

Discipline In The Case Of Interpersonal Disagreements

“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

(Matthew 18:15–18)

Seeking Reconciliation

The text before us presents to us the issue of church discipline as it relates to interpersonal disagreements. The aim of the disciplinary process here is to affect reconciliation between brothers who are divided by sin. It is only if every godly effort fails that excommunication becomes necessary. The goal is for the offended brother to regain the offending brother.

Jesus commands the brother who has been sinned against to privately approach the offending brother in an attempt to restore the relationship. Solomon warns us against talking to others in the event of such an incident. He explains that we may be found at fault and shamed if we do so. *“Debate thy cause with thy neighbour himself; And discover not a secret to another: Lest he that heareth it put thee to shame, And thine infamy turn not away.”* (Proverbs 25:9–10) Let us beware of the tendency to tell another when a brother has sinned against us. That will not help us, but will only serve to aggravate the situation, thus making it worse.

Having been sinned against, Jesus commands us to show our brother his sin. *“Then said he unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come. It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones. Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him. And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith.”* (Luke 17:1–5) We often think of rebuke as harsh words, yet rebuke can also be words that show a brother his wrong and call him to repentance. This can be done in a kind way. *“A soft answer turneth away wrath: But grievous words stir up anger.”* (Proverbs 15:1) This could indeed bring our brother to repentance, and that is the goal of approaching him in this manner. It is not an easy thing to do. The apostles understood the difficulty of this and said, *“Increase our faith.”* (Luke 17:5) If we will trust the Lord to take care of us and guide us, we will obey the commands of Christ and go to our brother seeking reconciliation.

Jesus tells us, *“if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.”* (Matthew 18:15) As the apostles, our faith is often weak, and we tend to think that it will be of no use to go to our brother. We must seek to have greater faith, as this is God’s plan for us to make peace with our brother.

Even though we often think that our offending brother should come to us and apologize, it shows the spirit of Christ and the gospel for us to go to our sinning

brother and seek to bring about reconciliation. That is what God has done for us. *"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are past away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation."* (2 Corinthians 5:17–19) Though we had sinned against God, He did not wait for us to come to Him in repentance; but He came to us in Christ, thus making reconciliation possible. We should show the same forgiving grace to our brother who sins against us.

It is indeed possible that our brother refuses to hear us and make peace with us. It is then that we should take the next step in seeking reconciliation and take with us one or two more brothers. These brothers are there to witness our desire for things to be right between our selves and the brother who sinned against us. These brothers are to be people who love peace and truth, because it is the aim of the meeting to seek peace. They should help by hearing both sides of the issue and calling the sinning brother to repentance. If he does not hear his brothers' call to repentance, they will have to bear witness to the church. Jesus' words regarding the matter being established in the mouth of two or three witnesses reminds us of Deuteronomy 19:15-21, where we are warned against perjury and called upon to witness truthfully. If the sinning brother refuses to repent and make peace, it will rest upon these witnesses to faithfully testify to the church when the offended brother submits the matter to the church's judging authority.

The Judgment Of The Church

"Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life? If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man amongst you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded? Nay, you do wrong, and defraud, and that your brethren." (1 Corinthians 6:1–8)

When all godly efforts at reconciling fail, the church is the final authority. Note that Paul, in the passage above, rebukes the Corinthians for taking their personal matters to the courts.¹ Not only were they fighting in the presence of unbelievers who did not observe and respect the law of God (1-3), but they were actually using the courts to cheat their brothers (:8)! Paul commanded them that they should be willing to take loss, if need be, and that the church was the proper place to deal with disagreements and divisions between brothers.

¹ This obviously refers to civil matters and not criminal. Not only does criminal law make us mandatory reporters in certain issues, we must recall that criminal law is the domain of government (*Romans 13:1-7*).

What is the procedure that is to be followed when a matter between brothers has to be presented to the church? First of all, the church should appoint some brother(s) to hear the matter and to render a godly decision. The Corinthians, being lovers of worldly wisdom and despisers of godly wisdom, were instructed to choose those whom they despised (:4-5). It is my belief that this means that they were to choose men who were godly and wise instead of those worldly wise brothers whom they preferred the most. Then these godly brothers should hear the matter and render a decision on behalf of the church. The decision rendered should be one that calls for the sinning brother to repent and make peace with the one against whom he had sinned.² Again, should the sinning brother hear the decision of the church, peace is made between the two brothers³.

In the event that the sinning brother still does not repent and reconcile with the brother against whom he sinned, the church must then pronounce the sentence of excommunication. He is to be treated as if he were an unbeliever, as he is acting like an unbeliever. Excommunication is the final resort. We have no desire to ever come to this point. The discipline of the church is for the purpose of teaching and guiding one another in the way of discipleship. Each step in the process of seeking reconciliation is a teaching step that should instruct us in the ways of Christ and godly behavior. It is only when every sincere and godly effort as outlined above fails that the church should withdraw her fellowship from the sinning brother. In all of these things the goal is peace. Jesus is the Prince of Peace (*Isaiah 9:6-7*), has come to bring us peace (*Romans 5:1-2; Ephesians 2:10-18*), and calls us to walk in peace (*Romans 12:19-21; 14:19; Colossians 3:15; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-16*). Excommunication is only for those who sinfully reject the way of peace, and then it serves the purpose of ministering peace within the body of Christ by placing the divisive person on the outside and calling him to repentance.

² Realistically, we should recognize that both parties may have sinned against each other, and the decision of the judges and the church may be to call both parties to repent.

³ Note that, while we speak of the church making a decision, they are doing so by means of those whom they have established as judges. It is quite possible that the whole of the issue does not need to be aired before the entire church membership in a meeting. The matter could discreetly be presented to the church, the church appoint judges, and the judges make a godly decision without every detail of the dispute being made public.