

Text: Matthew 18:15-17

Title: Unrepentant People

Truth: Jesus teaches us how to find some lost sheep.

Date/Location: Sunday May 22 & 25, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

The Lord Jesus just said (18:14) that it is not the will of the Father in heaven that any of the little ones—ones who believe in Jesus—should perish. We learned from that paragraph about finding lost sheep that the Lord cares for His people, and none of them will be permanently lost. They might stray for a while, but not forever.

It is because the Lord desires every sheep to be rescued that He instructs His disciples (and us) about what to do when a professing brother strays from the flock. The sinner does not do that by wandering to the mountains like a sheep with Alzheimer's or dementia. He does so by living in sin and not repenting. For the church family, it is imperative to take the steps necessary to persuade the brother to repent and come back to the fold because God desires His people to be safe in the fold.

The ministry of the church toward unrepentant sinners is often called *church discipline*. Regardless of the name of it, its goal is to bring sinners *back*, not push them away!

I. The Text

15 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.

- A. The text outlines a three-step process by which a Christian can try to persuade a brother or sister that he needs to take care of a fault: first privately, then with witnesses, and then with the church.
- B. Actually we could consider this a four-step process based on the verbs in the section directed at "you": 1) go and tell; 2) take with you one or two more; 3) tell it to the church; 4) let him be to you like a heathen.

II. Interpretive Cautions

- A. This text does not demand you "go" to your brother initially through only a personal visit. That way is the best, I believe, but if we are to insist that you must travel to the brother to speak to him, we thus criticize Paul for confronting the sin in the Corinthian church. We undercut Paul from writing to the Galatian church about a major error. You might object that those were not sins against Paul personally and are church-wide, although I would debate that objection since that too would seem to demand personal presence. But I need not put much effort into the objection because what about those portions of 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians that have to do with the churches' disapproval of *Paul's* methods and claim to apostleship? Those are issues of sin against Paul—and the Lord as well since Paul is Christ's

messenger. These *are* indeed issues where someone(s) sinned personally against Paul. See Matthew 5:23-24.

Almost any critical portion of the New Testament that calls out specific sin for what it is could be itself criticized because the author did not go personally to so and so and deal with the issue.

- B. This text does not demand that public sins be first addressed with a private rebuke. A private start would be a good thing, but if an author writes something that is wrong and distributes it publicly, then it can and *must* be called out in public because there are people who have been misinformed and need to be helped with the correct teaching. Bible teachers are going to receive a stricter judgment, and one of the ways God sees to that happens *in this life*. If you teach something wrong, do not be surprised to be called out on it publicly. You cannot make some big error in public and expect it to be hidden away in private so you do not have to deal with it.
- C. If person A sins against B, and C observes it, this does not mean that C was “sinned against.” Nor is he obligated to go to A or B, because he does not fit the “if your brother sins against you” clause of the passage. Now, it would be good if C had enough Christian maturity or guts to share with A the observation of his or her ill behavior, but perhaps C goes to their pastor and asks advice about what to do, or if anything should be done. C is maybe not the most mature Christian. I leave room for imperfect practice in this life, and we try to improve our approach as we mature in Christ. But since at least C, and perhaps A and B are in the same church, this does have to do with the pastors of the church because what impacts the

church impacts them (2 Cor. 11:28-29). Since elders (and all of us) are charged with the responsibility of warning those who are unruly, comforting the faint, upholding the weak (1 Thess. 5:14) it falls within their job description to help brothers A and B get things straightened out, by asking them speak to one another.

D. Here is another potential objection: “God values the love and unity of the Spirit. Using the passage for church discipline must be wrong, or it must be for another time and place, because God would *never* have someone leave the church.” That is just false thinking that sounds pious, but it is actually evil. The Bible is full of the doctrine of separation. Paul told the Corinthians to remove a man from the church (1 Cor. 5). Jesus tells us to treat the person like a tax collector—obviously not one who belonged in the church. Jesus said that he would remove entire churches from their place if they did not repent (Revelation 2-3). The Old Testament holiness codes show us that God is serious about keeping pagans away from His people because of the danger they pose.

III. The First Step and Purpose of “Church Discipline”

A. The stress of “going and telling” the brother his fault is that you fear he may respond negatively. You are apprehensive about bringing up an issue because it could ruin your friendship or result in the loss of a member in the church.

Look again at verse 15. **“If he hears you, you have gained your brother.” What a blessing, what a relief, what a gift from God! Do not lack faith in what God can do. This is the goal of this whole portion of Scripture.**

- B. To “hear” obviously means more than to hear what you have to say to him. It means to “get” it, to accept it, to receive it as a rebuke from a loving brother who is offering “faithful wounds” as a friend (Prov. 27:6). This “hearing” results in repentance. Like “hearing the word of the Lord.”
- C. To “gain” means to acquire by effort or investment. It is an investment into another Christian’s life to try to help them see their wrong for what it is and amend their ways.
- D. Let’s go back to the beginning. “If your brother sins against you.” Indeed, that will occur, and often in this life. Many times, a brother or sister will be sensitive enough to offer an apology on their own. Your heart should already be predisposed to forgive them. In this way you put into practice Ephesians 4:31-32, the sin is forgiven as God forgave you, it is metaphorically placed under the crimson flood, and it is washed in the cross-work of Christ.

