

Dealing With A Sinning Brother

An Attitude of Love and Forgiveness

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I would like to turn to a series of scriptures we often come to during the pre-Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread time.

I Corinthians 5:1-5 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife! And you [the Corinthians] are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Here in I Corinthians 5 we have the clearest example of disfellowshipping recorded in the Bible. And we see that it is for one of the most scandalous sins—an incestuous relationship between a church member and his father's wife. As Paul says, such things were not even talked about in the world of his day, and if you think about the world of his day, and the church he was writing to, that is saying something! It shows you how perverse this sin was.

Even in our own world, this sort of thing is only talked about on cable stations late at night, though it is getting worse and worse all the time.

Now the apostle's reaction upon hearing of this sin, and especially upon hearing that the Corinthians were so proud of their tolerance, was immediate and decisive—the offending church member was to be forbidden to fellowship with the church in Corinth. He took immediate action, and made a very harsh decision. Obviously he thought about it, but it was one of those things where he said, "This must stop, get that man out of the church!" It sounds very much like what Jude says, "You must handle some of these as if their actual clothes are full of wickedness." (Jude 23) You have to treat the sin, not with kid gloves but with a bat. You have to get rid of it right away!

If you will recall my sermons on the themes of I Corinthians that I gave a couple of years

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ago, the church there in Corinth lived in perhaps the most wicked city of the Roman Empire. It was the crossroads for shipping and travel in the Mediterranean, and like many ports do, it gathered the worst sort of people, and was open to every kind of activity known to mankind. And they were usually not the good kinds of activity. They were the perversions that were done in the dark.

It was also the site of the Isthmus Games every few years, and this created an Olympics-like type of atmosphere around the city that lured people into loosening their inhibitions. Corinth, you might say, was Las Vegas, Nevada, Rio de Janeiro, and the modern Olympic Village all rolled up into one hedonistic city. In other words, we could say, that at this time, Corinth was “Sin City.” So it is not entirely outside the realm of possibility that such a thing could happen and did happen among the church brethren in the city of Corinth.

Most of the converts in Corinth had been called out of that very perverse environment. They had a great deal to overcome. They had a lot of hardness to wickedness because they had grown up and lived among it all the time. To them it was not really unusual. They had to be shaken out of that way of looking at things. They saw the idolatry, the cheating, the lying, the perversities, the immoralities, and whatever else was happening there, every day. And they became calloused to it.

So, it is not unexpected that their conversion would be fraught with missteps, with backsliding, and plain lack of understanding of what God expected of them. Even though Paul had tried to teach them, he could not give them everything before he had to move on. And so, here he was writing back to them from a different city, trying to set things straight because they needed to be set straight.

We should also remember that Corinth at this point was a very young church. Paul had, just within the past couple of years, set it up there in the city of Corinth. And so, Paul, being their pastor, and seeing how horrendous this sin was, needed to deal with it quickly, decisively, and severely—the man was to be put out. There is no question.

He did this because the sin was terrible, certainly, and because he needed to get control of the situation before it got out of hand. He had to show these new Christians that sin cannot be coddled. It must be purged. That is what he then goes into, as you read the rest of chapter 5.

However, as we read the next sentence, Paul says,

I Corinthians 5:6a Your glorying is not good.

You can tell what his mind was really focused on here. He said, “Get that man out.” But, he was more concerned about the whole church having this attitude of “glorying” in their tolerance for sin. Perhaps Paul used this dramatic example to shake *them* out of their own sinful pride, because everyone in the church knew it was an incestuous relationship. Everybody was feeling good about it, really. They were glorying—boasting—that they were being so merciful and tolerant of this person. They were patting themselves on the back, proud of their so-called love.

But it was not true godly love. They were letting something go that they should not have let go, because it had gone beyond the confines of just that man knowing, or maybe one or two others, but it had gone and infected the entire church. So something had to be done.

We find in II Corinthians 2 and 7 that the situation ended well. Even though this was a heinous sin, and that the people in the church had been tolerating it, wrongfully, it still ended well because Paul’s letter (I Corinthians) was enough to shake them out of it, and they repented, and that is wonderful. So, both the sinful man, and the congregation repented. The people forgave the man, as well as did Paul, and they went forward together.

As we look at the passage, I want you to take note of the way that Paul approached the situation. We can get the impression from I Corinthians 5 and say that Paul said, “Get that man out of the church,” as if there was no thought, no consideration, and that it did not affect him at all. But we find that is not true.

