

The Privilege of Belonging to the People of God

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Date: 14 September 2025

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[0 : 00] So what would you think if I told you this phrase, You cannot have God as your father if you do not have the church as your mother.

What would you think if I told you this phrase, You cannot have God as your father if you do not have the church as your mother. You might think you'd walked into the wrong church this morning. That doesn't sound like a slogan that comes from evangelical churches. But actually, it's a truth that the reformers like Luther, Calvin and Cranmer held to and taught.

And the reason they held to such a high view of the church is that Jesus did. Modern Christians tend to think of the church as a bit of a chore. That little bit you've got to do on a Sunday.

That's not really important to us. In the West, we're very individualistic. And so what we think is really important to be a Christian, the way to have a really powerful experience of God is by having a deep, personal, a private, intimate relationship with God.

[1 : 15] It's all inward, on the inside, and it's just between me and God. But Jesus didn't think that way. He says that the way to have a full and powerful experience of God in your life is to be in a community with other Christians, to be involved and active in the life of the church.

So to have God as your father, you need to have the church as your mother. What stands out in that metaphor is that it makes the human relationships we have in church very important.

Being part of God's family, part of the church, means that we have access to the most powerful mechanism of change there is, each other. And so we're going to spend our time this morning looking at how important it is for us to be the church.

Now the series we've started, this little mini-series I guess in Matthew, is about how Christians are to relate to each other. And last week we saw that we've got to help each other, we've got to be involved in each other's lives, how to forgive each other, and then this week we're looking at how to confront each other.

How are we going to confront each other? What are we going to do when things go wrong in this family church that we've got? So we're going to look at the first point, this confrontation is the powerful process of change that Jesus has set up in his church.

[2 : 44] Confrontation is the powerful process of change. Wouldn't it be amazing to be part of a family where everyone got along all the time and no one had the slightest problem with anyone else?

Oh, what bliss. Well, just like our earthly families have personal conflict problems from time to time, in the church we need to learn how to handle conflict with each other.

Confronting each other, if done right, can be a powerful driver of change in people's lives. And so that's what Jesus picks up in verse 15. So we're going to go to Matthew chapter 18 and from verse 15.

He says this, If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.

So in dealing with problems in church family relationships, Jesus first, there's a step-by-step approach here.

[3 : 49] There's a three or four step approach. His first point is, go and speak to that person and only that person that you have an issue with. The goal is to win them over or to win them back.

This term, to win them over, is a profit term. If you do that, if you do this well, if there's confrontation and you sort it out well, in accordance with what Jesus is laying out here, you will create value for the family of God.

If you can speak to people about their sin in such a way that gets them to see their faults and gets them to change. But it's amazing how easily we get just this first step wrong.

I'm just going to go through a few things that we get wrong in this first step of how to be God's people, how to confront and how to help people change. The first thing we get wrong is that so many of us don't bother saying anything at all.

Because we live in this modern Western world, everything is individualistic. I'm in my small bubble, you're in yours, and if I don't have to interact with you, I'm happy with that.

[4 : 59] I can spend time online, I'd rather spend time on my phone. The last thing I want to do is go and challenge people and make a nuisance. It's messy, it's not nice, it's not fun. We say things like, oh, that's not my problem.

The problem with this thinking is it actually keeps the rift in the relationship going. When Jesus actually wants you to reconcile. Jesus doesn't say, go and speak to them if you feel like it. He says you need to go and do it. It's a command. Go and speak to them. But secondly, and this is by far the most common mistake that Christians make, they do the very thing Jesus says you are not to do.

They don't go and tell the person they've got a problem with. They go and tell someone else. Christians are so good at making spiritual excuses for their skinner and their gossip, aren't they? Oh, you know, I just need to ask, I just need a little bit of help with someone. I'm just going to tell you so we can pray for them together. Or you pretend to be all humble.

[6 : 17] Oh, I could, you know, they're so above me. I could never tell them. But then you break this command and go and tell someone else. Breaking this one little verse, this one command, is probably the cause of more pastoral problems in the church, in church relationships than any other.

So we've got to be careful about doing what Jesus says here. If you want to fix relationships and help people. You can't duck and dive.

You have to do what Jesus says. You must not go and speak to another person about an issue you've got with person A. You're not allowed to tell person B, C, D, or, you can't tell anyone. You have to go to that person before you try and tell someone else. However, there's a third problem in this first step of confronting people in their sin, and when there's issues, and how do we resolve it?

And that is people can confront in such a way that drives a wedge between them, and it drives them further apart. It doesn't reconcile. So we take the go and tell them their sin, but seriously, and we forget that what Jesus says is, yes, so that you can win them over.

