The world is saying, "By what authority do you Christians preach to us about sin and salvation? Set your own house in order and then we may want to listen to you."[1](https://www.praywithchrist.org/leaders-praying-and-becoming-the-true-church#endnote) Sometimes it takes outsiders to bluntly confront us with the unpleasant truth. Let's humbly face up to this embarrassing rebuke. The church must set its own house in order before we can again preach the gospel with power and moral authority.

So where do we begin? I discovered where we need to start when I was a Bible college student leading a group of unruly junior boys in a suburban church years ago. The boys were picking up bad language, bad attitudes and bad habits trying to act like "men." And who were their models? The men of the church, including some of the leaders.

I saw that trying to lead these boys to believe the gospel and follow Christ was a losing battle in this environment. So I shared the problem with an old deacon who was one of the most godly people in the congregation.

He agreed that the problem was real. "We need church discipline," he confessed, "but we'd have to begin with my daughter and I don't know who'd be left." So nothing was done.

Things got worse. Wally Johnson (not his real name), a young married man in his twenties, who said he was called to the ministry, was caught stealing checks from the mail. The church was totally unprepared to cope with the crisis that followed. Wally promptly said he was sorry and wouldn't do that again. The judge put him on probation. Soon he was back in church talking about his plans to go to seminary.

He was about to resume teaching a boys' Sunday School class, but several parents said they would withdraw their sons if he did. Others insisted that he should be restored to teaching because he had confessed and been forgiven. Facing the threat of a split the church board decided to give something to both sides by having him lead singing for the opening exercise of the Sunday School.

Things went along fairly well until he was caught stealing checks again. This time he went to prison. Eventually the pastor fell into immoral behavior and had to leave the church.

The problem in this church was deeper than the moral fall of these two men. The church had a form of godliness but they denied the power thereof (2 Tim 3:5). They were calling people to faith in Christ on the cross but not to faith and obedience to our sovereign Savior on the throne. When they presented the gospel they always stopped with the death of Christ. Oh, they believed in His resurrection and His present position of power and authority on the throne in heaven, but they did not see the relevance of His exalted position to the gospel or to the Christian life.

Most of the popular tracts and booklets presenting the gospel today stop with the death of Christ for our sins. The focus of their faith tends to be solely on this one aspect of His redemptive work.

When the late Dr. Martin O. Massinger was president of Dallas Bible College, he was frequently called upon to interview missionary candidates. He told me when he asked them to explain the gospel they always stopped with the death of Christ. They believed in His resurrection but they did not see that His resurrection and ascension to the throne in heaven was relevant to the good news of the gospel!

Should we then be surprised that so many people who believe the gospel today do not see the relevance of the power of Christ's resurrection and of His present position of supreme power and authority over sin, Satan, the world, death and all the enemies of their soul? No wonder they live with little or no power.

We need to call people to faith in the Savior Himself in the light of the power He gained by His death, burial, resurrection and ascension to the throne. Trusting the all powerful Christ results in a life transforming perspective and vision.

Christ's present position of power in heaven is sufficient to rescue the vilest sinner and perfect Him in faith, love and obedience.

Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them."

**(Heb. 7:25)**

The knowledge of the death of Christ left His followers disillusioned and devastated. They thought their faith in Him was in vain (Luke 24:21). Their faith was revived when they discovered that He had risen from the dead! They began to preach the gospel with power after He ascended to heaven and poured out the Holy Spirit on them in Acts 2. The gospel as it was summed up in I Corinthians 15:1-10 included Christ's death, burial, resurrection and His appearance to witnesses including Paul whose life was radically transformed by His new found faith. Paul was commissioned to preach to the Gentiles with power so as...

To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me (Christ)."

**(Acts 26:18)**

Belief in the power of Christ over all our enemies was reflected not only in the preaching of the apostle but also in his praying and in his appeal to the church to pray. Paul called the church to pray passionately and with unyielding perseverance to overcome Satanic and demonic power. We are like soldiers engaged in a life or death battle (Eph. 6:10-20). Paul's prayers for the church were models showing us how to claim the all conquering power of Christ to perfect the faith and character of God's people (Eph. 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Col. 1:9-14). Listen to him pray for his Thessalonian flock:

For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God; night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith? Now God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you. And the Lord make you increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints."

