

RECONCILIATION (PART 3)

MATTHEW 18:15-20

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

15 “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault when the two of you are alone. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother.

16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others with you, so that at the testimony of two or three witnesses every matter may be established.

17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. If he refuses to listen to the church, treat him like a Gentile or a tax collector.

18 “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.

19 Again, I tell you the truth, if two of you on earth agree about whatever you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you.

20 For where two or three are assembled in my name, I am there among them.”

Last week, we noted that in **Matthew 18:15-20**, the reconciliation of believers is dealt with under the theme of church discipline. As we consider the very important matter of church discipline, it is critical for us to note that Jesus refers to the “*church*” twice in verse **17**. He says, “*If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the **church**. If he refuses to listen to the **church**, treat him like a Gentile or a tax collector.*”

The Greek word translated “*church*” is **ekklesia**: (**ek-klay-see’-ah**), which properly means, “a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place.” The word is used by the writers of the

New Testament to refer to a body of people, “called out” of the world of unsaved humanity to become the people of God. The word refers either to the Mystical Body of Christ made up of saved individuals, or to local assemblies of God’s people.

There are persons who argue that since the discourse in **Matthew** chapter **18** preceded the day of Pentecost, our Lord could not have been speaking about the **New Testament** church. What these people seem to overlook however, is that Jesus had already introduced the concept of the church to His disciples in **Matthew 16:18**: “*And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my **church**, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it*” (**New English Translation**). Jesus’ instructions in **Matthew 18** were given in **anticipation** of the New Testament **ekklésia**.

The whole point of our Lord’s repeated use of the word “*church*” in **Matthew 18:17** was that the church is the proper forum in which matters of dispute or discipline should be handled. According to **1 Corinthians 6:1-6**, there is no external court or higher authority on earth to which issues regarding sin may be referred. It is therefore the expressed will of God that the disciplining of members of the Body of Christ should take place in the church.

One of the reasons why this is so is because true believers should be motivated by a genuine love for one another (**1 John 3:14**). In such a context, discipline will be administered in love, and for the genuine good and edification of the whole body.

John MacArthur comments that, “The goal of church discipline is not to throw people out, shun them, embarrass them, play God, be self-righteous, or exercise authority in an abusive manner. The purpose of discipline is to bring people back into a right relationship with God and with the rest of the body. Proper discipline is never administered as retaliation for someone’s sin. Restoration, not retribution, is always the goal.

This is obvious from the text of **Matthew 18**. The Greek word translated "won" in verse **15** is **kerdainó** [ker-dah'-ee-no], a word often used to speak of financial gain. Thus Christ portrayed the errant brother as a valuable treasure to be won back. That should be the perspective of every Christian who ever confronts a brother or sister about sin.

That is, in fact, the expression of God's own heart with regard to discipline: He sees each soul as a treasure to be recovered. That is the whole context in which Christ spoke these words."

While it may be tempting for us to take the path of least resistance and avoid confrontation, it is important for us to understand that when a brother or sister has offended us, or is involved in sinful activity, that is the very time we need to get involved. We have a duty before God to lovingly confront that person.

In our previous Lesson, we stated that the Scriptures outline **five** steps that are to be taken as it relates to the disciplining of a professing believer, and we considered the **first** step of the process which is a **Private Meeting**. In verse **15** our Lord says, *"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault when the two of you are alone. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother."*

If we have been offended by a brother or a sister, or if we are aware that a brother or a sister is involved in sinful activity, we are to go and confront the individual directly. The offending brother or sister will probably be more likely to acknowledge his or her fault in a private setting than if he or she is approached initially by several persons. In addition, a private meeting helps to avoid the problem of gossip that can occur when a matter is taken to others instead of to the person involved.

Our objective in meeting with the offending party is not to "set him or her straight," or to "get things off our chest," by lecturing him or her about how wrong he or she is. Our aim is to get him or her to listen to us

so as to win him or her back to the Lord! The best way of convincing someone of his or her sin is to take him or her to the principles outlined in Scripture. Our opinion really doesn't matter. It is God's Word that is the authority and must therefore always be appealed to.

