

Matthew 18:15-17

Introduction

For the past several weeks, we've been learning *how* to live together in true community, as the true assembly of Jesus, the Messiah. The truth is that in our flesh, this is an impossible thing to do. We've seen that by now, haven't we? But Jesus is calling us to *do* the impossible through faith in Him and reliance upon God's grace.

In verses 1-14 the theme has been the "little ones" – how we are to be little ones ourselves, and how we are to treat those who appear to be "littler" than we are. We've especially been warned about the danger of sinning against even the least brother or sister in the assembly – of being *in any way* a cause of their stumbling. But then in verse fifteen, Jesus changes course just a little as He tells His disciples what they are to do when the tables are turned – when someone else in the assembly sins against *them* (from now on, Jesus will speak of a "brother", and not a "little one").

I. Matthew 18:15 – 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.

So if a brother sins against me and I stumble, I can have no excuse. Instead of bearing a grudge and being overcome by bitterness and resentment, we must *go* to our brother and show him his sin with the goal of bringing about true conviction and repentance in his heart (cf. Lev. 19:17-18). The reality here is that if I truly go to my brother in the right and proper way (*privately* and with true *humility* and *gentleness*; cf. 8-9; Gal. 6:1) – this can only have the effect of killing and annihilating all feelings of bitterness, and anger, and resentment! Indeed, we may find this hard to admit, but I believe that one of the reasons we fail to go to our brother and show him his sin is because at some level we would *rather* stay bitter and angry. But let's say that I go to my brother and he still won't listen – what then? Jesus answers:

II. Matthew 18:16-17a – 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 refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

It should be more and more obvious that Jesus is definitely assuming a clear matter of *sin* in a brother's life. And here's another reason that I think we often refuse to go to our brother – because the issue is not clearly a matter of *sin*. Jesus is not just talking about hurt feelings, or being offended or angry. These things will be quickly resolved as we assume for ourselves the status of a little child. But when it comes to a *clear case* of being *sinned* against (where a brother or sister is guilty of breaking *God's* holy law), it can be much more difficult for us to conquer our *own* sinful feelings of bitterness and resentment. And so Jesus tells us to *go* to our brother and *show* him his sin. Instead of bearing a grudge against our brother, we are to *rebuke* our brother. We are to love our brother and seek to gain him back!

But the issue here is not just the restoration of a healthy relationship between brothers and sisters! *Because* this is so clearly a matter of *sin* (a breaking of *God's* holy law), we are *obligated* to do *whatever it takes* to bring our brother to repentance. In other words, the point here is not

primarily his relationship to me, but his relationship with *God*. My brother's sin is not first of all against me, but against *God*. And this is *why* if he will not listen to us when we go to him privately, then we must take one or two others along with us so that they also might try to reason with him *and* so that they might become witnesses of our attempt to gain our brother. But if our brother still refuses to listen, we must tell it to the entire church with the testimony of the additional witnesses. *Why?* So that the *whole assembly* might also reason with our brother and try to show him his sin.

What we're seeing here is the *priesthood* of *all* believers and the pastoral responsibility that *all of us* have towards one another! Nowhere in this passage is there any explicit mention of any church leadership! First, it is the "offended" brother himself (and definitely *by himself*) who is responsible to take action; then it is the "offended" brother plus one or two others (*not* necessarily church leaders); and finally it is the *entire* assembly (*not just* the leaders of the assembly)! So as soon as I am made aware of my brother's sin and his continued refusal to repent, I'm immediately obligated (as a part of this assembly) to go after that brother and seek to win him back through earnest prayer at the least, and ideally through earnest exhortation (phone call, letter, face to face conversation). *All* of us are responsible for *all* of us! *That's* the significance of telling it to the church. We are, *all* of us, our brother's keeper – not in the sense of "big brother", but in the sense of "little ones" watching out for each other.

