

THE STUMBLER BELIEVER

Matthew 18:15-20

Now if your brother sins, go and show him his fault, between you and him alone; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And 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 the Gentile and the tax collector. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst. (Matthew 18:15-20)

PUTTING IT IN CONTEXT

Most of Matthew 18 has to do with the reality that Christ's followers will continue to sin.

- The world is full of stumbling blocks; woe to the world.
- Some people deliberately cause His children to sin; woe to them.
- His followers are to value personal holiness over physical wholeness, but of course, that doesn't stop sin in its tracks; we must rely on His grace and the Spirit's sanctifying work.
- His disciples are not to despise any of His children because of their immaturity, weakness, and tendency to sin but rejoice when they repent as He Himself rejoices.

But how do Christians grow from immaturity in Christ to maturity? That I can tell you in one word: sanctification.

THREE PHASES OF SALVATION

The Bible speaks of salvation in three primary phases. Salvation begins with **justification**, in which the Holy Spirit brings us out of the domain of darkness and into the Kingdom of the Son, softens our hearts, and grants us faith. He forgives our sins and imputes the righteousness of Jesus to us. Salvation comes to completion with **glorification**, where we are finally made perfectly like Jesus in His resurrected humanity.

Between justification and glorification is **sanctification**. In **justification**, we are declared holy. In **glorification**, we will be at last made holy. In **sanctification**, we learn to live in holiness. Or we could understand this way. **Justification** and **glorification** are purely the work of God. **Sanctification** is guided by Scripture and empowered by the Holy Spirit but also involves our willing cooperation.

TRANSITION: Justification and glorification are instantaneous events. But sanctification takes the rest of our lives from justification onward. Until sanctification is complete, we will sin, and sometimes sinning believers need help from their brothers and sisters.

FIRST: A PRIVATE APPROACH

Matthew 18:15

Now if your brother sins, go and show him his fault, between you and him alone; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. (Matthew 18:15)

WHO DOES JESUS HAVE IN MIND?

Jesus is not speaking about family members or unbelievers but Christians: spiritual brothers and sisters. A brother or sister sins, violating the Law of God.

THE ISSUE IS SIN

Let me emphasize that Jesus is not talking about disagreements or differences but actual sins as defined by Scripture. In Philippians 4, Paul speaks strongly to Euodia and Syntyche, Christian women who were in conflict with one another. He urges them to live in harmony but never accuses them of sin. They had a serious conflict, but it did not rise to the level of sin.

Some translations have the words “against you” in this phrase. They were not in the earliest manuscripts. At this point, I’m of the opinion that Jesus is not talking about personal “against you” offenses since He deals with them in the very next passage. I believe that He is talking about stumbled believers, as we have already seen in Matthew 18.

HOW ARE WE TO RESPOND?

We are to go and show him his fault privately and discretely. The aim is to help a sinning believer understand what he has done so that he can be restored to the Lord. The implication is that he has not understood that he sinned and remains trapped in it.

Sin is deceptive and can easily trip us up before we really know what’s happening. Our hearts are easily deceived and manage to justify all sorts of sinful actions. It’s possible that it would take someone else to help us understand what we’ve done.

Since the aim is restoration and holiness, if the sinning believer listens and responds with confession and repentance, then the matter is settled. Nothing else is to be done. That’s the best possible situation. You have won your stumbled brother and helped him get back to his feet.

TRANSITION: But, unfortunately, Jesus says “IF he listens” and not “WHEN he

listens.” The truth is that a quiet, private approach does not always bring about repentance. What happens then?

SECOND: BRING WITNESSES

Matthew 18:16

But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. (Matthew 18:16)

If they refused to listen, then the disciples were not to shrug and ignore the issue. The first one takes one or two with him or her. Jesus quotes 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; at the mouth of two or three witnesses a matter shall be established. (Deuteronomy 19:15)

In Deuteronomy, the witnesses are witnesses of the sin, not witnesses to the conversation. The same holds true here. The witnesses are not there to observe a repeat of the first conversation. They are there as witnesses of the sin to establish the fact of what happened.

In the first step a Christian goes privately to a sinning believer: “I know that you are involved in sin; please, repent of it!”

In the second step two or three meet with the sinning believer: “We know that you are involved in sin; please, repent of it!”

Again, the hope is that the sinning believer will repent. Jesus does not repeat “if he listens to you, you have won your brother” in the second and third steps, but it is clearly implied. The aim is not destruction but restoration.

And if they repent, then the issue is settled. Nothing more needs to be said. All can rejoice in the Lord.

TRANSITION: But what if the sinning believer refuses to repent even when two or three bear witness to their sin? We are not to abandon our efforts to restore the stumbled one. There is still one more step to follow.

THIRD: TELL IT TO THE CHURCH

Matthew 18:17

And 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 the Gentile and the tax collector. (Matthew 18:17)

A final appeal is to come from the church, the congregation in which they fellowship. The aim of this third step is not banishment or removal but repentance. The hope remains that the stumbled believer will listen and respond well.

Did you know that the world has adopted this process? They don't call it church discipline, of course; they call it staging an intervention. It's usually used with an alcoholic or drug addict. The aim is to get as many people who care about them in one place at one time and have all of them individually appeal to the addict to get help.

