



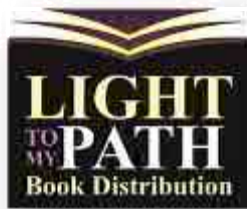
F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

IF YOUR BROTHER SINS

**RESOLVING CHURCH CONFLICTS
A STUDY OF MATTHEW 18:15-17**

If Your Brother Sins

An Examination of Matthew 18:15-17



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Light To My Path Book Distribution
Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia

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Published by Light To My Path Book Distribution
153 Atlantic Street, Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia, CANADA B1V
1Y5

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Special thanks to the proof readers Lillian Mac Neil, Diane MacLeod without whom this book would be much harder to read.

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PREFACE

I answered the phone and heard a familiar voice on the other end. It was a member of the church I was pastoring. Her voice was somewhat frantic. "You need to come over right away," she said. "Why, what's the matter?" I asked. "I'll tell you when you get here," she replied.

I left what I was doing and went immediately to her home. This would be one of my last pastoral visits in the church. My wife and I were returning home on furlough after a two year term in the country. The ladies of the church were planning a farewell party for my wife in appreciation of her ministry among them.

When I arrived, I greeted the church member and was invited to sit down. "What's the problem?" I asked. "It's so and so," came the response (she gave me her name). "She has invited the ladies from our sister church to the party we are having for your wife. She didn't consult me about it. She just invited them to join us. You're the pastor; I want you to speak to her about this. Tell her that she should have talked to me first," she said in an angry tone of voice.

"Did you speak with her yourself?" I asked. "No," she said, "She wouldn't listen to me." "How do you know unless you

try," I asked. "If I went over to her house she might hit me," she said. "Well why don't you phone her?" "I'll phone her if you listen in on the other line," she answered.

Considering this for a moment, I responded. "God's Word tells us that if we have a problem with someone we are to go to that person ourselves. I believe that if we want God's blessing in this matter, we need to do things God's way. I am not going to do anything unless you do this God's way. You speak to her on your own."

"All right," she said and went to pick up the phone in the other room. In a few minutes she came back with a smile on her face. "God has been speaking to her (she gave her name) about what she did. She apologized to me and we worked everything out." Together we praised the Lord for this wonderful blessing.

As I left her house that day, I wondered what might have happened had I listened to this lady. Imagine that the church had become involved in this matter. The result could have been disastrous. Churches have been split over simple matters like this.

We cannot escape problems between believers any more than we can between children in our own families. We will not always agree on how things are to be done. We sometimes act out of anger and pride. Personalities collide. People get hurt. Scripture is filled with examples of clashes between believers.

The Lord God knew these problems would exist and made provision for this throughout the Scriptures. Of particular interest to us here is Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15-17.

In this passage, Jesus shows us how to deal with problems that arise.

Matthew 18 challenges us to personally deal with the issues that come between us in our relationships. It provides a safe way for those who have fallen to be restored and encourages the average believer to take seriously the matter of helping his brother or sister in a time of weakness.

We have ignored this passage to our shame and to the hurt of many in the body of Christ. Over the course of the next few chapters we will examine Jesus' teaching and its application to our relationships in the church today. My prayer is that the Lord would use this study to help His people deal with the clashes that will inevitably come. May God be pleased to bring restoration and healing to many relationships in the body of Christ through this humble study.

F. Wayne MacLeod

1

IF YOUR BROTHER SINS

“If your brother sins” (Matthew 18:15, NIV)

As we begin this study of Matthew 18:15-17 notice that our Lord is speaking about a “brother.” This passage is for believers. The understanding is that there will be problems among believers in the body of Christ. This should not surprise us. From the very beginning of time conflicts have existed between brothers and sisters in the family of God. Way back in the book of Genesis we see how jealousy and anger raged in the life of Cain so that he killed his brother Abel (Genesis 4). What began in the Garden set in motion a great tidal wave of division and broken relationships among brothers and sisters of faith.

Take a look at the church of Christ in our day. Count the number of denominations and look at the history of those denominations. The history of the church is filled with infighting and clashes. Doctrinal differences, personal preferences and tradition have created innumerable conflicts, causing believers to divide. Christians have been burned at the stake, not by the enemy, but by fellow “believers” who felt they were doing God’s work. Jesus was betrayed by one of His own disciples. Both the Old Testament and

the New Testament are filled with examples of conflict between believers professing the same faith.

The encouraging thing about this passage of Scripture is that the Lord Jesus has a solution for these problems in His church. Knowing human nature and the conflicts that would inevitably come, He begins this passage with the words, "If your brother sins against you." He has not left us helpless to face these conflicts. He recognized that they would happen and gives us guidelines in how to deal with them. Considering the immensity of the problem, this passage is of absolute importance for us today.

Preferences versus Sins

Notice that in this verse the Lord speaks about sin. The word "sin" is significant and tells us something important. There are a number of issues that can cause problems between believers in our day. Personal preferences can divide the church. One person may prefer a quiet and reflective form of worship while another prefers a more lively style. Godly believers interpret the teaching of Scripture in different ways. Ideas about how a Christian should live can also be divisive. The apostle Paul has much to teach us about these matters in Romans 14:5-8; 12-13. Listen to his advice:

(5) One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. (6) He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. (7) For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. (8) If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the

Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord... (12) So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. (13) Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.

There will always be differences of opinion among godly believers. We should expect to see such diversity in the church. We will worship God in different ways. We will express our faith in different ways. I have traveled to different countries enough to experience the great diversity there is in the worship of our Lord. These differences, however, are not necessarily sinful. Paul encourages us to live with these differences and accept them as normal.

Some time ago my wife and I attended a church that had three different styles of worship. At 9 a.m. they had a traditional service which focused on the older and more traditional hymns. At 10 a.m. they offered a contemporary service for those who preferred a worship team and more modern choruses. The 11 a.m. service was a progressive service with a full band, louder music and more upbeat worship. As believers we all have our preferences. I am not judging the value of this practice for a church. God calls us to be patient with each other, however, in the body of Christ. We will not all see things in the same way. Before approaching a brother or sister about a matter, we need to determine whether what they are doing is sin or a personal preference.

Matthew 18:15-17 is not about the differences we find among godly believers in matters of preference. When Jesus says, "If your brother sins," He is speaking about a brother or sister who has disobeyed the clear teaching of Scripture and is walking in a way that is offensive to God.

If we are to understand the teaching of Jesus in this passage we must first distinguish between preferences and sin.

Sin has to do with disobedience to a direct and clear command of Scripture. This may either be intentional or unintentional. You don't have to act with evil intent to sin. You don't even have to know you have sinned to be guilty. Numbers 15:22-24 describes the offering made in the Old Testament for unintentional sins.

(22) “Now if you unintentionally fail to keep any of these commands the LORD gave Moses— (23) any of the LORD's commands to you through him, from the day the LORD gave them and continuing through the generations to come— (24) and if this is done unintentionally without the community being aware of it, then the whole community is to offer a young bull for a burnt offering as an aroma pleasing to the LORD, along with its prescribed grain offering and drink offering, and a male goat for a sin offering.

Ezekiel 45:18-20 speaks about sacrifices that were to be made for sins done through ignorance or without knowledge.

(18) This is what the Sovereign LORD says: In the first month on the first day you are to take a young bull without defect and purify the sanctuary. (19) The priest is to take some of the blood of the sin offering and put it on the doorposts of the temple, on the four corners of the upper ledge of the altar and on the gateposts of the inner court. (20) You are to do the same on the seventh day of the month for anyone who sins unintentionally or through ignorance; so you are to make atonement for the temple.

This passage is about a brother or sister who has sinned against God either intentionally or unintentionally --with full knowledge or with no knowledge of their sin at all.

Understanding Motives

There is another matter we need to consider in this context. We also need to examine the circumstances and the attitude of our brother's heart. Let me explain this more fully.

