

“When Love Breaks Down” Matthew 18:15-20 September 29,2002

The apostle Paul concludes his instructions on the priority of enlarging our capacity to love with the reminder of the eternally enduring nature of love. I would be remiss in this series on graduate level loving if I did not address what you are to do “when love breaks down”.

Let me begin my talk this morning with the following illustration. In the 4th,5th and 6th grade where I grew up the school district had contracted with the Boston Pops to come to our community four times per year to put on a program for all of the school children in our district. The purpose of the program was to introduce us to classical music, to introduce us to the various sections and instruments in the orchestra and to create another generation who would not only love classical music but would have some sense of appropriate behavior when attending the symphony. And so interspersed with learning about the instruments we also learned that you always come early to the concert, you go to the bathroom before you enter, you don’t talk or whisper as long as the director has his hands in the air, if you have a cough you bring a box of Smith Brothers cough drops, you never chew gum, and you don’t get up to leave early. Today we would add that you turn off all electronic devices. And then on the last program of the year Arthur Fiedler would come and captivate us with the glory of classical music and how the audience had a responsibility to behave in certain ways to enhance the experience. And we got the message. We really did. Well, go back 2,000 years to the time of Christ and realize that what boys and girls were taught about being in synagogue made our symphony prep time a walk in the park. From the earliest of ages they were taught what you could do and what you could not do in the synagogue service. And one thing you could not do is interrupt or makes a change to the order. And yet we find Jesus Christ in Matthew 5:23-24 saying the following words ***“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”*** What Jesus is saying is

this: When love breaks down it is a big deal. It is not to be taken lightly. In fact if in the midst of one of the most important events in weekly worship you realize that a relationship with a brother or sister in Christ has gone south, then you put your gift down and you leave, searching out that brother and making things right.

And so, in Matthew 18 Jesus address this more specifically with a procedure to follow. Let me read for you Matthew 18:15-20 page 695

What do you do when love breaks down? The first step is that you go to the person. Now, this seems to be so logical and ordinary that we wonder why Jesus even mentions it. But as soon as we think about it, we know that if we are the person who has been offended or sinned against we more often than not respond this way. We move away from the person saying I am going to shut them out, give them the silent treatment or whatever until they come to me and apologize. This is the classic song and dance in marriage. You hurt me and so I pout, or withdraw, or roll over and skip the good night kiss. The second response is to tell someone else. And the grapevine gets working pretty fast here. You can't believe how so and so treated me...or I just need to tell you what she did to me... or how can he be a pastor with the way he talked to me. You know that program also don't you. And yet Jesus pulls the breaker on this right away by saying what. "If someone has sinned against you, then you go and see them." He doesn't say, "Pray that they will see the evil of their ways and come back on their hands and knees asking for my forgiveness." We have here another illustration of the inversion principle that Jesus so often taught. He calls us to do the opposite of what the culture taught and demanded. And what is the primary illustration. Romans 5:8 But God showed His love for us that even while we were sinner, Christ died for us. We had sinned against the Father and yet the Father came, taking the initiative to restore the relationship. So the first step is that you go. And I might add that if you are the offending party Jesus does not give this teaching

to let you off the hook, but rather to remind us that in Christ both parties have a duty to restore broken relationships.

Step 2 Go to them in private. “Go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. Again, this goes both ways whether you are the offended or the offender. I believe that this is to create a safe environment for your brother or sister to hear of their failing. That is part of the beauty of the privacy. Lenski, in his commentary on Matthew helps us understand what Jesus is talking about here. “Jesus has in mind graver sins such as all brethren would be compelled to consider too serious to pass without plain evidence of repentance. This excludes what a sensitive brother may deem a sin without due warrant that it is such. In other words we are not talking about those things in life the love enables us to let go of and say “community is too important to let that ruin it.” Jesus is talking about deal breaking kinds of events. The word for sin is the one that means misses the mark as in shooting an arrow and missing the target. Some of you will say, “Well, what about the command not to judge?” Good question but you must look at the whole verse. We must apply the same standards to ourselves that we are questioning in the life of our fellow believer. Is this easy. Of course not but it reflects the depth of our Christ like love and the strength of our community.

Step 3. Go in private to resolve the issue. Let me repeat that the desired outcome is to resolve the issue and to restore the relationship. It is not, it is not to prove you were right and he was wrong. It is rather, and I quote, “if he listens to you.” The image again is of going to speak the truth in love so that conviction and restoration takes place. The offended party goes in love with the desire to bring forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration so that the other person is freed from their sin.

This is the procedure that Jesus installs within the Christian community to deal with the reality that though we are new creatures in Christ we still sin against and fail our brothers and sisters. We find it addressed in a variety of ways in many of the Gospels. Paul talks about going in gentleness.

Again, this is not speaking of an annoying habit or a difference in a life style issue. This is

addressing sin issue. The desire of Jesus and the teaching of the NT church was that risk taking to re-establish love would avoid a brother or sister from avoiding letting a sin get a stranglehold on them.

But Jesus has to take it one step further. What if you go in gentleness, in humility, in a way that reflects a deep love for your brother or sister and they reject what you say. They either deny it, or debate it or say it's none of your business. Jesus tells us to take two or three witnesses. Now frankly this could have two purposes. The witness could be aware of the whole issue and they go to affirm the seriousness of the sin and their desire that it be repented of and grace win the day. I think that is how most interpret it. I think the other piece is that the witnesses don't go so much to validate the sin but validate the method and the process by which one brother appeals to another believer to turn their life around. So if in the face of witness there is still a hard heart then the larger community can respond on their recommendation. And their response is to remove fellowship and community support from the individual.

Most today would say this is an outdated procedure, many would say they could share horror stories of this being done improperly but I do not believe we can ignore this direct teaching of Jesus that was illustrated several times in the rest of the New Testament. What it comes down to is this. Do you really love your brothers and sisters. Because if you love them, then you are willing to take the risk.