeatedly. **That is not behavior consistent with someone who claims to follow Jesus. So you should treat them in a way proportionate to their actions.** You don't pretend like everything's fine. You don't pretend like you are on the same page with each other about following Jesus, because you're not.

Now, for clarity here: you **can take this too far.** It also doesn't mean you refuse to *talk to them, or you quickly look the other way when you see them at Target.* It doesn't mean you look for ways to hurt them or bash them in front of other people or try to make life miserable for them. They're still an image bearer of God. We still have to remember how Jesus teaches us to treat people, regardless of their status in the kingdom. We have to remember that *God* causes the sun to shine on the evil *and* the good; the righteous *and* the unrighteous.² So don't take this to an ugly place that Jesus doesn't intend. But the relationship does *change*. It does look different because of their actions. The seriousness of their sin does mean that things *can't* remain as they were before.

And just in case you're still struggling with this, let me try to offer you **an analogy.** Let's say you know of a family in our city where the father of the family is actively, ongoingly cheating on his wife. And let's say that everybody in the family knows this is happening, but they're just *pretending* it's not. Each evening, they all sit down at the dinner table, and he just pretends like everything is completely fine. He goes "so what was everybody's favorite part of the day!? Anybody have fun at school?! What did y'all do today?" Never apologizes for the affair. Never shows any desire to stop it. Just operates as if things in the family are completely normal. Does that seem like a healthy way for that family to go about life? No, eventually somebody has to say "we're not just going to sit here around the dinner table and act like everything's fine. It's not fine. Your actions are destroying your marriage and our family. And it's not loving to just pretend that that isn't happening. So we're going to address it."

Okay, with that in mind, let's remember that **the biblical picture for church is that of a family.** The church *is* a family. And it doesn't make sense for a *family* to allow someone whose actions are hurting themselves and harming others to just keep coming in and sitting down at the dinner table and pretending like everything's perfectly normal. That's actually a deeply dysfunctional way to go about life together as a church. It's *unloving* to the person sinning, *and* unloving to anyone else who is impacted *by* their sin. So again, because we *love* each other, we don't *allow* sin to

² Matthew 5:45

destroy each other and ravage the community we have with each other. We address it. Even if it takes aggressive measures, even if it makes us uncomfortable, even if it requires awkward conversations. **We do it because that's what love looks like at times. Because sometimes, the most loving thing we can do for someone is insist that they change.**

Now, **if you thought that sounded intense**, brace yourself for this next part, v. 18:

*[18] "Truly I tell you, whatever you **bind** on earth will be **bound** in heaven, and whatever you **loose** on earth will be **loosed** in heaven. [19] **Again**, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about **anything** they ask for, it will be **done** for them by my Father in heaven. [20] For where two or three gather in my name, there **am I with them.**"*

Okay. So this part does contain some **odd language to us**, especially in v. 18. So hang with me while I unpack it, and then we'll address some lingering questions you might have about all of this. In v. 18, Jesus references the ideas of "binding" and "loosing." **In first century Judaism, to "bind" meant to require something of someone, and to "loose" meant to release someone from something.** So **what Jesus is saying is that when we collectively, as the people of God, tell someone that they must repent of their sin, he is saying that in that moment, we are acting with the authority of heaven—the power of God himself.** *And* when we, collectively tell someone that they are *forgiven*, or "*released*" of their sin (after confessing and repenting of it), we are *also* acting with the authority of God himself. What we "bind on earth" is "bound in heaven." What we "loose on earth" is "loosed in heaven."

And then, just to drive his point home, **Jesus says essentially the same thing** two *other* ways. First, "if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them." That's another way of saying that God gives a significant amount of authority to his followers, *especially* when they agree on something that needs to be done about someone's sin. Which could *also* be worded: "where two or three gather in my name, *there I am among them.*" God is saying his very Spirit is *present* with us when we go through this process. This is all very *significant* and very *powerful* in the eyes of God. ~~But that does mean I regret to inform you that the "two or more gathered in my name" verse is not talking about prayer meetings, or worship gatherings. It's not that God isn't present in those settings—it's just not what this passage means. Sorry to steal that thunder.~~

Alright. Everybody **take a breath** with me real quick. We just covered a *lot*. So what I want to do before we're done is twofold: I want to address a couple lingering *questions* we may be thinking in response to all of this, and then I want to take us full circle back to

the verses we skipped at the beginning of the passage. But first, two questions you may have. Question #1...

Isn't it cruel to *exclude* someone based on their behavior?

When Jesus says "if they don't repent, *treat them* as a pagan or a tax collector," many people think that sounds like a cruel response. And truth be told, it certainly *can* be. But not *necessarily*. Here's why I say that: **every group that exists in the world actually excludes somebody. Like every group.** If I am in a group called the *Tennessee Pastors Group*, that excludes anyone who's not in Tennessee, *and* anyone who isn't a *pastor*. If there's a group called the *Bicycle Riders Group*, who does *that* exclude? People that don't ride bicycles. Unicycle enthusiasts have to create a whole separate group! Over just one wheel!