In 1 Samuel 21:1-3 David and his men were running from Saul. They were hungry and thirsty and in need of refreshment. David asked the priest to give him and his men some bread. The only bread available was reserved, by the Law of Moses, for the priests alone. Out of compassion for David and his men, however, the priest gave them this holy bread. How easy it would be to condemn this priest for disobeying the Law of Moses. It is interesting to note, however, that Jesus commended him for his actions because he acted out of compassion for David and his men in a time of need (see Matthew 12:1-5). God accepted the actions of this priest even though it was literally against the Law He had given to Moses.

The law of the Sabbath in the Old Testament was applied very strictly by the Jewish leaders. Jesus, however, came into sharp conflict with the Pharisees over this law. Jesus saw compassion and justice to be of greater importance than the legalistic application of the law. Speaking to the Pharisees about why He healed a man on the Sabbath Jesus said:

(11) "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?"

(12) How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” (Matthew 12:11-12)

Would it not be wrong to let a man suffer on the Sabbath if you had the power to heal him or relieve that suffering? Would it not be wrong to let a sheep die in a pit on the Sabbath if you had the power to rescue it? Before accusing a brother of sin, we need to examine his motive and intention.

I often use the example of a man taking his dying friend to the hospital. He knows that every second counts and the life of his friend depends on him getting to the hospital as soon as possible. As he drives down the road, however, he notices the speed limit sign ahead. He has a decision to make. Will he let his friend die and obey the speed limit signs or will he break the law and save his friend's life? Would you condemn this man's speeding if he was trying to get his dying friend to the hospital as soon as possible? Would you quote Bible verses at him about how he needed to obey the government that God had put over us? Would you put him under church discipline because he did not obey the laws of the land? Surely not! When you understand his intention, you no longer see a reckless driver risking the lives of others on the road but a man of deep compassion trying to save the life of a friend. Surely this man's actions are not an offence to a holy God nor should he be accused of sin in such a case.

I have encountered many situations where people have been accused of sin before the intentions of their heart were examined. Had their accusers taken the time to listen and understand the situation, they would have been much slower to accuse them.

Matthew 18:15 speaks about a fellow believer who is living in a way that offends God. It is not about differences of opinion between believers nor is it about applying the law without examining the intentions of our brother's heart. If we are to correctly apply this teaching of Jesus we must first determine whether the actions and intentions of our brother or sister is truly an offense to God or simply a matter of personal preference and interpretation.

For Consideration:

- Is it realistic, in a sinful world, to assume that we will never have a problem with a fellow believer? Have you ever had to deal with misunderstandings and hurts in the church? Explain.
- What is the difference between sin and preferences? Give some examples of personal preference and interpretations that you have dealt with in your church?
- How important is it that we understand the circumstances of a person's choice or action before accusing him or her of sin?
- How patient are you with differences between believers?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He has provided a solution for the problems that will inevitably come between us as brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to accept the differences that exist between sincere believers in matters of personal interpretation and preference. Ask God to forgive you for the times you have not been patient and tolerant of a brother or sister who differed from you.

- Ask God to help you not to judge until you have truly understood the intentions of your brother or sister's heart.

2

GO AND SHOW HIM HIS FAULT

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault” (Matthew 18:15, NIV)

In Matthew 18:15 Jesus addresses the issue of what we are to do if a fellow Christian sins. As we continue our examination of this verse notice in verse 15 that the sin Jesus speaks about is against you personally. This passage does not speak about sins done to other people. This is not to say that we should not be concerned about the injustice or violence done to others. There are plenty of other Scripture passages that address this issue. In this verse, however, Jesus speaks to sins committed against us personally.

There are usually two temptations when someone sins against us. First, we are tempted to take matters in our hands and get revenge. This was such a temptation that the Scriptures provided for the protection of a person who had unintentionally sinned against another. In Numbers 35:10-14 the Lord commanded His people to provide cities

of refuge for the person who accidentally killed a brother or sister to protect them from the revenge of the family.

(10) "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, (11) select some towns to be your cities of refuge, to which a person who has killed someone accidentally may flee. (12) They will be places of refuge from the avenger, so that a person accused of murder may not die before he stands trial before the assembly. (13) These six towns you give will be your cities of refuge. (14) Give three on this side of the Jordan and three in Canaan as cities of refuge. (Numbers 35:10-14)

The apostle Paul warns us about taking matters into our own hands in Romans 12:19.

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

It is quite clear from these verses that Christians are not to seek revenge for any wrong done against them. We must resist any desire to "get even."

The second temptation for us, when a brother or sister sins against us, is to say nothing. Jesus taught that we were to turn the other cheek:

(38) "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' (39) But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right

cheek, turn to him the other also. (40) And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. (Matthew 5:38-40)

It would be easy to assume from this that the Lord wants us to do nothing when someone sins against us. This seems to be in direct contradiction to what Jesus tells us in Matthew 18:15. There is a significant difference between Jesus teaching in Matthew 5 and Matthew 18. In Matthew 4:38-40 Jesus is speaking about our response to an “evil person” (verse 39). This is someone who does not know the Lord or submit to His Word. Matthew 18 is very different. Here Jesus speaks about our response to a “brother” who sins against us. This shows us that our response to a brother or sister who sins against us ought to be different from our response to an evil unbeliever. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:39 that we are not to resist an “evil person.” In Matthew 18:15, however, we are to go to a brother and “show him his fault.” There is a higher expectation of believers. While we will always have differences with the unbeliever, God expects us to do all we can to resolve our conflicts in the body of Christ.

The point we need to make here is that this second option of doing nothing goes clearly against the teaching of Christ in Matthew 18:15. The Lord teaches that when a brother or sister sins against us we are to go and show him his fault. The word “go” here is not an option. This is a direct command of the Lord Jesus. If a brother sins against you, you are to speak to him about it. We hesitate to do this for several reasons.

First, as believers we feel the need to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:38-40). Sometimes we see it as our spiritual obligation to bear the insults and offenses thrown at us. Is

this not what the Lord Jesus did for us? Isaiah 53 describes the Lord Jesus as a sheep silent before His shearers:

He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth. (Isaiah 53:7)

Jesus did not resist those who put Him to death. When questioned, He was silent before His accusers. He allowed them to mock Him and nail Him to the cross. As believers, we sometimes feel that the spiritual thing to do is to follow Christ's example and be silent.

When I go to my brother, however, I am not going for my sake but for His. I am willing to turn the other cheek but remember that my brother has fallen into sin. If I ignore this, I allow him to continue in this sin without repenting. This will only be to his harm. I go to my brother in the hope that he will be freed from the burden of this sin not to defend myself.

The second reason why we hesitate to go to our brother has to do with our fear of his response. We simply do not know what our brother will say if we speak to him of his sin. Will he be angry with us? Will he strike out against us? We simply have no way of knowing what our brother's response will be. However, the command to go remains. Our brother has fallen into sin and whether he wants help or not, he needs to be warned. Many saints before us have risked their lives to communicate the truth of God's Word. The shepherd whose sheep has wandered from the fold knows that he will have to take great risk and expend much energy if he is to find his sheep and bring him back to the

fold. Jesus laid down his life on the cross for us. What are we willing to do for our brother? Will we risk upsetting him? Will we risk his anger? What is the price you are willing to pay to see your brother restored? When we truly love our brother, we will never be content to see him defeated by sin, even if that sin is against us.

Third, we sometimes hesitate to go to our brother out of a lack of confidence. This is especially true if the brother in question is older and more mature in the faith. We do not feel like we have the right to approach him because of his greater experience in the Lord. Sometimes this lack of confidence comes from the fact that we are not sure if we are right. Maybe we have misread the circumstances. It is easier to give our brother the benefit of the doubt than to approach him. Let's remember, however, that sin is a problem for the mature as well as the immature. Both the small and the great fall. I have often been challenged by my children in my walk with God. Though they do not have the experience I have in life, they can still teach me. Be humble but don't let a lack of confidence keep you from being obedient.