[7 : 36] And typically, when you've got an issue with someone, you immediately want to go and tell them when your emotions are up, when you're still angry, and it comes across in a judgmental way.

However, that's not what Jesus is telling us to do here. For example, Ephesians 4, 15 says to speak the truth in love. Not in anger, not in frustration, not to hurt the other person.

And so that means, if you're going to do this well, it might mean you must take a few hours before you go and speak to the person. It might mean you've got to take a few days before you go and speak to the person.

It might mean you take a few weeks. Don't try and solve the issue when you're irritated or hurt. Do it after prayer. For some, that means doing it after much prayer.

But when you do that, quite often, you'll find you don't need to raise with them at all in the first place. Just spending time in prayer with someone you've got an issue with often resolves the problem.

[8 : 44] I remember once, at a previous job, there was a big issue that developed between me and a colleague. We were at a Christian workplace, and believe it or not, it had something to do with the printer.

I mean, the most ridiculous thing, really. And I had been too confrontational. Oh, Jesus says we must go confront each other. I'm going to go and confront them about the printer.

And it didn't work, and it made the situation worse. And so I just, thankfully, I was, well, God must have just spoken to me and said, listen, my man, it's not working.

Go and spend some time in prayer. And I did. And I took my foot off the accelerator. I just held it up to God in prayer. And it took about two or three weeks. And the situation resolved itself, just like that.

I didn't have to do anything. I didn't have to tell them how bad they were, what they'd done wrong. They actually came to me and said, hmm, I think there's a problem with us and the printer. And we resolved it.

[9 : 49] So often, just spending time in prayer can help us fix Christian relationships in the church. However, if that doesn't work, there's a second step, and that is to escalate the problem, but with only one or two other people.

That's in verse 16. Jesus says, but if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that, and here's a quote from the Old Testament, every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

The second step, there's an escalation process. First step, you go and speak to that person. You're not to speak to anyone else. And don't make an excuse for speaking to anyone else.

And spend time in prayer before you go and speak to them. If it doesn't work, like they say with the rugby yesterday, if the springboks at first don't succeed, try and try and try and try and try, six times again.

But, if that doesn't work, you've got a second option open to you, and that's to escalate to one or two people. There's not carte blanche for you to go and tell everyone, and then out of the 15 people you're told, ask two people to come and speak with them.

[11 : 14] You're keeping it small. But this is a helpful step, because it tells the person in the wrong that this is serious. It's not just you and your own personal opinion.

There's other people involved now. And what's needed is repentance and reconciliation. Many issues are resolved at this level of the escalation process, as wiser Christians often help to drop the temperature when there's a heated situation.

But what's important for us to notice is that community is part of the entire process. It's intended to keep the community going, to working together, but you're using the community to help you resolve the problem.

You can't fight sin by yourself. There's a third step, and if that still doesn't work, you're to take the matter to the church as a whole.

That's in verse 17. And in fact, there's a two-escalation step in verse 17. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church.

[12 : 18] And if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or Gentile, depending on your translation, or a tax collector. I'm going to just talk about this step as one.

And so, many people read this and go, Whoa, that is hectic. He's talking about excommunication. Well, the final step is a heavy step, but it's not a harsh step.

Exclusion from the church body is never given without any possibility of return. The conditions are always that if the offending party is willing to repent and make amends, they will be welcomed back into fellowship again.

But it's that little bit about treat them like a tax collector or like a pagan, and we get confused about that because we don't know what Jesus means there because we don't treat our tax collectors very nicely.

But maybe it means the same thing in the end. But what about that pagan thing? Well, in Jesus' day, it just means those are the people that they didn't have fellowship with.

[13 : 28] They didn't have relationships with them. They didn't invite them into their houses. They wouldn't eat with them, especially if you're a Jew. A pagan is a Gentile. It's just a different word for Gentile. And a tax collector was even worse than a Gentile, as they are today, I guess.

Poor guys. But it doesn't mean we must be mean to them. It just means we exclude them from our company. Now, this is not easy, but it must be done.

In addiction recovery, they speak of enablers. These are family members who give in to pressure and allows their addict back into their home or back into their life and gives them access to money or food, etc.

after the family has decided to practice tough love. And so if you give in at this point, where the family has decided, look, you're our child, but we've got very strict rules about how we can relate to each other, and then one person says, ooh, no, they're going to give them a bit of money.

And the recovery process goes all the way back to zero again. You know, many people will say that they would never go to a church that practices this kind of discipline.