II Corinthians 2:4-5 For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears, not that you should be grieved, but that you might know the love which I have so abundantly for you. But if anyone has caused grief, he has not grieved me, but all of you to some extent—

He is saying that the grief he got was not from the man necessarily, but from all of them!

II Corinthians 2:5b not to be too severe [but “Yeah, you really hurt me,” Paul says.]

II Corinthians 2:6 This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man,

He is saying that it was the right thing to do, and the whole church was behind it, and it solved the problem.

II Corinthians 2:7 so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow.

So, the man was very sorry, very grieved by what he had done, that he had sinned to such an extent, and he was basically wallowing in his sorrow, and Paul said, “Okay, forgive him, and bring him back into the church because this sorrow could eat him up, and that wouldn't be good either.”

II Corinthians 2:8-11 Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him. For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.

In effect, Paul is saying, “There could be a possibility of Satan taking the situation as it has evolved, and making it worse because we're not doing what we should be doing in forgiving the man and bringing him back into our fellowship.” These lingering bits of distrust and lack of forgiveness could make things worse. He also says, “Bring this man back into your fellowship, forgive one another, because we don't want Satan taking this situation any further.”

Do you see the way that Paul approached this?

Paul was very thoughtful, very considerate, very loving, and very emotional about this situation. He got it under control, and then he made sure that the relationships in the Corinthian church were repaired.

Now, I specifically came to this example in the books of Corinthians because it is the most extreme and most explicit of its kind in Scripture. There is nothing really like it elsewhere. There is a place where the apostle John tells the congregation not to fellowship with some certain man. But, this one has the most information on it.

However, in that it is the most extreme, it is not the normal. Do you understand that? It is on the far end of the spectrum of how to deal with a sinning brother. It is not the rule, but it is the exception. It is not how we are supposed to handle most sins in the church. Hopefully most sins in the church are not of this magnitude, and do not need to be handled like this. Hopefully, most sins in the church are not known by everyone, and not dividing the church. Most times, when a church member sins, it is done in a corner, and maybe no one knows about it. Or, maybe only one or two other people might know about it. And that is the way that it should stay.

So, what we have seen here in I Corinthians 5 is an extreme example where Paul had to come in with a big stick, and take care of the urgent matter forcefully. Most other situations, however, should be dealt with more gently, privately, and carefully.

As the Chinese proverb goes, “Don’t use a hatchet to remove a fly from your friend’s forehead.”

Although I tried not to give the impression in my last sermon that we should tolerate or condone sin, some may have taken it that way. So, this sermon will concentrate on how to deal with a sin in a brother, because there are times when we must deal with it.

Now, in the past, and especially our experience in Worldwide Church of God in some church areas, ministers seemed to have a zero-tolerance policy; a kind of hair-trigger disfellowshipping gun, and if they heard of any kind of sin, they were out of there. That did not happen all the time; there were others who did it properly. But, I am just saying that there are those with that experience in the past.

On the other hand, there are some members who have pointed their fingers and flapped their gums about their brethren’s sins, and made matters that should have stayed covered into a congregation-wide controversy.

Neither of those things—the hair trigger disfellowshipment or the finger pointing—shows the love that we are to have toward our brethren.

So, if you get nothing more out of this sermon remember this sentence: We are to deal with our sinning brethren as *brothers*, not sinners. This encapsulates what I want to say today. It is not **SINNING** brethren, rather than sinning *brethren*—brothers. Understand that? The emphasis is supposed to be on the right syllable. We are to deal with our sinning brethren as brothers, not sinners.

Now, as we begin on how to deal with a sinning brother, we need to lay some

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groundwork, some principles that undergird our relationships with our brethren. So, I will take you through various succinct scriptures that show where any kind of dealing with a brother must begin.

The first is from a passage in Jesus' Passover message to His disciples. So, it is very pertinent to us at this time.

John 15:12 "This is My commandment [when Christ speaks like this, we should listen] that you love one another as I have loved you.

This is such a simple saying, but it is so difficult to accomplish and put into practice in our life. He had mentioned this earlier in His sermon found in John 13:34 and He said that it was a *new* commandment that He had given to them, that you love one another. He went on to say, "By this shall all men know that you are My disciples if you love one another."

So, this is His marching order to us. Are we not His disciples? Are we not His brothers and sisters? Are we not His church? This "loving one another" is to be the hallmark of God's people on the earth.

