

“WHEN SOMEONE SINS AGAINST YOU”
MATTHEW 18:15-17

Some of the last words Jesus spoke just before He was arrested and crucified came in the form of a prayer. He was talking to His heavenly Father about His disciples, and then about all those (like us) who would believe in Him. He said, **John 17:20-23**. ²⁰ *“I do not ask for [my disciples] only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me”* (John 17:20-23).

Our oneness with each other was and is the longing of Jesus’ heart, and that oneness is made possible because, according to Jesus, we have Christ *in* us, and we are *in* Christ and *in* the Father. We literally share in their relationship, a relationship that is characterized by perfect love, perfect peace, perfect harmony. So, when Jesus prayed in verse 23 that we may become *perfectly* one, He was asking that we may be able to love each other as He and the Father have loved us, and that our relationships with each other are characterized by peace and harmony. That simply means there are no walls or barriers between us because of an offense that has *not* been forgiven; there is no unresolved conflict, there is no lingering tension, there is no rivalry or jealousy or ill will. There are no cliques or constituencies where there is an “us” versus “them” mentality. There is no gossip or slander.

There is, rather, a commitment to *live* as one, just as Christ has made us one. There is a commitment to pursue reconciliation, even when we have been personally offended or injured and have reasons, from a *human* perspective, to hold a grudge or drift apart or build a wall. There is a commitment to preserve the relationship and restore fellowship with the person who has hurt us.

That is what this passage in Matthew 18 is about. Implicit in this text is an underlying commitment to regard our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ as God regards them—precious, worth guarding and preserving at whatever cost. It is a passage that tells us *how* to restore broken fellowship.

Jesus is instructing His disciples, and He says in **verses 15-17**. 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. ¹⁶ But 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. ¹⁷ If 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”* (ESV).

Trust me, Jesus was aware of our propensity to hurt and offend each other. He knew about our tendencies to get bent out of shape, lose our tempers, dig in our heels, get the upper hand, hold grudges, and jump to conclusions. He knew that our hearts are deceitful above all else and desperately wicked so that we have an uncanny inclination to distort reality and to believe and promote lies.

So, Jesus knew that life in His church would not always be pleasant or peaceful. Someone said, “The church is like Noah’s ark: If it were not for the storm on the outside you could not stand the stench on the inside.” Where there are people there are problems and conflicts, and those problems and conflicts need to be resolved.

But Jesus was also aware that resolving them is not always easy, and it may not

happen on the first attempt. Because of the volatile emotions that tend to accompany conflict, resolution can be a delicate matter that requires a thoughtful, constructive, and careful approach. So, Jesus lays out a process that ensures the greatest opportunity for success.

The first step is stated in **verse 15a**. ¹⁵ *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.*

Jesus’ use of the word “brother” here is intended to show that this offense has taken place within *His* family, which includes all those who have put their faith in Jesus and have been adopted by His Father. This “brother,” then, could be any member of Jesus’ family who sins against another family member—male, female, young, old, slave, free, Jew or Gentile.

But notice Jesus is giving a specific directive. He is talking about a family member (a fellow Christ follower) who has sinned *against you**. (see footnote)

Look at verse 15 again. ¹⁵ *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.”* The word, “sins,” means wrongdoing. It refers to acting contrary to God’s will or law. So, Jesus is talking about a *real* offense. He is not talking about someone who does something you do not like or something who rubs you the wrong way. He is not referring to an annoying personality trait or an irritating idiosyncrasy. Jesus is not describing a brother who bugs you because he has different political persuasions than you, or a brother who has different convictions or preferences. He is talking about someone who has wronged you, and what he/she has done is actually a sin against God, too.

Jesus is talking about someone who has taken advantage of you, or has taken something from you, or has treated you unfairly or unjustly. It could be someone who has exploited you, abused you, betrayed you, lied to you, lied about you, shamed you, slandered you, cheated you, neglected you, or abandoned you. These are examples of real sins, real offenses, that cause real hurt, and a real breach in the relationship.

If the offense is real, Jesus commands us to address it because it jeopardizes the oneness He longs for, and because it will *not* go away until it is resolved. Oh, you may be able to ignore it for a while or convince yourself for a while that everything is fine, but if it is real and it remains unresolved it *will* form a barrier between you and that person. And it will diminish or hinder your fellowship with each other, which is of great concern to the Lord Jesus, because He wants us to *live* as one.

So, when you have identified the sin or the offense, Jesus says to go and tell him his fault. A leading lexicographer defines the Greek word that is translated “to tell him his fault,” as “to state that someone has done wrong, with the implication that there is adequate proof of such wrongdoing” (Louw-Nida). In other words, this is not a “perceived” offense or a simple misunderstanding. This is an offense in which there is evidence that it has been committed.