We should not understand our Lord's instruction in verse **15** as a **command** to confront our brother or sister in respect of **every** offence or sin. The sins that merit church discipline are flagrant, sins that may destroy the peace and purity of the Body of Christ. Discipline is not to be enacted for every grievance that arises in the church. There are some things that we can overlook and take to the Lord in prayer. The Bible says that we should bear with one another and be longsuffering towards each other. **1 Peter 4:8** speaks of the love that, "*covers a multitude of sins.*"

When our brother or sister offends us or is guilty of sin, we have the option of either going to him or her directly or dealing with the situation under Christian longsuffering and bearing with one another. We do not however have the option of nursing a grudge, allowing bitterness to take root in our hearts, gossiping with others, or retaliating.

Jesus says, "*If he (i.e. the offending brother or sister), listens to you, you have regained your brother.*" If the offending person listens to you and repents, the discipline process may stop there. You have regained your brother or sister. You have regained him or her in two ways. First, the problem has been effectively dealt with. He or she acknowledges his or her sin and asks for forgiveness, both from the Lord and you. Perhaps you may discover that he or she was not entirely wrong and that you were not entirely right. But whatever the extent of blame on either side may be, the situation has been resolved. Second, you have regained him or her because you have not wronged your brother or your sister by going to others to spread gossip.

In the event that a private meeting fails to resolve the conflict, it is necessary to proceed to the **second** step which is a **private conference with witnesses**. In verse **16** our Lord says, "*But if he does not listen,*

take one or two others with you, so that at the testimony of two or three witnesses every matter may be established.”

The second step in the disciplining process passes from private dealing, to involve one or two other **spiritually mature** persons. The amount of people involved in the process of church discipline increases only as the offending party remains unrepentant. The point of the increased number is to cause the offending brother or sister to realize the seriousness of the situation. Even at this stage there is still no undue publicity. However, the witnesses represent the **beginning** of the entire church’s involvement in the matter. The offender is therefore put on notice that if he or she continues in sin, the consequences will only grow more severe.

The principle of two or three witnesses was established in the Old Testament Law. In **Deuteronomy 19:15** we read the following: *“A single witness may not testify against another person for any trespass or sin that he commits. A matter may be legally established only on the testimony of two or three witnesses”* (**New English Translation**).

This principle was designed to ascertain guilt beyond reasonable doubt before any verdict was made—especially in court cases. Therefore, having witnesses in this second step of discipline also suggests that the end of the process will be a form of judgment if the offender does not repent.

It is also true that if the offender denies that the offense actually occurred, there needs to be a second witness or some other objective evidence to establish his or her guilt. Every fact must be established by the testimony of at least two or three witnesses. Therefore, if a dispute comes down to nothing more than the word of the accused against the word of the accuser, the accusation itself is an insufficient basis for pursuing discipline, and the matter should be dropped.

The witnesses are to listen carefully to both sides of the argument before lending their voices to persuade the offender to acknowledge his or her offense and repent. They must heed **Proverbs 18:13**: *“The one who*

gives an answer before he listens—that is his folly and his shame.”
(**New English Translation**).

It may be that the one or two other spiritually mature persons, after hearing both sides of the story, may resolve the issue by assigning responsibility differently than the offended person had thought to do. As **Proverbs 18:17** states, “*The first to state his case seems right, until his opponent begins to cross-examine him*” (**New English Translation**). And **Proverbs 21:2** says, “*All a person’s ways seem right in his own opinion, but the LORD evaluates his thoughts*” (**New English Translation**). The goal in our loving confrontation of others must always be the restoration of relationship and not simply proving one’s self right.

In the presence of the witnesses the person cannot afterwards deny, or profess to have forgotten, what he or she had admitted to. And if the matter has finally to come before the church, these witnesses will be able to declare what was said when they met with the persons in conflict. They are also witnesses to the fact that the disciplinary process itself has been properly followed up to that point. Their presence at this stage is as much a protection for the one being confronted as it is for the one doing the confronting.

