

Church Discipline: Lesson Two

Personal Sin

Text: Matthew 18:15-17

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. [16] 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. [17] 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 as an heathen man and a publican.

This lesson is to cover how you must behave with regards to personal transgression. The only sin under discussion is when a brother sins against you personally. It is not unreasonable to extend the principles of this lesson to similar situations. Private sins in general might be well handled according to this pattern. However, it does not pertain to any public matter whatsoever, although, even in a public matter, if there is some doubt about the actual events in questions, these rules would not be a bad starting place in making sure we have our facts straight.

Step One: Thee and Him Alone

The first step in the process is to tell the brother of his fault. This is to be done privately. Obviously, a private conversation is pointless if you have already “blabbered” the matter to everyone you know, so implicitly, this passage is teaching us to extend the courtesy of privacy to a brother in sin. On the other hand, it is not unreasonable to seek counsel or advice so long as (1) it is really for advice and (2) it is done discreetly. “The way of a fool *is* right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel *is* wise” (Pro. 12:15). Sometimes another person can offer prudent suggestions on how God’s commands may be kept. For example, another person may better understand how to approach a particular brother so as to not aggravate a current problem. The rule here is the Golden Rule. Get the information you need to handle the situation without doing anything to harm the person in a fault.

In this private meeting, the stated purpose is to “tell him his fault”. Some prudent suggestions are in order here as well. Don’t beat around the bush. Be clear and concise in your statement of the problem. Try not to be combative, as our battle is with Satan and not our brother. It is easy to deal with this kind of problem in terms of getting even for the wrong done to you. Remember that this is not the goal. It is not about you. It is about your brother’s soul. Hence, we should not allow ourselves to become angry, even if baited, by following the simple command: “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: [20] For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God” (James 1:19-20). The wrath of man, anger over petty harms done to each other, will never allow God’s will to be done.

I would add this word of caution. This is not a step to take nonchalantly. You are not permitted to take step one and then decide that you are unwilling to finish this

process. You owe it to your brother to do all that is possible to bring him to repentance that he may be forgiven and escape the fires of Hell. You owe it to your God who demands this of you. That is why this deals with sin and not simple differences. With personal differences, we have another command. “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also *do ye*” (Col. 3:13). “And unto him that smiteth thee on the *one* cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not *to take thy* coat also” (Luke 6:29). The Bible pattern is very simple. If there is sin involved, follow Matthew 18 to its conclusion. If there is no sin involved, get over it. Allow yourself to be wronged for Christ’s sake that the kingdom of God is not weakened, but do not allow sin to fester in your bother for any reason.

Another passage tell us more about this kind of situation. “Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; [24] Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift” (Matt. 5:23-24). This is not a matter that is to be put off until some more convenient season. Meet your duty to your brother before you dare offer up sacrifice unto your God.

Step Two: One or Two More

Now, if this step was completed and repentance resulted, the task is done and the prize is won. We have gained a brother. If he will not hear, then a second step is commanded. One or two are to go with you to the brother. By way of prudence, if one is good, two is better. The idea is that every word will be established by having two or three agree in the matter according to Old Testament principle. Furthermore, the one or two probably shouldn’t be someone with an axe to grind with the brother. They should be respected and respectable. They should have character and prudence. The qualified elder’s of the local congregation would be logical choices.

Note that these “witnesses” are not to bear witness of the sin. They can’t, since the sin is private to begin with. They hear the matter out, and then they are to admonish the guilty party to repent. Notice that v. 17 refers to hearing “them”. These two men are not there merely to listen to you correct the brother. These two men are to try to compel the brother to repent. Sometimes situations like these arise and the two witnesses refuse to bring judgment, saying something like, “Well, you should pray about it and work it out.” If there is sin, the two witnesses **MUST** admonish the guilty party. They are duty bound to do so. They owe it to the brother in sin, and they owe it to their God. They can even afford to be more stern and direct than you were originally, because they are not directly involved in the wrong. They cannot be accused of bias, because the sin didn’t harm them. In all of this, they must also be meek.

Step Three: Unto the Church

If the brother repents at this point, then the goal is met and we have gained a brother. If he refuses to hear the witnesses as they admonish him, then a third step is

required. The matter must be taken to the church. At this point, some will bail out and say that they want the matter to remain quiet. This must not be. We owe it to our brother and our God to do all that God has commanded to bring our brother to repentance. This next step is absolutely required.

The church should be formally informed. This should not be a matter of gossip or hearsay. The one who was wrong must submit their accounting of the matter, as in the Old Testament, when the accuser had to cast the first stone. The two witnesses must then submit their accounting of the matter, explaining that all that is command has been done. At this point, the entire church has an obligation. No one gets to sneak out of this duty. You all owe it to your brother and to your God to do all that is required to win back your brother. The whole church is to engage in admonishing the brother. We are left to our judgment as to how this is done, but it must be done. You might write letters. You might have personal conversation. All avenues should be pursued in trying to bring about repentance. If, after some reasonable amount of time, the brother is seen to refuse to hear the church, then a last and most terrible step must be taken.

Step Four: Withdrawal

The final step is that the whole church will treat the guilty brother as “a heathen and a publican”. “Heathen” maybe is a more meaningful term in our age than “publican”. A heathen is a person that is unclean as a Jew would consider a Gentile. The relationship between Jews and Gentiles was strained to say the least. They carried out required interactions as quickly as possible. Unnecessary social interactions were completely avoided. This is the kind of relationship Christ was alluding to when he said treat him as a heathen man. The reference to a publican is not merely referring to distaste for the people to whom we pay our taxes. The publican was a Jew who was a Roman official, a traitor in the eyes of Jews. He traded allegiance to his people to serve a foreign king and make some money on the side. This analogy is very apt for the situation of Matthew 18. The person in question has willfully left his allegiance to the kingdom of Christ to serve Satan and enjoy worldly benefits. These two terms then describe the withdrawal of fellowship that the church is to make toward the sinner.

Why is this necessary? First, it is necessary because God has commanded it, and this simple fact should never be forgotten. Second, it is to produce shame in the sinner. They did not listen to the admonition offered in three different stages. Now, they may hear the admonition of shame. They may decide that they want their brethren back more than they want to hold on to their pride. Third, if the sinner does not repent, then the church has removed sin from its midst and kept the bride of Christ pure. We must be a people of one heart, and we cannot be such a people when one of us sins and has no care for the consequences.

A Positive Command

Lev. 19:17 Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him.

According to the Old Law, correcting a neighbor in sin was an act of love. Leaving that friend in sin was an act of hate. With that in mind, why is the doctrine explained in Matthew 18 so terrible to many?

When people see the end that Matthew 18 has to offer, they begin to believe that it would be better to not begin that process at all. Maybe, if we just let it slide, things will take care of themselves. Truth be told, it might, but “might” shouldn’t be good enough. We ought to have enough confidence in our all-knowing God to trust His plan. We ought to have enough love for our brethren and their souls that “might” is an unacceptable risk. Let us care for each other as brethren and bear the burden of social friction and confrontation so that we all will go to Heaven together. This is God’s way. This is God’s law. It is right and we must do it.