John 13:35 "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

That is how they will recognize you. They will say, "Look at how much this person loves his brother or sister in the church. That person must be a Christian." That is our identifying mark. They cannot see the Holy Spirit in us, but they should see our love for one another.

And, note the high standard, here. He does not say, "Just love one another." He says, "Love one another as I have loved you." Whoa! That is hard! That standard is way above what we are capable of doing. But, it is what we are to shoot for. None of us can reach that standard. But, we have got to try in our relationships with one another to show the same love as if Jesus Christ were in you (and yes, He is in you), and are treating that brother with the same love that were Jesus Christ there (and yes, He is there) would do.

That is hard. But, this is the first principle of how to deal with your brethren. Love them as Jesus Christ loves them. This is very, very hard.

Now, this does not give us very much wiggle room. If we go back through the life of Christ as found in the gospels, you will see that He generally showed great compassion for sinners. As a matter of fact, that is how He was known among the Jews. “Why do you spend all your time with winebibbers? Gluttons? Tax collectors? The very dregs of society? All those people, we wouldn’t dare be seen with.” But, Jesus, even with what we saw last time with the adulteress in John 8, He says, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.” He treated her very gently. He told her the right thing to do, to go and repent, but He did not throw stones.

So, just remember that the primary principle in dealing with our brethren is we are to love one another with the same love that Christ has for us and them.

The next principle to add to the love of Christ:

Philippians 2:3-4 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

So, we are to add to the love of Christ, humility and consideration—considering our brother better than we are. Whoa! A person pointing out another’s sin almost automatically feels superior to the sinner. “Look at what he did! I can’t believe it! I would never!” A person who points the finger of judgment at another comes across as a critic and a judge. And, even if he does not intend that his words come across as superior, or that his attitudes comes across as exalted in some way, yet it is almost impossible not to appear this way to the person you are accusing. Once you accuse somebody, they are put on the defensive. “Who is he to say that about me? Who does he think he is? Where does he get the right? Is he my judge? Who made him the policeman?” This is just an automatic reaction by human nature. But, we are supposed to come across to the person with lowliness of mind, esteeming them better than we are. And the situation in pointing out sin to another person with human nature in the mix makes it almost impossible to come across right.

Philippians 2:4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

This goes to motive! Are we, when we point out someone’s sin, really looking out for the

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other's best interest? Or is it an excuse? Are we really looking out for our own interests? That is, we are exalting ourselves by humiliating them? We need to think: Why are we doing this? Is it really to help them? Is it really done out of love to put them back on the right path? Or, are we somehow grinding them under our heel? We have to consider that. Can we see how dangerous pointing out sin can be? We are dealing with very fine principles here, and it is easy to fall short of the standard. In fact, pointing out another person's sin may expose us in ways that we never imagined. Us—the pointer out of sin! So we need to be very careful if we feel the need to do this.

So we have love, and now we have added humility and looking out for their best interest. Now, we add:

Matthew 7:1-5 "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? "Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Here we add Jesus' basic instruction on judging. If I can boil down what He said to a very clear succinct phrase, it is "Avoid judging others, but if you must, be extremely careful, because it will come back on you." Clearly, we must, at times, make judgments. We must evaluate situations and people. We must discriminate from time to time. It is second nature for us to analyze others, and draw conclusions. We do this the first instant we meet anybody. "I knew right away he was a crook! He just had that look in his eye." It is like we are "reading" their spirit. We see them, and they are wearing this flamboyant suit, and they carry a violin case, and you just know that they are a gangster, right?

It is your first impression. You automatically made an analysis and a judgment on that person, and you have only seen him for a couple of seconds. It is the way that the mind works. We do this automatically. But, these are our opinions of others, and I want to make a distinction on the term.

We have opinions. It is okay to have opinions. It should be based in fact. Sometimes our opinions are not based in facts, and we are way out of line. But, we are allowed to have opinions. The problem is when we raise those opinions into judgments. And then we take those opinions and condemn other people for unfounded things.

So, what Jesus is doing here is warning us against rash, harsh, unjust, and uncharitable judgments of other people, because each one of those things—rash, harsh, unjust, and uncharitable judgments—is a form of condemnation, which is presumptuous, and sinful, and therefore put *ourselves* under judgment. So we have to be very careful, because it says in John 5:22 that the Father has committed all judgment to the Son—not to us! We must be careful. What are we doing sitting on His throne?

