

- ***READ Matthew 18:1-7/PRAYER*** In 2014, Conrad Roy III committed suicide in Massachusetts. The young man was only 17 years of age at the time. While obviously very sad...Roy's death isn't all that unusual except for the fact that the trial of this young man's girlfriend at the time of his death has just concluded. Now, why was his girlfriend on trial for his suicide? Michelle Carter was tried and convicted of involuntary manslaughter because she continually urged Roy to follow through with his suicide. Through numerous text messages, Carter hounded Roy with questions and demands concerning whether or not he would go through with his plans to take his life. At one point in their text conversation, Roy was in the truck with the machine that would kill him through carbon monoxide poisoning, but he got out because he didn't want to die. Instead of supporting his desire to live, Carter simply replied. "Get back in." Martin Healy, chief legal counsel for the Massachusetts Bar Association had this to say about the actions of Carter, "The communications illustrated a deeply troubled defendant whose actions rose to the level of wanton and relentless regard for the life of the victim." Carter never called for help to Roy's family or the authorities. She didn't pull the trigger, but the actions of Carter were implicit in the decisions of Roy. (Washington Post)
- I share this story with you because it puts for a principle that has been on my heart and mind recently after hearing of a fellow preacher who within the past few months has left the faith and the church and has joined himself to a community type church. This is a man who I greatly admired because of his strong efforts in engaging unbelievers of all kinds to consider the truth of God's Word. He would regularly engage atheists or agnostics to consider God, but sadly it seems as if those influences and some other struggles he faced were too strong and pushed him off the path of truth and towards a mindset of semi-unitarianism that can be found in the typical community type church.
- Like the previous story, this in an of itself is extremely sad and disappointing. My heart was so hurt when I heard of where he and his family are at the moment. But I wanted to see how he had gotten there. So I watched and listened to a sermon he preached at this community church. The lesson focused on the idea of legalism, grace, and mercy. He frequently charged the "Church of Christ" (I have Church of Christ in quotations because he spoke as if the church is just another denomination in the current landscape of Christianity) with having systematic issues that were not in accordance with God's Word and as being issues that drove him to leave the church and the faith that he had once fought so strongly for. Some of the accusations were straw men that I have never encountered in my years of being around God's people. Some were just flat out false, but I can see where he was coming from based upon the changes that had taken place in his mind over the past few months. But then there were some things he said that really hit me because they could be and possibly are some legitimate issues that disciples need to be aware of so that they can avoid them at all cost.
- These two true real life situations I have shared with you this morning have many things in common. One being that in each case the main person made some terrible choices. One took his life and the other left the Lord and His Church. I pray for God's mercy upon each of them for their decisions. However, can I also point out that there were factors outside of the main characters that contributed to what they did? Michelle Carter coerced Conrad Roy into taking his life and she rightfully was convicted of the part she played. In the other instance, there is the possibility that some brethren behaved in such a way that they helped push this brother and his family away from the Lord. The bottom line is that each of these men will first and foremost be held responsible for their actions. But let me also strong suggest that those who pushed them to these points of action and decision had a hand to play that will be held accountable as well.
- Would you look again with me at what Jesus says here in **Matthew 18**? Let's focus on **vv.5-7**. As Jesus is detailing that a disciple of His ought to resemble a child, He says that those who support them, encourage them, and help them grow as children will also receive Himself. But He then quickly turns around and contrasts that by saying that those who cause Jesus's disciples to stumble will be guilty for the part that they played in their stumbling. You think Jesus meant what He was saying? I certainly do! Especially considering that He says that it would be better for that person to tie a large stone around his neck and to be tossed in the sea and to drown.
- Ladies and gentlemen...Can I suggest to you what I believe Jesus is saying to us in **v.7**? Would you agree with me that there are enough stumbling blocks in this world that Satan truly doesn't need our help pushing people away from God and His Church? This world is full of stumbling blocks that can cause a soul to forsake the Lord and live a life away from Him and His Church that eventually ends with his soul being lost forever. We cannot be part of the problem that pushes them away from God! Don't push them away! I truly fear that some brethren might have done some things that didn't encourage the man and his family to stay in the church. In fact, I'm terrified that some people might have actually done some things that pushed them away and caused them to stumble to the place that they are today believing that more often than not there isn't any truth and that we can make our own judgments about many of the things that God has addressed in His Word. This morning I want to take some time to share four things that we can do as Christians that can contribute to people not coming to the Lord or not wanting to stay as a part of His Church. I hope you'll seriously consider these things with me so that we will never be guilty of pushing someone away from the saving blood and body of Jesus Christ.