There is one more thing we need to understand here about the word "go." The person who is to go is the person who has been offended or sinned against. I described an incident in the preface of this study where a lady called me as the pastor to deal with an issue between her and her sister in the Lord. Jesus makes it clear in this verse that the one who has been sinned against is to go. This offense could have happened to someone else but it didn't. God has seen fit to allow this to happen to you personally. He is also calling you to do something about it. By virtue of the fact that it has happened to you, you are to go. Often no one else even knows about this sin. No one else needs to

know. God has put his finger on you and given you a command, “go, show him his fault.” To send someone else at this point is to disobey the clear command of Christ.

Notice the reason why we are to go to our brother. Jesus tells us that we are to go for the purpose of showing him his fault. Again let me underline the fact that Jesus does not tell us to go to defend our honor or our reputation. The reason we go is to help our brother understand his sin so that he can repent and be restored in his walk with God.

There are different ways of showing our brother his fault. Not all of these ways are godly. We can, for example, go to our brother with a self-righteous attitude and a desire to look good at his expense. This was the attitude of the Pharisee in Luke 18:10-14. Listen to his prayer:

(10) “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. (11) The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. (12) I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ (13) “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ (14) “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The prayer of the Pharisee is filled with pride. He compared himself to the tax collector praying beside him in the temple. He saw himself as superior and let everyone know it. Jesus condemned him for his arrogance. Matthew 18:15 needs to be understood in the context of this parable. In

going to show our brother his fault we must be careful not to go with a self-righteous attitude. This is the attitude of the person who believes that he is more spiritual than his brother. The self-righteous person loves to compare himself to others so that he can feel superior.

We can also go to our brother with anger in our hearts and a desire to seek payment for the hurt he has caused. The desire of this person is to take matters into his own hands. He wants his brother to pay for his fault. He wants to have a sense of justice. Again it is important to understand that while justice is an important theme in Scripture, Jesus' teaching here is not about seeking justice but about restoring a brother or sister who has fallen into sin. If you go to your brother seeking payment for what he has done to you, you are not going for the reasons Jesus specified here in this passage.

How should we show our brother his fault? Philippians 2:3 indicates that we should not go with selfish motives or conceit but considering our brother as being better than ourselves (something that is not easy when our brother has sinned against us).

(3) Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. (Philippians 2:3)

Speaking to the young men of his day, Peter challenges them to be submissive and humble:

(5) Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God

opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”
(1 Peter 5:5)

In Romans 13:8 Paul told his readers that there was one debt we would never completely pay off in life, the continuing debt to love one another:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13:8)

If we are to show our brother his fault we must avoid a self-righteous or angry attitude. We must also put aside any desire to seek personal revenge. Instead we must approach our brother in a spirit of humility and love considering him better than ourselves. Humility respects and honors our brother even when he falls. Love's desire is to restore and help him. It will not seek vengeance or try to look good at his expense. If you find that you can't go with a biblically humble and loving attitude, you need to pray that God would forgive you and give you this attitude.

It may be significant to mention here that the love we express as we show our brother his fault is not only directed toward the brother who has sinned against us but also toward the rest of the church. If this brother continues to sin, his sin will impact the harmony of the body of Christ. We help our brother to become aware of his sin out of a desire to protect the rest of the body of Christ lest they be hurt by him as well.

The command of Christ here is clear. If a brother sins against you, you need to go to him and speak to him about this for his own good. You must not speak to others about

this but go personally to him in the hope that he will recognize his sin and repent and you will be reconciled as brothers. We do this in love, shunning anger and pride lest we ourselves fall into sin and be guilty before God.

For Consideration:

- What is your natural reaction when someone has sinned against you?
- Why is it important that we go to our brother or sister when they have sinned against us?
- What hinders us from going to speak to a brother or sister who has sinned against us?
- Is there a difference between how we respond to an unbeliever or a believer who sins against us? Why?
- What is the difference between turning the other cheek and showing our brother his fault?
- How should we show our brother his fault? What attitudes should we avoid? What attitude should we have when we go to a brother who has sinned against us?
- What should we do if we find that we can't go to our brother with a humble and loving attitude?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to have a humble and loving attitude toward those who have offended you. Ask Him to forgive you for the times you have failed in your attitude.
- Have you been living with a wrong attitude toward a brother or sister who has offended you? Ask the

Lord for grace to go to that brother or sister to make matters right.

- Ask the Lord to remove any anger or self-righteous attitude you have toward a brother or sister in Christ who has offended you.

3

JUST BETWEEN THE TWO OF YOU

“Just between the two of you.” (Matthew 18:15 NIV)

There is an important story about David and his fighting men in 1 Samuel 25. They were wandering through the desert trying to escape from King Saul. They came to the region of Carmel where a rich man named Nabal lived. David sent his men to ask Nabal to supply them with food and provisions. Nabal responded by insulting David and refused to offer any assistance. When the men returned with Nabal's response, David became so angry he decided to attack Nabal's household saying:

May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him!” (Samuel 25:22)

David was insulted and decided to take matters into his own hands. He gathered his men with the intention of

slaughtering every male in Nabal's household. David's response seems extreme but is it possible that we are guilty of the same sin?

Have you ever spoke with evil intent to others about something a brother has done to you? Have you, by your careless words, gathered an army of men and women to stand against your brother? We may not physically attack the one who has offended us but the attitude of the heart is the same.

Jesus makes it clear in Matthew 18:15 that when we speak to a brother who has sinned against us we are to do so alone. There may be several reasons for this.

First, when we deal with the problem between us alone, we keep the problem from becoming larger than it is. Consider for a moment what happens when a story begins to spread. The more people who know about a matter, the more chances there are for misunderstanding. Stories tend to grow as they are passed from one person to another. By keeping the matter between me and my brother, I can prevent it from becoming worse than it is.

Second, by dealing with the problem alone, I can protect my brother from undue harm. We have an obligation to honour and respect each other in the body of Christ. The brother, who has sinned against me, is no exception. I have seen situations where a brother was willing to repent but because so many people were made aware of his sin and had their opinions about it, it was almost impossible for him to return to fellowship. If the matter had been resolved between the two parties involved this brother could have returned to fellowship with his honour preserved.

Third, by going to my brother alone and keeping his offense between the two of us, I protect the church. Satan loves nothing more than to give people stories to speak about. Gossip and slander are all too common in the church. When we speak evil about a brother we risk destroying the harmony of the church. Many churches have been divided because of people taking sides. Satan would like nothing more than to take the offense of a brother and use it to divide the church. By keeping the matter between my brother and myself I do my part to prevent this from happening.

Consider how Jesus dealt with sinners in his day. In John 8 the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery to Him while he was teaching in the temple. They pushed her forward and declared to all present that she had been caught in the act of adultery. Jesus dealt with those who brought her, asking that the one without sin cast the first stone. When they all left and Jesus was alone with the woman He addressed her privately, told her to leave her life of sin and let her go.

He dealt with the Samaritan woman in John 4 in a similar way. When all the disciples had gone to purchase supplies, Jesus spoke to her alone. He reminded her that she had five husbands and was living with a man who was not her husband. He challenged her to consider her ways but He did so in private.

Luke 19 tells the story of Jesus' encounter with a tax collector named Zacchaeus. Tax collectors were considered to be criminals in their day. They often took advantage of people and were considered by many to be thieves. When Jesus met Zacchaeus in Luke 19, He invited Himself to his house. When Jesus was alone with Zacchaeus, He spoke to him about his sin and challenged him to turn from it.

Zacchaeus accepted the challenge and restored the money he had taken by fraud. Jesus could have publically confronted Zacchaeus but He didn't. He chose instead to speak privately to him.