Remember that we should not judge another man's servant. We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. So, be careful, because if we start judging other people, it will come back on us, especially because we are taking over His job, and He does not like that. It is His prerogative to judge, not ours.

As mentioned before, especially in verse 2, Jesus warns us that judgment is reciprocal—it is like a boomerang. The judgment you send out, is what is going to be coming right back at you. So you had better be careful.

Others will see the way that we judge other people, and they will judge us to the same degree. "Oh, he deserved it! You should see the way that he treated Johnny." People do this all the time. They see, well if he did someone else wrong, then it is just karma (to use that term, but I do not believe in it, I am just using it), it is just the way that it should be, that he should be treated like that in his own right.

It is implied, here, and stated explicitly elsewhere that God Himself will judge us the way that we have judged others. So, we need to be careful.

If we want mercy and forbearance from God in the last judgment, then we need to show the same mercy and forbearance to others. This links this idea to the second great commandment—love your neighbor as yourself. Judge your neighbor as you want to be judged, which is the Golden Rule.

Matthew 7:12 "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

You can see the theme that is running through this chapter. Whatever judgment you mete out, as it says in the King James Version, that same judgment is going to be meted out back to you. Remember that the word "mete" means "measured," as it says in the New King James; or "metered." So if you measure out judgment to somebody harshly, it will more than likely be harsh on you. You would rather not have that, I think. I would not.

Then Jesus gives the example about the speck in the other man's eye, while you have the plank in your own. The speck has been translated in other Bibles as "splinter." Actually, it is a "mote," which is more like a piece of chaff—grain husk or some such small debris, or something that can lightly fly away in the breeze—almost dust. That shows you how small and insignificant this brother's sin is, whereas you have this huge 4 x 8 plank or beam in your own eye.

Jesus uses hyperbole, here, to show the difference. Here you have this huge column in your eye, and you are trying to see the little speck of dust in the other person's eye, and criticizing them for it? You are supposed to see the difference, here. It is judging a person's sin, which may be inconsequential. It may be small, and maybe already taken care of. The man or woman has already repented of this sin. Whatever it is, it is not significant enough to risk your eternal life over, is it? As a matter of fact, you had better be taking your time to figure out why you have this beam in your own eye! Quit looking at the other one so critically.

His question is, "Why are we being such a hypocrite? Why are we trying to appear righteous and zealous when it is clear that we are running others down to hide our own inadequacies and wickedness?" Well, it is clear, because everybody else can see this beam. Then, when they see you putting somebody else down for something that is really trivial, it shows the person to be a hypocrite.

In this same illustration of the speck and beam, Jesus is speaking about two related concepts: Nit-picking, which is being super-critical of many minor points. It appears like monkeys sitting and grooming each other in the jungle, picking nits out of each other's fur, always picking, trying to find it, whatever it is. Actually, in the wild they are doing good for their fellow, but the idea here with Christ is that we are not doing good for our fellow—we are just picking at the brethren in the church, and causing a great deal of trouble in the process.

The other related concept is disproportionality. It basically means, "Blowing matters out of proportion," or making mountains out of molehills. What Jesus is showing here is that in most cases they begin with trivial offenses, mistakes, or transgressions. Whatever they are, they are almost insignificant. But we seem to make a big deal out of them.

Over the long haul, from Jesus' perspective, these are little things that may truly be errors, faults, or mistakes, but they are unimportant, or easily overcome without being pointed out by anybody else. They are things that normally in the course of a converted person's life he is going to overcome. They are not huge salvation issues, in other

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words. They are small things that in the course of conversion, when one puts on wisdom, he sees that these things are not good, and he purges them from his life. They are not things, though, that need urgent pointing out by his fellows. He will take care of it. God will take care of them, or the growing converted person will take care of them.

In any case, in the vast majority of cases, they are not worth endangering or ruining a relationship over. It is too small. It is not a battle ground where we want to die.

So we have to be very judicious in choosing which battles to fight, because many are not worth the cost. The cost could be eternal life for one or the other, because they are things that can get out of control. There are many things that we should pass over and leave in God's hands. There is plenty of time. God is working with each of us, and He will take care of it.

