

DEALING WITH A SINNING BROTHER
Matthew 18:15-20

What makes a congregation a church? How can you distinguish a true church from a false one? What are the essential characteristics of the church of Jesus Christ? THE BELGIC CONFESSION OF 1561 answers by distinguishing three marks of the church:

1. **Faithful proclamation of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.**
2. **Faithful administration of Baptism and the Lord's Table.**
3. **Faithful exercise of church discipline.**

Church discipline guards the church's fidelity of doctrine, purity of life, and unity of fellowship. It falls into two categories: preventative discipline and corrective discipline. Preventative discipline is all the church does to teach believers to think and live biblically. But there will be times when believers sin and fall short of the glory of God. This is when corrective discipline is needed. Unfortunately, corrective discipline is the missing mark of the church. We may teach people to think and live biblically. But we rarely confront sin in the church. A congregation may force a pastor's resignation if he sins. But we do not deal with sin in the body-life of the church. As a result, the process of preventative discipline is short-circuited. It does no good to instruct a child to do right if you do not discipline that child when he does wrong. Healthy churches nurture believers to spiritual maturity through the faithful exercise of church discipline.

In **Matthew 18:15-20**, Jesus teaches the process of church discipline and the means of confirmation. It is the most definitive statement on church discipline in the New Testament. This text often claims attention for its call to excommunicate an unrepentant person. But the point of the passage is about reconciliation, not excommunication. It is surrounded by two passages about forgiveness. Verses 10-14 are about divine forgiveness. Verses 21-35 are about human forgiveness. Our text is an important qualification on the subject of forgiveness. It teaches us that forgiveness cannot lead to reconciliation – with either God or man – if the sinning person does not repent. **Matthew 18:15-20** is a call to repentance. Jesus teaches here that repentance is so essential to what it means to be the church that it must not be left to the individual. The entire church body is divinely obligated to participate in the process of discipline. **JOHN LEADLEY DAGG** noted: "It has been remarked, that when discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it." A true church follows the instructions of the Lord Jesus Christ in dealing with a sinning brother. These instructions fall into two sections.

I. THE PROCESS JESUS COMMANDS

The text begins in verse 18 with a hypothetical statement: "If a brother sins against you..." This opening clause is foundational for all that follows. It establishes the object of church discipline: "a brother." These instructions are not for the

unsaved or the unchurched. Church discipline is a family matter. It is to be practiced among brothers and sisters in Christ.

This clause also states the occasion of church discipline: “If a brother sins against you...” There go your dreams of a perfect church! The term “brother” is not gender specific. It refers to fellow Christians who have been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Yet a saved brother may still commit a sin. Worse, Jesus says he may sin “against you.” Scholars debate whether Jesus is talking here about sin in general or sin against another. But the Lord’s instructions clearly address sin against another brother. And the disciples understood these instructions that way. In verse 21, Peter responded by asking, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” The text is personal. It is about what to do when a brother sins against you. In the New Testament, the word “sins” is always Godward. So this is about more than petty disagreements, hurt feelings, or competing agendas. It is about what should happen when you become the victim of a brother’s sinful disobedience to God. What should you do when a brother sins against you? Jesus gives a four-step process:

A. ADDRESS IT PRIVATELY.

Verse 18a says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” Note that Jesus does not say that you should leave the church if a brother sins against you. But it is not enough to stay in the church and avoid that brother. Jesus says, “Go and tell him his fault.” The verb “go” is an imperative. You do not have the right to choose any other response. Sin must be dealt with. So the Lord commands you to go to your brother. Don’t wait for him to come to you. You go and tell him his fault. He may not know that he has sinned against you. In **Psalm 19:12**, David prays, “Declare me innocent from hidden faults.” Hidden faults are sinful attitudes or behavior that you are not conscious of. It’s presumptuous sin. A brother may sin against you without being aware that he has wronged you. Don’t presume to know another person’s heart. Go and tell him his fault. At this point, don’t tell anyone else. Anyone. Jesus says, “Go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” Confront your brother privately. Don’t make it a public issue. Address the sin one-on-one. Carefully choose the right words and place and time and manner to address the matter privately.