**(I Thess. 3:9-13)**

Paul meant business. He expected their faith to be perfected and to see their hearts established blameless in holiness and abounding in love. Paul did not pray like that casually! He was earnestly praying like that night and day. He was actually in birth pains as he prayed that Christ would be fully formed in the Galatian churches (Gal. 4:19).

Paul proclaimed the supreme power of Christ to completely transform believers and he passionately prayed fully expecting that such a holy heavenly life would characterize the churches he founded.

Prayer in that suburban church, like so many others, never even addressed the high vision and passionate commitment found in Paul's prayers. Their prayer meeting only focused on the sick, those who needed jobs and other surface needs. These things should be in our prayers, but passionate prayers for the perfecting of our faith, love and obedience must be renewed in out day.

Without this loyal commitment to Christ, the church becomes an adulterous bride ready for many lovers. That was the problem in that suburban church. They had no moral or spiritual compass. Oh, they thought stealing, adultery and a few other gross sins were wrong, but they lacked the positive commitment to give Christ the supreme love, faith and obedience which we owe Him. They had no passionate commitment to give the Lord the glory due His name.

No wonder sin reigned in that suburban church and also reigns in many of our churches today. Gallup found that "In ethical behavior, there is very little difference between the church and the unchurched" in America. This has caused the world to say to the church:

By what authority do you Christians preach to us about sin and salvation? Set your own house in order and then we may want to listen to you."[1](https://www.praywithchrist.org/leaders-praying-and-becoming-the-true-church#endnote)

When our claim to believe in Christ as the supreme and perfect ruler does not even motivate the church to fervently pray for complete love and obedience among our own people, no wonder the world doubts that our Christ has any authority at all. They have a right to doubt that we are, indeed, speaking for Christ when we call them to turn to Him in faith and forsake their sinful way of life.

The world also has a right to be skeptical of our authority because so many churches fail to exercise authority over backsliding and fighting Christians according to Matthew 18:15-20. Listen to our Lord's instructions in this passage:

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee like a heathen man and a publican. Verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them."

There are good reasons for applying this passage to any sin that takes place in the believing community. Christ told His disciples that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him and commanded them to go into all the world to make disciples (Mt. 28:18-20). Clearly this great commission shows that they were to serve under His authority and teach those who believed the gospel complete obedience to Him. For this task He promised to be with them always even to the end of the age.

Ephesians 2:18-22 reveals that the believing community is a living temple where God dwells in our midst. In this living temple we share access to God in prayer. In I Corinthians 5:1-12 we are commanded to call sinning believers to repentance and not allow them to remain in good standing in the church if they refuse to do so.

This drastic step is intended to wake them up and bring them to repentance so they will be restored to a good relationship with Christ and the church family.

We may conclude then that we can claim the presence and active leadership of Christ to enable the church to act with His authority in restoring sinning believers, if they are willing, or in denying them the privilege of partaking of communion at the Lord's table if they stubbornly refuse.

By agreeing in prayer we can get into harmony with God in heaven so that what we bind (forbid) on earth is what He forbids and what we loose (permit) He permits. In other words, Christ takes charge and establishes the reign of God in the Church. Our Lord's power and authority is promised in this passage to those who follow His instructions. I have joined with others in claiming Matthew 18:15-20 by persistent steadfast prayer until marriage conflicts were resolved and cured.

I think of Gil and Vanessa (not their real names) whose marriage was deeply troubled. They both professed faith in Christ. Gil was a very nice fellow when he was sober, but he often got drunk and became so violent Vanessa had to flee to her parents' home for safety. Both of them professed faith in Christ, but they did not know the power and authority of His presence to establish order and freedom in their marriage.

With two other believers joining me, we began meeting with Gil and Vanessa. We read Matthew 18:15-20 and I explained, "We are not experts, but we know how to claim the powerful presence of Christ through prayer and He is able to unite you in doing His will." They agreed.