There's a *student organization on UT's campus* right now called *The Council on Diversity and Inclusion*. Now you would think that if there's *any* group in the world that *doesn't* exclude people, that would be it, right? Like, that's *got* to be a perfectly *inclusive* group. *But* if you walk into one of that group's meetings and say "I actually don't *like* diversity and inclusion!" guess who they're going to exclude. *You!* Do you see my point? The existence *of* a group *necessitates* exclusion. That's just the definition of a group. Otherwise it's *not* a group at all. A group, by *definition*, is exclusive of someone. *So the community of Jesus is exclusive sometimes, too.*

But *here's the thing*: I would submit to you that the *community of Jesus* is the most *inclusive* exclusive group that there is. Because the community of Jesus *includes* people from every nation, every tribe, every tongue, every income level, every ethnicity, every background, every sexual orientation. It includes people that are *great* at following Jesus, and honestly the people that kinda suck at it. The Church of Jesus Christ will include anyone and everyone—the only qualifier is they *repent*. That they be willing to own up to their sin, and turn *from* it. So yes—anyone who shows a pattern of not doing *that* is excluded. But that's a pretty wide net, if you ask me. Does that make sense? The community of Jesus is the most inclusive group that there is.

That's the first question. *Second question* you might have...

Couldn't this process be *abused*?

Especially with that *"binding and loosing"* language. Even if this process is fine in and of itself, couldn't people *misuse* it in a way that abuses and manipulates people? Answer? *Absolutely*. It could be. It *has* been. People have misused passages like this one in the Bible to be unreasonably cruel to people in the name of Jesus. It has been used to keep

people in power that shouldn't be, and keep people out of churches that deserve to be there. To keep people from speaking out when someone needed to speak out. And I absolutely hate that. Especially as a pastor—it *grieves* me that people would manipulate this passage in that way.

But that being said, I would argue that **just because something can be abused**, doesn't mean the process itself is wrong. **Plenty of things are good in their intention, and bad when they are abused.** *Fatherhood* is often abused to horrendous ends; that doesn't mean we don't need fathers in the world. *Friendships* are often abused; that doesn't mean we don't need friendships. None of those abuses mean the ideas *themselves* are bad; they just mean we need to make sure we're approaching them in *healthy ways*.

So **the question** we should ask is **how do we do that?** How do we go about it in ways that are helpful and not harmful? That's the question we should all be asking, not just *this morning*, but every time we enter into these types of conversations with others in the Church: *how do we do this* healthily? And **to answer** that, I want us to **circle back to** the very beginning of our passage. Because there, Jesus gives us a parable to help us understand not just the *process*, but also the *heart* behind the process.

Look back with me at **Matthew 18**, v. 12:

[12] "What do **you** think? (In other words, "try thinking about it this way...") **If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?** (Answer? Yes, of course he would. He's in charge of the sheep, and he cares for his flock. Of course he would go find the one who wanders off...) [13] **And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.** [14] **In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.**

So if you'll remember, in **last week's teaching** Jesus started using this term, **"little ones,"** as a metaphor that refers to all followers of Jesus. So this is **a story that illustrates** the care and attention and affection that God the Father has for all of his children. And the story is about a sheep who wanders off, and then a shepherd who goes and finds it. And something about *this story* is meant to help us understand the purpose behind this whole process of engaging other followers of Jesus on their sin.

Now, I for one **find this** to be **a particularly helpful metaphor** for Jesus to use. Because *think about* it: does a sheep who wanders off do so *maliciously*, in an intentional effort to

hurt the other sheep? *No*. Do they wander off because they really hate their shepherd and want to cause him emotional turmoil? *No*. They're just *wandering off*. They see something that's interesting or intriguing or compelling away from the flock and start wandering towards it without thinking.

But at the same time, unbeknownst to them, there are a world of *dangers* awaiting them. Sheep are *notoriously* vulnerable to predators—they're very easy prey. So a sheep who is wandering off is doing something that *seems* fine to them, but actually *isn't* fine at all. *And isn't that how a lot of sin works? Sometimes we do something we know is sin: we know it's wrong, and we still do it. And yet, other times, we just start wandering. Drifting. But even if it doesn't seem harmful to me at the time, it still could be.* ~~In the words of Proverbs, "there is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death." Any of us could find ourselves in a situation like this.~~

But **Jesus' point** in telling the story is that **God the Father would never, in a million years, just be apathetic to a person in a situation like that.** He would never just allow someone he knew and loved to just wander off and not *care* to go after them. That's not who the Father *is*. Rather, he would *leave* the ninety-nine and go *find* the one. / Now even though Jesus *means* this as a metaphor, this situation wasn't hypothetical at all. Shepherds and sheep were *everywhere* in Jesus' day, and everybody he was talking to would've been *familiar* with the situation he was describing.

