

Matthew 18:15-17

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Jesus teaches His disciples a practical way to help and confront a brother who has become ensnared by sin. It seeks to keep his reputation intact while offering him a chance for repentance.

The parallel gospel account of this teaching is found in Luke 17:3.

Jesus then taught the disciples about confronting a brother who has fallen into sin. It is not immediately clear if what He said was in the same conversation from the preceding verses, where He told the disciples about greatness, little ones, millstones, and the parable of the lost sheep. What Jesus said about the topic of confrontation may have been a continuation in that conversation. It might be that Jesus is explaining to the disciples what He just did with them. Jesus had confronted them for wrong-thinking, with a goal to teach them, and help them prosper in His kingdom. Now, perhaps Jesus is explaining the principle that He just applied.

Or it may have been a separate conversation. Irrespective of whether it was part of the same conversation, mercifully restoring fellowship is an important component to being great, along with serving little children. When done as Jesus instructs, confronting *a brother* who *sins* is a way of serving him. Jesus had just applied this principle. He had led his clueless disciples to be able to see, but did so in a private conversation.

Jesus had already taught His disciples that they were not to judge others. He told them that measure or standard they used to judge someone, would be used by God as a standard by which He would judge them (Matthew 7:1-2.) He told them before pointing out the speck of sin in their brother's eye, they were to remove the log of sin in their own (Matthew 7:3-5). Those attitudes and principles still applied.

But at this point Jesus taught them how go about helping a *brother*—*someone* close to *you*—who has obviously made a sinful error or fallen into a pattern or lifestyle of sin.

If your brother sins, He told them, *go and show him his fault in private*. In other words, *if you see your brother* ensnared by sin *go to him alone and show him his sin* and keep this conversation between yourselves. This chapter 18 conversation took place in private, in a house (see commentary on Matthew 18:1-5). The reason *you* are to share this with *him* in private is because it spares *your brother's* dignity. It spares *him* the embarrassment of having *his* sin made public. It spares *him* from the possibility of judgment from the wider community. It spares *him* the temptation of being embittered for broadcasting *his sins* publicly. It gives him the best opportunity to hear, and to turn from the self-destructive ways of sin.

Hearing about *his fault* and acknowledging it may still be difficult for *your brother*. No one likes to admit they are wrong. And no one enjoys having someone else *show* and present to them their own *sins*. But when this is done privately it makes hearing about *his* faults easier to accept. And

it makes confessing *his sins* easier for *him* to do. This is the hope of going to *him* and showing *him his sins*—restoring *him* into kingdom fellowship with Christ.

When *you show your brother his sins* one of two things will happen. *He* will either *listen to you*. Or *he will not listen to you*. By *listens*, Jesus meant *your brother* agreed with what *you* showed *him*, and he confessed *his* faults and repented of *his sins*.

Jesus said, *if he listens to you, you have won your brother* and *your* hope for restoration has been fulfilled. *But if he does not listen to you, your* task is not done.

Jesus said *you* are to *take one or two more* people that *your brother* deeply respects *with you* and *go to your brother* a second time. This widens the circle slightly. It still seeks to preserve *your* brother's dignity, but by bringing *one or two more* people *with you* validates and confirms the message. The addition of *one or two more* follows the pattern set forth in Deuteronomy 19:15 *so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed*. In the case of Jesus, He alone represented *two or three witnesses*, because He was sent from God, and was God.

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church and *go to your brother* a third time. Now the congregation is involved. *Your brother* can either change *his* heart and ways and return to fellowship with *the church* or persist in *his sins* and stand against *the church*. The word translated *church* is “ekklesia,” which literally means “called-out-ones.” It refers to a “collection” or “assembly” of believers in a locale.

If *your brother* repents, restore him and celebrate his return to fellowship as the man who went looking for his lost sheep rejoiced when it was found (Matthew 18:11-13). But *if your brother refuses to listen even to the church* community to which *he* is called, *let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector*. Jews did not associate with Gentiles and tax collectors. They dealt with them as little as possible. If *your brother* chooses to persist in *his sins* and stand against the witness of *the church*, *he* is to lose his good standing a place of approval within *the church*.