I. Don't push them away by always teaching the "what" and never teaching the "why."

- A. Really what I am calling for in this point is for balance in our teaching. Now, I'm not just talking about teaching from the pulpit or the class lectern, but I'm talking about the teaching that ought to be taking place in our homes and among our families. Whenever we teach and whatever the circumstances, we must be people who rightfully balance what we ought to be or not to be doing but also why it is that God desires that we do or not do those things.
- B. One things that kids are infamous for doing is responding to everything with the question of "why?" As a parent, I'm sure that can become extremely annoying when everything you tell your child to do met with almost an automatic "why?" I know that I was guilty of doing this as a child. When my mom would tell me to do something, instead of doing it I almost always asked why it was that she wanted me to do it or to do it in that particular way. More often than not, it just frustrated my mom and she would respond with "because I'm the mom and you're the child and you are to do what I say." She even had a shirt she would wear around the house every now and then with a momma bear and her little bear and the momma bear was saying "because I said so."
- C. I fully admit that there are times when that type of response from a parent ought to suffice the questions of the child. However, can I suggest that there are times when that answer just isn't good enough. Especially when it comes to matters of morality or spirituality. We must be willing to answer our children's questions of why we do what we do and why we don't do what we do.
- D. Would you consider that Jesus often didn't just teach what to do, but that he also taught why it is that we ought to do what He says. Look back up at **vv.3-5**. Why ought we to become like children? Jesus says it is because we won't enter the kingdom of heaven unless we do. Why ought we receive a little child such as this? Jesus answers that it is because in doing so we will receive Him, as well. Time and time again we can look to the teachings of Jesus and see that He not only taught the "what" but He also taught the "why."
- E. Jesus saw, and we must see, the importance of making sure that we are teaching those in our care why it is that we do what we do. We need to teach them why we give such great weight to the idea of authority. We need to teach them that it is because God rules and He has the say. We need to teach them why we strive for purity in so many ways. That we don't drink because we value sobriety. We don't have illicit sex because it ruins lives. We need to teach the why because if we don't and someone challenges them on these issues...well if they haven't been taught the "why" then what leg are they going to stand on. More than likely they will be people who have shallow faiths without roots or they will be people who never came to faith because they saw no value in it. We must not push people away from God and His Church by not having balance in our teaching.

II. Don't push them away by being hypocrites.

- A. Jesus had quite a bit to say to a particular group of people concerning their hypocrisy and how it kept others from being what God would want them to be. Turn a couple of chapters past Matthew 18 to **Matthew 23** and consider with me **v.13**. Notice that Jesus is really going in on the Jewish Religious Leaders in this chapter. He has truly had enough of them and decides now is the time to expose their dark ways in the light. **V.13** is a tremendously damning verse in this entire context because Jesus really gets to why these individuals were being rebuked to the degree that they were.
- B. In this entire context Jesus refers to these people as hypocrites. He states that their hypocrisy was especially heinous because it was causing other people to be shut out of the kingdom of heaven. But how? How were their actions influencing others? Go back up to **vv.1-12**. Firstly, Jesus says that they were guilty of demanding that others live up to a particular standard of godliness while they themselves were not willing to put in the work to live up to that same standard. Not only that, but they were only doing what they were doing out of love for their own glory and not the glory of God. They wanted the honor and prestige, and their actions were causing others to fall away and not find the kingdom of heaven.
- C. Brethren, few things can be more devastating to the faith of others, especially those who are young and weak, than blatant hypocrisy by those who ought to know better. I'm not saying honest mistakes. I'm taking about willfully saying one thing by living in a completely different way. This is exactly what Jesus is pointing out in **v.3**. These men were saying and demanding one thing while doing something completely different. These types of actions can only hurt those around us and even push some away from the faith and the church all together.

III. Don't push them away by failing to show mercy and patience with people's struggles.

- A. The failure to show mercy and patience was another issue that Jesus had with the Pharisees. Notice in **Matthew 23:23**, *"For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness."* These so-called spiritual leaders were failing at leading because they were not willing to help people strive for God's holiness and righteousness.