And remember that to this point (the point of telling it to the church), the brother is still treated *as a brother*, and as one who still shares in all the privileges of membership in the Messiah's assembly. Even when we tell it to the church, we have *not yet* reached the final step of "church discipline"! Isn't this *amazing*? And shouldn't this be a comfort to all of us in light of the sinners that we *all* are? As God Himself has been so longsuffering and patient with *us*, so *we* are to show this *same* longsuffering and patience with the brother who has sinned against us – and even more importantly, against God. Now this should obviously have some implications for how we go about "telling it to the church." In our desire to show longsuffering and patience, we'll still be assuming for ourselves the status of a little child. We'll still be painfully aware of our own desperate struggle with sin. And so we will not "tell it to the church," as I'm told one person once did, by picking up the phone and calling each member individually. *How* we tell it to the church should be a reflection of our *love* for our brother and our desire to protect his reputation as far as is possible. And yet we *must still* tell it to the church!

A more literal translation of what Jesus says is simply this: "Tell it to the *assembly*." Or I think we could even translate, "Tell it to the gathered assembly." In the teaching of Jesus, and in the teaching of the Apostles, even the "invisible" church was never thought of apart from the *visible* expression of the *gathered* assembly. And in New Testament times, this gathered assembly was especially associated with the weekly meetings on the first day of the week. To tell it to the church is to tell it to the *gathered* assembly during one of its *weekly* meetings! To paraphrase the London Baptist Confession: "We are commanded to walk together in special associations, or churches... *in order to fulfill that corporate worship, which God requires of us in the world.*" And so we need to see that this act of "telling it to the gathered assembly" is just another part of that *corporate worship* which God requires of us in the world. I believe that if our Church services are biblically appropriate, then it won't feel "out of place" when a member stands up on Sunday morning (with the support of one or two witnesses) to tell the church about a brother's

sin and refusal to repent **and** to enlist the aid of the entire assembly in seeking to win back that brother. But in so many churches, to do such a thing in the Sunday morning service would be unthinkable precisely *because* we have compromised the true nature of the Lord's Day assembly. Here is a true test indeed of whether we have become "entertainment" oriented in our services! Some might protest, "What about the unsaved outsider who 'just happens' to visit on that particular Sunday?" And we would respond: "They didn't 'just happen' to visit. God Himself ordained that they should visit on that particular Sunday. And what more *authentic* and *powerful witness* can we have than the display of our commitment to true *love* and true *holiness* as we seek to win back our brother?" Now this witness may cause the unbeliever to leave in fear and disgust, *or* it may cause the unbeliever to turn from his own sin in true repentance as he declares that God is certainly in our midst (1 Corinthians 14:24-25). As the Apostle Paul says:

- ✓ 2 Corinthians 2:15-16 — We are the [fragrance] of Christ to God among those who are being saved *and* among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from *death to death*, to the other a fragrance from *life to life*.

So in our Church services, we are responsible to be the fragrance of Christ to God – period. This is a holy, and sacred, and sobering, and wonderful responsibility! We are responsible to be an authentic *witness* in our corporate worship – *including* any such time as we may need to tell a brother's sin to the gathered assembly. And yet we are *not* responsible for the results that differ according to whether a person is being saved or whether he is among those who are perishing. To the one, *we will be* a fragrance from death to death, **but** to the other we will be a fragrance from life to life. These things we must leave in God's hands. So let us pursue this authentic witness as we live in true community, as the true assembly of the Messiah! When we "tell it to the church," we are telling it to the gathered assembly.

But what is the best way to tell the gathered assembly? Well very simply, Jesus doesn't say. And so we must be guided by the principles of love, and humility, and *wisdom*. It seems very clear that the safest and most biblically appropriate and loving way to go about "telling it to the church" is to do so under the *oversight and direction* of the elders (cf. 1 Thess. 5:12; Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17; 1 Tim. 5:17). But if it's actually one of the elders who has sinned against you (cf. 1 Tim. 5:19-20), and who has refused to listen to your appeals or to the appeals of the additional witnesses, then you must go to the other elders, or possibly seek the help of the leadership at another assembly.

