

Rev. Seth D. Bode † Sermon 394, 09-20-2020 † Pentecost 16

“Lord God, you have appointed me as Pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.”

“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

MATTHEW 18

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. ¹⁶But 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.’ ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸Amen I tell you: Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Amen 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. ²⁰In fact where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am among them.”



Once there was a renowned captain, John de Monte Mirable, who gave a magnificent supper to some noblemen. He invited a number of poor people. Among the poor was a blind man who thanked his host for the supper, but moreover, for something the captain had once done for him. When his host wanted to know what he had done for the blind man, he was answered that the captain had commanded his eyes to be put out. He had formerly been a prominent cavalier, but at the same time a miserable robber and adulterer. So the captain had commanded him to be seized and his eyes put out.

The blind man took the opportunity to think about his sins, to repent, and to begin to live as a Christian, fearing and loving God. For such a gift, the man could not thank the captain enough, for otherwise he would with seeing eyes and great possessions and honor have gone to hell. Now he hoped, now blind and poor, to go to heaven.

After all, what will it benefit a person if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul? Therefore Jesus gave us a way to resolve sins against one another without putting out each other's eyes.

Jesus wants for His Church not heaven on earth, but to have a right status with Him on earth. The benefits of that will pursue us all the way to heaven, because a right status with Jesus on earth is a right status with Jesus in heaven. So we read these startling statements in our gospel: "*Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*" In a sense, however, this is not much different than the 3rd petition, where Jesus tells us to pray God's will ...

As It Is On Earth, So It Is In Heaven

1. The authority to forgive

God would have to grant the power of "as it is ... so it will be." This is a great power. It is the great power that the Christian church possesses. Jesus Christ trampled underfoot the devil and your sin, which on good Friday were suspended on the cross together with Him, and the devil must now flee at the mention of the name of Christ. If you wish to make use of these great treasures, behold, He has already bestowed them on you as a gift.

Jesus Christ, after redeeming the entire world, has given His followers power to forgive everyone's sins. "*He who hears you hears me*" (Luke 10:16). All rights and privileges belong to the Christian Church on earth, including the authority to forgive.

It looks like this: Verse 15 is the destination. It says we privately – not on social media – confront the person who sinned against us. If this conversation wins the person to repentance, that is the point! The opposite reaction would lead to going and finding a neutral believer in Christ to hear out the matter at hand. Finally, you tell the Church. We work with our elders, the Adult Discipleship Committee. We set up meetings and sort it out.

Notice the work of forgiveness is not exactly the official work of the visible church. Each Christian begins with private conversations. Christian discipline is

done out of love early on, in relationship to one another. But when a church does bring about an unfortunate decision, it is as official as if Jesus Christ says so.

Scripture itself gives the name 'church' to the visible assembly of the called (see v17). Jesus Christ also explains that it is the true church, not tonsures, sackcloth, collars, and long robes. Of those items the Word of God knows nothing, but rather wherever two or three are gathered together, no matter out to sea, 20 miles into the atmosphere, or 7 miles underground. If only they have the Word of God and trust it, there is most certainly the real, ancient, true, apostolic Church. Their word on earth is as good as God's Word in heaven.

2. The authority to retain

What happens when a sinner goes without repenting? The sins are retained. We deny the unrepentant sinner everything that the Christian Church possesses, such as the forgiveness of sins. The unrepentant sinner has no share in the suffering, death, and shed blood of Christ. We deny them the communion of saints and eternal life, so that they must give up heaven and Christian fellowship and be robbed of every grace of the Holy Spirit. All of this is what St. Paul calls in harsh tones, "delivering to the devil" (1 Co. 5:5). This is the heaviest set of consequences we could imagine.

A man without forgiveness is like a man who sleeps quietly while his house is burning down. A famous theologian was accustomed to say, "Would to God, we would be so displeased with ourselves in life as we are in death, we would then pray for forgiveness more heartily."

At our pastor's conference, one of the presenters told us a "vicar story," one of those fun tales from a year-in-training before we all became pastors. (Our synod has a wonderful internship year for pastors-in-training known as vicar year.) In this story, the vicar was sitting with his pastor with a young woman, church member her whole life, confirmed, but as it turned out living with her boyfriend. The pastor expressed the law gently, explaining this isn't how God wants her to live, and there could be eternal consequences for her if she did not repent and change her living arrangements. Her face changed to visible anger, stood up, and stated one awful curse at the pastor before storming out. A little while later there was a soft rap at the office door, and she came in. She apologized, acknowledged the pastor's admonition as true, and then said she saw no way

God would ever forgive her. Well, you know what the pastor got to say next. She was forgiven! And there was no waiting around, because we have ...

3. The command to forgive

With that great power comes the need / reflex / resolve to reclaim the one who has sinned. God has commanded every minister of the gospel to forgive men their sins, promising that He will do in heaven what the minister is doing on earth. The minister is not to look up to heaven to ascertain what God is doing; he is merely to execute his orders on earth and forgive people's sins, relying on God's promise that He is forgiving them.

"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" (19). The word "agree" at one time meant to "harmonize," as in singing. This requires that the prayer is in harmony or agreement, not saying two different ways about forgiveness.

Whenever a person showed the mark of a poor sinner, the apostles told him to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. They never asked him to wait until his condition had more fully developed. *"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God"* (Psalm 42:1-2).

So God did not tell those on earth, "You sort it all out down there. I will get back to you on the details when you arrive at the pearly gates." Instead, He granted us authority beyond this place.

Therefore, this is the reason forgiveness on earth is done in heaven; under no circumstances is Jesus Christ absent or unavailable. Heaven is where Jesus is, and yet He has not abandoned us here on earth. He is present according to His whole person with our Christian relationships, divine nature and human. This is a mystery, but as always our Savior Jesus Christ is the connecting point. Just as He hanged on the cross, suspended between heaven and earth for us, so does He connect heaven and earth to our eternal benefit.

Let us pray with King David in Psalm 19, *"Who can enumerate his own errors? Lord, forgive my hidden faults. Restrain your servant also from willful sins. Do not let them rule over me"* (v12-13).

Amen.