

Sermons on Matthew If Your Brother Sins

Part 1

Christian Confrontations:

The Value, Necessity and Attitude of Redeeming Confrontations

Matthew 18:15-20

With Study Questions

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Moreover __if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, __you have gained your brother. ⁻¹⁶⁻ But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that __' *by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.* ' ⁻¹⁷⁻ And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a _heathen and a tax collector.

⁻¹⁸⁻ " _Assuredly, I say to you, __whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

⁻¹⁹⁻ __ " _Again _I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, __it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. ⁻²⁰⁻ For where two or three are gathered _together in My name, I am there in the midst of them. _" (Matthew 18:15-20)

A Funny Principle

There is a funny little principle which seems to prevail in this broken world: the inverse relationship between things fruitful and things enjoyable. The principle isn't iron clad, and thankfully we see many exceptions. But I have found it inevitable that the foods I enjoy most are bad for me and the exchanges which are most beneficial in terms of human relationships are often the most uncomfortable.

As a parent, I have found that the biblical counsel of an effective, yet non-abusive, spanking is highly beneficial to the character of children. Yet in terms of human passions and undertakings as a parent, I can't think of anything I enjoy less than spanking.

The types of confrontational discussions Jesus lays as the foundation of productive and redemptive human relationships in the above passage,

as far as I am concerned, falls into a similar category. I can think of few things I actually enjoy less, yet produce more fruit, than seeking to be obedient to what we just read.

A Shocking Omission

The passage culminates with what can be called excommunication or church discipline with the words, “...if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.” (Matthew 18:17b) Jesus informs us of what should come before this (one-on-one confrontation, then confrontation with two or three people) and the authority that goes along with this (binding and loosing and the favored presence of Christ); so, the passage on church discipline has thoughtful bookends to be considered.

As we embark upon this subject, what I am about to share should be somewhat shocking. The Belgic Confession was first drafted in 1561, during a time of severe persecution of true Christians; the very authors were martyred for their faith in the word of God. I mention this because the biblical weightiness of this particular issue is so grave that it is to be considered one of the three marks of a true church. Article 29 of the Confession states:

The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church—and no one ought to be separated from it.

Once, while we as a church were going through the unenviable task of obeying Jesus in this matter, we found that the person who was the object of disciplinary actions simply decided to attend another church. Although greatly tempted to merely let the matter disappear, we believed that we would have been remiss in doing so. I called the new pastor.

He was a very sweet man who had been in the ministry for almost twenty years. The church was part of a very well-known and highly attended connection of churches popular here in Southern California. The

pastor very tenderly communicated to me that they felt church discipline to be harsh and overbearing and not something they would practice as a church.

He was a man very well acquainted with the Bible so I asked him about his understanding of the passage we read this morning and others like it. After a brief pause he said that if it came to his attention that there were unrepentant sinners in their congregation they would be confronted and asked to leave. In response I said, "So you do believe in church discipline at some level." "Yes, I guess we do but it's not a major topic here," he concluded.

To his credit, he acknowledged that it was something they should probably study and develop more deeply in their church. I appreciated his humility, and coming from a similar background, I certainly understand the low emphasis (or non-emphasis) of church discipline. But when this prevailing mentality is set against the backdrop of church history and how godly theologians have understood what the Bible says about what makes a church a church, the consequences become devastating. It's like saying that there are three marks of a man: mind, body and spirit, but for the last hundred years we've decided to leave the mind out.

It can be safely argued that the deplorable condition of western commercialized, consumer-driven Christianity is due in large part to negligence and/or ignorance of how Christians are to interact with one another when it comes to matters of sin and error; I speak firsthand.

And because of this, I think it is necessary to spend more than the average amount of time processing these powerful words of Jesus and the wholesale dereliction of the church when it comes to our obedience of them.

Three Part Series

This will be a three part series and I will seek to distill this passage into three sub-categories:

- Christian Confrontations: the value, necessity and attitude of redeeming confrontations (verse 15)
- Discipline: the missing mark of the modern church (verses 16, 17)
- Church: depots to heaven or hell (verses 18-20)?

We will begin this morning with the nature of redeeming confrontations.

Christian Confrontations: The Value, Necessity and Attitude of Redeeming Confrontations

Moreover __if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, __you have gained your brother (Matthew 18:15).

The Value and Necessity

Jesus tells us that the first confrontation should be one to one—alone. If people were simply willing and gutsy enough to do this, most problems would be solved before they begin.

What should jump out at us in these words of Jesus is the hopeful conclusion, **“you have gained your brother.”** Herein lies the *value* and *necessity* of Christian confrontations. The word *ekerdesas* means to win over. It’s the word used by Jesus earlier in this gospel:

For what __profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? (Matthew 16:26a)

Winning a Brother

The promising and joyful finale of this is the winning of the brother. But what does that mean—to win your brother? Does it merely mean you are now on good terms or is it more? The context seems to indicate much more, since the end of this exchange (if it goes poorly) is not merely a strained relationship, but actual expulsion from the church where the person is to be thought of as an unbeliever.

The winning of the brother should be thought of same way as we read in James.

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone __turns him back, ⁻²⁰⁻ let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way __will save __a soul from death and __cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19, 20).

“Someone” in verse 19 (*auton*) is third person singular. What we learn here is the immense responsibility given to each of us by Christ to be a means by which true faith is preserved. It is a *valuable* thing to encourage

a brother or sister in the faith and to the extent that God has chosen to utilize these relationships to bring His grace and love to people, it is *necessary* that we respond obediently.

