

RECONCILIATION (PART 2)

MATTHEW 18:15-20

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

15 “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault when the two of you are alone. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother.

16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others with you, so that at the testimony of two or three witnesses every matter may be established.

17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. If he refuses to listen to the church, treat him like a Gentile or a tax collector.

18 “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.

19 Again, I tell you the truth, if two of you on earth agree about whatever you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you.

20 For where two or three are assembled in my name, I am there among them.”

In our previous Lesson, we briefly examined **Matthew 5:17-24**. In verses **23-24** of that passage, Jesus calls on the person who is the **offender** to take the initiative in the process of reconciling his or her brother or sister to himself or herself. In **Matthew 18:15-20** He urges the **offended** party to make the first move. As we noted last week, **both parties** have an obligation to work for resolution when there has been a conflict.

There is in our society a prevailing culture of **unhealthy** tolerance for sin which unfortunately has infiltrated the church. Many Christians

believe that to judge any attitude or behaviour as being sinful is to “throw the first stone.” They will misapply Jesus’ statement in **Matthew 7:1**, “*Do not judge so that you will not be judged,*” to mean that believers should never disapprove of, or correct the attitudes and actions of other believers. To do so is perceived as unloving. Because of this, many churches either accept or overlook gross violations of biblical commandments, especially as it relates to leaders.

In his commentary on Matthew’s Gospel, **Stuart Weber** provides the following excellent summary of the **correct** meaning of Jesus’s words in **Matthew 7:1**: “Do not judge others until you are prepared to be judged by the same standard. And then, when you exercise judgment toward others, do it with humility.”

When Jesus said, “*Do not judge so that you will not be judged,*” He was not saying that believers are never to evaluate the attitudes and actions of others. A closer look at the verse in its context will help us to understand and appreciate the real issue that our Lord wanted to address. The **New English Translation** renders **Matthew 7:1-6** as follows:

1 “Do not judge so that you will not be judged.

2 For by the standard you judge you will be judged, and the measure you use will be the measure you receive.

3 Why do you see the speck in your brother’s eye, but fail to see the beam of wood in your own?

4 Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye,’ while there is a beam in your own?

5 You hypocrite! First remove the beam from your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

6 Do not give what is holy to dogs or throw your pearls before pigs; otherwise they will trample them under their feet and turn around and tear you to pieces.

Our Lord's teaching in this passage was primarily directed to believers, but the principle can be applied to anyone. Jesus **does** expect us to deal with "*the speck*" in our brother's or sister's eye in order to help him or her to get rid of it. The purpose of judging someone else's sin is to help him or her to walk in victory.

Many professing Christians see church discipline as unloving, and many church leaders are afraid to practice it for fear of appearing merciless. Yet refusing to apply church discipline **in careful obedience to Scripture** is the most unloving and merciless thing the church can do. When the church does not deal with unrepentant people, who have no shame or regret for their sinful attitudes and/or actions, it either gives them the **false** assurance that they are in a state of salvation, or it causes them to become hardened and to persist in sin.

In **1 Corinthians 5:12** Paul explicitly tells the believers in Corinth that they are to exercise judgment as it relates to each other: "*For what do I have to do with judging those **outside**? Are you not to judge those **inside**?*" (**New English Translation**). But how can we judge someone else with accuracy if we ourselves are not free? Before judging our erring brothers and sisters, we must first look honestly at our own lives and exercise the same judgment toward ourselves. When we do this, we judge others from a position of humility.

A faithful servant of God will evaluate himself or herself as accurately as he or she evaluates others. He or she will be cognizant of his or her own innate sinfulness and need of God's mercy. He or she will therefore have no reason to consider himself or herself better than others but will follow Paul's words to the Philippians: "*Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself*" (**Philippians 2:3 New English Translation**).

Jesus requires believers to apply His teachings **first** to themselves and then to others. When God reveals His truth to us, whether in Scripture or in some other way, our immediate response should be to say, “How does this apply to me? How do I appropriate this truth to my own life?” In following Jesus’ command to refrain from judging, we avoid drawing conclusions that are superficial, proud, hypocritical, or self-righteous.

Brothers and sisters, while church discipline is neither an easy nor pleasant exercise, the Word of God clearly teaches its importance. And it is the Word of God, not culture, which is the standard of faith and practice for believers. In fact, serious theologians regard church discipline as one of the marks of an authentic New Testament church. I am of the view that if a church is to be faithful to Scripture it must practice **biblical** church discipline in respect of professing believers who persist in known sin. If the church fails in this regard it is guilty of turning the grace of God into a license for evil (**Jude 4**).

The verses and passages of Scripture set out hereunder clearly indicate that believers have the responsibility to exercise judgment in respect of their fellow believers. All the verses and passages reflect the rendering of the **New English Translation**.

John 7:24

“Do not judge according to external appearance, but judge with proper judgment.”

1 Corinthians 5:1-3, 9-13

1 It is actually reported that sexual immorality exists among you, the kind of immorality that is not permitted even among the Gentiles, so that someone is cohabiting with his father’s wife.

2 And you are proud! Shouldn’t you have been deeply sorrowful instead and removed the one who did this from among you?

3 For even though I am absent physically, I am present in spirit. And I have already judged the one who did this, just as though I were present.

4 When you gather together in the name of our Lord Jesus, and I am with you in spirit, along with the power of our Lord Jesus,

5 hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

9 I wrote you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.

10 In no way did I mean the immoral people of this world, or the greedy and swindlers and idolaters, since you would then have to go out of the world.

11 But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who calls himself a Christian who is sexually immoral, or greedy, or an idolater, or verbally abusive, or a drunkard, or a swindler. Do not even eat with such a person.

