

Guardrails on the Path of Repentance

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- [0 : 00] How can sinners live safely together in the church?! Jesus saves people with a history of baggage, with evil, with sin in our heart, people like me and you.
- And he's saving us into his church. And so the church is not what you would call a safe space. It's not a place that you could expect not to be hurt or wronged or insulted.
- If you're part of Jesus' church, that will happen to you. Because we're sinners. And you will do that to other people because you are too. And yet the church survives, doesn't it?
- Here we are and we can thrive in Jesus' church. So how can that be? Well, Jesus did not have a kind of idealistic, a rose-tinted idea of what his church would be.
- He knows us too well. Well, he knows that a healthy, working, fruitful church doesn't just happen when you put Christians together. He designed his church with safety features.
- [1 : 37] And in this teaching seminar, Jesus tells us what three safety features the church needs in order not to be spiritually fatal to those who are part of it.
- Do you remember them? Humility, repentance, and forgiveness. Humility, repentance, forgiveness.
- If any one of those three things is not happening in the life of his church, it is spiritually fatal for the church. And tonight we're coming to the second one in that list, repentance.
- Now, repentance is a word for turning your life in a different direction, turning from sin towards Christ. And Jesus assumes that that's happening in his church.
- He assumes we're doing that. Our lives are pointing towards him and we're heading in his direction. But Jesus knows that we have it in us, even those of us who call ourselves his people, even as we travel his road to veer off course and not to turn his way.
- [2 : 46] Look how our passage starts in verse 15. If your brother or sister sins against you. Do you see how he's baked the reality of sin into his design for the church in this age?
- And that is a glorious thing, isn't it? Sin in the church, it's a byproduct, isn't it, of the fact that he has not called us into the church because of our goodness, but because of our faith in his life, death, and resurrection.
- Friends, Jesus expects there to be sin in his family because there are sinners in his family. He bled and died upon the cross so that it would be that way, to bring us together, the table spread before us.
- It tells us that, doesn't it? It preaches to us. But that does not mean that sin is less of a problem, that it's less lethal, simply because it's part of Jesus's church.
- So tonight, Jesus gives us guardrails on the path of repentance because he knows for sure that sometimes we will need to be corrected and pointed back into his path by others.
- [4 : 01] Now, to get it out there before we even kind of begin, these guardrails are normally grouped under what we call church discipline. And now we love threes, don't we? Right?
- Humility, repentance, forgiveness. Well, there's another big three of a true church that comes to us from the Scottish Reformation. Three marks of a true church.

The faithful preaching of God's word. The right use of the sacraments, that is baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the practice of church discipline.

Now, that might sound strange and unfamiliar, but what they're really saying is, if a church isn't interested in whether people's claim to be a Christian is backed up by their life, then it has no right to call itself a church any more than a Christian who isn't interested in living the Christian life has a right to call themselves a Christian.

And this teaching of the Lord Jesus is where they're getting that from. If your brother and sister sins against you and it goes completely unchallenged or uncommented upon, well, we're not being the church of Jesus, says Jesus.

[5 : 17] Church discipline is completely biblical. But, I want to get that out there first, but that is not the point of these verses.

Right? The point is what church discipline does or what it's for. Church discipline is not an end in itself. The whole point of it is to turn Christians back from the brink of destruction who go off course like crash barriers on a motorway.

So, Jesus gives us these guardrails that we call church discipline to bring us back to a life of repentance. That's the point.

The point tonight isn't that there must be discipline, although that can't be separated, but that there must be repentance.

And these guardrails are what Jesus has put in place to keep us on that path of repentance. And the first guardrail, this may be a surprise to some of us, the first guardrail is you.

[6 : 24] Verse 15. Look at this. If your brother or sister sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

Now, the you is you singular. Jesus gives the responsibility personally to each one of us for our brothers and sisters in a church family.

Not the elders, not the minister. You church members. You. However old or new you are as a Christian, however well you know people or maybe you feel a bit on the fringes, you are the first guardrail that Christ puts in place to help protect others in his church.

Fraser, Flynn, you were baptized this morning. Welcome to the team. First responsibility. You are the first point of contact, the first protection of the people sitting around you from sliding into a life of unrepentance.

Now, isn't that so different from the way we sometimes think of being part of a church? Right? We do. We love each other, don't we? We're close-knit here as a church family.

