

**Church Discipline Part 1**  
**Matthew 18:15-16**  
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Matthew 18 continues the section of Christ's training of the disciples for their future ministry. Matthew 18 is the fourth major discourse of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Matthew (cf. 5:1-7:29; 10:1-42; 13:1-53; 24:1-25:46). Jesus prepared His disciples for their future ministry of founding His church (cf. Matthew 16:18).

Matthew 18:15-20 describes the approach to restoring a sinning brother to a right relationship with the Lord. There are stages of increasing attempts to see repentance over sin. These stages should not be viewed as a rigid formula since it is more a process of increasing escalation of ministry.

It is important to note that the goal of this ministry is the restoration of the sinning brother. It is not to remove them from the fellowship of believers but to bring about repentance. We must consider a sinning brother to be the sheep that has wandered from the fold, not the wolf that threatens the sheep.

This perspective is based upon the context of Matthew 18:15-20, which is the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18:12-14. The shepherd is overjoyed at finding the one sheep that wandered away from the flock. The instruction of Jesus in ministering to a sinning brother is a means by which a wandering sheep can be brought back into the flock.

From the previous context of this chapter, any follower of Jesus must be humble, like children, with a desire to receive the little ones who desire to come to him. This is an imperative prerequisite for any true service in the name of Christ. We cannot expect to help those who have wandered into sin if we are proud and haughty. *"Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ"* (Galatians 6:1-2).

If we are not humble, we can potentially prove to be a hindrance to the repentance of one of these little ones. With humility we can guard ourselves against causing any further stumbling and truly bear the burdens of another who is caught in a trespass. This is why the characteristic of *"a spirit of gentleness"* is included in Galatians 6:1, for it is the manifestation of our submission to the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

## **The sinning brother (18:15)**

The initial attempt to help a sinning brother to turn from the error of his ways is through a personal, individual conversation with him. The subject of the conversation is the sin that has ensnared him. This leads to the obvious issue of what sins should be addressed.

But before we can examine the nature of the sin, we must first notice there is a significant textual variant in this verse. Many English translations read “*if your brother sins*” (NASB, NIV) and many English translations read “*if your brother sins against you*” (ESV, KJV). At issue is whether only the person who has been sinned against is responsible for this conversation or whether the believers as a whole are responsible.

The best and oldest manuscripts omit the words “*against you*” from their text, while later manuscripts include it. This typically has led modern English translators to follow the older manuscripts, but as we see with the ESV, in this case the later manuscripts are followed by some modern translations.

Typically, we find that older, more reliable manuscripts will have the shorter reading, which favors the decision to omit the phrase “*against you*.” Also, the inclusion of “*against me*” in Matthew 18:21 may have influenced a scribe to include it in verse 15. There is the natural tendency for scribes to seek to make the text more understandable, and limiting the responsibility to those against whom the sin has been made is certainly more doable.

For these reasons, it seems the NASB and NIV (2011) have followed the original text. There are many destructive sins that are not specifically against any who would desire to confront the brother with his sin. 1 Corinthians 5 is an example of this, yet Paul expected the Corinthian church to address the sin of sexual immorality among them.

Matthew 18:15 leaves the type of sin undefined. The only specific sin in the context is causing one of the little ones to stumble. But in 1 Corinthians 5, when Paul instructs the church to “*remove the evil person from among yourselves,*” he prefaces this with a list of any “*so-called brothers*” that Christians should not associate with. “*But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is a sexually immoral person, or a greedy person, or an idolater, or is verbally abusive, or habitually drunk, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a person*” (1 Corinthians 5:11). This gives us a perspective of what types of sin fall into the realm of being dealt with by the entire church.

There are other times where Paul lists sins that must not be associated with a believer:

*“God gave them up to a depraved mind, to do those things that are not proper, people having been filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, and evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unfeeling, and unmerciful” (Romans 1:28-31).*

*“Do not be deceived; neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor those habitually drunk, nor verbal abusers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).*

*“Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: sexual immorality, impurity, indecent behavior, idolatry, witchcraft, hostilities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21).*

*All bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and slander must be removed from you, along with all malice” (Ephesians 4:31).*

*“Therefore, treat the parts of your earthly body as dead to sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry....rid yourselves of all of them: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene speech from your mouth” (Colossians 3:5,8).*

*“For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, slanderers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness although they have denied its power; avoid such people as these” (2 Timothy 3:2-5).*

The basic challenge with these lists is that everyone in every church sins. Who among us has never been arrogant, ungrateful, greedy, boastful, angry, etc? At some point, every one of us will be guilty of some of these sins in each of the lists. Furthermore, while many of these sins are quite visible, some of these sins are internal in nature. A person can have bitterness, jealousy, greed, impurity, conceit and evil desire, and yet not exhibit any necessary manifestations. Clearly, in order to remove or avoid a person, these sins must be seen.

As we look at these lists, we find behaviors that are particularly disruptive to others. Those within the fellowship of believers are harmed by such deeds of the flesh, and those beyond the church will judge the church as hypocrites, and not above reproach. Paul compares the spread of such evil in the church to leaven in 1 Corinthians 5:6-7, *“Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump.”*

Therefore, the sort of sin that must be addressed according to the process of Matthew 18:15-20 are sins that harm the fellowship. This sort of high-handed rebellion has a deleterious effect on the little ones. When internal sins display themselves in such ways that create disruption, the church must respond.

Like leaven that gradually influences the entire lump of dough, unaddressed sinful conduct can gradually cause one of these little ones to stumble. It may guide those seeking to follow Jesus into evil deeds. *“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depths of the sea”* (Matthew 18:6).

