

Sermon for September 6, 2026 – The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 18:15-20 (EHV)

Theme: **You are your brother's keeper.**

- 1) Jesus shows you the way to admonish him.
- 2) Jesus gives you the authority to do it.

¹⁵ “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. ¹⁶ 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.’ ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ In fact, where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am among them.”

Confronting a person living in sin is one of the hardest things to do. “Who am I to talk to him when I am just as much a sinner as he? I don’t want to ruin our friendship.” Thoughts like these tempt me to put off the confrontation; to wait for the right time... which never seems to come.

But Jesus’ words in our sermon text have urgency. He does not command us to “go” when it is convenient, but to “go,” as in: “go now and show your brother his sin.”

Now, you might think: “I am glad I am not a pastor or elder because I would hate having to confront people like that.” But look carefully at our text. Jesus doesn’t address only pastors and elders. He commands every Christian to care for a fellow believer caught in sin. You too are your brother’s keeper.

“Who am I to do that?” you may wonder. “I wouldn’t know what to say. My friend or family member may get angry and call me a hypocrite. Someone else should do it.”

But the Lord has chosen you! By virtue of your baptism, He has called you to watch over your brother’s soul and warn him in love.

The thought of doing that may terrify us, but it is, in fact, the greatest act of love we can show someone caught in sin. Let us consider this truth under the theme: **You are your brother's keeper.**
1) Jesus shows you the way to admonish him. 2) Jesus gives you the authority to do it.

Part One: Jesus shows you the way to admonish him.

Jesus says: *If your brother sins against you, go and show him his sin just between the two of you.*

Notice that Jesus doesn't just call the erring Christian "a" brother, but "your" brother. That means, regardless of who he is, you ought to love him deeply and be greatly concerned for his soul.

But what does Jesus mean when He says, "sins against you"? For example, if you see a friend stealing from a store, can you ignore it because the sin wasn't directed "against you"? No, you can't. Because he is a member with you of Christ's body, any sin a Christian commits against Christ with your knowledge is a sin you must address.ⁱ

If, however, you learn of the sin only through hearsay, God does not want you to address it. That duty remains with the person who witnessed it. Urge him to speak with the erring brother and not gossip about it.ⁱⁱ The only exception is if the sin endangers a vulnerable person, like a child. Then we must tell the authorities about it.

If, therefore, you have firsthand knowledge of a brother caught in unrepented sin, Jesus says: *go and show him his sin just between the two of you*. Jesus' words are not a request. They are a command to talk privately with your unrepentant brother about his sin.

"Who? Me?" you might think. "I would feel like a hypocrite because I sin too. Isn't there a passage that says: Do not judge?"ⁱⁱⁱ Why not tell the pastor and just let him handle it?"

Because Jesus did not say: if your brother sins against you, tell your pastor. He commands you to go.

But what about the argument of being "too sinful" to address a fellow Christian's sin? Are you too sinful to be forgiven? Jesus paid for the sins of the world on His cross. Everyone who repents and believes in Him receives this forgiveness. His resurrection proves it. Apply this truth to yourself: your sins are forgiven. The very reason God wants you to confront your brother about his sin is so he can repent and be forgiven, like you.

Moreover, it's good you feel unworthy, lest you confront your brother with a Pharisaical attitude, revealing yourself as a true hypocrite. But if you go as a sinner needing Christ's mercy as much as the person you are confronting, then you will be careful not only to show him his sin but also his Saviour who died for him. Yes, the fact that you are a sinner who has been shown mercy makes you the best person to talk to your brother trapped in sin.^{iv}

But do this privately, protecting his reputation. And be hopeful. If you go with God's Word at His command, God goes with you.^v God's Word is powerful. Only the Holy Spirit can bring about repentance and faith, which He only promises to do through His Word.^{vi} This is why Jesus adds: *If he listens to you, you have regained your brother*.

There is great joy in heaven when this happens.^{vii} Why? The apostle James explains it best: *let it be known that the one who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins*.^{viii}

But what if the Christian brother refuses to repent? Jesus says: *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.*

Notice that Jesus does not say: “Gossip about your brother’s sin at church – asking any and everyone for advice.” No, He wants you to choose one or two loving Christians who will keep the matter discreet.

Even though the pastor might serve as a witness, a trusted friend of the erring brother is often a better choice. Why? Because everyone expects a pastor to warn against sin, but not always a friend. Regardless of who goes, the witness (even if he is the pastor) does not take over your responsibility of warning the erring brother. His job is to support you and note whether he repents. If he does, then assure him of his complete forgiveness in Christ and do not bring up the sin again.