[7 : 47] You're amazing. You're amazing at serving, welcoming, getting involved, cheering each other. We're going to be part of a church family. We're going to be part of a church family. We're going to be part of a church family. We're going to be part of a church family. But this, challenging sin, having that difficult conversation, this is something we're quite happy to leave undone, isn't it?

That's probably somebody else's responsibility. It's not for me to get involved in that, is it? Friends, Jesus says it's your personal responsibility before it's anyone else's.

You are the first line of defense. And notice, not when you have sinned, Luke, but when you have been sinned against. That's when you need to stand up, he says, and be the crash barrier.

When your brother or sister sins against you, it's part of your responsibility as their brother or sister to try to stop them from going even further and plunging off the edge.

Now, hang on your thinking. How can that be my job? Surely it's for them to come to me and say, sorry. Why do I have to go to the trouble of taking it to them?

[9 : 02] Right, but think about it. What does that assume about the human heart? Right, that assumes, doesn't it, that we understand ourselves well enough to know what we've done and own up to it freely.

But, you know, the Bible doesn't see us that way. The Bible says that our sin blinds us to what we're really like and who we really are. It deceives us.

And Jesus' teaching is based on that assumption, isn't it? You can wait a lifetime. And someone might never come to you to say sorry for something that they've done or said that's wrong.

They're blind to it. And if you really know yourself, you'll know that you need others to help you see yourself as you really are or to listen to what you really sound like sometimes, to protect us from the deceitfulness of our own sin.

So this is realistic, isn't it? Jesus is down to earth about what it's like in a church when there's sin. So then, what do we do when someone sins against us?

[10 : 13] Well, our instinct, I think, is to feel a lot but not do a lot. Or to say a lot but to the wrong people.

If we're feeling really generous, we say that we, don't worry, I won't bring it up. Probably they didn't even realize they'd done anything wrong. Or, you know, actually it's got under our skin. We say, well, they broke it.

They can fix it. Why do I have to go to them? But can you see, brothers and sisters, that both are wrong? Both are wrong. Neither is what Jesus teaches us to do when we are sinned against.

Jesus teaches us to quietly, calmly, privately, personally take them aside and go and have a word between you and him alone.

There's a gentleness there, isn't there? There's a dignity afforded to somebody in that, isn't there? That's a hard but a loving conversation to have.

[11 : 18] Well, how can that be loving? Well, for one thing, who wants to have a conversation like that? No one. No one loves to bring up difficult things, do we? Especially in a tight-knit church family like our own.

But when we don't have that conversation, we're only loving ourselves. Because actually, we just want to make life really easy for us. We don't have to go to the bother. So simply by going to someone and bringing it up, we're saying, it's not about me, it's about you.

I want to set my comfort aside to serve you, my brother or sister who sinned. That person might not thank you for it. But that does not mean that it's not loving.

And it's loving in its purpose, which is verse 15, to win them back, right? To gain your brother or sister. To reconcile the relationship. To bring peace where there is no peace.

That's what we want from a conversation like that, isn't it? Not to make people feel bad or get revenge or register our grievance. It's to prompt them to repent.

[12 : 30] To turn back. To say sorry. If he listens to you, says Jesus, you've won him back. And that's not just, you know, if they hear you say it.

But if they listen, they understand, they earn it. They turn back from sin in response. So, two implications, brothers and sisters, from point one.

One. If you aren't sinned against, stand up and be the crash barrier in somebody else's life.

Be the guardrail that Jesus teaches you to be in his church. Don't try to second guess what's best for someone.

Naturally, we'll think that this isn't the best thing to do. But Jesus says, no, this is the right thing to do. It's the best thing. To tell them their fault.

[13 : 28] Whatever it costs you, do it for their sake. Privately. Quietly. Lovingly. Gently. And number two.

If a brother or sister comes to you and tells you that you have wronged them, listen to them. Listen to them.

Give them the benefit of the doubt. Give them respect for having come to you and told you what they think. Consider it. Weigh it. Don't just brush it off.

And if there's something in it, own it. And turn back. Say sorry. That's what Jesus gives us this for, isn't it? There's no need to be upset or angry. The very fact they've come to you shows you, doesn't it, how much they love you and care about your heart.

Your walk with the Lord. Your place in the family. Friends, we think, don't we, that church discipline is the nuclear option. It only happens sort of once every ten years or something.

[14 : 34] Or just only is really a deterrent. But actually, this first kind of guardrail Jesus gives us isn't that, is it? This should be going on all the time.