It is true that there were times when Jesus openly condemned groups of people. He spoke harsh words against the Pharisees. He overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple. In these cases, however, Jesus is addressing a general corruption in the society. He spoke against the false teaching of the Pharisees or the materialism and irreverence of the money changers. There is a time to speak against sin and evil in our society. We need to address the false doctrines and practices of our day. Matthew 18, however, cautions us to be careful in what we publicly say about an individual brother or sister in Christ. He encourages us instead to speak privately to them.

If we are to be obedient to what Jesus is telling us in Matthew 18:15, we need to use caution in our times of sharing with brothers or sisters. Perhaps you have been in a prayer meeting where someone has shared unnecessary details about someone who offended them. Prayer meetings can become centres for gossip. We share details in our public prayers that can harm the reputation of our brother or sister. All this is done in the disguise of spirituality.

While it may be important that we seek the advice of a mature believer about what we should do about an offense against us, we need to be careful about how much we share. At this first stage of conflict, the offense must remain between me and the person who has sinned.

Following this procedure is not a guarantee of success. Notice that Jesus says, "If he listens, you have won your brother over" (Matthew 18:15). The phrase "if he listens"

makes it clear that not every brother will listen. To listen implies understanding, applying the truth and changing his ways. Not every brother will change his ways and turn from sin when we speak to him. Some will harden their hearts and resist us. If he does listen, however, we have won him over. Winning our brother over implies several things.

First, “winning our brother over” implies restoring his fellowship with God. His sin is a hindrance in his relationship with God. It acts as a barrier to communion and intimacy. When we approach a brother about his fault and he responds favourably, his intimacy and fellowship with God is restored.

Second, when my brother listens and responds favourably, his relationship with me is restored. This is especially true if we follow clearly the teaching of Jesus about keeping the matter between the two of us. There is nothing that can cause more problems than sharing my brother’s sin with everyone in the church. If my brother sees that I have respected him and his reputation in this matter, he will see my genuine concern. I win him over in the sense that I have won his heart and restored the relationship between us.

Finally, I win my brother over in the sense that I have kept him from falling more deeply into his sin. My correction has prevented him from continuing in his error and hurting others in the church.

Jesus makes it clear in verse 15 that we are to respect the brother who has sinned against us. When our brother sins we are to deal with this matter privately. We are to resist declaring his sin to others or seeking to win others to our side against him. Many problems arise when we do not deal with offenses privately. When other people get involved the results are often devastating. Jesus’ teaching

here prevents the unnecessary harm to the reputation of our brother. It protects the church from division and is the pathway to restoration between brothers and sisters in Christ.

For Consideration:

- Consider David's response to Nabal's insult in 1 Samuel 25. Is it possible for us to respond to the sin of our brother in a similar way today?
- Why is it important to keep the offense of a brother between yourself and the brother concerned? What are the possible results of sharing his sin publicly?
- What does this passage teach us about God's grace and concern for those who have fallen into sin?
- What does it mean to "win our brother over"? Have you ever experienced a situation where your brother has been won over? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to respect your brother who has sinned or offended you. Ask God to forgive you for the times you shared an offense openly and damaged your brother's reputation.
- Do you know a brother or sister who has refused correction? Take a moment to pray for them. Ask God to open their hearts to see their sin.
- Thank the Lord that He loves the sinner. Thank Him that Jesus' teaching in this passage protects

those who have fallen from unnecessary gossip
and slander.

4

ONE OR TWO WITNESSES

But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' (Matthew 18:16, NIV)

Jesus taught that when a brother sins against us we are to go privately and speak to him about his fault. We are not guaranteed success when we do this. Our brother or sister may refuse to listen. If this should happen, Jesus tells us in Matthew 18:16 what our next step ought to be.

Notice the phrase "if he will not listen." There is no mention here of how often we have spoken to him about his fault. We should not assume from this phrase that our brother needs to listen to us the first time. Sometimes we need to pray, wait for the right timing and return to our brother again. While each situation is different, there comes a time when we realize that we cannot change the attitude of our brother and need help.

The phrase “if he will not listen,” is not always easy to understand. When do we know that a brother is not listening and that we need help? Let me suggest four guidelines.

First, you know your brother is not listening if he refuses to give you audience. You may phone and ask to meet with him but he never has the time or resists any attempt to meet with you. He may consistently, despite your efforts to speak to him, avoid you and the issue you want to address in his life.

Second, your brother is not listening if he rejects what you have to say or finds excuses to justify his actions. He may throw the blame back at you or on someone else. He may simply not agree with you and your interpretation of the situation. He may also harden his heart and say he doesn’t care what you think. Your brother may hear what you have to say but refuse to accept it. Though he has heard what you had to say, by his refusal to accept it, he shows he is not listening.

Third, your brother is not listening if he does not understand what you are trying to say. There are times when our brother may not have a full understanding of the truth and the requirements of Scripture. He may not even realize that what he has done is sinful and needs to be instructed more clearly in what the Scripture teaches. When you speak to him, he resists what you say, not because he is trying to be difficult but because he is not aware of the requirements of Scripture. He may say, “I just don’t understand what you mean. I don’t see anything wrong with what I did?” Maybe you are not really able to communicate the truth to him in a way that he understands. If this problem is to be resolved, you may need to bring in someone who can help him more fully understand the requirements of God in Scripture.

Finally, you know your brother is not listening when he does not do anything about the situation to make it right. Your brother may warmly receive you into his home and listen to what you have to say. He may thank you for bringing the matter to his attention and send you from his house with a smile on his face. Over the course of the next few weeks, however, you see no change in his behaviour. Things continue to be the way they always were. His lack of action shows you that he has not listened.

Only when we are assured that our brother has not listened should we take the matter to the next level. At this point, we are to find one or two witnesses. We should be careful as to the kind of people we bring with us to see our brother. While verse 16 is not clear as to the qualifications of these witnesses, Scripture does have some guidelines to help us in the selection of the right people.

First, the witness you bring with you to your brother should be a believer. This is quite clear in the teaching of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 6 when he rebukes the Corinthians for using non-Christians to help resolve conflicts between believers:

(4) Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! (5) I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? (6) But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers! (1 Corinthians 6:4-6)

We should do our best to resolve the conflict in the context of the church. The unbeliever's concept of sin is very different from ours. They are not guided by the teaching of

the Word of God and His Spirit. Our witness should be one who loves the Lord Jesus and His Word and is led by His Spirit.

Second, our witness should be one who is not given to gossip. Listen to the words of Proverbs 20:19:

A gossip betrays a confidence;
so avoid a man who talks too much.

It can't be clearer than this. We are to avoid a man who talks too much and spreads gossip because he will betray our confidence. Our witness must be a man or woman we can trust to keep the matter between us and our brother.

Third, our witness must be a man or woman of integrity. The Law of Moses is quite clear that a malicious or false witness was to be punished severely.

(16) If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, (17) the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the LORD before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. (18) The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, (19) then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you. (Deuteronomy 19:16-19)

The witness you bring to see your brother must be one who is known to be honest and truthful and one whose word the church can trust. This witness will not distort or twist the truth but will speak clearly about what he or she sees and knows to be true.

Finally, the witness must be impartial. Peter describes the Lord God as being an impartial judge.

Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. (1 Peter 1:17)

The Law of Moses clearly stated that God's people were not to show favoritism.

“Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. (Leviticus 19:15)

What these verses tell us is that the witness we choose needs to be one who will not take sides. He comes to examine the conflict between you and your brother and to be a witness to both sides.

The witnesses are vital to the healing and restoration of our brother. They appear to have several roles.

First, the witness is an impartial judge. This means that when he examines the situation he may find you partially to blame. He may show you that you have misinterpreted the situation or that you have acted inappropriately toward your brother. Sometimes our judgment becomes clouded. Our witness gives us a second opinion. He may either confirm or challenge our ideas about our brother. When your brother sees that it is not just your opinion but the opinion of the witness as well he may also change his mind and repent.

