

Sermons on Matthew If Your Brother Sins

Part 2

Discipline:

The Missing Mark of the Modern Church

Matthew 18:15-20

With Study Questions

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Moreover __if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, __you have gained your brother. ⁻¹⁶⁻ But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that __' *by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.* ' ⁻¹⁷⁻ And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a _heathen and a tax collector.

⁻¹⁸⁻ “ _Assuredly, I say to you, __whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

⁻¹⁹⁻ __“ _Again _I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, __it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. ⁻²⁰⁻ For where two or three are gathered _together in My name, I am there in the midst of them. _” (Matthew 18:15-20)

Preface

After having lunch with a friend who had gone through a divorce, he told me he was going to be a guest speaker at a Christian university. He was a bit peeved that the college grilled him regarding his divorce. They apparently have a rule not allowing people to teach within three years of the breakup of their marriage.

I told him that I know why they have that rule: because so few churches exercise church discipline. If churches did exercise church discipline, all the university would have to do is call the clerk of the session (group of elders) of the person's church, find out who the true victim was in the breakup, and if the person is still eligible to operate in a ministerial capacity.

Review

We're in the midst of a three part series entitled, **“If Your Brother Sins”**. Last week we addressed the value, necessity and attitude of redeeming confrontations. Jesus taught that **“if your brother sins against**

you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, __you have gained your brother” (Matthew 18:15).

In these difficult encounters we are called to play a role in redeeming our brothers and sisters in Christ who might fall into some sort of transgression. We came to realize that this is much more than just mending personal relationships. The goal here is to restore someone going down a road of apostasy—someone turning away from the faith.

Since the end result of this passage (if things go poorly) is excommunication where the offending brother is to be thought of as an unbeliever, the gaining or winning of the brother here primarily has to do with restoring one’s faith. Similar to what we read in James:

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone __turns him back, ⁻²⁰⁻ let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way __will save __a soul from death and __cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19, 20).

Christians have a responsibility to play a significant role in strengthening each other in the faith. It’s not enough for the offended brother or the one who observes the sinful behavior to cope with it—he must deal with it. We have a responsibility to help each other.

We should be nurturing the types of relationships conducive to success in this area. If we’re called to do this, our brothers or sisters in the faith should know it is out of love and not out of frustration.

Faithful *are* the wounds of a friend. (Proverbs 27:6a)

And these confrontations should always be done kindly.

Brethren, if a man is __overtaken in any trespass, you who *are* spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of __gentleness (*prautetos*—mild and pleasant friendliness), considering yourself lest you also be tempted. ⁻²⁻ __Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill __the law of Christ (Galatians 6:1, 2).

But what if you prayerfully, gently and lovingly confront a brother who is genuinely sinning and he simply ignores you? This is our topic this morning.

**Discipline:
The Missing Mark of the Modern Church**

But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that *‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’*⁻¹⁷⁻ And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a *_*heathen and a tax collector (Matthew 18:16, 17).

Three Marks of a True Church

How many Christians, if asked what they are looking for in a church, would answer that they want a church that exercises church discipline? Although I might have agreed that church discipline should be practiced, for the first twenty years of my Christian faith, I would not have put it very high on the list of what I was looking for in a church. So I found it surprising to find that historically speaking, sound theologians (through their study of the Scriptures) viewed church discipline as one of the three marks of a true church¹.

Along with the pure preaching of the gospel and the pure administration of the sacraments, discipline is a non-negotiable if a church is to be considered a church. When I was first confronted with these marks I remember wondering why prayer, worship, brotherly love and other important components of the Christian faith were absent.

The answer is because these things can be done individually and in groups informally. But those who publicly preach the gospel must be accountable to a body for what they say since the heralding of the gospel carries an authority (like a representative from the government unraveling a scroll and reading a law that pertains to all its citizens) to which the listeners are required to respond. It is the church who is accountable to God for the pure administration of the sacraments. Paul is writing to the church about communion when he says **“when you come together to eat” (1 Corinthians 11:33b).**

And finally, the local Bible study has no authority to excommunicate its members. This is all to be done in a proper and orderly manner and these responsibilities, unlike other Christian actions, are uniquely given to the church—and no body should consider itself a church unless they are assuming this responsibility.

If He Will Not Hear

¹ Article 29 of the Belgic Confession.

Jesus uses a phrase He commonly used to describe people who, by the grace of God, heed godly wisdom, **“He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Matthew 13:9)**. In this case Jesus says **“if he will not hear”** (the confrontation by a brother). This may be understood as stubbornness on the part of the sinning brother. If you prayerfully, gently and lovingly confront a brother who is genuinely sinning and he simply ignores you, Jesus teaches **“take with you one or two more, that __ ‘_by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established’ (Matthew 18:16).**_ There are a couple of conclusions to draw here:

First, a person who is simply denying the obvious is less likely to dig their heels in against two or three people than against one. The modern phenomenon of the intervention where a group confronts an addict utilizes this function.

Second, this removes (virtually) all doubt regarding the reality of the sin; keeping in mind that the two or three brought are to be witnesses of the sin—not merely a support system. By these two or three, Jesus teaches, every word is established (*stathe*—might be established as valid); God is very concerned with the protection of the innocent. Jesus, as He commonly did, appeals to the law of the Old Testament.

_One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established (Deuteronomy 19:15).

And false accusations are not tolerated. It is often asserted that Christians who believe that the law of God should be the law of the land (generally called theonomists) do not take into account that innocent people are often executed. But it is not merely God’s law in terms of penology (punishment) that we are to honor, but God’s law in terms of due process. This particular passage continues:

If a false witness __rises against any man to testify against him of wrongdoing, ⁻¹⁷⁻ then both men in the controversy shall stand before the Lord, __before the priests and the judges who serve in those days. ⁻¹⁸⁻ And the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, *if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, ⁻¹⁹⁻ __then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother (Deuteronomy 19:16-19a).*

For all the accusations of harshness against the Old Testament law of God, it is a gracious law which protects the innocent far more than the laws currently in effect.