All the time. Between one and another, shouldn't it? All the time. Hebrews 3 verse 13 says, exhort one another every day, as long as it's called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

So church discipline works best when it's happening little and often. Little and often. Little conversations that perhaps actually no one even really knows are going on.

Because if it is as Jesus says, then very often you will have won your brother or sister and nobody else needs to know. You will have turned them back into Christ's way.

You will have been the guardrail that they needed you to be for them at that point in time. But what if that isn't enough? Well, the second guardrail Jesus gives us is us.

[15 : 42] Verse 16 and 17. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. So you can see each guardrail gets bigger, doesn't it?

We've gone from you on your own to you with one or two others to the church. And now there are a few stages here we'll walk through. But the reason I've grouped them together is that as soon as you go from it being kind of you to us, it goes from being an informal chat to a formal process.

Okay, notice the language, charge, evidence, witness. And that's partly because by this point the issue isn't only the sin in and of itself, but the response to that sin.

But the lack of repentance. So if you bring up someone's sin with them in private and they don't repent, what do you do? Well, you turn to others in the family.

[16 : 51] You turn to the church. Firstly, just by getting one or two others involved. Now often that's a good idea anyway, if you're having a hard conversation, just to have someone else there.

But notice these one or two others are there to be witnesses. A private conversation can be misremembered. He said, she said. But when there are witnesses, they can give evidence of what was said.

They can see what the response has been. And the charge, says Jesus, can be established. That is all legal language. It comes from the Old Testament law to do with justice in God's land, in the courtroom.

And so there is a formality to it now. And Jesus' point, I think, is that not repenting of your sin when you have been challenged is a very serious thing.

However minor or insignificant you might think the original offense was, not turning from it is really very concerning when somebody has pointed it out to you.

[18 : 00] So this is another guardrail, isn't it? A stronger one designed by Jesus to turn people back around. The implication then for us is, I think, if you've had that hard conversation with somebody and it didn't produce the outcome that you wanted it to, don't leave it there.

Don't just say, I did my best. They didn't listen. Don't give up on your brother and sister because Jesus hasn't given them up.

Get one or two trusted others involved, perhaps people who know the situation or maybe one of the elders, and go back and try again, says Jesus. See what a patient and gracious process this is.

Jesus gives it time. But it's possible that even two or three people together won't prompt that repentance that leads to life. So what then?

Well, gracious and patient Lord Jesus provides yet another guardrail for unrepentant sinners. Verse 17, the church. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

[19 : 17] Again, the guardrail gets bigger. It gets stronger, doesn't it? Now it's the church corporately that has to stand up and be the crash barrier. Now in our setting, we would understand this to be the church as represented by her elders, the Kirk Session.

I think that's merited by verse 18. So the binding and the loosing that we saw back in 16 verse 19. It's that power of the keys that Jesus gives to those that he set over his church.

First Peter and the apostles. Now under Jesus and their authority, ministers and elders of his church today. There'd be differences among different churches as to how that's to look or what extent the congregation as a whole is to be involved in that.

And maybe there's just different situations. But the point is that now the church speaks into the situation as a church with the full weight of the authority that Jesus has given to bind and to loose.

Because by now, the lack of repentance is at an alarming level that requires a very significant response.

[20 : 31] And Jesus clearly expects this level of intervention to carry weight in people's lives if he refuses to listen even to the church.

But sadly, even this sometimes doesn't prompt people back to Christ. So what then?

Well, Jesus provides a fourth and final guardrail. I wonder if you spotted it.

It's there in verse 17. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and tax collector. Hang on.

Isn't that it? Isn't that through the barriers and into the ditch? Well, yes and no. Yes, right? Because at this point, the church is in a position where we can't continue to support this person's claim to be a Christian if they've been challenged repeatedly and in different ways about their sin and haven't turned back.

[21 : 40] The relationship does change. They're removed from membership. They're barred from sharing in the family meal, the Lord's Supper. They're viewed and they're treated no longer as a brother or sister, but as an unrepentant sinner.

But that's actually not the end. It's the final guardrail. Jesus doesn't go into it here, but Paul says elsewhere that he removed people, he excommunicated people, so that they would come to their senses and be restored.

He says of someone in 1 Corinthians 15, you're to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. So even this final step, this final guardrail is designed by Jesus to lead someone back to repentance.