When a sheep like this wandered off, it would generally trek through the woods and the dirt and the mud for miles. Its fur would be filthy and often ripped to shreds from walking through thorns and briars and tree branches. If it was gone very long, because it was such vulnerable prey, it wasn't uncommon for sheep to be found with cuts and open wounds, bleeding, sometimes even with broken or missing *limbs* from where a predator had almost captured it. Sometimes the sheep couldn't find its way back because it had been maimed so badly that it couldn't even walk.

So in *most* scenarios, it's **not like the shepherd** would go find the sheep and guide it back to the flock. Usually the situation was much more dire than that. More often, what would happen is that the shepherd would find the sheep—dirty, mauled, bloodied, and half destroyed from its journey. So the shepherd would have to pick the sheep up and throw it over his shoulders—and he would carry it, sometimes *miles* back to its flock. And by the time the shepherd got back to the flock, he would have the mud and dirt and blood of the sheep running down his shoulders and all over his clothing. He would get the sheep into the pen, and he would lay it down in safety, and would nurse it back to health. Over days or weeks or months or years. That is what a good shepherd *did*.

Now **with that in mind**, take a look at what Jesus says about himself in **John 10:11-15**:

*I am the **good shepherd**. The good shepherd **lays down his life** for the sheep. The **hired hand** is **not** the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he **abandons** the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the **good shepherd**; I know my **sheep** and my **sheep know me**—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I **lay down my life** for the sheep.*

See, **that story in Matthew** isn't just about what a good shepherd *would* do. It's a story about what Jesus *did*. It's a story about God the Father sending his son to *be* the Good Shepherd for us. Do you see it? *We were* the sheep who wandered off. *We were* the ones who wandered straight into behavior that would harm others and hurt ourselves. *Our actions* put us outside the fold and care of God the Father. But then Jesus left the ninety-nine, to come after *us*. He was *unwilling* that any one of us would perish. He was *unwilling* to let our sin and our wandering be the end of us, but instead came after us at great cost to himself. He found *us* in the dirt and mud and filth of our sin—he saw *us* destroyed and bruised and broken from the brutality of sin—and he picked us up, put us on his shoulders, and brought us back to the fold where we belonged. This is what *he* accomplished for *us*—for you and for me, in the cross and resurrection.

And **please listen** to me on this: when he found you, **the look on his face** was not *disappointment*. It was not *anger*. It was not “I told you so.” According to Matthew, the look on his face was *rejoicing*. *Rejoicing* because he had found the sheep that he *lost*. *Rejoicing* because he found the sheep that he *loved*. That he *wanted*. That he *cherished*, that he set his affections on before the foundations of the world. Do you understand that he sees *you that way*? Do *you* see *him* in this way? Because *that* is the Jesus we read about in the Bible. *That* is the Good Shepherd who is “unwilling” that *any* of his sheep should perish. *That* is the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. *That* is the message of the gospel.

So here's the thing: **until you realize that**—until you internalize *that*—**maybe just hold off** on confronting other followers of Jesus about their sin. Because you don't yet *have* the *heart of the Shepherd* in you. You don't quite get what result the process in Matthew 18 is trying to accomplish. You don't quite *understand* its *objective* yet. But when you *do* understand that—when you understand that *that* lost sheep could just as easily have been *you*—when you understand that it *was* you and God didn't let you go—all of a sudden you're very equipped to walk into a process like this for someone *else*. All of a sudden it makes tons of sense why *you* would go after the one who wandered off, and

that you would do so even at great cost to you or to the relationship. Because you *were* the one who wandered off. You were the one who would still be lost if it weren't for the Good Shepherd, carrying you on his shoulders, to where you belong. When you understand *that*, you'll be ready to carry someone else on *your* shoulders, if that's what it takes.

So as we transition into a **time of response**, I just want to ask you to consider two things. First, **do you understand the depths of what Jesus did for you?** Do you understand that you were the sheep and *he* was the good shepherd, and that he came after you in love and tenderness? And second, if you do, **is that reflected in your posture towards others?** Maybe for you, you're not engaging others on their sin because to be honest, you don't think sin is all that bad. Maybe it's fine to do what they're doing, and who am I to challenge it? But that's not the posture of a good shepherd. That's the posture of a "" who lets the sheep be mauled and attacked. That's the posture of someone who doesn't care about the sheep at all.

Or, maybe for you, you're very comfortable confronting others on their sin, but you're not doing it with the tender posture of a good shepherd; you're not not doing it with the intention of rejoicing in finding a lost sheep. You're doing it self-righteously. Arrogantly. Condescendingly. Like someone who doesn't understand that they're only here because Jesus tracked them down and brought them back. / And in that case, I would point you back to the first question: do you understand what Jesus did for you? And maybe you need to sit and bask in that before the next time you engage somebody else.

Whatever needs to happen this morning, I trust that the Spirit will make it happen. Let's pray.