[14 : 40] But in fact, this process of escalation and tough love does actually work. In fact, in my work with addicts, in my previous job, it's the only thing that worked.

One of the clients, after years of his parents helping him out of difficult situations, always paying for things when he needed money, etc., etc., a little bit here, a little bit there, but it eventually got to the point where they said if he continues hanging out with the wrong crowd, they wouldn't come to his rescue.

Anyway, something bad happened one night and he was arrested, but he was still a young kid. He was in high school when this happened. And he was arrested and he fully expected his parents to come and bail him out.

And he was told by the police, no, they told us to keep you. Oh! He was shocked. How can they do that to him? They didn't bail him out and he spent the weekend in jail.

That's the last time he messed around with those people. And that was the last time he messed around with drugs. He said that was the thing that turned him around. It was their tough love that saved him.

[15:48] It was that unified front that said, so far and no further. If you behave like this, we'll accept you back. If you behave like that, we can't accept you in our house.

Now, obviously, this kind of discipline doesn't happen in the church often. In my years of church work, I can count less than one hand the times we've had to go this far in the church discipline process.

But we always leave the door open. It's clearly laid out what the issues were. We followed the escalation process and it's clearly laid out what that person must do to restore fellowship.

And there's a further escalation process. If they don't like what we say as a church, they can go to the area bishop. If they don't like what the area bishop says, they can go to our presiding bishop. If they don't like what the presiding bishop says, they can go to synod.

And I think it stops there. There's a huge escalation process. The whole point is to try and keep Christians relating to each other. The last thing we want is schism and fighting, although it does happen.

[17:01] But let me ask you, just considering these verses, when was the last time you helped a brother or sister with sin in their life by going to speak to them about it privately?

You might say, oh, I did it just this morning. Well, you might not need to do it that much. There's two people, kinds of people, they're really keen to go and tell people about their sin. You need to move over to the I need to pray about it side, but there's probably more of us, more Christians, who don't really want to get involved and don't want to speak to anyone about their sin.

When was the last time you helped your brother or sister with sin in their life by going to speak to them about it privately? Are there people you can think of that could use your help in getting their Christian walk back on track if they've wandered a bit, or maybe take it up a gear if they're sitting idle?

Go and speak to them after church today. Maybe don't do it after this sermon. Say, oh, I've really got to come and speak to you about something.

If someone does approach you, have you responded appropriately? This is the difficult one.

[18:29] Ooh, it hurts when someone says, hmm, Dylan, you know, I've noticed something I need to speak with you. Oh, and you get that sinking feeling. But if we do this right, if we think about this correctly, then I know that they're trying to help me.

So I'm going to be open to what they have to tell me. Are you willing to be shown your faults? You're not perfect.

We just prayed about, every week we confess our sin. We've all done something wrong this week that someone could have come to us and said, oh, my man, don't do that. Or my sister.

So we mustn't actually be surprised if there's issues in our life where we receive help from others. It's, can I just say that's the quickest way to change?

Yes, you can change, God can speak to you, and of course he does. And you, and you, and he speaks to us directly. I have found that he speaks much more directly and quicker when another person comes to me and says, just so that you know.

[19:36] I'm like, okay, thank you so much. are you willing to be shown your faults? Are you willing to walk a path with someone in the church to help you reconcile your differences with another Christian?

Church discipline is for our good and the best way for us to change. Otherwise, Jesus would have left this out. He would have just said, oh, if they've got sin in your life, just go away from everyone,

pray about it privately, just you and God, and God will tell you what you need to do and then you'll be okay.

He doesn't do that. If you've got sin in your life, you probably don't see it. It's very likely that someone else will see it. Go and help them. But please do it like this and do it with a good heart and a good faith.

I guess the way, the best way to think about it is the same way that we speak to our kids when they are growing up as parents. When we see them doing funny things, things we never taught them, we don't go and tell them where they're wrong to hurt them or to denigrate them or to break the relationship.

We do it to help them. It's the same with grown-up Christian discussions on sin. Church discipline is for our good and the best way for us to change.

[20 : 57] In fact, the church here is of huge importance. The thing is, sin is our biggest problem and we simply cannot beat it by ourselves. We need the help of the church of God in talking with us.

That's the first part of our passage. But, Jesus says that's not enough. What we also need on top of that is the church community united in prayer.

Because it is only as we unite in prayer that we get to be conduits that unleash the power of heaven on earth. And so, the second point on confrontation and fixing church relationships is this incredible, this powerful privilege of prayer.

Powerful privilege of prayer that we've got. In his next verses, Jesus gives the church the most amazing power known to man. Only Christians have the ability to call on the power of heaven to change people and to change the world.