The second role of the witness is to be a wise counselor. Sometimes we need help to resolve our problems. We

may need the wisdom of a brother or sister to help us find a solution. The witness can stand between you and your brother and act as a mediator to help solve the problem. Maybe we have been hindering our brother by a harsh and critical attitude. Maybe our brother has been dealing with some other issues in his life that need to be addressed before there can be resolution to this problem between us. The witness, as a wise counselor, can address these issues and help us find a solution.

The witness may also be a teacher. In the case where there is a lack of biblical understanding, the witness can often instruct our brother in the teaching of Scripture. This may not take place in a single sitting. It may require that the witness spend weeks with our brother discipling, praying and teaching him. The goal is to bring the brother who has sinned to a place of understanding and repentance through the teaching of the Word of God.

There is something else we need to notice in this verse. While Jesus tells us that we should bring one or two witnesses to see our brother, he does not say that these witnesses need to be brought together or at the same time. Consider for a moment that you bring a witness to your brother and he refuses to listen. While the first witness was unable to resolve the matter, he may have a suggestion of a second witness. Maybe the first witness finds that our brother's problem is a lack of Bible knowledge. He may suggest that you find a second witness who can instruct him in the Word. Our second witness may then be able to disciple our brother and give him a clearer understanding of God's requirements. This process may take weeks or months and many sessions. We need to exercise patience as we seek restoration.

While there is no time limit attached to verse 16, what is clear is that we must come to an agreement with our witnesses about our brother. The matter must be “established” on the testimony of two or three witnesses. The word “established” gives the sense of something being confirmed and sure. In other words, every effort has been made to be certain of the facts and circumstances before further action is taken.

The passage is quite clear that the sin of our brother is not to become public knowledge. Only ourselves, our brother and the witnesses know about the matter. Our brother's reputation is preserved and we minister quietly to him to help resolve the issue. No discipline has been taken by the church because the leaders are not to this point aware of the matter. Every opportunity is given to help our brother before the matter is taken to the next level. “Speaking to our brother” will sometimes require much more than a quick two minute conversation on the phone. Following the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 18:16 may require months of hard work, discipling and praying with a small team of witnesses. The purpose is to help our brother understand his sin and be restored to fellowship with the Lord and the church without damaging in any way his reputation. The witnesses we select must be willing to work with us to see our brother restored.

For Consideration:

- How do we know if our brother is not listening when we speak to him about his fault?

- What are the qualifications for the witnesses we bring to see our brother? How tempting is it to find witnesses who will take our side?
- What is the role of the witness? How can the witness help us resolve the problem with our brother?
- What do we learn in this chapter about the effort that sometimes needs to go into restoring our brother? Are you willing to put in the effort required to see your brother or sister restored?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He gives us every opportunity to repent of our sin before disciplining us.
- Have you been offended by a brother who refuses to listen to you? Ask the Lord to give you the right witnesses to work with your brother toward restoration.
- Ask God to give you patience to be faithful to the process of restoring your brother or sister.
- Ask God to show you if you are wrong and need to repent of any sin that keeps your brother or sister from fellowship with you or the body of Christ.

5

TELL IT TO THE CHURCH

*If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.
(Matthew 18:17, NIV)*

In the last chapter we examined the work and responsibility of the witnesses in dealing with the sin of our brother. Verse 17 begins with the statement, “if he refuses to listen to them.” This again reminds us that, with human nature, nothing is guaranteed. It is quite possible that even after the hard work of the witnesses our brother remains hardened to correction. If this is the case, Jesus taught that we need to take matters to the next level and tell it to the church.

What is the church? Very simply, it is the body of people all around the world who have accepted the Lord Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. This is known as the universal church. More specifically, however, the church can also be defined as a local body of believers who meet in a given region. We can assume here that Jesus is speaking about the local body of believers to which our brother belongs.

In the days of the apostles there was usually only one local church in a given region. Today, however, one town or city can have many churches. This means that our brother may belong to another church. What do you do if our brother does not attend the same church as you? What church should you approach about his sin? If at all possible, the sin of our brother should be dealt with by his own church. This means that you and your witnesses may need to speak to the leadership of your brother's church to inform them of the steps you have taken to resolve the situation.

Another problem in our day is that many believers do not actually belong to a local church. What should we do if our brother does not belong to a local church? There appears to be two solutions here in this case.

If your brother attends a local church (although he is not a member) you can approach the leadership of the church he attends. If your brother does not attend a local church, you may be required to go to the leadership of your own church to seek their advice. They may be able to examine your situation and approach your brother about his fault on your behalf.

Another important question that arises from the phrase, "tell the church" has to do with how this "telling" is to be done. Should the offended party simply show up one Sunday and announce the sin of his brother in a public meeting? This would seem to be very inappropriate. It would certainly be wrong to publicly accuse our brother for something when the church has not yet had opportunity to examine him and hear the reports of our witnesses. Very likely the best solution here is to approach the leadership of the church with the issue. The leadership, acting on behalf of the church, should then consider the accusation and decide on an appropriate action.

Why is the matter between two brothers to be taken to the church? 1 Corinthians 6 has been mentioned several times in the context of this study. Listen again to what Paul says in this important passage:

(2) Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? (3) Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! (4) Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! (1 Corinthians 6:2-4)

God has given the church the authority to judge cases between brothers and sisters in Christ. When a dispute arose in the church about circumcision in Acts 15, the local assembly in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to hear the judgment of the church leaders.

(15:1) Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." (2) This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. (Acts 15:1-2)

Exodus 18:13 tells us that Moses, as God's representative, sat "from morning till evening" to judge the various problems that arose between brothers and sisters in his day. God gives special authority to the leaders of his church to act on His behalf.

James 5:14-15 tells us that God will hear the prayers of the leaders of the church for healing and forgiveness:

(14) Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. (15) And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.

Jesus reminded that church in Matthew 18:18 that what they bound would be bound in heaven and what they loosed would be loosed in heaven. In other words, God takes the decision of the church seriously.

“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:18)

God gives the church the authority to make judgments and respects their choice. The church acts on His behalf and he expects us to submit to the decisions the leadership makes in His name.

When Joseph was made ruler in Egypt, Pharaoh took off his ring and placed it on Joseph's finger. In doing this, Pharaoh was saying that he trusted Joseph to make the right decisions. Pharaoh did not give up his position as supreme leader in Egypt but he did give Joseph authority to act on his behalf. While Joseph was answerable to Pharaoh, his decisions were to be respected as if they came from Pharaoh himself. This is the kind of authority God has given to the church. We are his representatives, accountable to God, but acting on His behalf in the world. Jesus

went as far as to say that whatever we asked, as believers in His name He would do it:

(13) And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. (14) You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. (John 14:13-14)

When we bring our brother and his situation to the church we are bringing him to the highest court on this earth. The church, as God's representative, is able to make a judgment that God Himself will respect.

What is the role of the church, and particularly the leadership of the church, in this conflict? First, it is the God-given role of the leadership in the church to act as God's authority in seeing that all is done in obedience to the principles of Scripture. This means considering what has already been done to resolve the conflict by the offended party and his witnesses and hearing the defense of the accused brother or sister.

It is important for us to notice that no judgment has been made to this point. Even at this level, opportunity is given to the brother to repent and turn from his sin. The purpose of bringing our brother to the church is not primarily to judge him but to restore him. Notice that it is only after the brother refuses to listen to the church that disciplinary action is taken. The assumption here is that the leadership of the church has also spoken to him about his sin.

It is the church leadership that makes the final judgment. This takes the matter of judging out of individual hands and places it in the hands of the church as God's representatives. This judgement, however, has only come as a result

of a lot of hard work in seeking to restore the offending brother and a continued refusal on the part of this brother to repent and be restored.