Jesus does not say how that evidence should be presented to the offender. But the implication in the text is that it ought to be done in a constructive manner. Because the purpose of going to the offender and showing him his fault is restoration and reconciliation. It is not for the purpose of merely airing your grievances, or giving him a piece of your mind, or shaming him, or condemning him. You are brothers, you are members of the same family, and your elder brother, Jesus, and your Dad, almighty God, want you to be reconciled.

So, the manner in which you show him/her their fault is really important, because usually when there is hurt there is anguish, and that anguish can be very deep. And, in such an encounter, emotions, not all of which are constructive, are particularly volatile and are often very near the surface. I am not suggesting that emotions should *not* be displayed in the encounter—they may be very appropriate—I am merely saying that we must try to express

them constructively.

Therefore, I think it is wise that before we go to our brother or sister and show them their fault, we ask God to preside over that meeting, over our emotions, over the conversation. I think it is wise to ask God to incinerate anything in us—opinions, perceptions, resentments—that are not of him, and then ask Him to give us wisdom (which He promises to give when we ask) and fill us with His Spirit. Then we can go in confidence.

Notice what Jesus says next, **verse 15b**. ¹⁵ *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.”* When you are initially confronting a person about their sin against you it is essential that you go to the person privately and try to resolve it between just the two of you, without getting anyone else involved. Why? Because it *contains* the damage. It preserves reputations, not just the reputation of the offender, but of the Lord Jesus. It prevents the matter from unnecessarily escalating. I think you know that when other people find out that a person has sinned against you, it causes them to be upset, it may cause them to think poorly of the offender. Jesus’ command to confront the matter privately is a safeguard.

But let’s be honest. After we have been hurt by someone, sometimes we *want* other people to know that we’ve been wronged by him/her, so they can sympathize with us and be irked with that person, too. We don’t naturally *want* to go directly to the offender...by ourselves. We naturally want to tell our friends first, perhaps form an alliance or build a coalition against the offender.

But Jesus prohibits us from doing that, because it unnecessarily expands the scope of the offense. It can seriously damage the reputation of the offender. It can stir up anger or resentment against the offender and cause even more disruption to the fellowship. It can be shared in a way that embellishes the offense—making it bigger than it really was. It can easily turn into gossip or slander, or a pity party; and it usually makes resolution much more complex and difficult, and, therefore, less likely.

Jesus is telling us that constructive conflict resolution between brothers and sisters in Christ demands that we be discreet. It requires confidentiality. He is asking us, for the sake of the relationship and for the sake of His church, to try to keep the matter contained between the offender and the one who was offended.

And Jesus says if you do that and your brother listens to you, you have gained your brother. When Jesus uses the word “listen” He obviously has more in mind than the offender just giving you an audience or hearing you out. The word has the idea of accepting, agreeing with, or favorably responding to. Jesus is describing a brother who receives this rebuke successfully, so that he takes responsibility for what he has done and seeks forgiveness, resulting in reconciliation. That is the best-case scenario.

But the brother may *not* listen, in which case Jesus tells us to take another measure. **Verse 16**. ¹⁶ *“But 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.”*

“If he does not listen”—meaning that he does not accept or agree with the rebuke or he does not take responsibility for his actions and seek forgiveness and reconciliation—then move on to step #2. Step #2 involves returning to the offender with one or two others to confront him again. Notice, the principle of containment is still in force in this step. The people who know about the offense and who are involved in the resolution process are to be as few as possible.

Forming this small group of witnesses complies with what God wrote through Moses in Deuteronomy which Jesus quotes at the end of verse 16. Though Jesus provides no

qualifications for these witnesses, the context implies that they ought to be fellow believers—part of the same spiritual family. Furthermore, the serious nature of this responsibility implies that these witnesses be spiritually mature, level-headed, honorable, impartial, loving, and wise. Once again, the purpose of this second visit, like the first, is reconciliation, and so these witnesses must be fully committed to that end.

If the offender listens to this small group and it results in forgiveness and reconciliation, wonderful! Walls are broken down and peace and harmony are restored. But **verse 17**, *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.*

You might be thinking after steps 1 and 2, “Haven’t we done enough already! This is starting to get *really* awkward!” Don’t forget that the oneness of His family is the longing of Jesus’ heart, and He wants us to be just as committed to that oneness as He is, which means that we will keep on pursuing it until we have exhausted our options.

So, if steps 1 and 2 are not successful, we go to step #3 which is to take it to the church. “Church” here means the gathered assembly of Christ followers in a particular location. In other words, present this matter to the entire church family of which this person is a part. Why? To shame him? No. To damage his reputation? No.

We do it so that any or all of those who are part of the assembly can try to convince the offending brother to repent and be reconciled. Again, bringing it to the attention of the whole church, as uncomfortable and even scandalous as it may seem, has a restorative purpose. It is intended to be one final application of pressure on the offender, so that he understands just how consequential his sin is, so that he realizes that it affects the entire church and not just the one he has hurt, and especially so that he understands just how grievous his refusal to reconcile is to the Lord Jesus.

