



SIN AND FORGIVENESS
CONFRONT SIN FAITHFULLY

Matthew 18:10-14

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“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. ¹² What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Introduction

Sin is an ever-present reality in all of our lives. We see it in the world, in the lives of others, and in our own souls. We’re constantly confronted with the reality of sin.

Our problem, however, is that we don’t always deal with sin very well. We hardly know how to deal with our own, much less another person’s.

When we confront sin in others, we tend to go in one of two directions. We either ignore sin or attack it; we either implode in frustration, or explode in anger; we’re either indignant and aggressive or self-righteous and passive-aggressive; we either launch a hostile email, or we get a friend on the phone and gossip and back-bite for half-an-hour.

Jesus’ Process for Addressing Sin

Jesus, however, calls his followers to lovingly address and faithfully confront sin. And in this passage, he describes for us a process for doing so, that is both faithful to Christ and loving to others.

This passage is often referred to as the passage on ‘church discipline.’ However, when we hear the word ‘church discipline,’ we don’t have a positive mental associations or emotional reaction. We don’t think love, grace and forgiveness, but judgment, hypocrisy, condemnation. Our emotional reaction is probably not unlike when, as juniors in high school, we read *The Scarlet Letter*.

“Make way, good people, make way, in the King’s name,” cried he. “Open a passage; and, I promise ye, Mistress Prynne shall be set where man, woman, and child may have a fair sight of her brave apparel, from this time till an hour past meridian. A blessing on the righteous Colony of the Massachusetts, where iniquity is dragged

out into the sunshine! Come alone, Madam Hester, and show your scarlet letter in the market-place!”

Practicing church discipline, lovingly addressing and faithfully confronting sin in each other’s lives, it’s hard not to find the whole idea pretty scary and intimidating, like dragging each other’s sin out into the sunshine.

Perhaps this is why we, as individuals and churches, so seldom *do* what Jesus calls us to here in these verses. We’re, understandably, riddled with *fear*: Fear of others, how they will respond to me lovingly addressing their sin; or fear of myself, will I mess it up, say the wrong thing, only make things worse, rather than better.

Overcoming Fear and Minimizing Mistakes by Following Jesus’ Process

This crippling or paralyzing fear is overcome, however, when we embrace what Jesus gives us: *a process for dealing with sin between one another*. What you will find is that following this procedure will empower you to confront sin faithfully. For it will enable you to avoid what you fear and to do what you know is good and true.

First, the process Jesus outlines here *protects you from yourself*. This process also *preserves the dignity of the person who needs to be confronted*. Rather than tearing them apart, it will build them up. Thirdly, the process Jesus outlines for confronting sin *promotes God’s grace and forgiveness*. We make a big mistake when we separate confronting sin faithfully from loving people or being forgiving or extending God’s grace. This is how we as believers and a church embody God’s forgiveness to one another.

Your Starting Point: “A Check-Up from the Neck-Up”

Jesus outlines a four-step process believers should follow when confronting sin in each other’s lives. But before you or I are to take even the first step, we need to make sure we’re at the starting point.

You know you’re at the starting point when you, first, check your *attitude* to make sure it’s right. *Do I have a Christ-like attitude?* You’re not ready to take the first step, until you have a peace that your attitude is right. The Bible places a high priority on attitude. What is the right kind of attitude? One that is humble, gentle, patience: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all *humility* and *gentleness*, with *patience*, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1-3; cf. Col. 3:12-14; Gal. 6:1). These three, not in the abstract, but in relationship to others, in particular, the individual you feel you need to confront.

You also, secondly, want to make sure you have the right *aims*, the right motives. *Do I have a God-glorifying aim?* If your intentions aren’t right, nothing will be right, even if it goes all right. You want to do this for the growth of person, for the good of church, and for the glory of God. If you detect a desire to get even, or put the other person in his place, or defend yourself, then you’re probably not yet at the starting point. You’ve got more work to do, before you take even the first step in the process.

And, thirdly, you need to make sure it's the right *action*. Lovingly addressing sin isn't the only biblical response we should have to sin. There's another response, and one that we ought to practice much more frequently, in fact. And that's called *bearing with one another's sin*. "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Col. 3:12-13).

Sometimes, however, sin is serious enough that it shouldn't be overlooked, but must be lovingly addressed. Here are good indicators: If it's dishonoring to God in a clear way. If it's damaging to your relationship, or the person's relationship with someone else. If it's hurting others, either directly or indirectly. If it's hurting the person him or herself. Or if it's compromising that person's usefulness to the Lord.

