

“Church Membership—Is it Important?”

Matthew 18:15-18

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:15-18, ESV)

In many ways, this sermon text is a logical follow-up to the last twelve weeks we spent in 1 Corinthians. As we looked at the first three chapters of that book, we saw the Apostle Paul addressing, over and over, the issue of division within the church.

He addressed the issues of wisdom and folly, as well as the issue of spiritual maturity (or lack thereof) and the issue of boasting or aligning oneself with certain leaders to the point of dividing the church.

While Paul addressed the issue of division from a number of angles, what he did NOT do was give practical direction as how to address division or the offenses or perceived offenses that often cause division in the church. You see before an actual division occurs, differences in opinion are moralized and seen as “sins.”

For example: infant baptism—I think it is very important. However, while I may think a person with a different view is “wrong,” or “misguided,” I don’t see him as being in “sin.” However, if I did, the process for approaching the issue is laid out in Matthew 18.

The only qualifier I’ll give as we consider what it means to deal with an offense and being sinned against, is that the goal of confrontation and pointing out another’s sin is always restoration. We see this not only in the text, but in the stories with which Jesus has sandwiched this teaching.

Just prior to our text is the parable of the “lost sheep.” Immediately following our text is the parable of the “unforgiving servant.”

Today, instead of giving you points, I’m simply going to go through verse 15 of this text, word by word.

Right at the outset, the text seems pretty clear. Jesus tells his disciples, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”

*If your **brother** sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.*

Notice the object of confrontation here—your brother/sister, not your enemy. When a person confesses faith in Jesus and is baptized into his body, at that moment, they are family.

Whenever we deal with difficult issues in church there are only ever two kinds of people we’re dealing with; individuals who have trusted Jesus and are therefore brothers; or people who haven’t trusted Jesus and are therefore not brothers. Either way, malice, self-righteousness, and/or harshness are never appropriate.

Consider a portion of a letter written by John Newton to a fellow minister who was readying to attack another minister. Newton says to him:

“As to your opponent, I wish, that, before you set pen to paper against him, and during the whole time you are preparing your answer, you may commend him by earnest prayer to the Lord’s teaching and blessing. This practice will have a direct tendency to conciliate your heart to love and pity him; and such a disposition will have a good influence upon every page you write. . . . [If he is a believer,] in a little while you will meet in heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest

friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts. . . . [If he is an unconverted person,] he is a more proper object of your compassion than your anger. Alas! 'He knows not what he does.' But you know who has made you to differ."

Notice: Newton says the person with whom you've got an issue is either a brother with whom you should long to be reconciled in order to experience now the unity and joy that awaits you in heaven or a non-believer.

If the person is, *in your opinion*, NOT a believer in Jesus, instead of your wrath and anger the person is a "more proper object of your compassion than your anger. Alas! He knows not what he does."

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.

The second thing to consider is the particulars of the issue at hand. Is what your brother/sister has done actually "sin" [i.e. a willful transgression of God's law] or does he/she have a difference of opinion which, in your mind, you've turned into a moral issue?

For example, consider infant baptism. Personally, I think it is a biblical issue and an important issue. However, it is not a MORAL issue. In other words, while I might disagree with a person who doesn't hold my view of baptism; I might think they are wrong; or misguided; or any number of other things; I don't think they are sinning.

What if, in fact, a person has sinned. They've committed some moral transgression. Besides compassion, as Newton has urged, let me also encourage you not to be surprised. In other words, *we sin because we are sinners*. And while the actions of another person might offend us or frustrate us, they shouldn't *surprise* us.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.

Breaking things down further when considering the actions of another, you have got to ask yourself, has my brother sinned against *me*? How this works out practically, most often, is when an individual comes and confronts you about the actions of another person—in other words, they gossip. They come to you and say, "Someone needs to talk to Tommy about..."

At this point, you need to help the person obey Jesus' teaching here by asking, "Well, have you talked to him? I'm the wrong person." Put differently, how much time do you spend discussing the sins of other people with individuals other than those allegedly committing the sin?

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.

The bottom-line: if you feel that you have been sinned against by another individual, GO and tell HIM—not someone else. What should you tell him? His fault? Why should the confrontation be "between you and him alone?"

One reason is that you may be wrong. Scandal often occurs when a person has talked and gossiped regarding another's perceived sin, only to find out they were wrong. The problem is that the "toothpaste is already out of the tube" and reputations are lost. You've got to ask yourself, "Am I accusing this person of some offense I've seen or some hidden motivation impossible for me to see or know?" By going alone, you are able to figure this out. You might even be surprised to find out that the person's motivation was "good," even if their implementation was misguided or hurtful.

If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

What does it mean for him to "listen to you?" Clearly from the context here it means that he not only has heard you, but has seen his/her sin for what it is, sought forgiveness, and promises to seek righteousness.

It seems there is also an assumption here that the person doing the confronting goes into the encounter willing to forgive. Are you? Think carefully before you say yes, because willingness to forgive means, basically, you're willing to "pay the bill" for the offense.

Notice what the text says when this happens: “you have gained/won your brother.” There is glory here. Why? Because it is a small portrait of what Jesus has done and continues to do for each of us.

All of us have sinned against Him and by His Spirit, He comes and tells us our fault—just you and Him alone. If you listen to Him, He has “won” you. If you don’t listen, He has “lost” you, or rather, you are lost to Him. Keep in mind, however, that when Jesus comes and confronts you regarding your sin, He always does it in the context of having already “paid the bill.”

Considering the context of this passage, we find both the goal of and the motivation for confrontation. The goal is Restoration and Reconciliation.

Immediately prior to this passage, Jesus tells *The Parable of the Lost Sheep*. A shepherd who has lost one sheep, leaves the ninety-nine in order to find it. When he does, he rejoices.

Additionally, let me emphasize that the text says, “...if he listens, you have gained (or won) *your brother*.” Too often we go into a confrontation and we forget those last two unbelievably important words “your brother.” Put differently, for most of us, the goal is NOT to “win our brother,” but rather simply “to win.” At best, this attitude isn’t consistent with the gospel. At worst, this attitude implies that we have actually responded to sin with sin! The way to avoid having “to win” as our driving attitude, we must keep in mind our motivation.

The motivation should be: Understanding that we have been forgiven.

Immediately following this passage is *The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant*. Peter asks, “Okay, Jesus. I ‘get it.’ But exactly how many times are we supposed to do this? Seven times?” Jesus then goes on to tell the parable. The point, of course, is that we are the wretched, indebted servants who have been forgiven all by the King. This being the case, how could we not forgive those who have sinned against us?

¹ The Works of the Rev. John Newton, Vol., 1, p. 269.

² “What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.” (Matthew 18:12-13 ESV)

³ “Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’

“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

“But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matthew 18:21-35 ESV)