

ANY GIVEN SUNDAY

Matthew 18: 15-20 & Exodus 12: 1-14

September 6, 2026

Dean Feldmeyer

In Paul Simon's popular song, "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover," the speaker notices that a buddy is involved in a toxic relationship and doesn't know how to get out of it. The speaker offers that there are at least "50 ways to leave your lover."

To name a few, the speaker offers:

Just slip out the back, Jack. Make a new plan, Stan.

You don't need to be coy, Roy.

Just get yourself free.

Hop on the bus, Gus.

You don't need to discuss much.

Just drop off the key, Lee,

And get yourself free.

That's how it works for most of us who find ourselves in toxic relationships—whether romantic, social, or professional. We feel stuck. Unable to move. And we end up desperately clawing, digging, and working to climb out of them and into the fresh air of—well, survival, at least.

Not so for the rich and powerful.

HIT THE ROAD, JACK

Okay, show of hands: how many of us have messed up at a job—or been laid off or fired—and then received enough money from our employer to live comfortably for the rest of our lives?

No? Me neither.

Funny—that's exactly what happened to Jill Soltau, the CEO of JCPenney. The company announced in June 2020 that it would close some 154 unprofitable stores because times were so tough. It had missed debt payments totaling \$29 million. But it still managed to scrape together a \$4.5 million bonus for her.

Chesapeake Energy was caught advancing an illegal scheme to suppress the price of oil and gas leases. So, they paid their CEO, Robert Douglas Lawler, \$15.4 million.

Bryan Stockton was fired as C.E.O. of the toy manufacturer Mattel, and then was paid \$4 million in "severance," and rehired as a consultant.

McDonald's former CEO Stephen Easterbrook received an exit package of almost \$42 million after his relationship with an employee was found to violate company policy. Wonder how much the "employee" received.

Former Fox News star Bill O'Reilly was paid \$25 million to leave the network in the wake of a sexual harassment scandal.

Neiman Marcus, the first major department store in the United States to seek bankruptcy protection, blamed the coronavirus for its \$5 billion in debt and asked the bankruptcy court to approve \$10 million in pay raises for its top executives.

And then there's Jerry Falwell, Jr., who after several sexual and financial scandals, was paid \$10.5 million to leave the office of president of Liberty University, the largest evangelical Christian fundamentalist university in the world.

IN MATTHEW'S CHURCH

The Gospel lesson for this day comes from the proto-Matthean portion of the Gospel—that is, the passages that do not appear in any of the other Gospels. It is unique, in other words, to Matthew. And we might reasonably wonder what was going on in the Matthean community that would move him to include this passage, which none of the other Gospel writers saw as necessary or compelling.

The pericope makes several different points all of which fall within the context of the previous passage (10-14), the parable of the lost sheep. Does a real shepherd actually leave the 99 in the mountains to search for the one that is lost? Of course not. And that is the point. God does!

God's love for the lost ones is extravagant, risky, even wasteful! That's what grace is all about, after all: extravagant, overflowing love and reconciliation.

Now, in verses 15-20, Matthew brings those metaphorical lost sheep home to the Christian community—the church. Conflict is, of course, inevitable. So how do the people of God relate to one another when such conflict arises?

The passage makes clear that we have a prophetic mission not just to the world, but within the church as well. We are not merely allowed, but encouraged, to call out wrongdoing by other members of the church. And here Jesus, as told by Matthew, tells us how to do it.

First, the responsibility falls upon the one who is wronged. If you have been wronged or perceive that you have been wronged by another member of the Christian community, you're not allowed to sit and pout until that person realizes what they have done wrong and comes crawling to you for forgiveness.

If we have been wronged by someone in the church, it is our responsibility, as disciples of Jesus, to go to that person alone and seek reconciliation. Don't start by dragging the whole church into your private quarrels. Seek a private reconciliation.

If it works, fine. You have gained or regained a friend in faith.

If that doesn't work, go to Plan B: repeat Plan A, but bring one or two witnesses with you—people who can testify that you are being reasonable, that this other person really did wrong you, and that they are being recalcitrant, obstinate, and obtuse.

If that doesn't work and the accused person refuses to be drawn into a reasonable dialogue, Plan C: "tell it to the church."

If that person refuses to listen to the whole church then, and this is important, "let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

So there! You're outta here, sinner! Don't let the door hit you on the backside on the way out.

But wait. Maybe not. We usually think of this passage as calling for exclusion. But if we follow the example of Jesus concerning Gentiles and tax collectors, what do we see him doing? We see him treating them as objects of missional outreach and grace. He includes them. He embraces them.

This is how we are called to treat those who have sinned against us—those lost sheep who have wandered away from the flock. They are to be included in the fellowship of the church and given an extra portion of grace and love, so that their hearts might be warmed and softened.

We must be careful, Jesus warns his disciples—and Matthew warns the church.

