

Matthew 18:15-20 *“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, 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, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸ ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ ‘Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

What are you passionate about? There are a wide variety of things that we might be passionate about: our family, work, hobbies, church, taking care of our yard, sports, or hunting just to name a few. When you are passionate about something you give it your complete attention; your total focus; all of your energy. We usually aren't afraid to give a great deal of our resources toward funding what we are passionate about and are willing to sacrifice other things to pursue our passion. We get that attitude that nothing is going to prevent us from reaching this goal.

Have you ever stopped to ponder the question: “What is God passionate about?” What is it that is so near and dear to God that he allocates a great amount of energy to pursue? What is it that is so precious to him he is willing to sacrifice to bring it about? God is passionate about you! This chapter 18 of Matthew helps us to understand how passionate God is about claiming and reclaiming those who are lost in sin. In the section just prior to our text, Jesus told the parable of the lost sheep. We see how truly passionate God is about the lost as the shepherd leaves everything behind including the 99 other sheep to find the one that was lost. He searches for that sheep until he finds it and when he finds it, it brings great joy to his heart.

In this, we see how precious the soul of every single believer is to our Savior Jesus. He cannot bear a single soul to stray into spiritual death. Jesus continues with this passion for lost souls in our text for today by encouraging us to continue carrying out the work of reclaiming lost souls by restoring fellow brothers and sisters to Christ when they fall into sin. So why is God so passionate about reclaiming sheep that have strayed from his pen? To really comprehend his passion, we have to make sure that we understand what sin does. By its nature, sin separates. It not only separates people from each other—you know how a sin committed against you can put an obstacle in your relationship with that other person—but it also separates the sinner from God. Continued living in sin eventually separates the believer from God's grace. Being separated from God means not only being separated from God's blessings here on this earth, but also means missing out on those blessings eternally. Plainly and simply, that means being condemned to hell for all eternity. God doesn't want that to happen which is why he is so passionate about reclaiming his lost sheep.

Here we come upon a topic that is not popular to talk about in our world/society today. In surveys that have been conducted by numerous agencies, the results routinely come back that while the majority of the people believe in heaven, those who believe in hell are a small minority. Religious surveyor, George Barna, reports in a survey that only 32% of people believe that hell is an actual place of torment and suffering. This is ½ of what it was only 15 years ago. One survey reported that only 42% of Christians believe in hell. Could this be why people in our world are so unwilling to stand up to sin? People don't want to think that their loved ones are going to spend an eternity in hell where they will experience endless, conscious suffering with no hope of any kind of relief. People don't want to think that if they commit a sin this is the punishment which they themselves deserve to face. They don't want to talk about hell and avoid discussion of it to appear culturally relevant. To many, hell is just a repugnant doctrine they don't want to think about. So they simply ignore it. They consciously choose to not believe it.

But just because they choose to ignore it doesn't mean it isn't real. I may choose to ignore the posted speed limit because I don't like it, but that won't stop me from getting pulled over. One may choose not to believe in hell but that doesn't make it less real. As Bible believing Christians, we recognize the reality of hell from the pages of Scripture. We know that God's punishment for sin is not just a slap on the wrist nor a small fine to pay: it is separation from him forever in the torments of hell. Why the passion for lost sinners? We don't want to see anyone face this unending punishment! We don't want them to be separated from God eternally with no way out when they have the chance now to turn from that sin and know the forgiveness and life that is theirs in Christ Jesus. If hell is real (which it is) and if those who do not believe in God and are separated from Him because of their sin will end up there eternally (which they will), then we as God's people are filled the passion of Jesus to do everything we can to turn them from that sin and to the forgiveness and life that Jesus gives. We proclaim this doctrine of hell not with joy or with a triumphant spirit, but with tears in our eyes and love in our heart. God wants no one to perish but all to come to a knowledge of the truth. As people who know the solution to the punishment of hell in Jesus, we can't help but do all we can to rescue as many as possible to live eternally with God.

Imagine for a moment that a doctor has taken some x-rays of a patient and as he looks at those pictures, his worst fears

are realized—it is cancer. Not only is it cancer, but the cancer is all over the place. He now has the unenviable task of informing the patient. He knows that the patient is going to be crushed and will probably break down in tears along with any family that might be there. There might be some harsh words directed toward him in anger as the patient comes to grips with what he has just said. So he wonders, maybe it is better to say nothing. He wouldn't ruin the patient's day. He would save him and his family from the heartache of the news and send him on his way with happiness in his heart.

