

# Brothers Under a Shepherd

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Proper 18

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Matt. 18:1-20

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Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let's take a few moments to review the Small Catechism on Confession. This is what it says:

“What is Confession? Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.

“What sins should we confess? Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer; but before the pastor we should confess only those sins we know and feel in our hearts.

“Which are these? Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, done any harm?

“What is the Office of the Keys? The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.

“Where is this written? This is what St. John the Evangelist writes in chapter twenty: The Lord Jesus breathed on His disciples and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’...

“What do you believe according to these words? I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself (LSB, p.326).”

You heard that St. John's Gospel is mentioned as a citation text. But as we heard earlier, and as we'll review, our Gospel text from Matthew also talks about Confession and the practice of the Office of the Keys that we use.

## Verse 1

Our text starts at an unusual place, but as you'll see, Jesus connects the opening with the rest of our passage. He describes how we're children under the Father in heaven, that we don't want to offend any of these little ones, and how to make amends if we do, or if our brother sins against us.

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, ‘Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.’”

Those of us who think of sin but lightly here see what sin deserves. And not just drowning, but eternal condemnation. Today there is this false hope that in hell one will see their friends again and eternity there will

be a fun time. But that is not how Jesus describes hell. Jesus says earlier in the Gospel of Matthew that in hell “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12b).”

Now Jesus does acknowledge that the world is not perfect: “Woe to the world for temptations to sin!” But He also says, “it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!” Indeed, if even one of your body parts causes you to sin, it would be better for you to chop it off and enter into eternal life without it than to keep it and weep amid the gnashing of teeth and fire in hell. As the commentator writes: “One need look no further than these words of Jesus to see how much the holy God hates sin...Who of us can say that our hand or foot or eye has not caused us to sin? We all deserve to be thrown into the hell of fire.”

Some of the next verses bring us comfort. Jesus continues, “What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. It is He who has come to seek and to save the lost sheep. And He desires to find all the lost sheep. He came to die for the sins of the entire world for all time that all might be forgiven, trust in Him as their Saving Shepherd, and be welcomed into paradise with Him. Everyone. Everyone of all time. Everyone of this time. Everyone of this nation. Everyone of this state. Everyone of this congregation. Every one of you. And we are all brothers and sisters under one Shepherd. Brothers and sisters who have eternity before us.

So “(i)f your brother sins against you” he has not severed your connection with your Savior and Shepherd. He has not taken away Christ’s gift of eternal life that you should get angry. You have more than enough in Christ. Rather, “(i)f your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” This is not because he owes you something—again, you have all that you need in Christ. It is in an effort to win back your brother, one of the little children, one of the sheep for whom Christ died.

“If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Matthew eighteen is all about our brotherhood under Christ. We are the little ones who believe like children. We live sanctified lives, not practicing sin, but repenting when we do stumble, lest we lead other little children of Christ’s away. But sometimes it is necessary to point out a brother or sister’s fault to him or her. The person may not even realize that what they are doing is sin, and so we aim to restore that person gently. By gently, we do it privately so as not to embarrass the person. Our hope is that they are crushed by the news and eagerly desire forgiveness and to turn from the sin.

As we’ve covered before, that is what we pray for ourselves in the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” And again, “God’s will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God’s name or let His kingdom come.”

Jesus continues, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 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 in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Our desire in Christ is not to have sin bound to us but to be loosed, to be set free by the Gospel. And this is what we desire for our brothers and sisters under the cross and under our Shepherd Jesus.

In each situation in life, the goal is to apply the Gospel, that beautiful, blessed news that we are set free from our sin by Jesus. This is the case in Confession and Absolution as a church body here each Sunday morning. It is the case if any of you should come to me for private Confession and Absolution. And it is even the case for any brothers or sisters who go through Church discipline. The desired goal is always to be able to give the freeing Gospel good news.

In some cases, that is not able to be done. But even when it is not able to be done, we always have the opportunity to reach out. According to the commentator, “After all efforts had failed to convince the sinner to repent, he was to be regarded as outside the Church fellowship. This did not preclude future efforts to regain him (ESV Study Bible, p.1621).”

So that is what we do as brothers and sisters under our Shepherd Jesus Christ. We live together in love. But we also recognize that we are still sinners. We do those things which we through God’s Spirit do not want to do. And we confess them. We confess them and receive forgiveness from Christ’s ministers, trusting that when those over us speak to us God’s Word, it is not their forgiveness we are receiving, but Christ’s. Then that forgiveness strengthens our faith, along with the body and blood of Christ in, with, and under the bread and wine offered on the altar, so that we might continue in faith until that day when our Shepherd brings us home. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.