But what if my brother *still* won't listen – even after he has been reasoned with, and exhorted by the entire assembly? Jesus answers:

III. Matthew 18:17b — And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

The first thing we need to see is that even though Jesus has just referred to the entire church, He is still talking *personally* and *individually*. Jesus doesn't say, "If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to *you all* as a Gentile and a tax collector," or, "let him be to *the assembly* as a Gentile and a tax collector." Instead, Jesus says, "If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to *you* (*singular*; the one who has been sinned against) as a Gentile and a tax collector."

Now I don't believe Jesus was implying that *only* the one who was sinned against need regard the unrepentant person as a Gentile and a tax collector (everyone else could go on regarding him as a brother)! But I do wonder if Jesus was pressing home the heavy burden of responsibility that rests on the one who brings his brother's sin before the church. I'm reminded of Deuteronomy seventeen:

- ✓ Deuteronomy 17:6–7 — On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. The hand of the witnesses shall be *first* against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of *all the people*.

The *entire* community was to have a hand in putting the guilty one to death, but it was the hand of the witnesses that must be *first* against him. The witnesses, by casting the first stones, accepted the [burden] of the responsibility; in the event of further evidence establishing the innocence of the... accused... they would then assume the responsibility for wrongful execution, in effect murder” (Craigie). In a similar way, we can assume that the unrepentant sinner is to be regarded as a Gentile and a tax collector by the *entire assembly* (cf. 18-20), but who is it that bears the burden of responsibility for this discipline? We could almost say that the entire assembly is just following *the lead* and *the example* of that brother who first brought the sin before the body. That's a *very* heavy burden of responsibility! And yet it's a burden that we *must* be willing to bear – knowing all the while that God will hold us accountable. Here is another reminder of how we must be absolutely *sure* that we are not dealing with bitterness or hurt feelings, but only with a true case of *sin* and an *unrepentant* heart.

So what does it *mean* to regard someone as a Gentile and a tax collector? Well, Gentiles and tax collectors were considered to be among the very worst kinds of sinners.

Matthew 5:46–47 (cf. 6:7; 3 Jn. 7) — For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not *even the tax collectors* do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not *even the Gentiles* do the same?

The tax collectors were even lumped in the same category with prostitutes (Mat. 21:31-32). So if we're regarding someone as a Gentile and a tax collector, then that obviously means we're excluding him from all the privileges of being a member of the assembly. This would include being barred from the Lord's Supper and shunned from fellowship in general.

- ✓ 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15 — If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and [do not associate; NASB] with him...
- ✓ 1 Corinthians 5:11 — I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.
- ✓ Titus 3:10 — As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him.

To many people this may sound “unchristian,” but there are several very important things that we need to remember. First of all, when we regard someone as a Gentile and a tax-collector, this

doesn't mean that we are to be bitter and mean-spirited. Every day that we refuse to associate with that "brother" or "sister" should be a cause of *genuine* grief and sorrow. Every time that this brother is excluded from the Lord's Supper should be a painful reminder of the need to be praying earnestly for his repentance and restoration.

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 5:5 — You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, ***so that his spirit may be saved*** in the day of the Lord.
- ✓ 2 Thessalonians 3:14 — If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and [do not associate; NASB] with him, ***that he may be ashamed*** [and repent!].
- ✓ 1 Timothy 1:19–20 — Some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan ***that they may learn not to blaspheme***.

As our constitution says: "Church discipline has the goal of restoration, ***not judgment and condemnation***... this process is intended to bring about a godly sorrow, restoration and the joy of his salvation."