Verse 18b states the intended goal of this process: “If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” The word “listens” refers to more than hearing you out. It is about your brother’s response. If he acknowledges his sin and repents, “you have gained your brother.” The goal is not to win an argument. It is to win your brother. **WARREN WIERSBE** comments: “Our attitude should not be that of a policeman out to arrest a criminal, but rather that of a physician seeking to heal a wound in the body of Christ; a wound that will spread sickness and death if left alone.” The goal is reconciliation. Mentioning the possibility of gaining your brother here before mentioning the possibility that he does not listen in verse 16 indicates

that we should go to our brother expecting the best. **1 Corinthians 13: 7** says, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

The church would be far healthier if we just obeyed this first step. Unfortunately, when a brother sins against us, we tell others instead of going to the brother. And the sinning brother often doesn't hear about it until it has made its way around the church. We may excuse ourselves by saying we are just sharing prayer requests. But there is a more biblical word for it: gossip. What is gossip? Gossip is when I say to others what I should be saying to you. This only creates division in the church. But if we obeyed this command, two believers that have an issue could work through it privately and be reconciled without anyone else knowing they had a problem. And the enemy would not have an opportunity to sow discord among the brothers. Let's start a revival here by committing to go to the brother that sins against us and tell him his fault between you and him alone. And if someone brings you information about a sinning brother, ask, “Have you talked to that person?” If they tell you no, then tell them that you cannot listen any further or get involved.

B. INVOLVE GODLY WITNESSES.

What if you go to this brother and tell him his fault but he does not listen to you? Verse 16 says, “But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” If your brother does not hear you, you cannot just say, “Oh, well. I tried and he wouldn't listen. I did what I could.” If he won't hear you, it is at this point that you must involve others in the process. Don't get your partners and double or triple team the brother. Select dependable persons to get involved.

Why do others need to be involved? Verse 16 answers: “that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” In the ancient Near East, the witness of two or three was accepted as forensic evidence. **Deuteronomy 19:15** says, “A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses shall a charge be established.” Two or three witnesses verified the truth of a matter. And this became the standard for church discipline. In **1 Timothy 5:19**, Paul writes: “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” And here Jesus instructs that you take one or two with you that every charge may be established. Maybe you are wrong and the brother is innocent. Or maybe the brother is wrong and refuses to repent. The witnesses can take the matter beyond he-said-she-said and establish the facts. And if the brother has truly sinned against you, the witnesses can exert godly peer pressure to encourage him to repent and be reconciled.

C. TELL THE CHURCH.

What if the sinning brother does not listen to you and the one or two others you take along with you? Turn up the pressure. Verse 17a says, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." This is the second reference to the church in the New Testament. In **Matthew 16:18**, Jesus says, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." This verse states the Lord's sovereign determination that the power of Satan will not overthrow his church. But **Matthew 18:17** is the Lord's sovereign determination that the power of sin will not overthrow his church. If there is a sinning brother in the church who will not reconcile with a brother he has sinned against, even with the godly pressure of two or three, you are to turn up the pressure by telling it to the church.

This is where many Christians and churches get scared away from the process of church discipline. We may be willing to go to a person and even take others with us, but we cannot imagine exposing the sins of a brother to the gathered church. This betrays our confusion about what it means to be the church. We think of church as somewhere we go, rather than what we are. We do not view the church as the called-out community of Christ-followers. We are people who just happen to publicly worship at the same place. But a true commitment to Christ will inevitably result in a true commitment to the church. The life of faith is to be lived out in community with other believers. And when a sinning brother refuses to repent it affects the entire body. So we are to tell it to the church that the entire congregation may exert godly pressure on the brother. This is a difficult step. But it is spiritually necessary. **Proverbs 27:5-6** says: "Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy."

D. WITHDRAW YOUR FELLOWSHIP.

Verse 17 says, "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." This is the final step of the church discipline process. If a sinning brother will not listen to the church, there is no higher court of appeals. Believers should not view the civil courts as an option for solving disputes with other believers. **1 Corinthians 6:1-4** reads: "When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church?"

The church is the final court of arbitration in disputes between brothers and sisters in Christ. But what if a sinning brother will not listen to the church? Verse 17 says, "And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile

and a tax collector.” A Gentile was anyone outside of covenant with God. A tax collector was one who betrayed his covenant with God. To treat a person as a Gentile and a tax collector is to treat that person as an unbeliever. It is to treat the unrepentant brother as if he is not truly a brother. This is what Paul prescribed for the brother in the church of Corinth that was in an adulterous affair with his stepmother. **1 Corinthians 5:5** instructs: “you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”

This call to withdraw fellowship from an unrepentant brother reflects a high view of church membership. The New Testament does not ever speak of joining a church. But if there is no such thing as church membership, this call to withdraw fellowship is meaningless. This instruction also assumes something of a true believer’s attitude toward the church. True believers participating members of the church for whom withdrawal of fellowship matters.

What does it mean to treat a brother like a Gentile and a tax collector? It does not mean you should be rude, hostile, or unloving. Gentiles and tax collectors were sinners that needed to repent. And Jesus treated them with more compassion than he treated the Pharisees and scribes that were religious hypocrites. As you would any unbeliever, you should pray for the unrepentant brother and try to lead him to faith and repentance. But you are not to permit him to think that he is a brother in good standing if he will not repent. I think an unrepentant brother should not be barred from corporate worship. But he should not take the Lord’s Table. Outside of corporate worship, church members should refrain from any interaction that condones his behavior. In **1 Corinthians 5:9-11**, Paul writes: “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler – not even to eat with such a one.”