Now, in verse 5 our Savior commands us to clean up our own act first. Take care of your own house. The reason is so that we will have the proper perspective and experience to truly help others. But, that is not going to happen until a lot of experience has taught us a great deal of wisdom. He implies that we will be qualified to remove the speck out of our brother's eyes only after years of living God's way. And that is because we have that beam in our eye, and it shows that we have not grown a whole lot yet. We are still having trouble with big sins. We need to work on ourselves first.

This also shows that this judging others, trying to remove the speck from your brother's eye is a rather *rare* activity, because the wisdom that we accrue in overcoming our particular sin will in its own way teach us to be very careful in dealing with others afflicted with that sin, because we will have gone through the experience of trying to overcome it, and we will know how sensitive we were, and we will treat the other very gently, understanding that person will probably have to take a long time to overcome it.

Now the whole passage of verses 1 through 5 screams, "**Caution** when judging!" We have not been called to be sheriffs or judges, but brethren. Ephesians 4 tells us that we are parts of a united self-edifying body growing up into the image of Christ. We need to be careful in judging our brethren.

One more. I purposely put this one here to bracket it with the love of Christ and number one, and this one as the fourth one to end the list.

Mark 11:25-26 "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven

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forgive your trespasses."

So we started with love of Christ, then we added humility with esteeming others better than ourselves, looking out for their best interest. We then took Jesus' instruction on judging which says to avoid it, and be very careful if you need to do it. So now, the fourth one is to forgive your brother. Forgive him! Notice what he says. "If you have anything against anyone, forgive him!" It is very straightforward. There are no loopholes. If you have anything against anyone, forgive him! And then He adds, "So that your Father in heaven may also forgive you." If you do not, neither will your Father in heaven forgive you.

Wow. That is a "whoa!"

As I said, these are the elements—the principles, the attitudes—that we need to have when we are coming before our brother who has sinned against us. That is a tough one. Do not stand aloof in your pride like the Pharisees did with the publican. Do not wait for the person you have something against to wallow in abject humility at your feet begging you for forgiveness. Just go ahead, and forgive him! Be pro-active. Start the process yourself. You will feel a whole lot better. Beat him to the punch.

Be like God in all of this. Be generous and gracious in your forgiveness, because Jesus says here, very clearly, that our own forgiveness hangs in the balance. If we want God to forgive us, we had better start forgiving our brethren of those things little and big that they may have done against us.

Do you hold grudges? God may not be forgiving your sins. Are you withholding your fellowship and affection from a brother or sister over some ancient ridiculous snub? God may well be withholding forgiveness from you.

Have you ever considered this? In Matthew 25, remember, Jesus said, "If you did it to the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." He takes that withholding of affection, and fellowship, He takes that grudge personally, because you are withholding your love and fellowship from one of His brothers or sisters in whom He also lives. Did you ever think of it that way? If you hold a grudge against one of your brethren, you are holding a grudge against Christ! This is not good.

But, this is what the scripture says.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says,

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Matthew 5:24 "Leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

It is not the other way around, here. I will just clear things up with God and things will be better. Well, no. It says to reconcile with your brother, and then present yourself before God. And the easiest way to start the process of reconciling with your brother is to forgive him. Let it go. It is not that important.

When we are all in the Kingdom of God together, we will all look back and say, "That was stupid! What did it really mean, anyway?" "So, you didn't dance with me at the Feast dance." It means nothing. "So you didn't like my casserole?" Most of the time it is just that trivial. We get our back up about some offense that does not make a hill of beans. This is that disproportionality thing I was talking about earlier.

Let it go. It is not important. It is not an issue of salvation.

Now that we have these attitudes and principles in hand, we need to consider Jesus' instruction about dealing with a sinning brother.

Matthew 18:15-17 is the passage that most *clearly* deals with this topic. We need to look at it carefully, and (pay attention to this) when we use it in those rare circumstances that we have to do this, make sure that we follow its instructions **to the letter**. Leave nothing out. Do not let yourself think that your particular situation warrants bending the rules. That is a big mistake. If we skip a detail, or God forbid skip an entire step, we are asking for the situation to blow up in our faces. These instructions are very specific, they are very detailed, they are a command from your Savior, "This is how you do it. Do it *precisely* this way." That is why He gave these instructions in the first place. It is not for us to go mixing and matching, and thinking that we are so smart that we can do it some other way.

Now, before we jump into the instructions, notice first the context for a few moments.