The meetings went along for some time with Gil falling back from time to time into heavy drinking and threatening violence. The only thing that kept me going was my conviction that our Lord has the power to set captives of sin free and this power is offered in the gospel.

At times it looked like the marriage was doomed to end in divorce, but we never gave up. We prayed and we worked with Gil and Vanessa with confident hope in Christ.

Finally, he went through an experience that deeply humbled him. He stopped drinking, confessed faith in Christ and was baptized. Gil's relationship with Vanessa and their children improved remarkably. Our Lord was present and actively working because in a united act of faith we claimed the promise of His presence.

Another couple, Bill and Mary (not their real names) had filed for divorce. They seemed to be hopelessly deadlocked. Heavy drinking and an affair created a stronghold of resistance to reconciliation.

The next day after the elders met with them, claimed the promise of Matthew 18:15-20, and discussed restoring their marriage, their relationship took a sudden turn for the worse. For months it was impossible to get them together for a meeting. However, the elders persisted in prayer and maintained contact with them individually for over a year.

Slowly their hearts were changed. The drinking problem was overcome. They finally began to entertain the hope of reconciliation. Then one of the leaders in the church confronted them and called for a return to faith, love and obedience to Christ. They agreed.

Christ was obviously present and in charge and the church rejoiced in the demonstration of His power to restore the marriage of Bill and Mary.

Marriages are not always restored by the intervention of fellow Christians. A member of a large gospel church left his wife for another woman. The church leaders prayed for him and plead with him earnestly to no avail. When the pastors and elders concluded they had done all they could, they told the church at the prayer meeting on Wednesday night, "We've done all we could to restore this man to obedience to Christ. Please pray for him and do whatever the Spirit leads you to do to restore him to the Lord and his family."

Twenty men from the church went to see the backslider and with tears begged him to return to the Lord. He refused. Finally, the church at their prayer meeting, with sorrow and earnest prayers for his restoration, agreed that the congregation could no longer allow him to take communion or fellowship with the church as a brother in Christ until he repents.

What good did this do? One, he was made aware that he had not just departed from his wife and family. He had departed from Christ by his stubborn refusal to repent. Two, he knows the exact sin that severed his fellowship with Christ. If he eventually wants to repent, he will know that he can return to that church and find the path to repentance and restoration to Christ. Three, any others in the church who might be tempted to have an adulterous affair were made aware that the church would not tolerate such rebellion and unrepentance.

When the church tolerates rebellion and unrepentance, it compromises its loyalty to Christ who is Head over all things to His church. When a sinning brother's heart hardens into stubborn refusal to repent, he must be expelled. To harbor known rebels in our ranks breaks the loyalty of our whole church to our Commander in Chief.

I was speaking to some seminary students on this subject and one of them commented, "My father was in a men's Sunday School class and one of the members left his wife for another woman. Nothing was said about this sin. Eventually eight out of the ten men followed his example!" Paul's warning in I Corinthians 5:6 came true!

### POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever applied Matthew 18:15-20 in a conflict? What was the outcome?
2. Do you think that church discipline is "too harsh"? Why or why not?
3. How could church discipline be misused?
4. What is the right way to exercise discipline? What are some of the positive results when this is done?
5. Can you outline the steps of church discipline given in Matthew 18:15-20?
6. When calling people to salvation, why do we need to emphasize not only our Lord's death, but also His resurrection and ascension to the seat of supreme power?
7. Why does the world have a right to question our authority as a church?
8. Why do we need to be patient and persistent when we claim out Lord's power and authority in restoring backsliders and resolving conflicts?

## Research for Instructor

Empty forms of godliness have crept into the believing community repeatedly down through the ages and they are here today. Read the 18th chapter of Judges; 1 Samuel 2:17-36 and Matthew 6:1-5 for examples. Can you think of more examples in the Bible or in contemporary Christian groups?

## Endnotes

1 Warren Wiersbe, The Intergity Crisis, Nashville, TX, Oliver Nelson Books, 1988, 17-18.