II. THE ASSURANCE JESUS PROMISES

Verses 15-17 record our responsibility in church discipline. Verses 18-20 record the Lord’s role in the process. This latter section of the text makes it clear that we are not in the process alone. The Lord is with us. Obedience to verses 15-17 is not easy. No loving Christian wants to confront his brother, make his sin public, or withdraw fellowship from him. But no obedient Christian considers ignoring the Lord’s instructions an option. In verses 18-20, Jesus leads us through this spiritual tension with three promises that give assurance that God is with us when we obey his instructions for dealing with a sinning brother.

A. THE ASSURANCE OF KINGDOM AUTHORITY

Verse 18 says, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” This is the

second time Jesus mentions “binding and loosing.” In **Matthew 16:19**, Jesus says to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Some claim this promise of the divine authority was given personally to Peter. But this repeated reference to binding and loosing makes it clear that this is a promise to the church. The promise does not mean that heaven will ratify whatever decision the church makes on earth. **WARREN WIERSBE** is right: “The church does not tell heaven what to do, but obeys what heaven commands the church to do!” This promise assures that obedient disciples have divine authority to carry out church discipline. In 16:19, binding and loosing refers to our authority to open the doors of the church for the repentant. But 18:19 refers to our authority to close the doors on the church on the unrepentant. We should carry church discipline with the assurance that when we do what the Lord tells us to do in regards to a sinning brother, heaven has our back!

B. THE ASSURANCE OF ANSWERED PRAYER

Verse 19 says, “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.” This is arguably the most grossly misused biblical promise concerning answered prayer. Many use it to claim that a prayer request is guaranteed to come to pass as long as two or more believers agree on it. But scripture never teaches that the number of people praying about something increases the odds of getting an answer. No promise of scripture stands outside the conditions set in the rest of scripture. Every promise must be read in light of the context in which it is given. This verse is not a blank check. It is a promise Jesus gives in the context of his instructions about church discipline. When Jesus says, “If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask,” he is referring back to the “one or two others” in verse 16. The word “agree” is where we get our word symphony. It means to be in harmony with one another. Jesus says when members of the church unite in prayer to deal with a sinning brother; the Father in heaven will answer their prayers.

This promise reminds us that discipline must be carried out in the church prayerfully. You should pray for the sinning brother that he would repent and be restored to the fellowship of the church. Likewise, you should pray for yourself. **Galatians 6:1** says, “Brothers if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” Moreover, you should pray for the discipline process. Without believing prayer, the church may either treat the sinning brother too softly or too harshly. Prayer is essential if the church is to faithfully walk the thin line between hating the sin and loving the sinner.

C. THE ASSURANCE OF DIVINE PRESENCE

Verse 20 says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” Like verses 18-19, this promise is often misused and abused. If few people show up for a prayer meeting, worship service, or other church function, we console ourselves by claiming the promise of this verse. But this promise is not divine consolation for poor attendance. It is another promise given in the context of the Lord’s instructions about church discipline. The two or three here points back to the command to take one or two others with you if your brother does not listen. These are two or three that come together to exhort a sinning brother to repent. Jesus describes them as those “gathered in my name.” To do something in the name of Jesus is to do it with his approval, in his authority, and for his acclaim. When we are gathered in his name, he is present. More than that, for he is fully present everywhere. But he is obviously present and actively in charge when we gather in his name to confront a sinning brother.

Don’t miss what this closing verse reveals about the Lord Jesus Christ. In this verse, Jesus claims to be omnipresent. Omnipresence is a divine attribute. It means that God is never late, tardy, or absent. God is fully present everywhere at the same time. This is what Jesus claims when he says, “For whether two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” Christianity is Christ and Christ is God. And he declares that he is with us when we call a brother to repentance, reconciliation, and restoration. He is with us in the process. And he is with us beyond the process. In **1 Corinthians**, Paul instructed the church to withdraw fellowship from the brother who was having an affair with his stepmother. But in **2 Corinthians 2:6-7**, Paul writes: “For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.” While the church had turned this brother over to Satan, he was still in the Lord’s hands. God changed his heart. And the church was to restore him back to fellowship.

Remember that the goal of church discipline is always forgiveness. In **Matthew 18:21**, Peter asked, “Lord, how many times will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” In verse 22, Jesus answered, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” Then Jesus told a parable about a servant who owed his king an incalculable debt. But the king had mercy on him and forgave the debt. Then that servant met another servant that owed him money. But he refused to show any mercy and had him thrown in jail. The king heard about it. He called in the unmerciful servant and revoked his forgiveness and threw him in jail to be tortured until he repaid his incalculable debt. In verse 35, Jesus declares, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” May the Lord help us to be people who are ready to forgive and eager for reconciliation.