Tell it to the Church

But, of course, no system which involves human beings is incapable of being twisted and perverted. Later in this very gospel there will be two false witnesses who will testify against Jesus (Matthew 26:60). Nonetheless, God has given us supreme counsel on how to confront sin. First a one on one encounter; if that is rebuffed, then two or three witnesses; **“and if he refuses to hear them,”** Jesus says, **“tell it to the church”** (Matthew 18:17a).

Tell it to the church does not mean to show up at church Sunday morning and just start telling people. Jesus is going to say **“if he refuses even to hear the church”** (Matthew 18:17) indicating that the church has put together and unified statement to which the person is capable of responding. In an Old Testament context, that would have meant the Sanhedrin (the Old Testament elders or court of justice—Luke 22:66) which would be supplanted by the New Testament elders.

Adjudication

Since what we have here are accusations, witnesses and a verdict, churches are required by the justice of God revealed in the Scriptures to properly adjudicate (give a ruling) the matter. If a person is maintaining their innocence, whether it's a certain behavior or doctrine, they are given the opportunity that any accused person should be given to provide a defense. This may go so far as to include a trial with additional witnesses and other evidence. What's important here is that, as Jesus had already taught, it be an established or valid accusation.

For many churches, similar to our own, the accused person can appeal to a higher court than their own session if they believe things were handled improperly. Similar to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, matters can be taken to a council consisting of the heads of many churches that justice may prevail. And the process of disciplinary action may be incremental—e.g. the withholding of the Lord's Supper for a season (1 Corinthians 5:11).

Let Him Be To You

But if the brother, Jesus teaches, **“refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a _heathen and a tax collector”** (Matthew 18:17). In short,

if a person is shown to be engaging in continual, unrepentant violation of the law of God—and they refuse to repent, even at the behest of the church—they should be considered an unbeliever.

In fact Paul, giving further information regarding this doctrine, informs the church that it goes beyond simply regarding the person as an unbeliever, but includes a certain level of dis-acknowledgement and / or admonishment.

But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, __that you withdraw __from every brother who walks __disorderly and not according to the tradition which __he received from us...¹⁴⁻ And if anyone does not obey our word in this __epistle, note that person and __do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed.¹⁵⁻ __Yet do not count *him* as an enemy, __but __admonish *him* as a brother (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15).

In other words, our relationship with a person who Paul refers to as a “so-called brother” (1 Corinthians 5:11, NASB) is to revolve around encouraging repentance.

What Church Discipline Accomplishes

This is a meaty subject and much can be said, but time does not permit it so I would like to conclude with some brief bullet points that can be pursued in our “Q and A” after the service. The course of church discipline given to us by Jesus accomplishes the following:

- The reclaiming and gaining of offending brother (1 Corinthians 4:5).
- The deterring of others from similar offenses (1 Timothy 5:20).
- The purging of the leaven of sin which might infect the whole lump (1 Corinthians 5:6-7).
- Vindicating the honor of Christ and the holy profession of the Gospel (2 Samuel 12:14)
- Preventing the wrath of God from falling upon the church (1 Corinthians 11:31, 32).

All this is accomplished, and not to mention the general unruliness which takes place in Christendom when this process is neglected. Christians recognize a need to confront false professions of faith. And when the church

refuses to fulfill its duty, Christians are tempted to sort of ecclesiological vigilantism.

People determine whether others are (or are) not true Christians by whether they prayed a prayer at a crusade, or whether they are sweet or nice. Everybody is adjudicating without a due process. As judgmental as the process of church discipline seems to most people, if obeyed, it actually reduces the temptation to be judgmental. The psalmist writes,

If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?
(Psalm 11:3)

If the government doesn't protect us from criminals, the individual is more likely to sit on his porch with a shotgun. If the church doesn't purge out the sin, the individual is tempted to make judgments on his own.

Two Last Points

Two last points: Church discipline is *de facto* impossible without church membership. If a mark of a true church is its willingness to discipline, a mark of a true Christian is his willingness to be part of a true church.

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you (Hebrews 13:17).

This verse reveals a defined relationship between the elders of a church and its members. Today's prevailing anti-church membership mentality wars against the souls of the godly and is crippling when it comes to churches fulfilling this mandate given by Jesus Himself.

And finally, disciplinary action is aimed at established, willful, unrepentant sin. Jesus taught of the tenderness of the gospel.

A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench (Matthew 12:20a).

Church discipline is not aimed at the struggling sinner. It is not designed to put a foot in the face of a man seeking to crawl out of a hole. Every and any sinner who came to Jesus who was sorry for their sins and willing to repent, no matter how deep the sin or how intense the struggle, has found grace. It is no less true today.

Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ⁻²⁹⁻ Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ⁻³⁰⁻ For My yoke is easy and My burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

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Questions for Study

1. What role are we to play in the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ (page 2, 3)?
2. What are the marks of a true church (page 3)?
3. If a sinning brother doesn't respond to your one on one confrontation, what should you do and why (page 3, 4)?
4. If the sinning brother still fails to respond, what is the final recourse (page 6, 7)?
5. What does it mean to "tell it to the church" (page 6)?

6. Discuss adjudication (page 7)?
7. What is the church's response if the sinning brother fails to repent (pages 7, 8)?
8. What are some things church discipline accomplishes (pages 8, 9)?
9. Why is church membership important (page 9)?
10. Is church membership harsh and unfriendly toward those struggling with sin (page 9)?