The chapter begins with a question, "Who is the greatest in God's Kingdom? And Jesus answers that, "We must be converted, we must turn from our evil way, and we must have the humble attitude of a child." Then, He adds (this is very important because this gets the ball rolling) in verse 5, "And whoever receives one little child like this in My Name receives Me." This is very, very important.

Verse 5 sets the tone for the entire chapter. And He adds here that we must be willing to

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receive, accept, have a relationship with those with whom God calls as if they were Jesus Christ Himself. There are no exceptions. Sorry. The little child that He is talking about—this little one—is one of God’s children, just like you. And so He says that we have to receive our brethren just as if they were Jesus Christ Himself.

What does this sound like? Principle number one—love one another as I have loved you. That is the main principle behind this entire chapter. When we deal with one another, this has to be the strong basis of every word and action.

So, if we are truly seeking the Kingdom of God, we are being transformed into Christ's image, and we are becoming humble as a little child, we need to be receiving God’s other children as if they were Jesus Himself. This is part of it.

Yes, we have the goal of going to the Kingdom of God. We are doing our part in overcoming and growing and becoming converted. We are trying to be humble. But, we also must fellowship with the other children of God in love. They are important to our salvation, because they are also parts of Christ's body. They are the people we are going to be in a relationship with *forever*—an intimate relationship with these people—the called of God, the saints.

So be very careful about the relationships among one another. This is *very* important.

He then next warns us against offending our brothers and sisters in the next few verses, and also talks about avoiding sin at all costs—cutting your arm off if it offends you—as it were. Notice, that His instruction is directed at us. It is not about correcting them, it is not about making them do something. It is us.

He says, “It’s your responsibility not to offend them. It’s your responsibility not to sin, giving them a bad example, and leading them astray.” So, He is putting *all the responsibility* on us. *The onus is on us*. It is *not* on the other person. We need to *not* offend them. We need to quit sinning, and be a good example to them.

In verse 10 is the Parable of the Lost Sheep, where the shepherd goes after the one, leaving the 99. Notice how this begins.

Matthew 18:10 Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones.

That is the theme of this parable—despising that other sheep. Why are despising that other sheep? Because it has gone astray. And, who is it that goes after it? Us? No. It is

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the Good Shepherd who goes after that one, the despised one. Why? Because he is also part of the flock. He wants to bring the despised one back into the flock. And if Christ is willing to do this, to go to all kinds of effort to bring that straying one back into the fold and fellowship, what should we be doing as His disciples, His followers? We should be doing whatever we can to help that one who has gone astray to come back into our fellowship. These are all strings on a pearl necklace, so to speak. They all fit together. The instruction, one after another, is getting us in the right frame of mind to understand what He is talking about here, and will be getting to in a moment.

So, here in this particular place, we need to remember that God is working with our sinning brother too. And, we should be loathe to interfere with what God is doing, especially by despising them.

I want to skip over the instruction, here, for just a moment, and we will see that the last section in the chapter is Peter's question about how often do we forgive a brother if he sins against us. And Jesus said an infinite amount of times—countless times. Always forgive your brother.

And then He gives the parable of the unforgiving servant, telling us that we need to try our hardest to emulate the perfect forgiveness of God the Father, or else,

Matthew 18:32-35 "Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. [Jesus' comment is] So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

He dangles us over the Lake of Fire over this issue! Do you see how important it is that our relationships among each other are loving, accepting, supporting, helpful, and united? This is really serious.

Now, obviously Jesus realizes that there will be times when we must say something or another to a church member who has sinned against us. We are not going to avoid it all of the time. Sometimes we just have to clear the air, or make him aware of what he has done, because he may not even know how a word or whatever has affected us. That is fine, but we have to make sure that we are well-armed with these attitudes and principles—love, humility, forgiveness, mercy, goodwill, non-condemnatory demeanor,

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and really trying to do the best for them.

Then we can follow these instructions.

Matthew 18:15-20 "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

Perhaps the most important thing that we need to take from the instructions given, particularly from verses 15-17 is how delicately Jesus tells us to handle this. Like I said, every little detail, here, is important. We need to make sure we follow them precisely.

First of all, the matter under discussion should be a **sin**—notice, He says just that—if your brother **sins** against you. The word, here, is hamartia, which should be understood as “transgression against God’s law.” This is something of a higher nature than just a slight or an offense against you. It is an actual sin. It is a salvation issue. This is a problem of consequence, whether salvation or division in the church. This is on a very high level we are talking about.