But for that to be effective, that person does need to know that that has happened, don't they? They need to know that they are now on the outside. So how do we do that well?

Well, sermons could be preached on this. However, in short, that relationship has to still exist, and it has to change.

[23 : 00] If someone has broken faith with the church to this degree, they need to feel that break. The loss of intimacy, the sense of being on the outside, the recognition that they have put themselves there.

By their unrepentance. And yet, where would we want an unrepentant unbeliever to be, but in church on a Sunday, and sitting under the preaching of the word, and spending time with Christians?

Isn't that what we would want? It can't be the same as it was, and it doesn't always work out like that, but that's where we would want them. How else can they be redeemed and repent and be restored?

Now, you probably have loads of questions, and I'm happy to talk afterwards about it, but I just want to ask one question before we move on. Why? Why would we do all this?

What's the point? Again, you could write books on it. Books have been written on it, but I just want to answer that question in three ways. Firstly, the aim.

[24 : 06] We've just touched on this. Why do it? Well, the aim of these guardrails is not to punish, to shame, to push people away from the church.

That's not why Jesus gives it to us, and it's not why we do it. Sometimes these guardrails have been misused in those ways, but that totally twists Jesus' purpose in giving it to us, doesn't it, which is to lead people back to him.

If those ever are our motivations, we need to repent, because their aim is the opposite, isn't it? It's to try to avert punishment on the last day, so that this person does not have to bear their shame and guilt before God, and so that they would be restored to the full and rich and joyful communion of God's people.

Now, we maybe struggle with that, because sometimes that isn't the outcome, and people do feel shamed or unwanted or unwelcome. Sometimes people do leave the church, and often in those cases, it doesn't matter how warm or gentle or loving the approach has been.

You sometimes, even the challenge, even the challenge can trigger that fight-or-flight reflex, and that's really sad, and that is not what we want.

[25 : 38] But just because we maybe have seen situations where these guardrails don't seem to have worked the way we hoped, that isn't reason to question their purpose.

People may not have felt loved by these crash barriers that Jesus has put up, but that does not mean that they are not loving. In fact, we know, don't we?

We know it, that discipline and love are not opposite things. We heard it this morning, didn't we? When Caleb and Samuel are screaming no in our faces, Susie and I don't have a choice to make between whether to love them or whether to discipline them, because we love them.

We take them aside. We give them time out. We talk to them. We discipline them. It's the same with God and his people. Hear this from Proverbs chapter 3. My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary with his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves as a father of the son in whom he delights.

If we think other Christians or the church are being harsh to step in, to challenge, what must we think of the Lord when he convicts us of our sin, to correct, to challenge, to avert that eternal danger, it is a loving aim.

[27 : 10] We do it to bring someone back into the path of repentance. That's why we would do it. Secondly, because of the alternative. Now, I don't want to spend long on this because the alternative is super obvious, isn't it?

It's letting people sail over the edge of the cliff into oblivion. Or it's letting people do untold harm to his church, to Jesus' church, and not trying to stop them.

And whether that's because we're too nervous or too shy or don't think it's our place or we don't really care or we're not that interested or we don't want to make a fuss or whatever, what it can never be is a kind and loving thing to do.

It's not caring, is it, to let people keep being steamrolled by somebody who should know better. It's not a caring thing to do, to let people drift onto a path that leads to destruction and not warn them.

The alternative to these guardrails, then, is not to try to bring people back to repentance and to Christ or to do it in a way that we feel comfortable with and play down the call or the seriousness of sin and its consequences.

[28 : 30] And the result is that the church is harmed and people are lost for eternity. Now, we're not in control of the outcome of these things. But we can do better, can't we, than step back.

And so we follow these guardrails Jesus gives us because the alternative is so awful. And thirdly, we do it because it comes with Jesus' authority. And we've been seeing, haven't we, in Ephesians, Jesus is the head of the church, his body.

Or the New Testament also calls him the chief shepherd, which in our language would be kind of the lead pastor. With a capital P. The elders, it says, are under shepherds or pastors with a little p.

And that's actually, by the way, that's why the free church exists. Right? That testimony that Jesus is the king and head of his church and no one else gets to tell the church how it's to be ordered.

Not a king, not bishops, not ministers, not elders, but Christ alone orders his church. So when Jesus teaches us how to handle sin and the life of his church, as he does here, or he tells us how to do anything in his church, what do we say?

