

It was quite the rescue operation, wasn't it? While the hurricane was dumping gallons of water on Houston, I was stuck in my house, like most of you were. And like most of you, I was watching the news almost the entire time. And they were showing one water rescue after another. It was quite the rescue operation. Do you know how many Houstonians were rescued from flooded houses by boat? Last count I saw was 3000.

But the really cool part of the rescue operation was this: Many of the rescuers were not police, firemen, or national guardsmen. They were average citizens. People from Houston, other parts of Texas, even other states who were watching the scene unfold on TV saw people in need of rescue, had the equipment to help, and did.

I thought of that as I studied the gospel lesson this week. Because in it, Jesus describes an ongoing rescue operation. Not in Houston, but in the Church, among the family of believers. It's a much more important one, because the people who need rescuing didn't just fall into flood waters, they're believers who fall into sin. They're not just in danger of losing their lives, they're in danger of losing their salvation. And here's the thing: Jesus says the rescue workers in this operation aren't just pastors and elders who are trained for the work. They're “average” Christians. They're you.

It can be an intimidating task – and Jesus knows that. That's why he assures you here that he gives us what it takes to carry it out. Listen as Jesus tells you: When your brother sins, go! 1) Your goal is to save, 2) Your Savior goes with.

¹⁵ “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.”

I. Your goal is to save

It's easy to get the wrong idea about Jesus' words here. People might think Jesus is promoting pressure tactics or the threat of public embarrassment as a means to get straying Christians back on track. Or that the goal is “cutting the dead wood” out of congregations, kicking out the people who don't meet our standards. Even Christians can get the wrong idea about Jesus' words here: That it's just a mechanical, four-step process for dealing with believers when they're sinning.

Friends, there's nothing mechanical about this. It's not a process; it's about people. Every word Jesus' speaks here is dripping with his living love for souls. And the goal isn't to punish by embarrassment or to kick people out...the goal is **to win your brother**. The goal is repentance...forgiveness...to rescue a soul. "Matthew 18" might bring to mind words like "church discipline" and "excommunication," but it would be a lot better if it brought to mind: "Rescue operation."

To remind us of that, that it's all about love, and all about rescuing, Jesus told a story just before these verses. He described God as a shepherd, his people as a sheep. When one of them wanders off into sin, he refuses to sit idly by and watch it die. He does whatever it takes, even leaves the other 99, to go and bring it back.

But then he turns to you and me and says: "I do that through you." **When your brother sins**, he says, **go**. Notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't say, "Just wait a while...he'll probably come around on his own." He doesn't say, "Go and get pastor, he'll know what to do." He doesn't say, "Just pray for that person and trust that Jesus will change his heart." No, Jesus says, "**Go**." Jesus wants to change that person's heart, but he does it through you. You who know about the sin, who are close to the situation...he sends you as his own ambassador, as that person's first responder. **Go, and show him his fault, just between the two of you.**

But that's not easy, is it? Oh, it's easy to do when the sin is against you, and in your anger you're eager to rub it in their face. But Jesus doesn't send us in anger. He sends us in love. Then it becomes the hardest thing in the world to do. To confront someone you love and, in love, to say to that person: "You're sinning."

Like me, you've been there, so you know how hard it is. How you play out how the conversation could go a hundred times in your head, and how most of the ways it could go don't end well: Them getting angry and you getting hurt. And there's a voice inside of you feeding you reasons not to go: "Mind your own business...that's between them and God." "Who am I to show them their sin? I'm a sinner, too!" "Someone else could do it better than me." And like me you can think of too many times when that voice has won out.

Friends, it shows us that...well, Jesus loves the wandering far more than we do. His goal is to save, but ours is more often to save ourselves from hurt and rejection. And that means that we're not just part of the rescue operation – first and foremost, we're the ones in need of rescue.

But Jesus' love for the wandering is also his love for you. **If your brother sins against you...** We weren't even Jesus' brothers; we were his enemies. And we had sinned against him. But he loved you anyways. He loved you and he longed to win you over, make you a part of God's family, make you a part of his flock. So he went. His goal wasn't just to show you your faults, it was to save you from them. He went from heaven to earth, and became your brother when he became a man like us. He went to the cross, where he died - the shepherd laying down his life for you, his lost sheep – paying for all your faults, all your sins. He went to you through his word, and brought you to faith, washing your sins away, making God your Father and you his brother, bringing you into his fold.

And his love for you hasn't changed. His rescue mission for you hasn't stopped. Can you think of how determined your Shepherd is to keep you in his fold? How all the times in your life you've wandered, he's relentlessly pursued you because he isn't willing to lose you? Through his word, through other Christians, calling you to repentance, assuring you of his forgiveness, bringing you back in his loving arms.

And now he says to you, "**Go.**" Is there someone in your life Jesus is calling you to go to? A child who is staying away from Jesus' word? A fellow member who you know is falling into a sinful lifestyle? Someone who needs you to go, show their fault, just between the two of you? May Jesus' love for you move you to go. And as you do, remember your goal. It's repentance, rescue, forgiveness. Even if it comes to bringing one or two others along so that they can hear God's voice from more than one mouth, even if it means getting the church involved so we can all express our loving concern, even if it finally becomes necessary for the church to say that their words and actions show they are no longer a Christian – the goal never changes. It's always to win the person, to rescue the soul.

II. *Your Savior goes with*

When the water rescues were going on during the hurricane, I remembered feeling a bit useless. I wanted to get out there and help. I just didn't have a boat or a life preserver or any other equipment. If I went out to rescue, I would have ended up needing rescue.

Jesus didn't just tell his disciples to go. He reassured them that he was sending them fully equipped for the task. **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.** We call what Jesus gives his disciples then and now the keys. It's that special power and right he gives us to forgive the sins of the penitent; and to withhold forgiveness from the impenitent, as long as they do not repent. And that when we do that on earth, like Jesus says, it's done in heaven, too.

And they bring us comfort, don't they? On Sunday morning, when we get together and confess our sins before God, I say to you, "I forgive you all your sins." That's not just my opinion. No, Jesus says, when you hear those words, you're hearing his words. It's "as valid and certain, in heaven also, just as if Christ our dear Lord were dealing with you himself."

But that also gives you confidence when *you're* called to use these keys. When your brother sins, and you go and show him his sin, you're not just sharing your opinion with him, your judgment on the matter. It's Jesus judgment your sharing. And when that person says, "I've sinned," you can pass along more than a hope that God's forgiven them. You speak for God himself when you say, "Your sin is gone, as far as the east is from the west."

And you can go in the confidence that you are never alone. ²⁰ **For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.**" We sometimes use that verse in context of worship; but Jesus uses it in the context of this rescue operation. Go, and as you do, "There I am with you." Your hands may be shaking because you can't take confrontation; your voice may be quivering because you're scared of what will happen; your heart might be giving you a thousand reasons not to say anything. But Jesus is still there with his promise, "When you go, I

go with you.” The one who came into the world not to condemn it, but to save it; the one who loves the person in front of you more than you ever could; he is with you. To listen to your prayer for courage and answer it. To bless your words and to work through them.

If your brother sins against you... It’s a daily occurrence this side of heaven, isn’t it? Harvey’s rescue operation over...but this one’s ongoing Thank God that, for all our sins against him, Jesus came and rescued us. In thanks, now join the rescue operation. Go...with Christ’s love, and Christ’s presence. Amen.