

STEPS TO CORRECT OFFENDING BROTHERS

MATHEW 18:15–20

Introduction: Division and Church Discipline

Sinning against a brother is a matter of great concern to God. It is so serious that if the offending brother refuses to rectify the matter, he is to be severely disciplined (v. 17). However, when dealing with discipline, two critical points are to be noted.

1. The sinning brother *is a brother, a genuine* believer. He sins against another brother. The breach is between two genuine believers who are *in the church*.
2. The sin is a personal offense; that is, the wrong and harm are done against another person. A fellow Christian believer is injured, hurt and damaged in some way.

God has one great concern: He wants peace restored. He wants peace between the brothers, and He wants peace within the church. The disturbance caused by two offending brothers is so damaging that God lays down very specific steps as to how the matter is to be handled; and if the sinning brother refuses to be reconciled and to rectify the wrong, God says the disturbance is not to be tolerated any longer.

- I. Step 1: attempt reconciliation (vv. 15-17).
- II. Step 2: discipline the brother (vv. 17-18).
- III. Step 3: bathe the matter in prayer (vv. 19-20).

I. Mathew 18:15–17 Sin Against Believers, Reconciliation

The first step in correcting an *offending brother* is to attempt reconciliation. Note when a brother disturbs or offends us, we do not wait on the offending brother to come to us. We are to go immediately to him. There are three specific steps to be taken.

1. Go to the brother alone and “show him his fault.” This seems to indicate that he may not know that he has done wrong and offended us. If we do not go to him, he may never know or be able to correct his behaviour. If he does know he has offended us and we do not approach him, then the breach remains, and the guilt of the sin continues. The division and damaging effects of the division can only grow and deepen.

Something else can happen: our own heart and mind can brood, be poisoned, become resentful, even bitter and grudging and revengeful. We desperately need to do all we can to resolve the matter.

- a. He is to be approached alone. We are not to share the matter with anyone else, nor are we to openly rebuke him. This only deepens and hardens the feelings and division, causing bitterness and hostility.
 - b. The words “just between the two of you” hint at how he is to be approached:
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- => humbly; searching our own hearts (to see if we did anything to cause the offending behaviour — knowing that we too can offend others ever so easily).
- => being soft spoken and gentle.
- => expressing our desire for understanding and straightening out the matter so that we may be reconciled.

Mat 5:24 “Leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”

Phil 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

2 Tim 2:14 Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen.

2 Tim 2:24 And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.

Thought 1. When a brother offends us, our response becomes critical to Christ. There are four responses common to human flesh that we are to guard against with all diligence.

- 1) A *self-centred response*: acting babyish, innocent or as a martyr; brooding, hatching and pondering the evil and hurt done to us; being consumed with the wrong done; keeping our minds on the personal injury until the whole divisive affair poisons our hearts and minds. Remember: this is common to human flesh, a tendency among us all.
- 2) A *withdrawing response*: avoiding the brother; being apprehensive, perhaps even fearing to face or associate with him; showing displeasure or getting back at him by ignoring or neglecting him.
- 3) A *gossiping response*: a self-justifying sharing; a self-vindicating sharing; a tendency to share hurt and evil and wrong done, to share with close friends in order to picture ourselves as blameless. The problem with sharing the division with others is that Christ says we are to go to the person first. Then if he does not respond to our appeal, we are to seek loving and wise counsel.
- 4) A *retaliating response*: becoming embroiled in the divisiveness and wrongdoing ourselves; reacting and lowering ourselves to the level of the wrongdoer; getting back at the wrongdoer.

Thought 2. When a brother offends us, the most important response (after prayer, of course) is to go to the brother alone. There is great wisdom in this instruction, wisdom that teaches both brothers to subject the flesh and to give prominence to the spirit.

- 1) Wisdom for the *offended brother*. Human nature tends to react, brood, share the evil and seek retaliation — whether simply withdrawing or attacking. Christ demands that we conquer the urges of the flesh to react and that we control the

situation through the Spirit. We are to keep quiet and pray. Then we are to go to the brother and discuss the matter, seeking reconciliation. Simply put, we are to be spiritually minded.