[29 : 51] Well, yes, Lord, of course. Of course. You're the pastor of the flock. You're the head of the body. We wouldn't tell Jesus, would we?

Actually, Lord, that's not really that culturally sensitive. And people might feel that that's really harsh. And some people have left because of this or they felt unwelcome and pushed away.

We would never tell the Lord Jesus, would we, that we know better how his church should be organized. And yet we do when we don't do this.

And I don't just mean when we, the elders, don't do it, but when you, a member of his church, don't do it. Right? You're not the sin police. But if you are sinned against, Jesus tells you very clearly what to do.

Be in no doubt that nobody loves his church more than he does. This table tells us, doesn't it, how much he loves his church.

[30 : 57] He bled and died upon the cross to save his people. He knows what's best for us and he tells us that it is this.

Yes, Lord, we're listening. His authority, which our final few verses expand on, don't they? You ask the final guardrail then, Jesus himself.

Now, the last verse in our passage is a really well-known one, but it's often quoted out of context. Just have a look at verse 19 and 20. Again, I say to you, says Jesus, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them. Now, of course, it's true, isn't it, when a few friends get together to pray that Jesus is present and that's very encouraging.

But that's not what's happening here, is it? This is still to do with the guardrails. The anything they ask in verse 19 is to do with any issue or any dispute that two or three witnesses from verse 16 are praying about.

[32 : 09] not. And Jesus is saying that if they come through prayerful deliberation to a shared conclusion about what the issue is and what's to be done about it, then Jesus says their actions are in sync with God in heaven.

in these circumstances, in this context, God and his church are acting as one, he says. It's the same idea in verse 18 about binding and loosing.

Those terms were used by rabbis to talk about what was forbidden and permitted. Binding meant it was forbidden. Loosing meant it was permitted. And Jesus is saying that the apostles in their teaching are speaking in sync with God.

Their words are his words. Whatever you say is forbidden is forbidden. Whatever you say is permitted is permitted by God. And therefore, if we stay in line with their teaching in the New Testament, then what we say is right or wrong on their authority really is what is right or wrong according to God.

That's what's known as the power of the keys to bind or loose people's consciences by God's word and therefore to hold us to what he is taught. So, when the two or three or the church prayerfully stand up and act as the crash barrier, Jesus says, we are acting with God's own authority.

[33 : 45] 4 verse 20, where two or three are gathered in my name, that is to be the guardrails, to lead people back, there I am among them.

Friends, know that it is Jesus himself, crucified and risen, who is present and acting and speaking through the loving challenge of his people.

when his people stand up and act as the crash barrier on the path to repentance, we don't need to ask, what would Jesus do? We see what he's doing, he says, through the loving actions of his church.

That's what he's doing. So, friends, let's trust Jesus with his church. Trust the guardrails that he has put in place.

Trust his methods. Trust his presence in the pain. We are weak. We get it wrong. We sin against each other. We do. And we need to be pointed back.

[34 : 53] And he is mighty to bring us back to repentance, back to him. Ultimately, he is the difference, isn't he, between somebody falling away and somebody turning back.

When we've done all that we can, he is still at work. So let's trust him. Trust him to build, to protect his church.

Trust him to do what he promises to do, to be present with us. And trust him to lead us back to him for eternal life. Let's pray as we trust him now.

Amen. Amen. Lord, we confess that we do not love your church as you love your church.

Loving shepherd of the flock, how we adore you. Lord, we praise you for what you have done in laying down your life in love for us.

[36 : 04] us. And Lord, you know what is at stake, what you have saved us from. Lord, the sin that is in our hearts, nothing is hidden from you.

And still, Lord, you are patient and gracious. Still, Lord, you tend your flock. You lead us in paths of righteousness for your name's sake. You bring us back when we wander.

You find us when we stray. And we thank you, Father, for giving us each other to help one another to do that, to stay on the narrow, the hard path that leads to life.

And so, we pray, our Father, that you would give us that love for each other that is willing to say the hard thing, that is willing to call another person back when we wander.

Lord, we pray that you would give us that trust in Jesus to lead and to head and to rule his church in the way that he has said he will. Lord, protect us, we pray, from our own sin.

[37 : 08] Lord, you know how much damage it does. So keep us, we pray, and guard us and keep us turning to you, Lord, from our sin to trust in your finished work.

For all this, we pray in your name. Amen. Amen.