

## RECONCILIATION (PART 4)

### 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.”*

In verses **15-17** of our text, the Lord Jesus outlines **five** steps that are to be taken as it relates to the disciplining of a professing believer.

The **first** step in the process 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 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 him or her directly. Our Lord says, *“If he (i.e. the offending brother or sister), listens to you, you have regained your brother.”*

In the event that a private meeting fails to resolve the issue, 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 disciplinary process passes from private dealing, to involve one or two other persons. The point of the increased number is to cause the offending brother or sister to realize the seriousness of the situation. 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. If after a private conference with witnesses, the offender remains obstinate, 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.”*

It is my opinion that before any 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.

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.

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 clearly indicates that the members of the Body of Christ should no longer have fellowship with a person who persists in

a sinful life-style, refusing to be corrected. He says that they should not even eat with such a person (verse **11**).

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 has been taken. In these situations the Lord provided a **fourth**, drastic step in the disciplinary process. In verse **17** He says, *“If he refuses to listen to the church, treat him like a Gentile or a tax collector.”* The **fourth** step in the disciplining of a professing believer is **public exclusion from the church**.

This step includes the revocation or cancelling of the person’s membership in the local assembly. He or she is no longer to be regarded as a member of the Body of Christ. Rather, he or she should be regarded as an unsaved person, and therefore should not be allowed to participate in any activity that is reserved for members. In particular, he or she should be barred from participating in the celebration of Communion.

This fourth step of discipline does not mean that the church has determined that the offending person will suffer eternal punishment in the lake of fire. Thankfully, the Lord has not given the church that authority. In fact, the fourth step is not even an indication that the church is saying definitively that the person being disciplined is not saved. No member of the church has a light with which to look into the soul of any another person.

The fourth step is the church’s **public** declaration that it is no longer able to credibly affirm a person’s profession of faith. However, as far as the treatment extended to him or her by the members of the church is concerned, public exclusion or **excommunication** from the church is not a license to treat him or her with contempt or hostility. In fact, Jesus’s respectful, compassionate treatment of Gentile’s and tax collectors should be our example. But as long as the offending person continues to

identify with the Lord Jesus Christ and His church while living brazenly in sin, believers should not relate to him or her as if nothing were wrong. In order to send a clear signal, both to the individual and the outside world who are observing, even fellowship in everyday social settings is to be suspended.

**John MacArthur** explains that, "The term '*Gentile*' was primarily used of non-Jews who held to their traditional paganism and had no part in the covenant, worship, or social life of the Jews. On the other hand, a '*tax-gatherer*' was an outcast from the Jews by choice, having become a traitor to his own people. Jesus' use of these terms doesn't mean that the church is to treat these people badly. It simply means that when a professing believer refuses to repent, the church is to treat him as if he were outside of the fellowship. They are not to let him associate and participate in the blessings and benefits of the Christian assembly."

When a person has been excommunicated from an assembly, he or she should still be allowed to attend church services, unless there are extenuating circumstances such as the threat of physical harm. After all, church services are open to the **all** members of the public. The excommunicated person should still sit under the Word of God as it is preached or taught. In **1 Corinthians 1:21** Paul states clearly that it is through the preaching of the Word that God is pleased to save sinners, and the one who has been publicly excluded should therefore be encouraged to avail himself or herself of every opportunity to listen to the Word of God "rightly divided."

Church discipline only makes sense in churches that affirm that Jesus Christ is not just Saviour, but also Lord, and that He requires us not only to **hear** the gospel, but to also **repent** and **believe** the gospel. Discipline works best in a **culture of discipleship**, where church members lovingly and regularly encourage one another in gospel faithfulness.

The Body of Christ has a Scriptural responsibility to make it clear that persistent, flagrant sinning is incompatible with Christian fellowship. Because the offending person has identified with Christ and is known as a “brother” or “sister,” it becomes vitally important for the fellowship as a whole to demonstrate that this person’s consistent rebellion against Christ is incompatible with a profession of faith in Him.

In **1 John 1:6-7** John writes the following:

*6 If we say we have fellowship with him and yet keep on walking in the darkness, we are lying and not practicing the truth.*

*7 But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*

**(New English Translation)**

**John Macarthur** makes the following observations relative to church discipline:

“The tragic reality of living in a fallen world is that church discipline is unavoidable. It’s unlikely a local church will escape the need to respond to flagrant sin within the flock. And church discipline, as outlined in **Matthew 18:15-20**, is the only righteous response to a church member whose sins cannot be safely overlooked without harm to the offender or to the Body of Christ. The process must be initiated with private confrontation. If the offender refuses to repent, further confrontation is required with witnesses. If he persists in unrepentance then the entire congregation must be informed.