This is why it is imperative that such sin be turned away from by the brother and why it cannot be ignored, either for his sake or for the sake of the fellowship of believers. Decisive change must occur, *“And if your hand or your foot is causing you to sin, cut it off and throw it away from you; it is better for you to enter life maimed or without a foot, than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into the eternal fire”* (Matthew 18:8).

This is why we have the responsibility to take the initiative and to *“go and show him his fault in private.”* To show him his fault is to instruct in the way of righteousness and to explain the significance of disobedience, in hope that the conviction of the Holy Spirit will bring repentance. It is not a ministry of condemnation, but one of exhortation and restoration toward obedience.

This often will result in a positive response, *“if he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”* This is due to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers brings the conviction of sin and the desire to follow Jesus. This is the work of the Lord, not of the eloquence of our words.

This is to be done in private for two reasons. First, it provides the brother with the best opportunity to respond in repentance without any other influences. A personal conversation assumes an existing relationship that is able to carry the message. Second, it protects the brother from gossip if he repents.

Galatians 6:1-4 provides the proper attitude that the one seeking to restore the sinning brother must bring. *“Brothers and sisters, even if a person is caught in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual are to restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you are not tempted as well. Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks that he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting, but to himself alone, and not to another.”*

We cannot think we are better than the person we seek to serve. In this restoration, we bear the burden of another and it is imperative that we do this with a spirit of gentleness. Harsh rebuke was reserved by Jesus for false teachers, not those who had stumbled into sin. This is consistent with the principle of humility from the preceding context (Matthew 18:4).

The vast majority of sinful thoughts, words and actions are not a threat to the peace and unity of the church. If we desire to preserve the peaceful unity in a church, we must exercise forbearance, *“Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* (Ephesians 4:1-2).

While we must bear with one another, this does not mean that we cannot serve those who may be struggling with sin, or that we are unable to speak with a person about their sin unless it is a sin that threatens the peace of the church. *“We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ”* (Colossians 1:28). Yet this is limited to personal encouragement, not church discipline. We can help all people potentially, but this requires spiritual wisdom regarding how to serve them faithfully.

It is also important to remember that to get someone to stop sinning is not necessarily a means to sanctification. Why a person turns from their sin is as important as whether they turn from their sin. We cannot rebuke people into righteousness. Also, when we admonish others, we must teach them from the word of God. Our goal must not be simple behavioral conformity to morality.

Whatever the state of someone’s spirituality, we must be patient with them. *“We urge you, brothers and sisters, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone”* (1 Thessalonians 5:14). Those who are demanding and conceited in their approach to ministry may upset the very peace that we are called to preserve.

### **The serving brothers (18:16)**

If the sinning brother does not listen to the individual who has gone to “*show him his fault in private,*” the next step in ministry to him is to “*take on or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED.*” This reason for taking one or two more is a quotation from Deuteronomy 19:15, “*A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.*”

So we see that from the use of Deuteronomy, the purpose for the two or three witnesses is to confirm the evidence. These two or three people have witnessed the sin, and therefore there is a basis for accepting the accusation. This is necessary in order to protect a person from false accusations.

Some have considered the witnesses as confirming the rebuke of the individual and the lack of repentance. Yet Deuteronomy 19 references a matter to be confirmed, not simply addressed. Deuteronomy 19:16 introduces the possibility of a false accusation, “*If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing.*” Therefore, the role of the witnesses in the function of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament Law was to protect a man from the false charge made against him by a malicious person (cf. 1 Timothy 5:19). Simply witnessing a rebuke does nothing to guard against false accusations.

Furthermore, there is an assumption that the accusations are indeed against the revealed will of God. Many people are willing to judge others unrighteously, according to their opinions and personal applications of general truth. “*Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you*” (Matthew 7:1-2; cf. James 4:12). We must not admonish others regarding what is not intrinsically sinful.

In order for two or three people to go to a person regarding their sin, there must be some degree of collaboration involved. This should not involve a fishing expedition to discover what we others may know about someone. Rather there are occasions where more than one person encounters sinfulness and each one can themselves speak to what they have witnessed.

This is why Jesus used the term “witnesses.” This requires that the sin has truly been observed. After all, if a sin will have a detrimental effect upon the church fellowship, it will not happen without people being personally aware of it.

If there is sin that only one person has witnessed, that person can show him his fault and wait until there are other witnesses before moving forward. Unless, of course, the person confesses and refuses to repent, or there is such evidence that exists that there can be no reasonable doubt about the sinfulness. In such cases, people can simply witness the evidence of the sin to speak with the sinful brother.

We can be patient with a sinning brother if others have not witnessed the sinfulness. If there is no repentance, it is likely the sin will continue and others will see it. If there is no further manifestation of sin, the church is not threatened.

### **Conclusion**

Many churches avoid the application of Matthew 18:15-20 because it appears to be unloving. Yet *“those whom the Lord loves, He disciplines”* (Hebrews 12:6). If the Lord does not ignore sin but moves to help us mature, then it is not unloving to do what He does. We must adjust our perspective on love to align with the will of God, rather than our preconceived notions.

Certain sins are so destructive to the church that they must be addressed publicly when there is no repentance. This is because *“a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough”* (1 Corinthians 5:6). The spread of such sin can infect others in the church. As a church, we have a responsibility for the spiritual well-being of both the individual and the church as a whole.

Any conversation with a fellow believer about their sinful behavior should be with the expectation of repentance. *“Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?”* (Romans 2:4). God is at work in the lives of His people and will lead them to repentance. We can trust His kindness to bring about a positive change when we follow the Lord’s teaching regarding those who have been ensnared by sin.