There is no question but that this step in the process is difficult and painful. It pains everybody, not just the parties involved in the conflict. But it is a loving thing to do. It is loving because unless the person repents and is restored, he/she will go down a path of misery and destruction. This step is intended to save that person.

But, if the person still refuses, **verse 17b**. *And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*”

To treat a person as a “Gentile or a tax collector” means to treat him or her as someone outside the Christian community, or as someone who is not a part of the family. Such treatment resembles the Old Testament practice of “cutting” someone “off” from the assembly of Israel (e.g., Gen 17:14; Ex. 12:15, 19; 30:33, 38). People have used different words to describe this—disfellowshipping, ex-communication, or shunning—all of which emphasize a punitive aspect of this action. But this is not punitive, per se, it is disciplinary. Yes, it means not allowing the person to participate in public, corporate fellowship with the church until they take responsibility for their offense and repent. But that break in fellowship is intended to grief, remorse, and regret in the offender so that he/she will be compelled to come out of the darkness back into the light.

In closing our time this morning, I’d like to mention two things by way of application. First, I want to call your attention back to Jesus’ prayer in John 17. It was the longing of Jesus’ heart that all of His followers be one, even as He and the Father are one. It was His prayer that we live in *perfect* oneness, which means that we love each other as Jesus and the Father have loved us, and that our relationships with each other are characterized by peace and harmony. That means there are no walls or barriers, no unresolved conflict, no lingering tension, and no rivalry, jealousy, or ill will toward one another.

It means that we have a deep, abiding commitment to *live* as one, just as Christ has

made us one. There is a commitment to pursue reconciliation and restoration when we have been personally injured. There is a commitment to obey Jesus' instruction in this passage, even though it requires a lot of emotional energy and perseverance.

Second, we've got to be committed to seeing the whole process through, if at first there is no success in our attempts at reconciliation. It may be awkward, it may be time-consuming, it may *seem* risky, but it is Jesus' prescription for success and that means it is absolutely the best possible method.

And regarding that third step, church discipline, please know that we at EBC are committed to practicing this, as uncomfortable as it may be. I know the risks of being sued, I know that those who are disciplined often leave one congregation for another that accepts them with no questions asked. But the leaders of those churches have to give an account to God one day for that. But, by God's grace and with His help, we will obey Jesus' words whatever the fallout, because His method is the best and His method is an expression of true love.

***Do the Words, "Against you," Belong in v. 15?**

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone" (Matt. 18:15a ESV).

There is a discrepancy in some of the ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament that are still around. Some manuscripts omit the words, "against you", so the verse would be translated, "*If your brother sins go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone" (18:15a).*

Remember, we do not have the original manuscript of Matthew's gospel, or any other New Testament book for that matter. We have *copies* of the original manuscript, or, more precisely, copies made from *copies* of the original. And even though we can have a high degree of confidence in the accuracy of those copies because the scribes who copied them were known to be extremely careful, since they were copied by hand, there have been known to be rare, but occasional discrepancies. And that is what we have here—either a scribe added "against you" or he deleted "against you."

Obviously, this is an important matter because whether or not the words "against you" were part of the original text of Scripture determines whether or not they are really God's words and whether or not they belong in the Bible. Furthermore, it significantly changes the meaning and application of the verse. If the words, "against you", are not part of Matthew's gospel then verse 15 would seem to mean that we have a responsibility to confront a brother or sister in Christ *whenever* they sin.

I would suggest to you that if this *is* what Jesus said then it seems to me that we would have to spend an awful lot of our time pointing out each other's sins, and that seems incompatible with the character of God and the teaching of Scripture. Not even Jesus, who knew every impure thought and motive in every single person He ever met, did that when He was living on this earth.

It seems to me it is best to interpret this verse as it is translated in the NIV, "If your brother sins *against you*..." The reason I feel comfortable with this is because right after Jesus gave this instruction Peter asked Him a question. **Verse 21**, "*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins **against me**? Up to seven times?'" (18:21).*

For me, the context is the most compelling reason to conclude that the words "against you",

in verse 15, were included when Jesus gave this instruction. And so, I have proceeded with that assumption.

When Someone Sins Against You **Matthew 18:15-17**

Main Idea: When a brother/sister sins against us we must pursue reconciliation by confronting him/her in a caring, constructive manner

When a “brother” sins against you (15-17)

The meaning of “brother” (15a)

The meaning of “sins” (15a)

The process of personal confrontation (15b-17)

Step 1: Resolve it privately (15b)

“Showing him his fault”

Containing the damage and restoring the sinner

Step 2 (if #1 fails): Take one or two witnesses (16)

Establishing the facts

Applying more pressure for restoration

Step 3 (if #2 fails): Take it to the church(17a)

Establishing the seriousness of unrepentant sin

Applying more pressure for restoration

Step 4 (if #3 fails): Treat the offender as an outsider (17b)

Like a “Gentile” or “tax collector”

Implications for church participation

Application

Regarding our personal commitment to obey Jesus’ instruction

Regarding the church’s commitment to discipline