In a sense, Jesus calls for the church to carry out an intervention. All the saints are to urge the sinning brother to confess, repent, and be restored. It is not to be an expression of anger, disappointment, or rejection. It is to be a heartfelt, urgent plea with a stumbled saint to turn away from his sin and back to the Lord Jesus.

If he repents of his sin, then the matter is settled. Everyone can rejoice and move on.

But if he refuses to listen even to the church, then Jesus calls for a change in the relationship. The church is to no longer to view him as a fellow believer but as a Gentile and a tax collector. The New Testament contains a number of instructions about this sort of thing.

One example is First Corinthians 5:9-11, which says,

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people; I did not at all mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the greedy and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But now **I am writing to you not to associate with any so-called brother** if he is a sexually immoral person, or greedy, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler — **not even to eat with such a one.** (First Corinthians 5:9-11)

This doesn't mean looking at them with hatred or disgust. It means going back to the Gospel and urging them to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus Christ. They might be truly saved; if that's the case the Lord will purify them apart from us. But it's more likely that they are false converts, and their sin has finally revealed their unsaved state. Either way, they cannot be allowed to remain in the fellowship, but we continue to hope and pray for their salvation.

We must remember that unrepentant sinners are not innocent victims.

Little children, let no one deceive you. The one who does righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. The one who does sin is of the devil, because the devil sins from the beginning. The Son of God was manifested for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. (First John 3:7-8)

As Christians, we want the best for people and we want to believe the best. But we must be obedient to the Word even if others aren't. Someone who claims to be a Christian but refuses

to repent of sin must be removed from the fellowship.

TRANSITION: This is a fearsome thing to do. Who are we to make such judgments about others? Well, remember, we aren't making the judgment; Jesus is. He commands us to remove unrepentant people from the fellowship. If we refuse to obey Him, we are just as trapped in sin as they are. And remember, too, that because we believe in the sovereignty of God, we can trust in His purposes. Listen to what Jesus says next.

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

Matthew 18:18-20

Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." (Matthew 18:18-20)

The phrase "shall have been bound" is not very good English, is it? At the very least, it's clumsy. But it is very accurate to what Jesus says in the Greek text.

I know you remember the phrase from the Lord's prayer, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That's what we see here.

These decisions don't begin on earth; they begin in heaven. Second Timothy 2:25 says that repentance is a gift of God. I can think of only two reasons why the Lord would not grant a sinner repentance. One, He is teaching them a lesson that requires deep humility, so He is letting them flounder in their sin to humble them. And two, He is revealing that they are not

actually saved at all.

So if we have followed the instructions Jesus gave and someone refuses to repent, and it becomes necessary to remove them from the fellowship, we are simply carrying out the will of God in heaven. By the time we reach the decision that they must be removed, He has already removed them.

By the same token, when someone repents after the first conversation, or the second, or the third, it is because He has granted them repentance in heaven. That's why we should never respond to someone's repentance with relief, as though THEY finally made it happen, but with rejoicing, because God has shown Himself merciful on their behalf and ours.

The authority of a Christian and of the church itself is always and only the authority to carry out Jesus' instructions. We have no right to make decisions on our own. Jesus commands us through His Word. He empowers us through His Spirit. When we face a sinning believer, we can be sure that He already knows about it and that the process He gave us is what He wants us to follow.

TRANSITION: We'll come back to Matthew 18:18-20 next week and explore it in greater depth. For now, let's bring today's message home.

BRINGING IT HOME

God willing, it will never be necessary to bring a matter like this before the church. But because Jesus has commanded it, and we believe that His Word is true, if it becomes necessary, we will follow His instructions. Our love for one another must never take precedence over our love for Him. If we do trust Him and love Him, then we will find strength and comfort in following His Word and will.

Let me offer you a couple of observations about this passage.

First, actual sin must be involved. The Bible defines sin for us. It's not a matter of how we feel or what we think. It's a matter of what Scripture says. It's so important that if we must approach someone, we do so with an open Bible in our hands so that we show that person what they have done. We must not require people to be subject to our feelings or values. Instead, we must be united around the Word of God. The values of our world are changing faster than anyone can keep up. People are being "canceled" today because of values most people held twenty years ago. The Bible never changes, so we can trust that what was a sin when it was written remains a sin today.

Second, if we were quicker to follow Jesus' instructions the outcome might be better for all concerned. If we leave someone to soak in their sin for a long time, their heart might become calloused. If we go quickly with wisdom and gentleness, they might be more willing to listen and repent than if we wait until their sin is firmly rooted. I don't mean that we should be hasty, but neither should we be sluggish. I can say from personal experience that I've only benefited when people have come to me quickly because of sin in my life.

Finally, the aim is always repentance and restoration. Even if it becomes necessary to remove someone from the fellowship, we trust that Jesus will never abandon His true child. He might allow them an extended time of disobedience in order to teach them. He might even allow them to suffer greatly as a result of their sin. But He will never cast out one of His own. He knows those who are His; we don't. We can trust Him to work in ways that we do not see and will likely never know.