For Consideration:

- When and how should the church be informed of our brother's fault?
- What authority does the church have to be the judge in the case we have with our brother? Why is it important that we respect the decision of the church?
- What is the role of the church leadership in helping to resolve the conflict with our brother?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He has given us a body on earth that can judge cases between us as brothers and sisters.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you did not respect the leadership of your church as His representatives.
- Take a moment to pray for the leaders of your church. Ask God to help them to be wise in their decisions.
- Ask God to give the leaders of your church a heart of compassion that seeks to do all it can to see reconciliation and faithful obedience to the Word of God.

6

IF HE REFUSES TO LISTEN TO THE CHURCH

And if he refuses to listen even to the church. (Matthew 18:17 (NIV))

In the last chapter we saw the responsibility of the church in dealing with a brother who has persisted in sin. To this point our brother has had many opportunities to repent and consider the nature of his sin. He has been spoken to personally and privately by a brother. When he refused to listen to that brother, witnesses were brought in to speak with him, teach him and warn him. After refusing to listen to these witnesses, the decision was made to bring him to the church. The church leaders have now examined and spoken with our brother, encouraging him to repent and be reconciled. Notice that, even after all this effort, our brother may still refuse to listen.

It has been my experience that, by this time in the process, the brother or sister concerned has given up on the church or left it completely. There are many reasons for this. Let me touch on a few of them here.

First, the brother may leave the church because of hardness of heart. In other words, he simply does not want to leave his sin or admit that he has been wrong. This hardness may be the result of pride in his life. He refuses to submit to the counsel of the church because he loves his sin and wants to continue in it. Knowing that his sinful actions will not be accepted in the church he feels compelled to make a decision. Either he repents and is restored or he continues in his sin and leaves the church.

A brother or sister may also leave the church at this time because of a sense of betrayal. Maybe our brother has grown up with us and developed many great friendships over the years in the church. When confronted with his sin, however, he feels that his friends and spiritual family have taken a stand against him. This may be due, in part, to the way the matter has been handled. Sometimes those who have dealt with our brother have not always communicated love and acceptance. They may have spoken harsh words or said things that left him feeling like his friends have now become his enemies. He feels he has no choice but to leave the church.

Another reason why a brother may leave the church is because of sense of embarrassment. He may feel that his sin has come out in the open and everyone knows about it. When he comes to church now all he can think of is what people must think about him. He becomes so uncomfortable and embarrassed about people knowing his sin that he chooses to stop attending church and may leave it completely.

Some people feel that embarrassment is to be part of the process of discipline. They feel that exposing a person to public shame is a necessary part of restoration. These individuals do not understand the difference between public

embarrassment and the conviction of the Holy Spirit. The conviction of the Spirit is not intended to embarrass or humiliate. It is intended to bring an awareness of sin and restoration. Public embarrassment will only create more hurt and hinder healing. Our goal is to bring healing and restoration.

A fourth reason why a brother may leave the church in this process is because of what he believes to be irreconcilable differences. In other words, he may not agree with the church's definition of sin. Maybe the "sin" that is being addressed is a debatable point among believers. It is possible that our brother differs with us on our definition of sin and is no longer comfortable with the church's position. The difference may be such that it becomes very difficult to work together. He chooses instead to find a church which is more compatible with his personal convictions.

Finally, a brother may leave the church in this process because he feels that he has lost the confidence of the body. This is especially true of those who have been in leadership. This loss of confidence is so great that he may feel he can never work in the church again. When he stands up to speak or teach, people see him in a different light now. They see him as the one who fell into sin, even if he has repented and been reconciled. They do not trust him. Sometimes people are unwilling to forget the past. The brother may now feel compelled to find another church where he can minister or where people will no longer see him as a "fallen brother."

Notice in verse 17 that Jesus says "if he refuses to listen even to the church." The word "even" is quite significant. It is one thing not to listen to a brother or the witnesses he brings but quite another not to listen to the church. God has given the church special authority to judge matters

such as this. The Bible teaches us to respect and listen to the leadership God has established:

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Hebrews 13:17)

Having said this, we need to realize that there are times when a brother may have legitimate differences with the leadership of the church. Paul was urged by the church not to go to Jerusalem but felt compelled by the Spirit to go anyway (Acts 21:4-6: 10-14). He refused the counsel and advice of the prophets and church leaders to do what he believed was God's will for his life.

Church leaders are not perfect. Sometimes they mishandle or misunderstand the cases brought before them. Sometimes, in the process of trying to handle a brother or sister's case, they fall themselves into sin and say or do things that are hurtful to the accused brother. What should a brother do when those accusing him fall themselves into sin while dealing with his case? In such a situation the accused brother may need to approach the leaders concerned and speak to them privately about their actions and follow the procedure Jesus has laid out in the passage we are dealing with here in this book.

What is important for us to understand is that the church, though imperfect, has been given the responsibility to judge and settle matters between believers. This is a God-ordained responsibility given to the leadership that God has placed over us. God expects us to listen to their counsel and advice and holds us accountable to their requirements.

Having said this, however, the leadership, as God's representatives, are also accountable to God. As such, they need to be careful in their dealings with the cases brought before them. God expects that they love and respect His children. Probably there is no passage as powerful on this subject as Ezekiel 34.

(2) Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? (3) You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. (4) You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. (5) So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. (6) My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them. (7) Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: (8) As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, (9) therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: (10) This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves.

I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them. (Ezekiel 34:1-10)

Here in this passage the Lord accuses the shepherds of His people of causing the sheep to be scattered. The shepherds, in this case, were concerned only for themselves. They did not exercise care in dealing with God's people. They mistreated them and ruled harshly over them. God would judge these shepherds severely because of their treatment of his people.

With the authority God gives to the leaders of the church comes an awesome responsibility. We must care for the sheep and do our best to provide for their healing and restoration. It is not God's intention to lose one of His sheep. He will hold the leadership responsible for each sheep that has not been nurtured. The church needs to be a safe environment for the sheep. The sheep need to know that they can trust the shepherds to care for them. It falls on the leadership to provide that safe and healthy environment. Doing so will go a long way in helping the sheep to feel comfortable in remaining in the church and seeking restoration.

For Consideration:

- What are the reasons why people leave the church during this process of restoration? What can be done to avoid this?
- Is it possible to have a legitimate difference of opinion with a brother over what is sin? Give some examples?

- Why is it important to listen to the church? What makes this difficult at times?
- What is the responsibility of the leadership of the church toward its members? How can the way a spiritual shepherd treats an accused brother change the way he responds toward the church?
- What is the difference between accepting and loving a brother and accepting his sinful behaviour? How important is it that we make a distinction between these?

For Prayer:

- Is there a brother or sister in your church struggling with a problem? Take a moment to pray for them. Ask God to show you how you can demonstrate love and acceptance.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord for the leaders He has placed over you. Ask Him to give them grace, wisdom and compassion as they deal with the sheep.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace and humility to submit more fully to the leadership He has established in your church.

7

TREAT HIM AS A PAGAN OR A TAX COLLECTOR

If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Matthew 18:17, NIV)

As we come to the end of this reflection, Jesus told His listeners that if their brother did not listen even to the church they were to treat him as they would a pagan or a tax collector. As we examine Jesus' teaching let's consider first who the pagans and tax-collectors were.

Pagans live their lives as if God does not exist. They have removed God from their lives and practices and feel no obligation to consider Him or His requirements. The tax collector showed no respect for the property of others. They were responsible to gather taxes from the people and often cheated them to enrich their own pockets. Many became rich off the backs of those who had far less than they did. They showed little compassion or concern for others. Their only concern was for themselves.

The brother who has ignored the counsel and hard work of the church to restore him, has in reality, been acting like a pagan and a tax collector. He has disregarded the requirements of God like a pagan and, like a tax collector, has shown no respect for the church and its members.

