

JESUS TEACHES HOW TO TREAT A BELIEVER WHO SINS

- Life Application Commentary

The goal of confronting individual sin in the church is always repentance, forgiveness, and restoration.

The method for trying to achieve this worthy goal is described by Jesus in this text.

Matthew 18:15-17... "If another believer sins (*against you, **) go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. 16 But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. 17 If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won't accept the church's decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector." NLT

Matthew 18:15

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one."NRSV

These are Jesus' guidelines for dealing with those who sin against us. These guidelines were meant for Christians (not unbelievers) and for discipline and conflict resolution in the context of the church, not in the community at large. These steps are designed to reconcile those who disagree so that church members can live in harmony.

The two earliest manuscripts omit the words "against you," and indeed there is a very high degree of doubt about their inclusion. The addition of "against you" focuses the sin in the area of personal offenses; its exclusion means believers could confront other believers when they see sin in their lives, not just when the sin is interpersonal. Of course, since most sin is interpersonal, these offenses must be dealt with properly.

Step One: Jesus explained that the person who has been offended must first *go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone*. A personal confrontation, carried out in love, will allow the sinning member the opportunity to correct himself or herself. However, the person doing the confronting ought to be very certain of his or her accusation and that he or she is doing this out of true humility with a view to restoration of the other (see Galatians 6:1-4). This call to confrontation is not a license for a frontal attack on every person who hurts or slights us. Many misunderstandings and hurt feelings can be solved at this stage. This saves church leaders from getting involved in everyone's personal concerns. Personal confrontation also keeps believers from gossiping with one another. Instead, believers are to be mature enough to go directly to the source and deal with the problem at that level.

When someone wrongs us, we often do the opposite of what Jesus commands. We turn away in hatred or resentment, seek revenge, or engage in gossip. By contrast, we should go to that person first, as difficult as that may be. Then we should forgive that person as often as he or she needs it (18:21-22). This restores relationships. However, there can be no forgiveness when there is no repentance.

Matthew 18:16

"But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses."^{NRSV}

Step Two: If the personal confrontation yields nothing and the confronter is *not listened to*, then he or she is to proceed to step two. In this step, the confronter takes *one or two others along*. This is backed up by Old Testament law (see Deuteronomy 19:15). It is unclear from the text whether these "others" come along in order to support the confronter by bringing additional testimony about the erring person's sin, or if they are witnesses to this second meeting so as to give testimony should the erring person need to be brought before the church (step three, 18:17). These "others" also ought to help in reconciliation at this second meeting, hoping to settle the matter privately. An erring person might be willing to listen to the wise counsel of these "others."

Matthew 18:17

"If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church."^{NRSV}

Step Three: If the additional witnesses can accomplish no reconciliation and *the member refuses to listen to them*, then the third step is to *tell it to the church*. (This is the second and last time that the word "church" is used in the Gospels, see 16:18). The objective at this point still is not disciplinary action but helping the sinning person to see his or her fault, repent, and be restored.

"And if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."^{NRSV}

Step Four: Even the law of love has its limit. The fourth and last step is to disassociate from that person. The goal, even through this difficult act, is to help the person see his or her sin and repent. Paul recommended such action to the church in Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15). The person should be treated *as a Gentile and a tax collector*; such people were shunned by the Jews. Matthew recorded this saying for his Jewish audience who would understand the metaphor for the kind of avoidance Jesus demanded in this situation. In the phrase "let such a one be to you," the word "you" is singular — while the decision of the church is made corporately, the avoidance is acted out at the individual level.

While all people in the church are "sinners saved by grace," and while no church will ever be free of members who commit sin, the person described here has a huge blind spot to sin, and many people can see it. Yet this person refuses to listen to those whom God sends to help. In the church, believers are to teach, challenge, encourage, admonish, help, and love each other. But there can be no true fellowship with a believer who refuses the loving guidance of his or her fellow church members. - Life Application Commentary

It is sad but Jesus makes it clear that in the church there will be some occasions when church members will have no other alternative but to follow His four step process in dealing with persons who persist in sinful actions with no concern or desire to repent and change. Jesus also makes it clear that there will be times when church members will have to go as far as to disassociate themselves from members who refuse to repent from a lifestyle of sin. To not do so would be to encourage the wrong doer to think that a sinful lifestyle is acceptable with God and repentance and change are optional. It would also send a message that Christ and His church have no real standards worth being committed to and that God's many pronouncements about the consequences of sin are merely fables. In today's culture that believes real love must accept as "fine" any lifestyle that a person adopts, Jesus' teaching on sin in the church is not popular with many church members. The reason being that far too many "Christians" do not have much knowledge of the Bible they say they believe.