

CHRIST-HONORING CONFRONTATION

Do you remember the old commercial for American Express? “Don’t leave home without it”. Think of what that little saying implies. It makes the assertion that the American Express card is so vital, so necessary and so useful that it would be a mistake to ever leave your house unless you were taking the card with you. I can think of two passages of Scripture that are indispensable to the Christian life and unity within the church, yet for all of their importance they are frequently ignored. To ignore these passages is to invite trouble, individually and corporately. On the other hand, to put these passages into practice is to have great success, as God counts success. When I think of them I am tempted to say, “Don’t do Christianity without them”.

What are these two vital texts? They are Matthew 18:15-17 and Matthew 5:23-24. Every church that ever succumbed to division and faction, every relationship between two Christians that ever ended in defeat reflects a failure, at some level, to practice the commands found in these verses (please read them at this time). Please note that Jesus Christ Himself is the one who issued these commands.

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over”.
(Matthew 18:15)

Matthew 18:15 could not be more clear. If your brother/sister sins against you or offends you, go to him in PRIVATE. This doesn’t mean you first talk to five or six other people to complain about your brother. They should not hear one word of complaint from you. Your duty is to **go directly to your brother and to do it privately.**

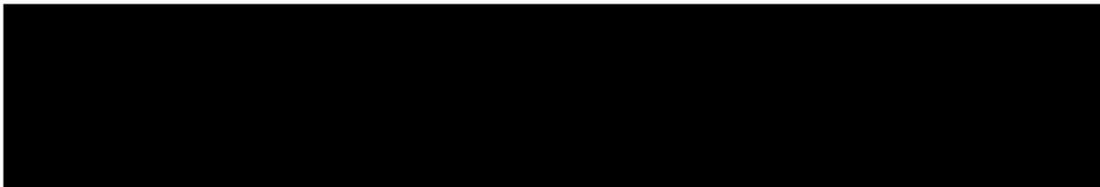
Why do you go to your brother? To win an argument? NO. To vent your anger? NO. To demand an apology? NO. You go to your brother to win him over. This doesn’t mean that our goal is to win him over to our point of view. To win him means to experience joint victory over the incident that divided the two of you. It means to be restored to a Christ-honoring relationship. If the issue was really to do with sin, it means apology and forgiveness have been carried out. If, after meeting together, it turns out that the issue was simply a misunderstanding, so much the better.

Folks, obedience to this passage is not optional. If I believe my brother has sinned against me or wronged me, and I speak of it to anyone other than the brother in question, I am sinning. If I decide not to confront, my only other option is to cover it in love and to FORGET ABOUT IT (1 Peter 4:8). No one else should ever hear about it.

We must also be careful not to listen to complaints of one Christian against another. If we provide a listening ear to Christian A who is upset at or has been offended by Christian B, we are joining Christian A in sinning against Christian B, even if Christian B committed the original sin against Christian A. In the nearly 2,000 years of local church history, probably no single internal factor has been more destructive than the disobedience of Christians when faced with a Matthew 18:15-17 situation.

Matthew 18:16-17 provides further instructions which need to be followed once step one (verse 15) has been carried out. These verses describe the corporate responsibility of the congregation. It is not my purpose here to give a detailed explanation of all the mechanics involved in the fulfilling of Matthew 18:15-17. I would, however, like to recommend one of the best books ever written on the topic. It is The PeaceMaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict, by Ken Sande (Baker Books, 2004). I have used this book with one of our discipleship groups, and I want every ministry leader here at Grace to study it. I recommend it to everyone at Grace.

Now for the second vital passage, Matthew 5:23-24. In this passage Jesus deals with the same situation as Matthew 18:15-17, but from the opposite side of the equation. What should we do if we have sinned against our brother? In the same vein, sometimes we haven't sinned, but our brother still holds something against us. Even if we are confident that the issue is not one of our having sinned, we still have an obligation to take the initiative in addressing this issue which concerns our brother. And if there is even a chance that we have sinned, the sense of urgency to seek out our brother should override all other matters.



Think about the startling words of Jesus in Matthew 5:23-24. What could possibly be more important for a first century Jew than to keep the sacrificial system? The sacrifices/offerings were central in the Old Testament, and we also know that the sacrifices/offerings were an important foreshadowing of the death of Christ. No matter how important worship/offering is, Jesus said there is something even more important. If we have a broken relationship with a fellow believer, we must do all that we can to make it right. Granted, it does take willingness on the part of both parties, but we should always be willing to make the first move toward reconciliation. This is especially true if there is any possibility that we have caused or contributed to the disruption.

The Matthew 18 passage and the Matthew 5 passage are amazingly effective in bringing reconciliation to our relationships. The problem isn't with the passages, it is with our unwillingness to obey them. The human capacity to justify disobedience to God's Word is beyond measure, but it is rarely displayed more prominently than when we are looking for excuses to ignore Matthew 18:15-17 and Matthew 5:23-24. Perhaps the greatest danger Grace Community Church will ever face is the potential that we will disobey these biblical commands. But let's end on a bright note. There is something wonderfully encouraging and joyful about watching two Christians resolve their differences by applying these Scriptures. The more faithful we all are to obey these sacred commands of the Lord, the more bountifully we will be blessed, the more unified we will be, and the greater will be our joy. Show me a church that practices these passages in a spirit of love, truth and humility, and I will show you a church where God is doing unimaginably great things.