Further impenitence at this point demands the final step in the discipline process—excommunication: *‘If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector’* (**Matthew 18:17**). This does not call for heaping scorn on the person. It is not a command to treat the person badly. It simply means that the person is

to be regarded as an unbeliever. The repeated hardening of his heart calls the reality of his faith into question. From henceforth he should be regarded as an evangelistic prospect rather than a brother in the Lord."

We must bear in mind that at every stage of the process of church discipline the overriding purpose is to regain our brother or sister. And so, even at this drastic fourth stage when the church is unable to affirm that the individual is indeed saved, the primary goal is to win him or her to the Lord.

In **2 Thessalonians 3:6** Paul writes, "*But we command you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from any brother who lives an undisciplined life and not according to the tradition they received from us*" (**New English Translation**).

In verses **14** and **15** of the same chapter he writes,

*14 But if anyone does not obey our message through this letter, take note of him and do not associate closely with him, so that he may be ashamed.*

*15 Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.* (**New English Translation**)

The command to not have fellowship with the unrepentant brother or sister does not exclude **all** contact. When there is an opportunity to admonish him or her in love and to appeal to him or her to return to the Lord, the opportunity should be taken. Indeed, we should seek for such opportunities. But the contact should be for the purpose of exhortation and pleading and for no other.

There is a sense then in which even when a person is excommunicated from the church, the Body still exhibits a great interest in the welfare of the person. If he or she subsequently demonstrates genuine repentance, he or she is to be welcomed back into the fellowship. This is the **fifth**

and **final** step in the process of disciplining a brother or sister. It is the step of **Public restoration**.

If a person who has been excommunicated repents of his or her sin and expresses genuine remorse, the church should be informed and the person should be **publicly** restored and accepted back into fellowship. Of course, there should be a period of observation of the person's life before he or she is asked to serve in any official capacity in the church. It may also be necessary to assign spiritually mature persons to work with the person as he or she renews his or her walk with the Lord.

In Paul's letters to the Corinthian believers we have an example of church discipline being administered to a professing Christian who was guilty of gross and presumptuous sin. In **1 Corinthians 5:1-13** we read the following:

*1 It is actually reported that sexual immorality exists among you, the kind of immorality that is not permitted even among the Gentiles, so that someone is cohabiting with his father's wife.*

*2 And you are proud! Shouldn't you have been deeply sorrowful instead and removed the one who did this from among you?*

*3 For even though I am absent physically, I am present in spirit. And I have already judged the one who did this, just as though I were present.*

*4 When you gather together in the name of our Lord Jesus, and I am with you in spirit, along with the power of our Lord Jesus,*

*5 hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*

*6 Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast affects the whole batch of dough?*

*7 Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch of dough—you are, in fact, without yeast. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*

*8 So then, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of vice and evil, but with the bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.*

*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.*

*12 For what do I have to do with judging those outside? Are you not to judge those inside?*

*13 But God will judge those outside. Remove the evil person from among you.*

**(New English Translation)**

In the sordid scenario described in this passage, a professing Christian who was a member of the church in Corinth, was having an incestuous relationship with his father's wife. It is apparent that they were living together in a permanent alliance. Interestingly, Paul does not pass judgment on the woman which implies that she was not a member of the assembly and probably not a believer. Verses **9-13** appear to support such a view. This kind of sin was condemned by the Old Testament Law, as well as by the laws of the Gentile nations. Even the unsaved Gentiles did not practice this kind of sin!



Instead of mourning over the terrible state of affairs in their assembly, the believers at Corinth were puffed up. They were probably boasting that they were so “open-minded” and non-judgmental that even persons who sinned flagrantly and presumptuously could be members in good standing! It appears as though very little, if anything, had been done to confront this “brother” with a view to getting him to repent. But since the situation was already public knowledge, and the man was continuing impenitently in the most depraved kind of immorality, Paul exercised his apostolic authority, dispensing with the first three steps of church discipline outlined by our Lord, and ordered the church to excommunicate the man immediately!