Obviously, this isn't an exact science. So how can you know if you've got the right attitude, the right aims, and the right action? *By going to God in prayer*. This is the only way you'll know whether you're at the starting point. Don't go talk to a friend about it, until you've first talked to the Lord about it. Don't ask for someone else's advice, until you've sought the Lord's advice. And certainly don't confront another person, until you've first confronted *yourself*—your own sinful heart. That way you allow yourself to be confronted *by the Lord*, so that he ensures your're attitude and aims are right, and that this is the right action.

Once you've done that, and feel peace about moving forward, then you're ready to engage in the steps Jesus outlines in this passage.

Step 1—Personal Confrontation

The first step in the process is personal confrontation: to address the issue both personally and privately with the person. "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother" (v. 15).

There's a tiny little word that is all important: "go." For if we fail to go, we won't ever confront sin faithfully. But this means mustering up the courage to do it, as well as the trust. And this means go, may I add, in person. It doesn't say, "Fire off email!"

A large part of confronting sin faithfully rests on how we "tell" someone his or her fault. The way we do this can determine the outcome. Of course, it's critical that we "tell" the person the fault in a loving, gracious, humble, tentative way that honors Christ. The temptation is to be angry, self-righteous, indignant, frustrated, speaking evil against, and all the rest. So be prayerful about not only what to say, but how you say it.

You'll also note the emphasis Jesus places on this first step of confrontation being *private*, that it be between you and the offending person only: "between you and him alone" (v. 15). This is intended to protect the person being confronted from unnecessary harm, to his relationships or reputation. This is how we show care and concern for a person being confronted. This first private step also helps contain a person's sin as much as possible, keeping it from spreading to others, creating more sin and dissension and division within the body.

In my experience, this first step is often all that's needed. When believers are confronted lovingly by other believers, it often results in one or both repenting of the wrong and finding restoration. The brother is "gained," as Jesus said.

Step 2—Involve Mediators

But, regrettably, I think we all realize that confronting sin doesn't always go that way. There's an alternative direction it can go: not up, toward repentance and reconciliation, but down, toward resistance and even rebellion.

Jesus understands this, and so sets out a second, a third, and even a fourth step. The second step involves bring one or two others to speak with the person. "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" (v. 16).

The "two or three witnesses" alludes to Old Testament teaching. Jesus' point here is to involve a mediator to help provide some objectivity and perspective, to help protect both the one bringing the charge and the one receiving the charge. The witnesses serve to confirm whether the offended person has a legitimate grievance. And, if so, then these witnesses can help facilitate a way forward toward reconciliation.

Obviously, when involving witnesses, you want to choose people of wisdom and character. You don't want necessarily to invite your mom and dad, or your two best friends; but individuals of proven character and judgment.

Step 3—Apply Church Accountability

Often small group confrontation is sufficient to help someone appreciate how he has wronged another person. But sometimes even this is insufficient. Or, as Jesus says, "refuse to listen to them" (v. 17), then you need to proceed to Step 3 in the process: "tell it to the church" (v. 17).

At this point, the priority to keep the circle of those involved as small as possible for as long as possible, gives way to the need for increased accountability for the person who is unrepentant—and so, involving the whole church.

Obviously, care must be taken as to how this is done. It's not appropriate to interrupt a sermon, say, and 'tell the church' you've got a problem with Joe, the guy who sits in the balcony during the second service.

Instead, it is the leadership of the church that is responsible to communicate this kind of information to the whole church. Therefore, it is often the case that the matter will be brought to the elders of the church for their prayerful deliberation and counsel. And then they will in turn communicate the issue to the whole body.

Again, we see in this step an increase in the number of people involved. Here, it is the whole church that is to be informed and, by being informed, called to prayer and action. They are to come alongside the unrepentant brother or sister, and plead with him or her for repentance and reconciliation.

Step 4—Disfellowship in the Hope of Restoration

Should the individual still not respond to the prayers and pleading of the entire congregation, then the church moves to the fourth and final stage in this process. "And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (v. 17b).

This is a very solemn and sobering and indeed sad decision to come to. For what the church is called to do, is to no longer view nor treat the unrepentant individual as a fellow believer, a brother or sister in Christ. Instead, as Jesus says, that individual is to be viewed and treated as a non-Christian: “let him be to you as a Gentile and tax collector.” For that’s precisely what the Gentile and tax collector were in Jesus’ day: individuals who were outside the kingdom of God.