We have been given great power. The things we do and say to others in the church—whether they condemn or enable—can create lasting impressions. Impressions that can either bind or free a person for the rest of their life.

That's one of the reasons Christians do not function merely as individual, rogue do-gooders. We function as a community; and when we do, we have the promise that Jesus will be there with us.

In this week's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, we are told the story of the first Passover—a night of terrible death and fear on one hand, and, on the other hand, a night of liberation and salvation for God's chosen people. The story concludes with an admonition that this day must not be forgotten. It "shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance." Kinda like the homecoming football game, maybe?

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus concludes his teaching with, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Two or three? How about twenty or thirty thousand? Or a hundred and six thousand?

SECULAR RELIGION?

As the people of God, we often struggle to remember and observe the rituals of our faith. Passing them down to our children in some meaningful way is often difficult and filled with

complexity. We also often forget that our religious faith is a corporate one, meant to be practiced together—in a group of two or more—not alone in the woods, or walking along the beach, as is popularly supposed.

The secular culture, however, does not seem to have any problems whatsoever when it comes to celebrating our secular religions corporately—or finding successful ways of handing down their rituals. Around here, people leave their season tickets to the Ohio State Buckeyes or the Cincinnati Bengals to their children in their wills.

When our grandsons were preschoolers, on autumn Saturday mornings they would march around the house to the sound of the Ohio State Marching Band playing “Across the Field” and “Buckeye Battle Cry” at top volume.

Yesterday, a whole bunch of American men—and not just a few American women—breathed a giant sigh of relief. The waiting was finally over. The speculation was through. The anticipation was rewarded. Football season has officially begun.

For a while, we could sate our gridiron hunger on preseason scrimmages and exhibition games, but our patience was running a bit thin. We longed to hear the crunch of the pads, the “oomph” of the linemen when the ball is hiked, and the roar of the crowd when the pass is completed or the quarterback is sacked.

Baseball may be our national pastime, but football is our national religion.

Like any good religion, it is steeped in ritual and song: the team fight song and the National Anthem, the entrance of the teams onto the playing field, the introduction of the captains, the coin toss, the halftime show. The symbolic leaders are identified by their garb—the uniforms of the players, the officials, the cheerleaders, even the bands. And the media prophets make predictions and point out the weaknesses and strengths of each team.

And on Saturdays and Sundays, we don our game-day apparel—our jerseys and hats in the appropriate colors—and we enter the temple for the three-hour service of what? Adoration? Devotion? Adulation? Awe? Glory? Homage? Praise? Veneration? All synonyms for worship.

Here are the seating capacities for the top four football temples in the NCAA. We would be hard-pressed to find churches that big:

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor – Michigan Stadium: 106,901

Pennsylvania State University -- Beaver Stadium: 106,562

University of Tennessee at Knoxville – Neyland Stadium: 102,455

Ohio State University, Columbus – Ohio Stadium: 102,329

In 2025 there were 667 college football teams in the United States, and they played 3,486 games. They drew a total attendance of 52,372,043 fans for an average of 15,026 per game.

The pro stadia are small by comparison, but their seats are bigger and more comfortable. The largest professional football stadium is MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey, home of the Giants and the Jets with a seating capacity of 82,500. Average attendance at

NFL games remains roughly 67,000–70,000 fans per game. (The seating capacity of Paycor Stadium, home of the Cincinnati Bengals, is 65,515.)

In 2018, NFL games drew 17,177,581 fans nationwide, generating an estimated \$1.7–\$1.8 billion in ticket revenue. All those figures are very impressive and tend to make preachers uneasy.

At first, it sounds as though our secular religion of sport is taking over the rightful place of our Christian faith. We wonder about the heat of the rivalries and the sometimes tribal, even violent loyalties of the fans. We worry when rival fans report fearing for their lives when they visit the stadia of other teams. We find ourselves concerned that the amount of alcohol served at pro football games has too often made them inhospitable places for children and families. And we rightly wonder if, as a nation, we are investing our enthusiasm and our adoration—not to mention our money—in inappropriate places. But then we hear the figures about how Christians attend church on those same weekends.

Gone are the days when we took people at their word when 40 percent of Americans—about 118 million—claimed they had been in church the previous Sunday. Today, sociologists of religion actually count bodies in pews, and the real number is much closer to 20.4 percent, or roughly 63 million people in church.

Still, that means on any given Sunday, 63 million people gather together for worship. That's more than attend all college football games in an entire year and more than attend all NFL games in an entire year. In fact, it's only about three million fewer than the combined annual attendance of both college football and the NFL.

See, no matter how much we love our alma mater or our local pro football franchise; no matter how devoted we are to our favorite football teams; no matter how caught up we get in the rituals and the pageantry, the hymns and songs, the roar of the crowd, and the thrill of the competition—we still love our Jesus more.

And isn't that exactly as it should be?