How are we to treat a pagan and a tax collector? The best way to understand Jesus' teaching here is to consider how He Himself treated them. We begin in Matthew 9 as Jesus is choosing His disciples. Passing by a tax collector's booth in Matthew 9:9 Jesus saw a tax collector named Matthew. Listen to the account of what happened that day.

(9) As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. (10) While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. (11) When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" (12) On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." (Matthew 9:9-12)

What was Jesus' response toward Matthew the tax collector? He asked him to follow him as one of His disciples. He went to his home and had a meal with him. He did this to the absolute frustration of the religious leaders of his day who wanted nothing to do with such people.

Consider also the parable Jesus told in Luke 18 about a Pharisee and a tax collector.

(10) “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. (11) The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. (12) I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ (13) “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ (14) “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:10-14)

Is it not interesting that the Lord Jesus, when comparing the religious leaders and the tax collector, chose to side with the tax collector in this parable. He saw something in them that others could not see.

Probably the most famous tax collector of the Bible is a man named Zacchaeus. When he heard that Jesus was in the region, Zacchaeus climbed a tree to catch a glimpse of him. When Jesus reached the spot where Zacchaeus was, He stopped and called up to him: “Zacchaeus come down immediately. I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5, NIV). When Zacchaeus came down out of the tree, the Lord Jesus went to his home and had a meal with him. He spoke personally to him about his lifestyle and challenged him to make things right. Zacchaeus responded enthusiastically to the Lord Jesus and repented of his sin.

What about pagans? How did Jesus respond to them? Consider what people of His day said about Jesus in Matthew 11:19:

(19) The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners."' "

Listen to the Apostle Peter's counsel to the church of his day regarding pagans:

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2:12)

Peter advised his readers to live such a good life among the pagans that they would be forced to glorify God because of them. There are two things we need to see here. First, Peter believed that the pagan could come to a place of glorifying God. Second, he called all believers to life with the purpose of helping these pagans come to a greater knowledge of God.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul accused the church of practices that were not even seen among the pagans (see 1 Corinthians 5:1). The Lord God often accused His people of living lives that were more evil than the pagan nations around them (2 Kings 21:9; 2 Chronicles 33:9). Jesus makes it quite clear that if we are going to make an accusation against a brother we need to examine ourselves first.

(3) "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? (4) How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? (5) You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your

own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:3-5)

Surely what is true of a brother is also true of an unbelieving pagan. Before accusing them of sin we need to be careful to look at ourselves to see where we stand.

There have been those who have interpreted Matthew 18:17 to mean that we are to shun a brother who has sinned and refuses to repent. This is not how Jesus treated the pagans and tax-collectors of His day. The reality of the matter is that we often treat the unrepentant believer worse than a tax collector or pagan. While we might seek to befriend our pagan friend in the hopes of winning him to the Lord, we will avoid an unrepentant brother. We would do all we can to win a hated "tax-collector" but we have heard many horror stories of how believer has treated a fallen brother. Jesus shows us a different way.

Jesus befriended the tax collector and sinner. He ate with them and spoke to them. He worked with them to restore them to faith. Peter tells us that we are to live our lives before them in such a way that they are won back to faith. Probably one of the most powerful passages to speak to this matter is to be found in Luke 15. Listen to this parable Jesus:

(3) Then Jesus told them this parable: (4) "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? (5) And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders (6) and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' (7) I tell you that in the same way there will

be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” (Luke 15:3-7)

This is a very touching passage of Scripture. Notice that there were one hundred sheep in the fold but one of them was lost. What was the response of the shepherd toward that one lost sheep who had left the fold? Verse 3 tells us that he left the ninety-nine in the fold and went out into the countryside to find it. The priority for the shepherd was that lost sheep. He would do all he could to find it and bring it back to the fold. Isn't that the response we need to have toward a lost brother? Instead of avoiding and shunning him, ought we not to be doing all we can to win him to the fold?

Treating a brother as we would a tax collector and pagan requires a lot of work. If a brother has wandered from the Lord, he needs to be restored to fellowship. It is our responsibility to do all we can to help that brother. Like the shepherd of Luke 15, we should not give up until he has been restored to his right relationship with God and his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Having said this, the Scripture makes it quite clear that there are consequences to persisting in sin. We need to take a moment to consider these consequences.

The Old Testament law required that only children of Israel could participate in the celebration of the Passover, no foreign pagan was to be involved in this celebration.

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, These are the regulations for the Passover: No foreigner is to eat of it. (Exodus 12:43)

In a similar way, the apostle Paul called all believers to examine themselves before taking part in the Lord's Table because those who participated in an unworthy manner brought judgment on themselves.

A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. (29) For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. (1 Corinthians 11:28-29)

It is quite clear from this that if we treat a brother as a tax collector or a pagan, we must refuse them permission to participate with us in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Second, in Deuteronomy 17:14-15 the Lord told his people that they were not to allow a pagan foreigner to rule over them.

(14) When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us," (15) be sure to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your own brothers. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite. (Deuteronomy 17:14-15)

In the New Testament Titus gives us the qualifications for leaders in the church. Notice that one of the qualifications is that the elder be "blameless."

An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not

open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.
(Titus 1:6)

It is quite clear from these verses that a brother who has refused to listen to the church cannot have any position of leadership in the church of Christ. He must be removed from leadership.

Third, consider the following passage in Ezra 4:1-3:

(4:1) When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the LORD, the God of Israel, (2) they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here." (3) But Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us." (Ezra 4:1-3)

Zerubbabel and Jeshua believed that the work of expanding the kingdom of God belonged to the people of God. The pagan had no place in this.

This is confirmed by Paul in the New Testament when he says:

(14) Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? (15) What harmony is there between

Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? (2 Corinthians 6:14-15)

When we treat a brother like a pagan this principle applies. The brother who is treated as a pagan cannot participate in the work of the kingdom of God. He must be removed from any official ministry of the local church until such time as he repents and is restored.

Beyond these practical actions taken against the brother there are other consequences for his persistence in sin. These consequences are even more serious than the inability to participate in the Lord's Table, lead or even serve in the local church. Scripture teaches that when we persist in sin, our fellowship with God is hindered in different ways.

Speaking to husbands of his day, the apostle Peter told them that if they were not considerate to their wives, their prayers would be hindered:

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers. (1 Peter 3:7)

If a lack of consideration for our wives hinders our prayers, how much more will a hardened heart that refuses to listen even to the church hinder answers to prayer? God may simply refuse to answer the prayers of the individual who will not listen to the church and repent of his sin.

Second, Jesus told his listeners in Matthew 5:24-25 that God may not accept the worship of a brother or sister who refuses to be reconciled.

(23) "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, (24) leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-25)

Fellowship is broken with our heavenly Father when we persist in sin.

1 Corinthians 3 tells us that God will judge the quality of our work.

(12) If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, (13) his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. (14) If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. (1 Corinthians 3:12-14)

This means that we will have to answer to God for our actions. This is not something we can take lightly. When we stand before God on the Day of Judgment and see how we have wasted our lives in rebellion and sin, the consequences will be devastating. While our salvation is assured, we lose our reward and fail to gain His approval.

The brother who refuses to repent and perseveres in his sin must not only be removed from ministry in the church

but will find that God may refuse to hear his prayers, rejects his worship and will ultimately judge him for his actions. These are serious matters before God and will have lasting eternal consequences.

For Consideration:

- In what way can an unrepentant brother or sister be compared to a tax collector or pagan?
- How did Jesus treat the tax collector and pagan of his day? How does He expect us to treat our fallen brother?
- How has your church treated fallen brothers or sisters?
- What are the Biblical consequences for refusing to repent of our sins?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have treated a fallen brother worse than a tax collector or pagan? Ask Him to give you grace to love your brother as He requires.
- Thank the Lord for His example of compassion and forgiveness for those who have fallen.
- Ask the Lord to help your church have a godly attitude toward those who have fallen in their midst.
- Take a moment to pray that the Lord would restore brothers and sisters who have fallen.