The second is that the sin should be against *you* personally. “If,” it says, “your brother sins against **you**.” This means that the sin was committed at your expense, or that it was directed at you personally. You are the direct victim of this sin—not your friend, not someone else that you care about, but this is something that was done to you. You are not a bystander, but were directly affected.

The third is, “Tell him his fault.” Notice how simple that is. Tell Him what he did wrong. Tell him his sin. This means that you are to make him aware of what he did. This does not mean to preach him a sermon, or to tell what a wretch he is. Your discussion is to be informative—informational—not confrontational, or preachy in any way. Once he knows what he has done, you have fulfilled your duty. “The ball is in his court.” It is, then, his responsibility as a son of God to apologize to you, and to seek forgiveness from God,

and repent.

Hopefully, he takes it well, and thanks you for helping him by saying something as, “I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware that it affected you that way, I didn’t mean it that way,” or some similar manner. And, if you have done it right, hopefully there will be no hard feelings, because he could see your love, your humility, that you are not preaching at him, that you only wanted to make sure that things are okay between you, and the relationship can go onward and upward. You have actually covered the sin. It is just between you and him, and God alone. This is the best situation.

The fourth point is that he may not believe he has done anything wrong. Some people are a little hardheaded that way. So, in that event we must consider whether we want to take this to the next level or not. This does not mean that we *have* to take it to the next level. Consider whether it is worth taking to the next level or not. Will doing so cause more trouble? Evaluate how egregious the sin is. If the sin is egregious enough, we should probably go forward for his sake, not for yours. But, if you think the sin is bad enough, that it really needs to be dealt with because it has the potential of really being quite divisive to the church, or a salvation issue with him, then we should move forward. But consider, first, whether you should or not.

The fifth point is to take one or two others with you the next time you talk, and I want to impress you, here, that Jesus says to take one or two **witnesses**. “By two or three witnesses (you being one) every word may be established.” This is not your friend who you have told. This is someone who also saw whatever it was that caused the sin, and can give his own testimony as to the fact that it was a sin. They should not be just supporters who know of the sin from your hearsay. They are there to provide testimony that the sinner, indeed, committed a sin; to convict the sinner that he did wrong. Again, this is not to be a brow-beating. This is not to be a group drubbing of the person. It is not to be a counseling session. It is only to help the other person to acknowledge wrongdoing and apologize.

The sixth point is if he still refuses to admit his sin, Jesus says to take it to the church. However, this probably does not mean the whole church at this point, but to church authorities—a pastor, or shepherd. Remember that the overall principle is to show love, and confining the knowledge of the sin to as few people as possible is showing love. That is what my previous sermon was about. That is how we cover sin. We confine it to as few people as possible, so that it is not shouted from the rooftops. We want to keep things to as few people as possible.

Now, usually, this is the step where the minister gets involved, and hopefully he will act

Dealing With a Sinning Brother by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

as an objective observer and mediator to get to the bottom of the story, and figure out what actually happened. And if there is any counseling to be done, this minister will be the one to do it. It is probably better for anybody directly involved in the situation not to play that part.

Point number seven is if the person is still intransigent, and it is clear from all the testimony that has been given that he truly did sin, then the best course of action would be disassociation. Treat him no longer as a Christian brother, as he is being stubborn and unrepentant. This is the point where disfellowshipping would occur.

The next verses (18-20) say that if this is the decision of the church—reached righteously—that God will back it up. But, we have to be very careful that it is righteous, it is loving, that we went through these steps perfectly, we did it truly out of godly love.

Now, it is clear that this process here in Matthew 18:15-17 is particular, it is intricate, it is considerate, and it is based on outgoing concern for the brother who has sinned. It is not to make us look better, but it is so that the other person would repent. It is not judgmental, it is not vindictive, it is not punishing in any way, it is not retaliatory, or anything similar. It is done to restore the brother to fellowship, because it is within this fellowship that he would be able to grow the most.

Let us conclude by looking at how James finishes his epistle. Put into the back of your mind as you think about this how this is in the context of prayer. In many ways, one could consider that is on James' mind most of all; that what he says to do here is accomplished mostly through prayer.

James 5:19-20 Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

That is the attitude that we need to have in dealing with a brother or sister in the faith who has sinned against us. It is done in love, to save him from eternal death, and to cover his many sins that could lose him his salvation. We are all on the same path, and our behavior toward one another should ensure that we all enter the Kingdom of God together.