- B. I can't think of a better example of this than when they brought the woman who they had caught in the act of adultery to Jesus. In **John 8:1-11**, the Pharisees drag this woman before Jesus to humiliate her and put Jesus in a tough situation concerning what to do. They wanted so badly to hurt Jesus and His reputation that they would sacrifice this woman to do so. Here's the problem with what they did. Firstly, Jesus wasn't the proper authority on the issue. Secondly, where was the man to condemn along side this woman? Jesus simply replies with his famous statement *"He who is without sin among you, let him, be the first to throw a stone at her."* One by one they left the situation. Jesus shows mercy to this woman by not unjustly condemning her, but at the same time He told her to go and sin no more.
- C. I firmly believe that we are responsible for looking out for the spiritual well being of one another. However, I have witnessed that our zealotry for holiness and purity sometimes doesn't leave much room for patience and mercy. It might be that we see someone doing something they ought not do, but how do we approach that situation? I think it ought to depend on a few factors. If it is a brand-new Christian who is not learned in the way of Christ then that correction needs to reflect that recognition of spiritual immaturity. Any correction must be given with a spirit of humility knowing that we too are susceptible to temptation and sin. (**Galatians 6:1**)
- D. A failure to show this type of mercy and patience with those who are trying to fight, but fail at times can ruin the faiths of some. They see hardness and impatience, and why would they want to be a part of a people who behave in such a way when that isn't the way that Jesus dealt with others. Sure He scolded the Scribes and Pharisees harshly in **Matthew 23**, but this was after much time putting up with their foolishness...oh and by the way...He is Jesus who was without sin so He could throw as many stones as He desired. Let's not push people away from God by failing to show others the love, mercy, and patience of Jesus.

IV. Don't push them away by grasping onto traditionalism.

- A. Again, the poster children for pushing people away from God are the Pharisees. This time in **Matthew 15:1-9**, we find them giving Jesus a hard time for not making His disciples wash their hands according to the tradition of the elders. The influence of the Jewish Religious leadership was so widespread that those seeing Jesus's disciples not do this would certainly make a big fuss over it. However, this wasn't a matter of divine law or even hygiene, but it was only a matter of doing as the tradition had stated in case someone had touched a Gentile, something a Gentile had touched, or something to that effect.
- B. Jesus uses the occasion to again show the foolishness of those bringing the charge against Him and His disciples. He flips the script on them and asked them a question that actually mattered, "why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" See now we're getting into things that actually matter. There was nothing wrong with their traditions so long as it didn't contradict God's divine law, but unfortunately they had crossed that line. They had neglected helping parents because they had given money to the temple instead. They had taught their precepts and traditions as if they were doctrine. They had pushed people away who weren't willing to live up to their standard. Jesus rebukes them strongly for this.
- C. Brethren, we must be honest and recognize that we have plenty of traditions ourselves. In reality there is nothing wrong with that because many of our traditions help us to carry out the traditions that actually matter, those being the traditions of the Apostles. (**II Thessalonians 2:15**) The problems occur when we begin to elevate our traditions as being the only way in which things can be done. The problems occur when we say that a church must meet at two separate times on Sunday. They occur when we say that our songs must be sung with a leader and music on the screen or on the pages. They occur when we say that there must be a midweek study. They occur when we say that the sign outside must say a particular things.
- D. These problems occur anytime we seek to judge others based upon a standard that we ourselves have come up with. They especially occur when we will hold to our standard as tightly as possible while neglecting the standard that God has laid before us. Now those things I mentioned specifically, I have no issue or hard pressed belief on any of them. They just happen to be the simplest examples to use in this point so don't take them to a place I am not taking them. The only place I am going with them is that these things ought not to be held to the level of doctrine and to the point where those who are weak and struggling are pushed away from God because we can't let go of our own pride and preference for the sake of those who need our love and patience.

Let me reiterate again, so that I am not misunderstood...the decisions that each of us make...we are first and foremost responsible for them. I will have to answer for my decisions, and if I ever leave the faith or sin in some manner then I am the one who will answer for that. However, I must also acknowledge that if I ever encourage another's leaving of the faith or sin then I too will be held accountable for causing them to stumble. May God help each and every one of us to consider these points this morning and run from doing such things so that we may never cause one to stumble. May we never aid another in their unbelief, but may we only ever encourage others to seek out God, His Will, and His Church.