8

WHEN THERE IS NO RESOLUTION

As we conclude this study we need to balance what we have learned so far with the rest of Scripture. I trust that I have communicated the importance of pursuing a brother who has been living in sin. We certainly must do all we can to resolve this matter and see our brother restored to fellowship. The goal of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15-17 is restoration.

Having stated the importance of doing all we can to resolve a problem with our brother, we need to realize that not all conflicts will be resolved. Sometimes, even when we do everything right, the conflict remains. Paul understood this when he said in Romans 12:18:

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Notice what Paul is saying here. When he says, "if it is possible" and "as far as it depends on you," Paul is telling us that it will not always be possible to live at peace with

everyone. There will be people who resist us and have evil thoughts toward us. Jesus had many enemies. These individuals hated Him and crucified Him on a cross. His issues with them were never resolved nor will they be throughout all eternity. Those who hate Christ will be separated from Him forever with no hope of restoration or reconciliation. It should not surprise us, then, that we too will have people with whom we may never be able to settle our differences.

Church discipline does not always resolve our problems. A brother or sister may continue in his or her sin even after being disciplined by the church. What are we to do when we cannot find a solution to the problem between us and our brother or sister?

LOVE

In Ezekiel 35 God was angry with the people of Seir (Esau's descendants) because they "harboured an ancient hostility and delivered the Israelites over to the sword."

(3) and say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against you, Mount Seir, and I will stretch out my hand against you and make you a desolate waste. (4) I will turn your towns into ruins and you will be desolate. Then you will know that I am the LORD. (5) "Because you harbored an ancient hostility and delivered the Israelites over to the sword at the time of their calamity, the time their punishment reached its climax, (6) therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will give you over to bloodshed and it will pursue you. Since you did not hate bloodshed, bloodshed will pursue you. (Ezekiel 35:3-6)

The reference to the “ancient hostility” goes back to the fathers of these two nations, Jacob and Esau. Jacob stole the birthright and the blessing of his brother Esau. Esau swore that he would kill Jacob (Genesis 27:21). This bitterness was passed on from father to sons so that Esau’s descendants hated the people of Israel and delivered them over to their enemies. God was angry with them because they acted out of anger and bitterness toward His people.

It is one thing to have an unsettled matter between ourselves and a brother and quite another to act out of anger and bitterness toward that brother. Jesus teaches that we are to love our enemies and do good to them.

(44) But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (45) that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:44-45)

Even if you can’t find a resolution to your problem with your brother you can still love him and do all you can for him. Loving him, providing for him or even befriending him does not mean you support what he has done. We may never agree with him or his actions but we can still love him.

DROP THE MATTER

There are times when we simply need to learn to drop a matter. The writer to the Proverbs says this:

Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out. (Proverbs 17:14)

When we lack the wisdom to know when to drop a matter, we create even more problems and make the situation with our brother worse. Proverbs 17:14 warns us that we need to drop the matter before a dispute breaks out. This was the problem with the people of Mount Seir in Ezekiel 35 (quoted above). They didn't know when to drop the matter and this resulted in whole generations acting out against the people of Israel.

The apostle Paul, writing to fathers has this counsel to give:

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4)

We exasperate someone when we provoke them to anger by our actions or words. Paul is describing a situation where a father has something against his son. The father persists in his anger against his son to a point where the son is provoked and lashes out. How easy it is for us to do this in our relationship with our brother or sister in Christ. We continue to speak to them about their sin and every time we meet them we remind them of their actions. In doing so, we provoke them to anger. We are commanded not to do this. The writer to the Ecclesiastes gives us wise counsel when he says that there is "a time to be silent and a time to speak" (Ecclesiastes 3:7, NIV). If our pursuing the matter causes our brother to sin even more, would it not be best to be silent instead?

There is an interesting passage in the book of Amos that speaks about the wisdom of keeping silent in evil times:

(12) For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts. (13) Therefore the prudent man keeps quiet in such times, for the times are evil (Amos 5:12-13).

Notice that Amos speaks of the prudent man keeping quiet because the times were evil. The prophet speaks of a time when evil rulers oppressed the righteous and deprived them of justice. In these evil times, if the righteous were to speak out, they would not be heard. In fact, they would likely be accused and condemned for their stand. In order to avoid even greater evil, the wise man was told to be silent and leave the matter in God's hands. There is a time to pursue justice and righteousness and there is a time to drop the matter and entrust it into the hands of the Lord God lest we provoke our brother to greater sin.

TRUST GOD

The prophet Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be oppressed and afflicted but would not open His mouth against his accusers. Instead He entrusted all vengeance to his Father:

He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
Vengeance is mine says the Lord. (Isaiah 53:7)

The Lord Jesus did not defend Himself against the evil of those who beat Him and crucified Him. He trusted His Father to use what happened to Him for good. That is exactly what the Father did. Jesus was crucified through the injustice of evil men but His death brought salvation to His people.

Joseph was sold as a slave and taken to Egypt where he had to serve the cause of a foreign nation. Out of jealousy, his brothers had sold him to a band of traveling merchants. His brothers sinned against Joseph but God would use what happened to him for good. Joseph would become a powerful leader in the land of his slavery. God would use him to save his own people in a time of severe famine.

We will not win every battle. A brother gave me some counsel one day I never forgot. Speaking of a situation he had encountered in his family he said: "Wayne, I fought until I lost the battle then I had to be a good sport about it." His advice is wise. As believers we can be sore losers. We need to accept our losses with grace. While we are to do our best to resolve a problem between ourselves and a brother or sister, when this is not possible, we are to continue to love, drop the matter and trust the Lord to work things out for good.

FORGET THE PAST, MOVE ON

Let me conclude with this final challenge from the prophet Isaiah:

- (18) "Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
- (19) See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the desert
and streams in the wasteland." (Isaiah 43:18-19)

We have likely all met individuals who have not been able to forget the past. They have been wronged in some way and even after years have passed, they have never been able to forget the wrong done to them. These individuals still feel the need to make the offending brother or sister pay for their actions or words. It is all too easy to dwell on the past. God is calling us to forget what has happened and look ahead to the new things He wants to do. We can become so tied up in the past that we fail to enjoy the blessings of the present. How often have we ruined today with the problems of yesterday. Instead of trusting the Lord, we waste our lives in bitterness and resentment. You cannot change what was done to you, but you can change how you live your lives today. God is calling us to forget the past with all its pain, learn from it and trust Him with the future. May God give us grace to know when we have done all we can and when we need to put the matter aside and trust Him to care for what we cannot resolve.

For Consideration:

- Will we always be able to find a resolution to our conflicts with people? Are there people in your life with whom you have unresolved conflict?
- What efforts have you made to resolve the conflict between you and your brother or sister? What comfort do you find in the fact that even Jesus had people who didn't like Him or agree with Him?

- How have you been treating those with whom you have unresolved conflicts? Have you been demonstrating the love, mercy and compassion of God toward them?
- How is it possible to make matters worse in your attempt to resolve a conflict?
- How can God use your unresolved conflicts? How has he shaped you by those conflicts?
- Are you able to forget the past and move on to the new things God is doing? What in particular do you have a hard time forgetting?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to love those with whom you still have unresolved issues.
- Ask the Lord to show you if there is anything you need to do to bring a resolution to the problem between yourself and a brother or sister. Ask Him also to show you if you need to drop the matter and entrust it to Him.
- Thank the Lord that He is able to use the problems that we are facing to accomplish His greater good.
- Ask God to give you the ability to be able to forget the past and move on to the good things He has prepared for you.

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