On the one hand the command *let him be to you as a Gentile or tax collector* does not seem to be as severe as the command to stone the evil person and “purge the evil from your midst” that was set forth in the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 17:7; 19:19; 22:24). Though it follows the same principle to not allow sin the opportunity to gain a foothold or a place of honor within *the church* community. But we know God is not mocked (Galatians 6:7) He will judge His own. Lest we think this is less severe, consider what the author of Hebrews says about persistent sin.

“For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.”

(Hebrews 10:26-27)

This is a terrifying prospect. Willful sin, with knowledge of the truth, will be judged. The judgement fire that will purge this sin is the same judgement fire that will “consume the adversaries.” Paul paints this same picture in his letter to the Corinthians, speaking of someone whose deeds on earth are burned up in the fire of God's judgement.

“If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.”

(1 Corinthians 3:15)

The man whose deeds are all burned up will not himself be consumed by judgement fire, as will the adversaries. But judgement is judgement. And Jesus wants us to gain rewards rather than experience loss.

Losing one’s place within the kingdom is a severe loss. Recall that Jesus just told His disciples that it would be better for some if a millstone was tied around their neck and they were hurled into the depths of these sea, suffering a premature physical death, than to suffer the loss of reward associated with causing Jesus’s little ones to stumble (Matthew 18:6). Jesus said it would be better to cut off a limb or pluck out an eye than to lose everything in Gehenna (Matthew 5:29-30; 18:8-9). Losing rewards in God’s kingdom is not just an “Oh well, at least I am still in heaven” kind of loss. It will clearly be an immense loss, something we likely can’t really understand in this life.

Jesus is making clear the great benefit we give others when we lead them to see their best, true benefit comes through following in obedience to God. As terrible as it will be to lose kingdom rewards, this is not losing one’s place in God’s family or losing the gift of eternal life. We can never ‘out-sin’ God’s grace (Romans 5:20). This is similar to what happened to Esau, who remained a member of the family, but lost his inheritance (Hebrews 12:16). The devastation described in these passages is a loss of inheritance and place in God’s kingdom. Our deepest desire is to enter into the joy of our Master, and that can only occur through living as a faithful steward (Matthew 25:21,23).

It is not for us to decide rewards. God is the judge. He will distribute His rewards and punishments. But Jesus called His disciples to share the truth with gentleness and love whenever they see a *brother* going down the wide path (Matthew 7:13) leading to destruction. It is for the good of our *brother* and for the good of ourselves, lest we too stumble and fall. It is not for us to demonstrate superiority, and elevate ourselves. It is to be done in humility, after facing our own sinfulness (Matthew 7:1-3). This same principle is found in other parts of scripture. Some of these follow:

“Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.”
(Galatians 6:1)

Whenever we see our *brother* sinning *his* way to this kind of devastation, we are *to go to him* and *show him his fault* in order to save *him* from kingdom ruin. It is the loving thing to do.

“My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul [‘psuche’] from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

(James 5:19)

Kingdom life is meant to be lived in community. As sojourners striving to enter the kingdom by the narrow road, having brothers we can trust to have our best interest in mind (Proverbs 27:6) who gently point out our faults is a treasured blessing—if we will listen to them.

“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up.”
(Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)

Jesus’s teaching about how to restore a brother living in sin is a very practical way of doing what Moses commanded in Leviticus 19:17: “You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him.”

It was also an elaboration of what He told His disciples in Luke’s gospel:

“Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.”
(Luke 17:3)

Going *to your brother* in gentleness and love to show him the truth of his faults and the results they will yield is a way of serving him. It would be easier to not inconvenience yourself, or risk disturbing your brother and possibly losing his friendship. Going to him could prove costly. Not going to him could prove more costly still—both for *your brother*, but also for *you*.

Biblical Text

If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.