- 2) Wisdom for the *offending brother*. Human nature avoids and is slow in admitting wrong. A humble, loving and caring visit to seek reconciliation is an encouragement for a brother to confess, apologize and be reconciled.

Thought 3. Note just how wise the Lord's instruction really is. Just think what enormous lessons and qualities are learned and developed by three brothers' sitting down to seek reconciliation, to seek the very qualities of the Spirit's fruit...

- Love
- Faithfulness
- Patience
- Goodness
- Peace
- Kindness
- Joy
- Gentleness
- Self-control

Thought 4. Think what a different world this would be if this step alone was practiced by all: the difference in human relationships personally, nationally and internationally; the difference in health emotionally and physically (ulcers, blood pressure, heart attacks etc.).

2. *Go to the brother with witnesses*. Some Christian brothers are stubborn; others are immature; still others are gripped by selfish and sinful motives and behaviour. Therefore an offending brother may not be willing to be reconciled nor willing to admit his wrong. In such cases, one or two loving and wise brothers are to be taken with us to the offending brother. This act does several things.
- a. It shows the brother that there is deep concern; a number of people do care and want to help.
 - b. It also shows that the offense is known by more than one or two people. At least several know.
 - c. It helps to prevent bias, selfish reaction and partial interest.
 - d. It also provides objective and wise counsel between the two differing parties. Agreement and reconciliation are more likely to arise from this.

Thought 1. This step should never be taken until the brother has been approached alone. We are not to talk about or share a brother's wrong with anyone else not even until we have sat down with him personally in the love of Christ.

However, this step is to be taken if he persists in his divisiveness. But it is always to be done in a spirit of humility, love, care and personal unworthiness.

Thought 2. There is sometimes a tendency to give up after a divisive brother refuses reconciliation — to let him suffer whatever punishment follows. However, Christ says, "Keep on; stay after him. Don't give up." Note: this is the demand of Christ throughout the whole course of discipline. Christ never gives up reaching out to the

sinning brother. Therefore, the church is never to give up (See *Church Discipline*, Mt. 18:17). The divisiveness of the Galatian church and its personal attack upon Paul are prime examples of this fact. Paul was constantly reaching out to those who were so imperfect and ever failing (Gal. 4:19f).

3. Go before the church (See *Church Discipline*, Mt. 18:17).

MATHEW 18:15
SIN AGAINST BELIEVERS AND RECONCILIATION

“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.”

Mathew 18: 15

How does a Christian brother sin against or offend another brother? There are many ways.

1. By his behaviour and Christian liberty: doing that which is allowed but is offensive and misunderstood by a weaker brother. (Rom. 14:1-23; 1 Cor. 8:12.)
 - => Offending his conscience => Grieving his spirit
 - => Being a stumbling block => Being a bad example
2. By confronting him face to face
 - => Insulting => Showing disrespect => Abusing
 - => Humiliating => Showing bitterness => Degrading
 - => Being angry => Being hostile => Arguing
3. By tearing him down behind his back.
 - => Talking about => Murmuring => Lying
 - => Criticizing => Gossiping => Spreading rumours
4. By encroaching on his rights or property.
 - => Deceiving => Lying => Cheating
 - => Envyng => Stealing => Bypassing □

II. *Mathew 18:17–18 Church Discipline*

The second step in correcting an offending brother is to discipline the brother. Christ discusses two points in dealing with the actual disciplining of an offending brother.

1. The earthly discipline. If the offending brother refuses to be reconciled after the appeal by two or three believers, then the matter is to be carried to the church. Why would Christ say that personal offenses are to be taken before the church and made public?
 - a. The offending brother has already refused two humble and loving appeals: the first appeal of the offended person, and the second appeal by one or two loving and wise witnesses.

