

“Restoring our Fallen Brethren”  
(Matthew 18:15-17)

Last week, we were considering the wonderful gift our Lord gives us in the ability to think and communicate. It is the most powerful gift that we have of all of those which the Lord gives to men. Just think about the ways we can use it. With it, we can bless and worship God and build up His saints in love and holiness. With it, we can comfort those who are downcast. With it, we can share the good news of what God in Christ has done for the salvation of lost sinners. This gift truly is a wonderful blessing, one that only men and angels share from among all of God’s creatures. But because it is so powerful, this is why we also need to be very careful how we use it. With it, we can blaspheme God, attack His saints, and divide the body of Christ. It can turn people away from the Gospel more easily than it can draw them near. Satan knows how effective words are. This is why he constantly uses them to attack the church of God. And because this is a weapon best used within the ranks of his enemy, he often enlists us to do his dirty work. How many within the walls of the church have believed they were doing God’s will in exposing some sin, when in fact they were really furthering the plans of their enemy, and were themselves sinning against God because of their lack of love? Solomon reminds us that we must always seek to cover the faults of others, not expose them unnecessarily. To cover over a sin is to seek love and reconciliation. But to expose it unnecessarily is to separate even the most intimate of friends and bring reproach upon the name of Christ. Our motive must always be that of love. If it isn’t, it doesn’t matter what we do, it will be sinful. Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). If the love is there, so is our testimony for Christ. But if it isn’t, neither is that testimony.

Our motive in dealing with sin must always be that of love and reconciliation. If it isn’t, then no matter what we may try to do, we will plant the seeds of division within the body, we will end up tearing Christ’s body apart. The question that we need to consider this morning is when should we bring it to someone else’s attention and when should we not? We can’t always cover over and hide our brother or sister’s sin. Sometimes it is so serious, not to expose it would be sinful on our part and would provide the devil an opportunity to continue to do injury to the body of Christ. The answer is that there is a time to hide sin and a time to reveal it, a time to cover over it and a time to expose it. This is what Jesus tells us in our text this morning. What He says is that ***Sin must first be dealt with in private, and if it can’t be resolved there, then it must be exposed. But this must always be done out of love and a desire for reconciliation, and never for retribution.***

In Matthew 18, Jesus deals with how to overcome sin and its separating effects when it becomes a roadblock to entering into His kingdom, whether that sin is ours, or someone else’s. First, He warns us that we must never be the cause of someone else’s failure to enter the kingdom. He says in verse 6, “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea.” Whether the one who believes in Christ is young or old, the warning is still the same: we must always be the means of bringing men closer to Christ, never further away. He pronounces a curse upon those who would drive men away, “Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!” (v. 7). Next, He tells us that we must be

careful that we don't ensnare ourselves and keep ourselves from entering that kingdom. If our hand or foot or eye causes us to stumble, we must cut them off and cast them away from us. It would be better to enter into life crippled, lame or blind, than to be whole and cast into the fiery hell. What He means, of course, is that it would be far better to put to death the sins we are most susceptible to, than holding onto them, to be cast into the lake of fire. Finally, He shows us how precious every one of His sheep are to His Father, and how the Lord wants us to show the most concern for those who have fallen into sin. If one of His sheep should stray from the fold, it is much more important to the Father that that particular sheep be sought after and found, than that the other ninety-nine be ministered to. This tells us that our priority in the church, both for its ministers and members, is the recovery of those who have fallen into sin. If we know someone who has gone astray, we shouldn't neglect him under the pretense of caring for those who haven't, but must concentrate our efforts on bringing that lost sheep back into the fold.

But now this raises the question of what is the best way to go about this. Sometimes when one of Christ's lambs goes astray, it is something that all the other sheep know about, because it is a public sin. When that happens, it immediately becomes all of our responsibility to do what we can to bring them back in. But at other times, the sin they commit might be known only to a few or maybe only to one. What should be done then? Our Lord gives us step by step instructions in our passage this morning.

The first thing we should note here is that Jesus is referring to real sins that are committed and not merely to differences of opinion. As long as the church is on earth, there will be differences of opinion, because as long as we are here, we will still have sin living in our souls. This sin will keep the eyes of our minds at least partially veiled, so that we won't be able to see things as clearly as we should. It is the sinfulness of our hearts that sometimes causes us to lean to one interpretation rather than another, when that interpretation is far from the truth. It is also sin that will blind us to the fact that we make mistakes and have errors in our judgment. Sometimes pride will cause us to hold fast to a position for no other reason than that we simply choose to believe it. We saw last week how our Lord wants us to deal with these kinds of differences. We should cover over them in love. We must not let these things cause divisions among us, but love each other in spite of them. It's when we insist on our own way and refuse to fellowship with anyone who doesn't hold our position that we cause divisions in the body of Christ. When I was at seminary, one of students there believed that the King James version of the Bible was the only legitimate translation and that anyone who didn't hold to that version alone could not be a Christian. He used to put evangelistic tracts in the box of one of my professors, simply because he used the NIV translation in his classes. Sometimes we become so narrow in our opinions that only a few people in our estimation are true Christians. Only a few will ever make it into the kingdom of heaven, and even fewer are fit to fellowship with. At times like this we need to remind ourselves that, even though the vast majority of mankind will ultimately be lost, the number of the true saints is still so vast a multitude that no man is able to count them. We also need to remind ourselves that when we adopt these exclusive positions and look upon everyone else with contempt, that we become more obnoxious in the eyes of God than those we condemn. While we think we are fighting for Christ's honor, we are actually dishonoring Him because of our lack of love.

But of course real sins also take place in the body of Christ, and when they do, we need to know how to deal with them in the right way.