Other times the sin is of such a nature that you realize it may be a fault of hearing or understanding or another limitation of the person. Maybe it is even a mistake on your part—how you understood the situation. Perhaps it is a relatively small thing. Maybe it is a quirk. Maybe it is a genuine sin but you overlook it because you love the brother (Prov. 10:12, 1 Peter 4:8).

Only when it is serious enough or a pattern enough or harmful enough to warrant Matthew 18:15-17 is this process even started.

- E. The initial privacy is important because it protects the reputation of the brother and keeps sin where it

started—at the “local” level. It does not gossip or spread it around.

IV. Second through Fourth Steps of the Process

- A. The second and third steps proceed in similar manner as the first. The fourth is of a different nature.
- B. With sin issues that are significant enough to warrant this process, if the brother fails to heed your call to repent, then it is time to take along one or two others who have witnessed the same activity. Note: they are not witnesses of the second step of church discipline. Rather, they are witnesses of the original offense. The sin must have been such that it was known to others as well. These are others who have observed his bad pattern of behavior. They establish the truth of the sinful behavior. Jesus uses a principle from the Old Testament in Numbers 35:30, Deuteronomy 17:16, 19:5, John 8:17.
- C. What if there are not two or three witnesses? The matter is dropped. Do you think that is unfair? Indeed, the world is not a fair place because it is full of sin. And some sins will go unaddressed. Do not fret, however, because of evil doing. This approach helps avoid falsely imprisoning an innocent person who is the victim of one malicious witness. *That* is an egregious and insufferable evil that must be avoided. And if a serious sin cannot be addressed this time, there will likely be another time—or before the judgment seat. Not that you are looking for vengeance. Remember, the controlling idea is this: “you have gained your brother.”

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- D. I believe there should be plenty of grace in this process, and plenty of time. You can do more than one visit or attempt to speak to your brother. And if the church becomes involved, the same grace and patience is to be exhibited.
- E. The third step of discipline is that if the unrepentant brother persists to ignore wise advice up to this point, then the assembly of believers must be brought into the situation—to protect them from this brother, but also as the final court. The church should pray for and approach the brother with a loving appeal to change.
- G. If that fails—three in a row—then it becomes likely that the brother was not genuinely saved. He certainly is not acting like it at present, and has had plenty of opportunity to adjust his ways. The likelihood that he is not real increases over the course of time as he continues to refuse to come back to the Lord.
- H. This process is very wise, for at least two reasons. One, it protects the accused because a pastor or individual in the church cannot reasonably bring just any frivolous thing before the church. It maintains a level of accountability so that dumb stuff is not brought up. Second, it shows the offender the severity of their sin. The entire church is agreeing that it is sin to (fill in the blank), and it is not appropriate amongst God's people. That should get a person's attention. It is not just an individual or the pastor who "doesn't like me." It is a church who loves you, calling you to repent!
- I. When the church treats the person like an unbeliever and tax collector, that means that the church estimates the person is not (behaving as) a true Christian. And since what the church binds on earth is bound in heaven, and

what is loosed on earth is loosed in heaven; and if they forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven (John 20:23, and v. 18). Technically, this is not giving up. Still everyone is hoping for restoration, but the likelihood does statistically decrease very quickly after this point.

- J. What should other churches do? If the offender goes to another church, the second church should generally defer to the church which brought the disciplinary action, and not have that person join membership. The second church does not know anything, or perhaps only one side of the story, so it cannot make an independent judgment as to whether the person is OK or not. It should at least be wary because this person was a cause of a large problem at the other assembly and that kind of person should not be welcomed in willy-nilly into the second church.

V. Related Passages

- A. 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. This passage gives an example of a man living in sin, instruction about the removal of this man from the fellowship, his destination, the proper attitude for the church, the danger of leaven in the church and the need for purity, and a correction about judgment for those outside the church as opposed to those inside.
- B. 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15. In this section of Scripture we read that Christians should hold back full fellowship from every professing brother who walks disorderly, which means out of step with Biblical instruction generally, not following Paul's diligent example, and not being willing to work. Instead of working, they are being busy-bodies with their time. Such are commanded to work and eat

their own food, and if they do not (generally, or specifically in the matter of work/busy-body), then the other Christians are to note them and not keep company with them so that they may be ashamed. We are not to treat him as an enemy, but admonish as a brother.

- C. Notice that we do not treat those in Matthew 18:17 as enemies either—but as possible brothers who are walking astray and need to be brought back. They are not enemies, they are in need of God’s help and in need of exercising their wills in repentant faith.

Conclusion

The objections that I dealt with earlier notwithstanding, the problem with Matthew 18:15-17 and the other portions is not in the understanding of them. It is in the *obeying* of them. After you evaluate whether the issue should even be brought up—and many times it should not be—the issue is to care enough about someone that you will speak to them and try to win them back into the fold.

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