To be sure, this does not mean that this individual is to be treated meanly, or that you are to act in any way that is unloving or ungracious. Remember, Jesus is himself “the friend of tax collectors and sinners” (11:19).

But what this does mean is that you no longer enjoy fellowship with the person. But rather your interaction with him or her is to have the same kind of gospel intentionality that you would have toward a non-Christian. The person is to be treated as a non-Christian; to be loved *to* Christ, but not engaged as a lover *of* Christ.

But remember, this solemn act is always done with a view to the eventual restoration of the individual. This isn’t intended to be permanent; in fact, the church only comes to this point in order to help bring the person to repentance and restoration.

Nor is this shutting the door of forgiveness in the person’s face. When the church follows through on Matthew 18, “it becomes an expression of God’s forgiveness *in action*, seeking to reach out to the unrepentant one in an effort to restore him or her from his or her sin.”¹

This, in turn, puts the process in proper biblical perspective, for the person who *refuses* to acknowledge his need for forgiveness and thus freely embrace God’s offer of forgiveness demonstrates by his actions that he is not part of the community of forgiven and forgiving ones; hence, excommunication.

Indeed, the flow of thought in vv. 18-20 is this: vv. 18-19 provide the sanction for church discipline, affirming that the local church has authority—indeed, divine authority—to make these rulings about a person’s life. And then v. 20 provides the explanation for how it is the church can possess such awesome power: because of Christ’s astonishing promise of his presence with them.

The Benefits of Faithful Confrontation

The benefits that come to us as we faithfully confront sin are many.

1. When we faithfully confront sin in each other’s lives, we drain the swamp of gossip and kill the alligators of bitterness and back-biting.

2. When we faithfully confront sin in each other’s lives, we strengthen the immune system of the body called the church.

3. When we faithfully confront sin in each other’s lives, we love our neighbor as our self. Jesus’ famous love-command—have you ever noticed the context? You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD. You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge

¹ Eric. J. Bargerhuff, *Love That Rescues*, p. 135.

against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD (Lev. 19:16-18).

In the word of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Nothing is so cruel as the tenderness that consigns another to his sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin.”²

4. When we faithfully confront sin in each other’s lives, we experience the fruit of our heavenly Father’s fatherly discipline. When the body of Christ faithfully follows Jesus’ teaching in this passage, it’s not the church who acts, but God who *enacts* his own discipline through the church. This is the Father treating you as a son or a daughter.

And what son or daughter is there whom a father does not discipline? Sure, in the moment, having your sin confronted seems painful not pleasant. But do not forget what this kind of discipline produces: “the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:11).

When you grasp this, you will be far less likely to resist having your sin confronted by others; and far more ready to embrace what’s being said to you because you believe God is the one addressing you. When a brother or sister sits down with you to address sin in your life, you’ll be like the young boy Samuel, who heard the Lord calling out to him and responded: “Here I am, Lord. Speak, for your servant hears” (cf. 1 Samuel 3).

5. When we faithfully confront sin in each other’s lives, we embody the gospel of reconciliation in the midst of a relationally broken world.

Be Faithful and Confront

So, in light of the biblical call to confront sin faithfully, and the benefits that come from doing what Jesus teaches, my closing challenge is to do what Jesus calls each one of his followers to do: to faithfully confront sin. And let me encourage you with this thought: as you do this, you will *be free*. You will free of the bitterness and anger you’ve carried with you.

You will *be surprised*. You will be surprised that it’s not as scary as you thought. And, in fact, you’ll be surprised that it goes better than you’d thought. And, you’ll be surprised that the person respects you, rather than despises you for doing it.

And you will *be Jesus*.

The Cross of Christ: The Foundation & Focus of Church Discipline

The Cross of Christ is the foundation for and focus of the church’s practice of discipline. It is the ground and goal of our loving confrontation of sin in each other’s lives.

Jesus is the one who took God’s punishment for sin upon himself. Punishing sin isn’t the prerogative of the church or anyone in the church; it is God’s prerogative alone. Doing what Jesus calls us to here isn’t punishing people, but proclaiming God’s wondrous forgiveness and grace.

² Cited in Sande, p. 195, from Life Together.

May we embrace the forgiveness of the gospel, and humbly follow the direction of our Savior. And may we grow in our love for others and for Christ, so much so that we don't fear but rather welcome the opportunity to point each other to the cross and the grace of God which is there. And may our practice of church discipline truly express God's fatherly discipline, for our good and his glory!

Amen.

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