First, Jesus says, "If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother" (v. 15). In the King James, the words are added, "against thee,"

meaning that if your brother sins against you, then you are to go to him. This difference is there because there is a variation in the manuscripts. But certainly, both are true. If your brother sins against you, you must go to him, and to seek to be reconciled to him. And even if the sin he commits is not against you, you are still to go to him. Paul tells us in Galatians 6:1 that we must be concerned for all our brothers and sisters in Christ. He writes, “Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted.” Jesus is telling us here that if we know our brother or sister is in sin, then we must go to them and seek to bring them to repentance.

But now notice how we are to do this. First, He says we must go to him. We are not to let that offense, especially if it is committed against us, foment in our hearts until it gives birth to bitterness. Those who tend to shy away from confrontation often fall into this snare. They are too afraid to talk to the person who offended them and so they retaliate with hatred. But far from bringing about the reconciliation that Christ desires, this only gives birth to more sin. If we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves, and even to love our enemies, how much more are we called upon to love those who are our brethren? If we hate them instead, we are the ones who are sinning. Jesus calls the offending party “brother” twice in this verse, to remind us that we are dealing with a family member, one that is a part of the same body with us, one that we will be living with forever in heaven. We are not to harbor hatred and bitter resentment in our hearts against our brother or sister. We are to love them. And if we really do love them, this means that we must confront them if they have done something wrong, not for the purpose of hitting them over the head because of the injury they have caused us or someone else, but for the purpose of reconciling that person to us because we love them, and because we love Christ, and want to see them reconciled to Him. Jesus commands us, “If your brother sins, go and reprove him.” The goal is, “If he listens to you, you have won your brother.” If we don’t go and become spiteful instead, then someone needs to come to us and rebuke us for our sin.

But notice something else Jesus says here. He says that when a sin has been committed, we are to go and reprove them “in private.” In the original, He says, “Between you and him alone.” This reminds us that we are not to go to someone else with our brother’s sin, but only to him. Now it is true that sometimes we might need to seek counsel from someone we trust, when we’re really not sure what we’re supposed to do or the best way to go about it. But we must be careful that it really is counsel that we are after, and that we are not expressing a sinful desire to gossip about it or to vent our frustration to someone else. Jesus says that this sin must be dealt with in private, just between you and him alone. It’s a different matter if the sin is public, so that everyone already knows about it. But if it isn’t, telling others about it won’t help the situation. It will only tend to make others more suspicious of them. I remember a long time ago when I was in High School, and I worked in the evenings at a gas station, a man, who was a good friend of the owner, called and wanted to have a flat tire worked on very close to closing time. Usually I didn’t mind, but on that particular occasion, another employee was there who immediately began to tell me all of the bad things he could think of about that man, especially the fact that he liked to inconvenience others by asking for help at the last minute. Foolishly I listened to my friend and didn’t give the customer an opportunity to demonstrate his own character and very reluctantly fixed his tire, which put a rift between myself and the man, as well as between myself and the owner. I learned a very valuable lesson, but the price was high. I’m not sure if the owner or that customer ever forgave me. If my friend had simply followed Christ’s words here and had either gone to that customer with his grievances or simply covered over them, rather than telling me about them, he could have spared me the consequences of a judgmental spirit.

How many within the body of Christ have had their minds poisoned in the same way by listening to those who may have been well-meaning, but who didn't restrict their comments to the ones who really needed to hear them?

But having said this, Jesus recognizes that this isn't always enough to remedy the problem. Sometimes when we go to our brethren in private, and reprove them for their sins, they still don't repent. What are we supposed to do then? Jesus says that it is still to remain relatively private. Now you are to take one or two more with you and go to that brother and confront him again. The reasons Jesus gives are two. The first is implied by the beginning of verse 17, "If he refuses to listen to them." The reason they come with you is to try and help you convince this brother that he has sinned and that he needs to repent. Perhaps if he doesn't respond to one, he will respond to two or three when they have had the opportunity to hear the facts and give their judgment. But again bear in mind the reason you are there: It's not to condemn, but to restore. Our Father rejoices more over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine who need no repentance. The second reason is, if he doesn't repent, there need to be two or three witnesses at his trial, the same number required by the Old Covenant Law. Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 19:15, "A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed." This is to lessen the possibility of someone being framed for something they didn't do. It isn't infallible. Naboth was still unjustly put to death on the testimony of two false witnesses (1 Kings 21:13). But still it makes it much less likely to happen.

But now lastly, what are we to do if they won't listen to us, or to the one or two others we take with us? Then it needs to be told to the church. This either means we are to tell the body of Christ so that all of the brethren might go to this brother and seek to restore him, or more likely, it refers to what Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8, where he says that when there is a dispute in the church, it ought to be brought before the courts of the church, and not before the unbelievers. If the brother refuses to listen even to the church, then Jesus says, he is to be put out of the church: "Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer" (v. 17). This is when a private matter becomes public, and again, it is only that the person who has sinned might be brought to repentance and restoration, not that he might be made an object of ridicule and condemnation.

Christ has given us in His Word an orderly way to deal with those who sin against us and others. I think we would all admit that if the church would follow His directions, it would go a long way in healing the divisions which are in her. Not only does this make reconciliation possible, it also makes it easier. When the matter has been cleared up and the brother reconciled, there isn't all the other damage to deal with, caused by others getting involved who had no business doing so. May the Lord then help us to follow His counsel for the good of His church, and may He most of all increase our love for one another, so that each other's true welfare will always be foremost in our hearts, in all we do. Our Lord tells us, if we truly love His people, then we truly love Him (1 John 4:20). Amen.