While it is true that believers are not to judge each other’s motives or ministries, we are to be honest about each other’s conduct. Administering church discipline is never pleasant, but since it is commanded in the Scriptures, we must obey God and set our personal feelings aside.

**John MacArthur** comments as follows:

“Paul’s words are harsh, but they give insight into what excommunication is about. The sinning person is *‘deliver[ed]...to Satan for the destruction of his flesh.’*”

In other words, he is given over to the Satan-controlled system of sin and dissipation that he has chosen, where he will reap the full consequences of his sin. The excommunicated person may descend to the very depths of sin before repenting. In this final step of the discipline process, the church hands the sinner over to the natural result of his sin.

Notice that Paul characterizes the potential end result as *‘the destruction of his flesh.’* Sin, especially of the deliberate and wanton variety, often takes a physical toll on the sinner. Sin’s natural consequences may include illness, or in extreme cases, even death (1

**Corinthians 11:30**). If he or she is a genuine believer, this should be a further motivation to repent, and the person will be ultimately saved. Again, the primary objective is the repentance and restoration of the offender."

In verses **3-5**, Paul commands the church to convene an official meeting at which the offender is to be dealt with according to divine instructions. Public sin must be publicly judged and condemned. The church was to gather together and expel the offender. Paul does not recommend that the man be treated gently. He uses strong words in his instructions: "*hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh*" (**1 Corinthians 5:5**), "*Clean out the old yeast*" (**1 Corinthians 5:7**), and "*Remove the evil person from among you*" (**1 Corinthians 5:13**).

The Public exclusion from the church was to be done by the authority of Jesus Christ and not simply by the authority of the local church. That is what Paul means in verse **4** by, "*in the name of our Lord Jesus.*" Church membership is a serious matter and must not be treated carelessly or lightly.

What does it mean to deliver a professing believer "*over to Satan?*" It does not mean to deprive him or her of salvation. The church cannot grant salvation and it cannot take it away. When a believer is in fellowship with the Lord and with the local assembly, he or she enjoys special protection from Satan. But when he or she is out of fellowship with God and excommunicated from the local church, that special protection is removed. God may even permit Satan to attack his or her body severely so that he or she will eventually repent and return to the Him.

Brothers and sisters, willful sin is like yeast or leaven. If it is tolerated, it will eventually permeate the entire body. In verse 6 Paul says, "*Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast affects the whole batch of dough?*" Sometimes an unrepentant believer must be put out of the assembly **for the sake of the assembly**.

It can be a daunting prospect for the church to deliver the final judgment of excommunication. But we can be confident of God's approval when we eject members from the church based on the principles of Scripture.

What exactly was Paul's motive for recommending such harsh treatment for this person? The answer is found in verse **5**: *"hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."*

Brothers and sisters, we have repeatedly emphasized in these Lessons, that the ultimate goal of church discipline is always the restoration of the offender's relationship with God and with the other members of the Body of Christ.

**2 Corinthians 1:1-11** describes the disciplining of a certain person in the church and his subsequent repentance and restoration. The **New English Translation** renders the passage as follows:

*1 So I made up my own mind not to pay you another painful visit.*

*2 For if I make you sad, who would be left to make me glad but the one I caused to be sad?*

*3 And I wrote this very thing to you, so that when I came I would not have sadness from those who ought to make me rejoice, since I am confident in you all that my joy would be yours.*

*4 For out of great distress and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears, not to make you sad, but to let you know the love that I have especially for you.*

*5 But if anyone has caused sadness, he has not saddened me alone, but to some extent (not to exaggerate) he has saddened all of you as well.*

*6 This punishment on such an individual by the majority is enough for him,*

*7 so that now instead you should rather forgive and comfort him. This will keep him from being overwhelmed by excessive grief to the point of despair.*

*8 Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him.*

*9 For this reason also I wrote you: to test you to see if you are obedient in everything.*

*10 If you forgive anyone for anything, I also forgive him—for indeed what I have forgiven (if I have forgiven anything) I did so for you in the presence of Christ,*

*11 so that we may not be exploited by Satan (for we are not ignorant of his schemes).*

Bible commentators are not sure if this passage has to do with the same man whom Paul wrote about in **1 Corinthians 5**. What is very clear however is that even a person whose sin is so grievous that he or she has to be severely disciplined by the church, may, by the grace of God, be eventually brought to a place of genuine repentance and restoration.