But, like change, it is done in community and for a particular purpose. It's done in community and for a particular purpose.

[22 : 09] It's not carte blanche to order your personal private jet from heaven, but rather to help your Christian brothers and sisters to escape the vice hold of sin in their life and enjoy the life to the full in the community of God.

And so here's an incredible truth that Jesus teaches us, that the church works with heaven to change what happens on earth. It is amazing and only Christians have this superpower.

So, we're going to read from verse 18 to verse 20. Jesus says, Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.

Binding on earth will be bound in heaven. Okay, now, we've come across this before in Matthew 16 where Jesus was giving Peter the power of the keys to the church.

[23 : 23] but this is not about binding Satan. We mustn't take these verses out of context and apply them straight to the most dramatic thing we can think of.

As someone says, I don't know why they keep binding Satan, the problem is he keeps getting loose. now, it's not to say we mustn't engage in spiritual warfare, but it doesn't happen like this.

So, we mustn't take these verses out of context. We must keep them in context and when we do that, it means that binding and loosing is talking about binding and loosing people from their sins, which is actually just as dramatic if you think about it.

Because Jesus has been talking about the problem of broken relationships, the problem of sin in our lives, these next verses must have to do with that. He's not going to spring from there to some totally different subject.

Now, many Christians balk had been given this kind of authority from Jesus. It doesn't sit well with us. How can I do something here and then God is going to do that in heaven?

[24 : 43] Who am I to do that? But remember, it's not you. It's done in community. The you here is plural. It's very important that you know that.

Jesus, in our English translations, we don't have plural you anymore. In the old English, they did. Was that like thee and thou and that? Do you remember that? Whoever did Shakespeare?

So, in modern English, it's just you and we don't know if it's plural or not, if it's singular or plural, but in the Greek it's plural. So, it's you all. I tell you, I tell everyone standing here, all his disciples, whatever all of you, together, bind on earth, will be bound in heaven.

And how do we know he's talking in plural? Because of the next verse, verse 19, again, I tell you all that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them.

So, this is talking about people being together. Jesus is talking about the disciplinary process he's just been explaining. In fact, the last verse is often taken out of context to mean that Jesus is with us in our prayer meetings.

[25 : 58] That last verse where he says, where two or three are gathered in my name, I am with them. We take that as a wonderful promise in all our prayer meetings. I mean, we've done that here. Where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be there.

I'll be listening to their prayers. I'll be there to help you. But if we're talking about the context of discipline, it's talking about Jesus being with his people in judgment over their sin.

It's a warning. I will come and visit you, and I'm going to help you sort out what must happen. It's both a warning and a promise.

Jesus leaves it kind of open-ended here. It's not just to be used in judgment, but also in promise because the disciplinary process is not to harm or to hurt, but to restore and to heal and to help. And for that we need Jesus' help. What I want us to notice is that if the church is faithful to the process of change, doing this disciplinary process, meeting with each other, taking our issues to God in prayer, prayer, it will unleash heaven's power to keep the church connected to Jesus.

[27 : 13] Either people will be loosed from their sin as they respond to church discipline in repentance, or they will stay bound in their sin and outside of the church if they don't.

As the church meets to pray about these things, God takes our words and actions into account as he works in the world. It's an incredible privilege that no one else on earth has.

The church is in a sense heaven's ambassador on earth. Now we don't have a lot to do with ambassadors in everyday life, but in the political world ambassadors are given certain power and authority to act on the sovereign's behalf, on the government's behalf.

They often get what's called plenipotentiary! power. Plenipotentiary power. That means they're given a lot of authority to make decisions on the government's behalf. They don't have to keep an arsonium, they can just go and do, they're given a wide range of things they can go and do.

But the king or sovereign or the government has the ultimate right of veto. But even though he does that, they're given the right to act and effect change on behalf of the government.

[28 : 30] Friends, this is amazing. We, as Jesus Church, get to be part of this process of change. Your words and actions have real world consequences with the stamp of heaven on it.

You say, no, but how, you still, still, I'm not sure about this. It doesn't sound right, it doesn't feel right. Well, one of the things that the church is called, we've given many names in the New Testament, one of them is we are called the body of Christ.

And it's not for nothing that we are called the body of Christ. He is our head, we are his body, Jesus is not on earth anymore. He's not physically here, he's physically in heaven, he's physically seated at the right hand of God.

So how does he effect change on earth? Yes, he can work through his spirit, he can work through angels, you know how he's chosen to work? He's chosen you to work through, to change how things happen on earth.