But “¹⁷ *If he refuses to listen to them,*” Jesus says: “*tell it to the church.*”

Why? So the entire congregation, his spiritual family, may add their loving concern for his soul. This is not meant to shame him, but to call him back before he forfeits his salvation. If he repents, reassure him of Christ’s forgiveness, rejoice with the angels, and treat him the same way the prodigal son’s father treated his boy when he returned.^{ix}

But if he refuses to listen to the church, then, so far as the church can judge, he has shown himself to be an unbeliever. The church, therefore, is left with no choice but to break fellowship with him, just as Jesus says: *And, if he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as an unbeliever or a tax collector.*

What exactly does Jesus mean by that? Is He calling us to shun him? Absolutely not! Rather, He is commanding us to treat him like any other non-Christian. Keep calling him to repentance and keep inviting him to church as opportunity allows, just as you would a non-Christian friend. Why? Because only the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word can convert him back to faith.

At the same time, things can’t continue as they did before. Out of love for his soul, we can’t allow the impenitent person to partake of Holy Communion, lest he eat and drink judgment on himself.^x Nor can he hold office in the church, vote, or receive a Christian funeral while he remains impenitent. His refusal to repent has separated him from Christ.

Carrying out Christ’s command toward impenitent family members and friends is not easy. Nevertheless, Christ’s love compels us. We prayerfully carry out His command in hope – sharing God’s law and Gospel at the appropriate times to save his soul from hell.^{xi}

But let’s take a moment to “flip the script.” Let’s consider Jesus’ words from the perspective of the sinner who needs to repent. One day a Christian brother or sister may need to call you to repentance over some sin you excused away. Your initial reaction might be dismissive. You might get angry and try to shut them up. Understand that by doing this, you’re trying to shut up Jesus, who commanded them to come to you. He gave them the keys to warn you in love.

May the LORD forgive us all for despising the loving warning a Christian brother or sister needed to offer us. And the LORD does forgive us! In the peace of forgiveness, let us learn to value their rebukes as gifts from God meant to bring us back to the comfort of Christ's forgiveness.

Part Two: Jesus gives you the authority to do it.

Jesus said: *"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."*

Jesus has given His Church the keys of heaven. If we, in accordance with Scripture, tell someone their sins are not forgiven, they are not forgiven. If we tell someone, in accordance with Scripture, that their sins are forgiven, Christ Himself forgives them.

But what if the congregation refuses to forgive a repentant man? Or what if a man only puts on a show but isn't truly repentant?

The Bible says: *Do not be deceived. God is not mocked.*^{xiii} The LORD forgives the truly penitent man regardless of what the congregation does, and He will hold the congregation accountable for refusing to pronounce the forgiveness He commanded it to pronounce. And the unrepentant man who fooled a congregation into forgiving him has not fooled God! He has only fooled himself; God's wrath remains over him.

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.

Because God listens to His Church, we, as a congregation, never have to wonder whether He stands behind our decisions when dealing with an impenitent person. When we, at Christ's command, withhold forgiveness from the impenitent, the LORD withholds it. Whenever we do that, we also pray, asking the LORD to bring the disciplined person back to faith. The LORD hears our prayers and continues to call him back through His Word.

And if the man repents, we can forgive him, reassuring him that the LORD welcomes him back as His dearly loved child and heir of heaven. Our pronouncement is as sure and certain as if Christ Himself spoke it. Why? Because Christ promises to speak through us. The fact that God does this shows how merciful He is to those who turn to Him in repentant faith. Not only does He honour us with the treasure of His forgiveness, but He also chooses us to dispense it to others.

Jesus also says: *In fact, where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am among them.*

That means Jesus is here - in our services, Bible classes, and congregational meetings. The LORD is with you whenever you use His Word to call back an erring brother. He is with the Church whenever we must practice the tough love of excommunication. Make no mistake, even though the congregation votes, Jesus Himself is the one guiding it - closing heaven to those who refuse to repent and opening heaven to all who repent and look to Him alone for salvation. His body suffered

for all sins. His blood was spilled for our redemption. He is the one who underwent the curse of death so that we might be forgiven.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: the LORD has entrusted each of you with the keys of heaven so that we could keep watch over one another and warn each other whenever one of us is led astray. Therefore, when a brother is caught in sin, do not be afraid to go to him. Say to him, “I too am a sinner who deserves nothing but God’s wrath, but Christ has mercifully led me to repent and has forgiven me. He is offering you this same forgiveness. So repent, dear brother. The Lord is faithful and will forgive you. He will restore you to a new life – all to the glory of His name.”

And what Christ commands you to tell others, He commands me to tell you. Know, repentant brothers and sisters in Christ, that the LORD has forgiven all your sins. Jesus paid for them in full through His cross. Live in the peace of this forgiveness, ready to share it with the world. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Galatians 6:1

ⁱⁱ Cf. Proverbs 11:13, 1 Timothy 5:13, James 4:11

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Matthew 7:1-5

^{iv} Cf. 1 Timothy 1:15-16

^v Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20

^{vi} Cf. Romans 1:16, 10:17

^{vii} Cf. Luke 15:10

^{viii} James 5:20 EHV

^{ix} Cf. Luke 15:22-24

^x Cf. 1 Corinthians 11:27-29

^{xi} Cf. 1 Corinthians 5:4-5

^{xii} Cf. Galatians 6:7