- b. The offending brother's refusal to be reconciled is a serious threat and danger. If the breach continues unresolved, it will cause more division and harm both within and without the church. Other lives will be seriously affected, both among the saved and the lost. The testimony of the church and of those involved in the division will be weakened, and the interest of the almost saved will be soured and dampened, perhaps extinguished. The tongues of the carnal believers and of the lost will be set aflame. A brother who trespasses against another brother and causes division within the church (and who refuses to be reconciled) commits a serious offense that affects many lives. Because of this, the matter has to be dealt with step by step. It cannot be ignored and left unresolved.

Taking a person's behaviour before the church, whether the church as a whole or some official committee of the church, is a very serious matter. It is as serious a matter as can be imagined. But what Christ is after must be kept in mind: Christ wants to keep the sin, division and devastation from spreading and destroying the lives and testimonies of others.

- c. Christ wants the two brothers to be reconciled with each other and with God, and He wants the offending brother to be restored into the care and fellowship of the church.
- d. Christ wants to keep the sin, division and devastation from spreading and destroying the interest of the *nearly saved*, perhaps causing them to be lost forever.
- e. Christ wants to prevent giving the world a reason for setting their tongues on fire and spreading rumours that damage the image and work of His church.
- f. Christ wants the two brothers and their close friends and fellow church members to build a strong witness, not a divisive witness. He is not willing for a single person to perish. He wants the world saved, every person in the world (2 Pet. 3:9), and two things are essential for a church to reach the maximum number of people which it should be reaching:

=> Love — brother loving brother in the Lord (Jn. 13:33-34).

=> A strong witness and testimony by the brothers of the church.

- g. Christ wants differences and divisiveness settled among His people and not by the world's legal system of unspiritual (carnal) or godless philosophies and arguments. The atmosphere of law settles nothing; it only produces more trouble and deeper feelings and rifts. Among God's people, disputed relationships and differences are to be settled between the two involved persons *alone*. If that fails, then one or two loving and wise persons are to be called in. Then and only then, if these fail to settle the matter, is the matter to be taken before a number of official representatives from the church. This procedure is clearly the wish of our Lord (Mt. 18:15-17; See 1 Cor. 6:1-8.)
- h. Christ wants every member to work and build, not destroy the church. The church exists for worship, fellowship, ministry and witness. Harmony, peace, love and

purpose build the church; sin and divisiveness destroy the church. For this reason alone, divisiveness must not be allowed to prevail within the church. It has to be dealt with if the church is to remain the church and be the Lord's.

What is said above bears repeating. Taking a person's behaviour before the church is a very serious matter. It is as serious a matter as can be imagined. Several facts make it extremely serious.

- a. A person's life is involved. The person can be damaged, turned off and pushed away from the Lord and God's people forever.
- b. Public discussion of personal behaviour is a very, very sensitive subject. It can easily arouse emotions and cause more division. It can even turn some of the spiritually minded away from the church.
- c. Personal behaviour and *juicy news* are what *the unspiritual or carnal nature* of man enjoys discussing. It is the subject of which rumours are made. It sets aflame the tongues and imaginations of most people. Few are spiritually free of the urge to talk about the faults and rumours surrounding others. The very nature of man enjoys knowing and sharing the faults of others with close friends. Why? It is the downing of others that elevates self and gives some justification (excuse) to sinful behaviour and flesh-feeding habits. And most follow and revel in sinful flesh, not in God's Spirit. This is true even among many professing believers.
- d. Few can keep confidences. Few can keep quiet. Even the most trusted and loving and wise do not keep confidences. A person who will keep confidences is more rare than a precious gem that takes many lifetimes to discover. Therefore, when a matter is shared, it must always be remembered and understood that it will be spread around. What will the effects be as it spreads around? The effects must always be measured as one considers sharing personal behaviour and differences with others, whether with just another individual, or with the church as a whole.
- e. The world — both the public and the lost within and without the local community — will hear about personal behaviour being carried before the church. Again, the effect upon the world's thoughts, talk, attitudes and openness of heart to the gospel must be carefully considered before rushing before the church with matters that concern personal behaviour.