It's an incredible privilege. It's also a bit scary if you think about it. We are literally Jesus' hands, mouth, and feet on earth.

[29 : 56] However, the power and authority to affect change doesn't come from ourselves. The source of that power comes from what Jesus did at the cross.

We are simply conduits of that. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.

And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors. As though God were making his appeal through us, we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

Paul is talking about the apostles, but that can be applied to disciples as we do the same thing by preaching the gospel. As we do the same thing when someone has an issue, we go and speak to them and say, you need to sort out that sin.

And when they say, hey, I'm really sorry, I should have done that. We get to apply the power of Christ's blood in their life and we say, good, I forgive you, your sins are forgiven.

[31 : 02] It's amazing. It's so lovely to forgive someone their sins and to reconcile them with each other and with God. God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against him.

That's the work of the cross. But he doesn't do that work by himself. He then gets us to be part of it. He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. Jesus says, okay, I've done this, now here, go and take it and give it to others.

We become Christ's ambassadors, employing people, imploring people, to be reconciled to God. A few things for us to think through.

Christian, do you realize what a powerful privilege you have in being part of the church? Yeah, you came to church on a Sunday, sing a few songs, say a few prayers, but what this is telling us is that we are the most powerful institution on planet Earth.

We're the only ones that are connected to God like this. We're the only ones that he listens to. You've got a powerful privilege of being part of the church.

[32 : 34] You get to affect what happens in the world by your words and actions. things. But dealing with issues, with sin, with people, must be done in the way Jesus says.

Not doing it that way, doing it your own way, will result in failure and compromised witness. You'll be hurting Christians as well as the church's witness to non-Christians.

God Secondly, do you realize that you cannot do Christianity on your own? You need to be involved in the life of the church.

It is a high calling. It's not a small thing to be part of the people of God. It is the thing that God wants. He doesn't save people individually. He saves them to be part of his people.

He saves families. He saves generations. He saves you so that he can work through you to effect changing in the world. No one else gets to do this but us.

[33 : 40] Isn't that cool? So make good use of your time on earth. Spend it with other Christians praying for your family.

Spend it with other Christians praying for your friends. Spend it with other Christians praying for your world. It is so exciting. After he's wrestling in prayer for a person.

Oh, and they sit at the back of the church. Praying for a family member. Boom, out of the blue. You know, can you get me a Bible?

Praying for a major situation in the world. at our synod, there was a statement on repentance for apartheid.

It turned out that they had never officially adopted a statement on apartheid from the church's synod. And they wanted to amend that. God, how many people were praying for the end of apartheid?

[34 : 50] And that happened almost overnight all those years ago. So, prayer is the gift that is only given to Christians.

How can we not use it more? But lastly, if you're not a Christian, what you need to know, and here's an easy way to tell, if you're not really involved in the church, yeah, you come every now and then, we get dragged in, maybe Christmas, maybe Easter, maybe you're here by mistake today, and you're thinking about the rugby, or what a lackaday it is, likely that you're not really a Christian, because you're not really involved in the church.

You need to know, don't be fooled, just coming here, dips and drabs, ins and outs, don't think that you belong to the people of God. God is not on your side, and what's more, he's not listening to you. He has no reason to do anything nice to you. If you want God to bless you, you need to join his people. You can only have God as your father if you've got the church as your mother.

The people of the king, you need to join them, you need to join us. What that means is, you need to bend the knee to Jesus. That means submitting your life to him, and that's the only way to have him as your friend.

[36 : 10] The only way to have your sins not counted against you is to trust in Christ and have him as your king. But what happens then is you join his people and you get all these other blessings along with having your sins forgiven.

You get to reconcile people when things don't work well. You've got a whole process of sorting it out. You've got other people helping you grow.

You can feed back as well as God gives you wisdom in your life. With Paul, if you're not a Christian, we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God, join the church, and become part of God's solution to change the world.

Can I pray for us? Heavenly Father, oh, it's so humbling, Lord, to realize what a high position you've given your people.

Lord, in and of ourselves, we are wholly inadequate at dealing with our own sin, let alone the sin of others, and we really need your help.

[37 : 19] But Lord, we all need your help together. So help us to take these words and use them, Lord, to spark good relationships, to spark time in prayer, to go and grab another person and say, listen, we need to pray for these things.

God will answer our prayers if we spend time together asking him to help us overcome sin, asking him to bless other churches. Lord, we've heard about Paul and we know about Elias.

We know, Lord, that you want to build your church. We want to spend time praying for our brothers so that your kingdom may come on earth, and we want to be part of that solution. You've created us to be part of that solution.

Help us to trust in that and to make a difference. Amen.