But would that be loving toward the patient? Is it love to be quiet and say nothing when you know that the cancer will kill the patient? We can't imagine this happening! Besides the malpractice lawsuit that would put the doctor out of business, if you care about people you want to do all that you can to help them. The best way to help them and treat the cancer and perhaps even get rid of it is to inform the patient and set a plan to try and fix it. That is love—doing the best for the other person regardless of the cost to yourself. Yet how many people are unwilling to do the same for a brother or sister in Christ when they are set in a sin? When we know that sin damns and will separate the person from God eternally and we choose to keep quiet, ignore it or overlook it, is that love? No, we would say that is the very opposite of love. And by definition, anything that is not love is sin. Not seeking to turn a brother or a sister from sin is itself sin on our part that separates us from God. It's easy for us to use the modern day excuses: We see a fellow brother walking away from his marriage just because he wants to move on to a different part of his life and we stay quiet and reason, "It's not my problem." We see a sister move in with her boyfriend who just wants to try it out for a while before they think about marriage and we stay quiet and reason, "I don't want to get involved." A family that we know hasn't been to worship in quite a while and is despising the Word of God by weekly choosing something else as more important than hearing God's word and we think about calling them but never do because we reason, "Who am I to judge?" That's not love. It's apathy. That doesn't show care and concern for the souls of our brothers and sisters. This is selfishness at its best! This is self-serving—serving only to soothe the conscience that doesn't want to get involved in the conflict that sin brings. The lesson from Ezekiel this morning reminds us that God will hold accountable whoever fails to warn a brother or sister about his or her erring way. In answer to Cain's question when confronted by God, God tells us today: Yes, you are your brother's and sister's keeper! Christian love for each other leads us to seek passionately the lost.

Our passion for the lost comes from recognizing how passionate God was in rescuing us. Jesus spoke so tenderly when he reminded us, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost." God was so passionate in seeking the lost he was willing to sacrifice his own son in our place. Jesus was so passionate that he willingly faced death and hell so that we wouldn't have to. God was so passionate that he sent our parents or friends into our lives to share the good news of his gospel with us so that we could know and believe in him. Our sin, all of it, is paid for in Christ Jesus. As God has loved us, so we now love one another. As God in his passion for our salvation sought and saved us when we were lost, he now sends us with passion for the lost that others might be saved. Remember the purpose of our brotherly admonition: to bring a sinning fellow believer to repentance. The goal is not justice, judgment or condemnation. It is grace: God's undeserved love. In Bible times, God dealt with his people directly. Today, God deals with sinners through others. We are the instruments of God's grace, seeking with the same passion and heart of love to gain those fallen away. We have the privilege of being God's mouthpieces. We—not just me as pastor or the Leadership Team as elders—we, the entire church of God share in this responsibility and work. This is what the work of the church is all about: rescuing sinners and restoring them before God. We are not interested in coldly advancing morality. Part of being a member of this church is asking our fellow brothers and sisters to admonish us when we are going astray and do whatever necessary to turn us from the fires of hell. Love one another enough to carry out this important work.

Even the way Jesus sets for us to go about this work shows his love for lost sheep and his passion to reach them. Perhaps the biggest word in Jesus directions is: Go. Don't send a harsh, too pointed email which slams the other person. Don't write them a letter. Don't ignore it or overlook it. Don't ask the pastor to talk to the person or post frustration about their sin on Twitter or Facebook. Don't gossip about it or spread it to others. Go! Go to the person one on one. Deal face to face with your brother or sister and in humility laced with love, sit and work to lead that person to a recognition of his/her sin with the purpose of restoring them through God's grace. If after a while of trying that person is unwilling or unable to see his/her sin, then in love take other mature, humble Christians along as witnesses. If the person is still unable or unwilling to see the sin, then tell it to the church. Then make an appeal to all of God's people to see if someone can't lovingly lead that person from sin. Finally, if they are still unwilling after that, then treat the person as a pagan or tax collector. We call this excommunication. This is a declaration that fellowship has ended because that brother or sister has willingly chosen to separate himself/herself. Yet even this is love. It is the last act of love to point out to the person the great consequences their sin has caused and turn them back to the Lord. None of this is ever easy. It's never easy to confront someone in their sin much less remove someone from a congregation because of sin. It leaves a hole in your stomach to know that someone is rejecting the will of God and chooses to remain separated from him. But it is always done in love in hopes of turning a person back to the Lord.

God brought us into a family of believers for a reason. He did this so that we can mutually encourage one another, admonishing when necessary, walking together on the path to life. You are each other's keepers—not in a judging, condemning, arrogant way, but with humility and love and care for the souls of your brothers and sisters. Love one another. Be passionate about one another. With joy in your heart, carry out the work God has given us to do as we model his passion for the lost. Amen.