Now, when should a personal matter and difference be taken before the church? Perhaps a more appropriate question would be, when should a personal matter concerning a brother ever be discussed with another individual?

- a. When we are *absolutely sure* that God does not want us to continue bearing the hurt and injury any longer as a learning experience. When we are absolutely sure there is no more need for us to be...
 - learning more trust
 - learning more patience

- learning more endurance
 - learning more love
 - learning more hope
 - learning more conformity to His image (or suffering)
 - learning more humility
 - learning more experience
 - learning more glory
- b. When we are *absolutely sure* that the Lord’s Spirit is leading us to share the matter of personal behaviour.
- c. When we are *ready to acknowledge* our own failures and sinfulness and potential for failing (Rom. 14:4; 1 Cor. 10:12).
- d. When we are gripped by a spirit of prayer, softness, tenderness, warmth, love and humility.
- e. When we are gripped by the spirit of “carrying each other’s burdens” (Gal. 6:1-3).
- f. When we are *absolutely sure* that we have followed the steps spelled out by Christ (Mt. 18:15-17).
2. The heavenly support of the discipline. Note that heaven’s discipline of the divisive brother is the same as the earthly or church discipline. What does this mean? One thing is sure — it cannot mean that any man or any church has the power to forgive or not forgive sins. No man or church has the power to doom or save and set free a person.

What it probably means is this: when a brother chooses sin and refuses to be reconciled after the church reaches and reaches out after him, he is lost to the church. There is no relationship between him and the church. The church failed to reach him; therefore he is *bound to the earth* and to being treated as an outsider. Thus heaven — God Himself — will reckon him to be bound by sin as an outsider just as the church binds (reckons) him. Similarly, if he is ever reached by the church and ‘loosed’ from the bondage of sin, heaven will reckon him loosed. God will receive him back as a redeemed brother, as an insider.

Thought 1. In the final analysis, divisiveness and those who cause divisiveness have to be confronted and handled. “A household divided against itself will not stand” (Mt. 12:25).

Christ insists that a divisive brother be disciplined and treated as an outsider. (But we must *always remember*: this action is to be taken only after reconciliation has been attempted at least three times.) Why must divisiveness and the brother who caused the divisiveness be handled?

- 1) Divisiveness threatens survival. A body, an organization, even the church itself can stand only if it is unified and functioning in peace and harmony.
- 2) Divisiveness threatens purity and character. The church is seen as corrupt and weak if such things as divisiveness and grumbling are allowed.
- 3) Divisiveness threatens order and mission and ministry. Divisiveness can threaten and cause failure of any purpose, mission or ministry. Disorder assures defeat and failure.

Thought 2. This passage is a wonderful thing: Christ Himself, our wonderful Lord, has given us the very procedure (steps) to take in dealing with divisive brothers. How much we need to follow His instructions!

Thought 3. Discipline of a divisive brother is necessary in order to preserve the church and all that it stands for.

MATHEW 18:17 CHURCH DISCIPLINE

“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” Mathew 18:17

The outlines and preceding notes of this Scripture should be read before reading this note in order to have a complete picture (Mt. 18:15-20).

A brother who has a personal quarrel with another brother is to be disciplined if three things exist.

=> If he continues in open rebellion against the Lord.

=> If he continues to be gripped by the selfishness, covetousness and worldliness of this earth.

=> If he refuses reconciliation with his brother after three attempts at reconciliation have been made as spelled out by Christ.

What is the discipline? The divisive brother is to be treated just as he is acting: as an outsider — just as a pagan and a tax collector. The pagans or sinners and tax collectors were the very people for whom Christ reached out. They were outside the fold, but they were reachable. The divisive brother is acting as an outsider: he will not listen and respond to the humble and loving appeals for reconciliation.

Therefore, he is to be left alone and not bothered until he is ready to listen and be reconciled. He is refusing reconciliation and living as an outsider, just as the lost live. Accordingly, the church can do nothing but treat him as an outsider.