Numerous Shipwrecking Offenses

And although the James passage has to do with wandering from truth, there are numerous offenses which are capable of leading souls to shipwreck:

Greed

For the love of money is a root of all *kinds of* evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows (1 Timothy 6:10).

False Knowledge

O Timothy! __Guard what was committed to your trust, __avoiding the profane *and* __idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge—⁻²¹⁻ by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith (1 Timothy 6:20, 21a).

Scripture Twisting

You therefore, beloved, __since you know *this* beforehand, __beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked... (2 Peter 3:17)

Enticements and Desires

Blessed *is* the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive __the crown of life __which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. ⁻¹³⁻ Let no one say when he is tempted, “_I am tempted by God_”; for God

cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. ⁻¹⁴⁻ But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. ⁻¹⁵⁻ Then, __when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, __brings forth death (James 1:12-15).

Blasphemy

This _charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, ⁻¹⁹⁻ having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck, ⁻²⁰⁻ of whom are __Hymenaeus and __Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to __blaspheme (1 Timothy 1:18-20).

The point here is not to attack the perseverance of the saints, which I don't think is in question, but to recognize that the Christian faith is to be thought of as the lifelong waging of warfare, and the victors are the ones who keeps the faith to the end (2 Timothy 4:7).

And what Jesus is teaching here is our responsibility not so much to nurture enjoyable relationships with each other (although that is certainly included), but to play a significant role in strengthening each other in the faith.

When to Engage

Although many manuscripts read **“if your brother sins against you,”** it is only late manuscripts that add the phrase **“against you.”** This verse should more properly be understood as it's translated in the NASB: **“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private...”** It's not just a sin against you, it's any sin.

So how do you know if it is your responsibility to engage? It seems a bit much to understand this passage in such a way as provoke certain individuals to view themselves as ecclesiological policemen with their 'sin-speed' guns pulling sinners over for jaywalking. You can become quite annoying if you think it's your job to continually find and ferret out the sins of others.

Yet at the same time, it is equally heinous to fail to engage in the name of peace and harmony. When Jesus instructs to “**tell him his fault,**” it is an imperative. As we just learned, potentially austere sanctions hang in the balance. Just because a person somehow finds their own peace in the matter without confronting the sinner is secondary.

If I am continually engaging in sinful behavior (and I emphasize continual because repetitive and unrepentant sin or error seems to be what’s in question here), it is your responsibility to confront¹ me. There is nothing holy about ignoring a sinning brother; it’s your (and my) responsibility to do something about it.

But how do I know if it is appropriate for us to actually engage? For one, if God has providentially brought us to a place where we find ourselves knowledgeable of a sinning brother, we must seriously and prayerfully determine whether or not we should make an appointment² to discuss the issue.

This relates a bit to our final point. And I bring this up because we should avoid the attitude that we’re merely fulfilling an obligation but rather winning a brother. And if we can compare this to winning a sporting event, ninety percent of the effort of winning a sporting event takes place before the game ever begins. Good athletes prepare for a contest.

A Redeeming Attitude

How do we prepare to do this—to win an erring brother? This has to do with the attitude of redeeming confrontations.

First, there needs to be recognition by all parties involved that this is a good thing. Proverbs teach,

Faithful *are* the wounds of a friend... (Proverbs 27:6a)

It is difficult to be on either side of these conversations. But we should all prepare ourselves by embracing, not only our responsibility to confront, but our willingness to be confronted.

¹ ‘Con’ means before or along with; along with ‘front’ creates the idea of standing in front of—not necessarily hostile but face to face—normally with the idea of a disagreement of sorts. An anonymous note does not fulfill the requirement.

² I say make an appointment because merely blurting something out in a spontaneous manner will not give the impression that you have prayerfully and thoughtfully approached the matter.

Let the righteous strike me; *it shall be* a kindness. And let him rebuke me; *it shall be* as excellent oil; let my head not refuse it... (Psalm 141:5a)

But (secondly) this should not be an excuse for an aggressive and abrupt display. Paul writes of a Christian attitude in the redemptive process:

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who *are* spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness (*prautes*—mild and pleasant friendliness), considering yourself lest you also be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:1, 2).

Notice how Paul brings in the possibility of being on either side of the issue. You might have to confront. Later you might need to be confronted. Take this into consideration with your tone.

Again, the point to all of this is not to merely fulfill an obligation but to win a brother. And so we (thirdly) should always be cultivating the types of relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ which will lend itself to success in this area.

Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one (Colossians 4:6).

In a certain respect we should all be seeking to earn the right to play this role in the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ. That doesn't mean we refrain until we've earned the right (who knows when that might be?). But it does mean that true effective confrontations should be done, and to the best of our ability, be perceived as having been done, in love. And in doing so we, as Paul taught, "**fulfill the law of Christ.**"

There are people in our lives who we know love us and there are others who seem to have it in for us and are just waiting for us to make a mistake. I have found that I am more apt to respond to a person who has demonstrated that they truly care for my soul than someone who has their finger in their pocket like it's a holster.

But what if you prayerfully, gently and lovingly confront a brother who is genuinely sinning and he simply ignores you? We will discuss that at our next meeting.

Questions for Study

1. What are the marks of a true church (page 2, 3)?
2. What seems to be missing in today's church? Why do you think it's missing (pages 3, 4)?
3. What does Jesus mean when He says "you have gained your brother" (pages 5, 6)?
4. Whose responsibility is it to confront a sinning brother (page 6)?
5. What are the consequences if Christians fail to do this (pages 6, 7)?
6. How do you know if you are to engage a sinning brother (pages 7, 8)?

7. What are some of the components to a redeeming attitude (pages 8-10)?