Once again, it must be remembered that the objective is nothing less than gaining back a brother or sister. The **first** step is repeated; an effort is made to lovingly and patiently show him or her, his or her sin again. But this time it is done in the presence of one or two additional persons.

In many cases when the offending brother or sister is confronted with additional witnesses, he or she will respond to this second step with repentance. If so, the matter is settled. If he or she acknowledges the offence or sin and repents of it and forsakes it, this should be the end of the matter. It would be inappropriate at this point to broaden the circle of involvement beyond those who are already witnesses.

Covering the offence or sin, in the sense of not exposing it further, is the right and loving response to the sinner who repents. Unfortunately, as with step one, if there is continued unrepentance the disciplinary process must be taken to another level.

The **third** step to be taken in the disciplining of a professing believer is **a public announcement to the church**. In verse **17** our Lord says, *“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.”* Regarding this third step **John MacArthur** makes the following remarks: “From a pragmatic perspective, it is easy to think of several reasons for **not** following this command: It’s harsh. People will be offended. It’s embarrassing for the person being disciplined. It will tarnish the public image of the church. What if the person being disciplined sues the church? The stark reality of the discipline process might drive unbelievers away. People’s sin is best dealt with quietly, out of the limelight.

But in the face of all those arguments stands one powerful reason why the church **cannot** afford to ignore this important step of discipline: **Christ commanded it**. That simple fact means it is therefore required for all who wish to honor Him as Lord.”

It is my opinion that before an announcement is made to the church, the leaders of the assembly should meet with the offender and give him or her another opportunity to confess and repent of the sin. They should warn him or her that if he or she does not do so, the details of the situation will subsequently become public knowledge.

At every stage of the process of church discipline we must bear in mind that the overriding purpose of each step is to regain our brother or sister. The church is to be told about the person’s sin not as a matter for gossip or public ridicule, but to enlist the help of the entire congregation in appealing to the person yet another time. More people are involved at this point in order to pursue the sinning brother or sister more

effectively. In essence, the whole church is enlisted to appeal to him or her.

Brothers and sisters, discipline is the responsibility of the whole church. It is not the responsibility of the pastor or the leaders alone. It is a corporate duty. This approach helps to protect the church from abuses of power by leaders, such as that described by the apostle John in **3 John 9-10**:

9 I wrote something to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not acknowledge us.

10 Therefore, if I come, I will call attention to the deeds he is doing—the bringing of unjustified charges against us with evil words! And not being content with that, he not only refuses to welcome the brothers himself, but hinders the people who want to do so and throws them out of the church!

(New English Translation)

Diotrephes was evidently not satisfied with the official position he held, but desired to rule the entire church. He abused his power and influence as a leader in the church in order to turn itinerant preachers away and even to excommunicate some of them singlehandedly, together with those members who supported them.

The problem of the abuse of church members by their leaders is perhaps more rampant today than it was in John's time. Many Pastors operate as little God's in their assembly, virtually doing as they please with no regard for Scripture. In a church that adheres to biblical principles, it is never the task of any one person to excommunicate members. Church discipline is a corporate duty, and that is why the whole church must be brought into the process before anyone is excommunicated.

If a brother's or sister's sin has to be made public, the church should be instructed in how to relate to the offending brother or sister. In **1 Corinthians 5:9-11** Paul writes the following:

9 I wrote you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.

10 In no way did I mean the immoral people of this world, or the greedy and swindlers and idolaters, since you would then have to go out of the world.

*11 But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone **who calls himself a Christian** who is sexually immoral, or greedy, or an idolater, or verbally abusive, or a drunkard, or a swindler. Do not even eat with such a person.*

(New English Translation)

Church members should no longer have fellowship with a person who persists in a sinful life-style, refusing to be corrected. It cannot be “business as usual.” Paul says that they should “*not even eat with such a person.*”

If however, the offending brother or sister is finally convicted by the gathering together of the church and repents, the entire church has a duty to reaffirm their love and forgiveness toward him or her.

Unfortunately, there are times when the offender still refuses to repent even after the third step of church discipline have been taken. In these situations the Lord provided a **fourth**, drastic step in the disciplinary process. Lord willing, we will consider that step in our next Lesson.