12 For what do I have to do with judging those outside? Are you not to judge those inside?

13 But God will judge those outside. Remove the evil person from among you.

1 Corinthians 6:1-6

1 When any of you has a legal dispute with another, does he dare go to court before the unrighteous rather than before the saints?

2 Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you not competent to settle trivial suits?

3 Do you not know that we will judge angels? Why not ordinary matters!

4 So if you have ordinary lawsuits, do you appoint as judges those who have no standing in the church?

5 I say this to your shame! Is there no one among you wise enough to settle disputes between fellow Christians?

6 Instead, does a Christian sue a Christian, and do this before unbelievers?

1 Corinthians 14:29

“Two or three prophets should speak and the others should evaluate what is said.”

In **Matthew 18:15-20**, the **reconciliation** of believers is dealt with under the theme of **church discipline**. The Scriptures outline five steps that are to be taken as it relates to the disciplining of a professing believer. We shall briefly consider these steps.

1 A Private Meeting

“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault when the two of you are alone. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother.”

In the **first** place, a believer who has a conflict with another believer is called to address the matter with the other person **personally**. If we have been offended by a brother or a sister, or if we are aware that a brother or a sister is involved in sinful activity, we are to go and confront the individual directly. The Scripture clearly states, *“Go and show him his fault when the two of you are alone.”* To act quietly and privately when confronting another believer concerning his or her offence is not less important than it would be if we were the one who had committed the offence and were being confronted. We must bear in mind that the person we are meeting with is a “brother” or a “sister,” someone who is precious to the Lord and should be precious to us also. Let us remember the “Golden Rule” of our Lord recorded in **Matthew 7:12**: *“In everything, treat others as you would want them to treat you, for this fulfills the law and the prophets”* (**New English Translation**).

When matters are handled privately, misunderstandings can be addressed, and there is great potential for the other person to respond positively. In addition, a private meeting helps to avoid the problem of gossip that can occur when a matter is taken to others instead of to the person involved.

Our objective in meeting with the offending party is not to “set him or her straight,” or to “get things off our chest,” by lecturing him or her about how wrong he or she is. Our aim is to get him or her to listen to us so as to win him or her back to the Lord! The best way of convincing someone of his or her sin is to take him or her to Scripture. Our opinion really doesn’t matter. It is God’s Word that is the authority and must therefore be appealed to. Our attitude should reflect Paul’s instruction in **Galatians 6:1-3**:

1 Brothers and sisters, if a person is discovered in some sin, you who are spiritual restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness. Pay close attention to yourselves, so that you are not tempted too.

2 Carry one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

3 For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

(New English Translation)

Our Lord says that if we have been offended or have knowledge of a brother’s or sister’s sin, then we, not the pastor or anyone else, are the ones to go to him or her. To convince a person that he or she has erred is a difficult and delicate task. Our aim in confronting the offender should always be to restore him or her to God and to those he or she has wronged.

While we should pray before we go to confront our brother or sister, we should not call several persons to have them pray about the matter. That is usually just an excuse to spread gossip. Of course, we may need to

seek confidential counsel from mature believers, but we should limit it to two persons at the most. The offending brother or sister will probably be more likely to acknowledge his or her fault in a private setting than if he or she is approached initially by several persons. In a private meeting the matter may be dealt with without anyone else ever having to know about it. It is important for us to acknowledge however that there are cases in which discipline should not begin with private admonition. Public sins should be dealt with publicly, as Paul shows us in **1 Corinthians 5**.

When we are going to confront a brother or a sister, we should ensure that we are properly apprised of the facts. If someone informs us about someone else's sin, we should instruct **the informant** to go directly to the offending person. We should never confront anyone on the basis of hearsay or gossip, unless we are going to ascertain the facts. We should confront lovingly. If the offending person knows that we genuinely love him or her, and care for him or her, he or she will be more likely to listen and respond in a godly manner.

Brothers and sisters, we should not understand our Lord's instruction in verse **15** as a **command** to confront our brother or sister with **every** sin that they may commit against us. The sins that merit church discipline are flagrant sins that may destroy the peace and purity of the body of Christ. Discipline is not to be enacted for every grievance that arises in the church. There are some things that we can overlook and take to the Lord in prayer. The Bible says that we should bear with one another and be longsuffering towards each other. **1 Peter 4:8** speaks of the love that "*covers a multitude of sins.*" Yet clearly, there are some things that we cannot suffer with for long without addressing them.

When our brother or sister offends us or is guilty of sin, we have the option of going to him or her directly and dealing with it; or we can decide to deal with the situation under Christian longsuffering and bearing with one another. We do not however have the option of nursing

a grudge, allowing bitterness to take root in our hearts, gossip with others, or retaliate.

As **C.H. Spurgeon** said, "We must not let trespass rankle in our bosom, by maintaining a sullen silence, nor may we go and publish the matter abroad. We must seek out the offender, and tell him his fault as if he were not aware of it; as perhaps he may not be."

Jesus says, "*If he (i.e. the offending brother or sister), listens to you, you have regained your brother.*" If the offending person listens to you and repents, the discipline process may stop there. You have regained your brother or sister. You have regained him or her in two ways. First, the problem has been effectively dealt with. He or she acknowledges his or her sin and asks for forgiveness both from the Lord and you. Perhaps you may discover that he or she was not entirely wrong and that you were not entirely right. But whatever the extent of blame on either side may be, the situation has been resolved. Second, you have regained him or her because you have not wronged your brother or your sister by going to others to spread gossip.

In **James 5:19-20**, James writes,

19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone turns him back,

20 he should know that the one who turns a sinner back from his wandering path will save that person's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

(New English Translation)

Lord willing, we will continue our examination of **Matthew 18:15-20** next week.