1. The offending brother himself made the choice not to be reconciled. He stood at the crossroads of reconciliation on three specific occasions. He is personally responsible for his decision.
2. The church reached and reached out for the dear brother. It made every attempt to lead the brother to stop the divisiveness and to be reconciled.
3. The life the brother has chosen to live is his discipline. It is his decision to be an outsider instead of being reconciled to his brother and his church. It is his decision to live in the world of “sinners and tax collectors” instead of living in the presence and reconciliation of God’s people.

4. The discipline of the brother is a discipline which allows the church to continue to reach out for the backslidden brother. *Sinners and tax collectors* are the very people to whom Christ went and to whom the church is to go.

The discipline of the brother is: “Treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” Apparently Christ is saying this: the church is to continue seeking after him *as it seems wise*, just as they seek after all outsiders. Realistically, however, the attempts at future reconciliation would probably be much less often. The dear brother’s heart will have fewer opportunities to be stirred by those who love and care for him so deeply.

Mark 9:42 *“And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.”*

Rom 14:21 *It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.*

Rom 14:13 *Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.*

Rom 14:15 *If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.*

Rom 14:21 *It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.*

2 Cor 6:3 *We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.* □

III. *Mathew 18:19–20 The Role of Prayer*

The third step in correcting an offending brother is the essential step — to bathe the matter in prayer. The words. “Again, I tell you,” stress the importance of this step. The matter must be *bathed in prayer*, but how we go about praying is critical.

1. We must seek agreement about the matter of correcting a brother (v. 19). The matter of correction is an awesome responsibility. It is not to be left in the hands of a single person. There are always to be at least two persons involved.
2. We must seek God’s will and approval, making sure correction is His will (v. 19). No correction should ever be attempted that is not God’s will and is not according to the explicit statement of His Word. Any correction of an offending brother must demonstrate God’s love, compassion, and mercy.
3. We must seek unity “in Jesus’ name,” not just human agreement, not just following human thoughts and rules governing discipline. The unity must be “in His name,”

brought about by His Spirit and in accordance with the whole counsel of God’s Word (not just a section taken out of context or interpreted without considering all of God’s teaching about a matter) (v. 19).

If these steps are truly pursued, the Lord promises His presence in the decision made and in the correction of an offending brother.

Mat 7:7 “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”

1 John 2:10 Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.

Mat 21:22 “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”

Eph 6:18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. ■

MATHEW 18:19–20 PRAYER

“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” Mathew 18:19-20

This passage shows us the power of united prayer — even if the number praying is only two persons.

1. Christ says, “Anything you ask for, it will be done for you” (v. 19).
2. Christ also says, “There I am with them” (v. 20). Note: Christ did not say, “I will be there.” He is already there. This is a very special presence, the real, actual presence of Christ. It is equivalent to the Shekinah glory, the very special presence of God that dwelt in the tabernacle and temple. It is a deep sense, a consciousness, an intense awareness of God’s Spirit communing with our spirit. God manifests His presence in a very special way to the believer (Note Jn. 14:21-22; 2 Cor. 3:17-18).

However, two things are absolutely essential to experience the power of united prayer.

1. “If two of you on earth *agree* [sumphonesosin] about anything”: the word *agree* means to be in complete accord; to harmonize together like that of a symphony; to sound together; to act together in each other’s nature. It is the very opposite of wandering thoughts, half-hearted commitment, disconnected purpose, disjointed and misplaced understanding, unsynchronized spirits, and incomplete and piecemeal knowledge.
2. If “two or three come together *in my name* [eis to emon unoma]”: literally this says “into my name.” The idea is close and intimate union with Christ. It is a

“getting into” the Spirit of Christ; a longing to be in union with Him and to act only for His glory. It is a depth of *spiritual union* demonstrated by so few. Note: it comes not only from private prayer but from prayer with others.

This says something of critical importance. We should never attempt to correct a brother unless we first have a deep spiritual union with Christ — a union so deep that we can act only for His glory. We must be free of all fleshly urges *to get at a brother*. We must act only for God’s glory. □