As we think about the reality of church discipline, we should also remember how much love and patience has already been shown to the unrepentant brother! He has been rebuked and appealed to at *least* three separate times – the first time in the utmost privacy and confidentiality, the second time with only one or two additional brothers, and this last time by the entire church! And even here, we shouldn't think that this procedure is a hard and fast, cut and dried, four-step *only* process! Before the brother takes one or two others along with him, he should most likely make *more* than one attempt (even *multiple* attempts) to seek repentance and restoration *in private*. And before we take the final step of absolute exclusion from the community, we may even take the "half-way step" of still regarding him as a brother, but yet withdrawing from the more intimate fellowship that we used to share.

- ✓ 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15 — If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and [do not associate; NASB] with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother [he is not *yet* to be regarded as a Gentile and a tax collector].

So as we think about the very sobering reality of excluding someone from the life of the church, we must remember that the goal is always repentance and restoration, and that this drastic step has been taken only after every other measure has been attempted and failed. But there's one more thing that we need to remember in *every* step of the process – from the initial appeal to the final act of excluding from the community. ***We need to remember the holiness of God***. This assembly is the *temple* of the Lord, and that means that this assembly is *holy* because it's the special place of God's holy *presence*.

- ✓ Ephesians 2:21 — In [Christ Jesus] the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.
- ✓ 1 Corinthians 3:17 — God's temple is holy, and you [plural; the assembly] are that temple.

It is *because* of God’s holy presence in our midst that a brother who is found in sin must *surely* be rebuked and exhorted to repentance. In the same way, it is *because* of God’s holy presence in our midst that an *unrepentant* “brother” must *surely* be *removed* from our midst!

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 5:6–7, 13 — Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump... “Purge the evil person from among you.”

That last phrase is actually a quote from the Old Testament. When the death penalty was prescribed in the book of Deuteronomy, eight times the instructions were concluded with these words: “So you shall purge the evil from your midst” (Deut. 13:5; 17:7, 12; 19:19; 22:21, 22, 24; 24:7).

- ✓ Deuteronomy 23:14 — Because the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp... therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.

It should be clear by now that Jesus’ instructions in Matthew eighteen don’t *just* apply to when my brother has sinned *against me*. Instead, these instructions actually *apply* to *all* cases of sin and unrepentance. We must remember that even a sin against me is *first and foremost* a sin against *God*. And *all* such sin must be purged from our midst (whether through repentance or through church discipline), *because this assembly is the special place of God’s holy presence*.

Conclusion

So after all of this, I wonder if we need to be taking our obligations to one another more seriously than we do. We are, *all* of us, our brother’s keeper. We are all responsible for one another. And of course, this means that I need to humbly (and gratefully!) recognize that you are responsible for me. Hopefully, we should only rarely, if ever, have to come to the point of “telling it to the church,” much less regarding someone as a Gentile and a tax collector. But shouldn’t even the possibility of such drastic measures cause us to be more *committed* to taking that *first* step when a brother has sinned? If step four should be almost non-existent, and if steps two and three should be *rare* at best, then shouldn’t step one be happening perhaps *more often* as we live together in community? Indeed, we could say that in some sense the *reason* for step one is so that we can *avoid* steps two, three, and four!

Do you know of a sin in a brother’s or sister’s life, and have you been ignoring that sin and looking the other way? Has a brother or sister *sinned* against you (and against God), and have you chosen the path of bitterness, and resentment and bearing a grudge? *Go* to your brother and show him his sin(!)... keeping watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted (Gal. 6:1).

We are the assembly of the Messiah. We are the temple that He is building. We are the holy dwelling place of God Himself.

- ✓ Hebrews 3:12–13 — *Take care*, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But *exhort one another every day*, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

This business of being the assembly is a serious business – it’s a life and death business. Your sin is my business. And my sin is your business. Brothers and sisters, let’s be truly *committed to one another* in love, always remembering that *this* is the holy temple and dwelling place of God. Here, once again, is the secret to living together in authentic *community*, as the true *assembly* of the Messiah.