

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

When you hear the phrase “Matthew 18,” what comes to your mind? Could it be the Parable of the Lost Sheep? What about the woes to the world for temptations to sin? For most of you, I bet you were thinking about Church Discipline.

Christ’s words, “*If your brother sins against you...*” are one of His most unpopular commands that Jesus ever gave. It’s so unpopular that Matthew 18 is so often ignored or even denied. After all, there is something inside each and every one of us that would prefer complaining to someone else instead of actually talking with the person who sinned against you, or you think sinned against you.

- Our sinful nature would prefer to complain to every other person, except to the one who offended you.
- Our sinful nature would rather spread rumors and gossip.
- Our sinful nature would rather pout and say, “*I’m right and you’re wrong.*”

It is certainly hard to talk to your brother or sister in Christ when he or she has done something against you. We all know that it is. We would rather commit to false peace than actual peace.

Now, Jesus here is talking about sins that your sibling in Christ has committed against you, which should be distinguished from things that you may just not like about your fellow brother or sister, such as opinions and quirks of behavior that tend to annoy you. What Christ is talking about here are violations of the Ten Commandments, things like: dishonoring your parents, not supporting your neighbor’s every physical need, adultery, stealing, telling lies, not speaking up in defense of your neighbor when he is falsely accused, having a lustful eye to another’s property or spouse.

But as we see in Christ’s words, the bulk of what Christ is saying here is that we shall not give false testimony against our neighbor, so that we do not hurt our neighbor’s reputation.

But what does our sinful nature prefer to do? Ignore the sin or attempt to cover up the sin. After all, who really wants to confront an unrepentant sinner? It’s awkward. It’s uncomfortable. But guess what? That is what we are called to do as Christians, so that we can gain back a brother or a sister from the hell of fire.

This is so opposite of what we want to do. Our sinful nature and the world would much rather ignore sin and move on. Act like it never happened. The world would like nothing less than to memory hole every bad thing and just move on. But do we ever really move on when sin is not addressed? No! The lies that go under the carpet will soon be revealed. The world would like us to believe that covering up sin is a good thing, but God says that covering up sin is never healthy.

In fact, covering up sin and avoiding confrontation is not Biblical. One of those lies that is so often perpetrated upon us – *and that we often buy into* – is that it's just not nice to not make nice. The world's lies say that we must be affirming of everything from every possible angle. And really, this seems so pleasant to us. This is what our sinful nature wants because we would always prefer a path of least resistance. It's more cooperative. It avoids confrontation.

But God's way is different than our way. God's way is to confront sin. God's way is to call sin a sin, which is so different than what we want to do.

We would much rather use passive aggressive behavioral techniques, such as complaining to others, or sending anonymous letters to the person who offended you, or even if there were communication, our sinful self would much more prefer to hide behind texts or emails, instead of actually talking face to face. God's way is so different than our way. This is why Matthew 18 is so unpopular. God's way is to confront sin directly, so that He may bless us by Christ covering our sin.

God's way is about reconciliation and protecting reputations. Jesus didn't preach His words from Matthew 18 out of the blue, but they are in accord with the 8th Commandment which is given to protect ours and our neighbor's reputation. So, when someone tugs at your ear with a complaint, do not entertain it. Gently ask, "*Have you spoken to the person who has offended you?*" If they say no, then tell them that's the first thing they should do. But if they keep complaining without telling the other party, let that complaint go in one ear and out the other.

Now, Matthew 18 is not out of the ordinary when it comes to God's Word. In fact, God chose Ezekiel as His watchman to confront sin. God said to Ezekiel, "***When you hear a word from My mouth, you shall give them warning from Me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand***" (Ezekiel 33:7b-8).

Now, what about the wicked? Would they be the people who are obviously wicked that even the public would decry against them? No! The wicked is everyone who is rebelling against God. Well, that's us! That's us, all the time! This is God confronting sin, so that the one being warned would turn away from their sin and receive God's forgiveness. This is what it means to warn.

But I have often heard: "*Who are you to judge?*" Well, who is doing the judging? Is it you? No! It's God. To Ezekiel, God said: "***When you hear a word from My mouth, you shall give them warning from Me***" (Ezekiel 33:7b). So, when we as God's people are called to speak, we are speaking what God has said and nothing more. If we don't say anything, what will happen to the unrepentant sinner? As God says, the wicked one will die in his sins, but you will share in the blame. "***But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul***" (Ezekiel 33:9).

God's point in warning is not to destroy but to get sinners to turn from their sin. God could have just given up on humanity when Adam and Eve fell into sin. Instead, He continued to speak to us so to bring us back to Him. He continued to converse with humanity through His prophets, evangelists, and apostles. God doesn't want all of us to be lost eternally. In fact, He keeps speaking to us as He sends us pastors and fellow Christians to warn us of our sin so that the sinner would be forgiven. This is the clear evidence that God wishes to save us by giving us the forgiveness that Jesus earned for us on the cross. But this only happens when the sinner repents of their sin, rather than cling to their sin.

This is such a challenge for us. Our society perpetually tells us to just get along, coexist, and tolerate. Today, we live in an era where certain things that were once considered sin are considered acceptable. Even the laws of this country outlawed such sins. But now the law makes so many sins legal, so that we fear even saying a word against such sins.

Instead of confronting sin, we would rather shy away from even mentioning the sin. We would rather not cause offense. We would rather not rock the boat. So often, we choose to tolerate sin, which shows intolerance to God and His Ten Commandments.

Again, God's way is to confront sin, since He always desires to bring the sinner to repentance, so that forgiveness can be applied.

God is ultra-serious about sin. Sin separates us from Him and from each other. God desires reconciliation. He desires togetherness with Him and our neighbors. So, when Jesus says, *“If your limbs cause you to sin, cut them off”* (Matthew 18:8-9), He isn’t saying to actually cut off your limbs to avoid sin, but He is looking sin right in the eye. Sin is serious, the fire of hell is not temporary, it isn’t something that will last for only a certain length of time; it lasts forever. So, what Christ is saying is that if you would cut off your hand in order to avoid sinning, it would be well worth it in avoiding hell. Sin is that serious.

Confronting sin is about saving. Yes, confronting sin is uncomfortable, but there is always a good reason: it’s about salvation for the sinner. In Matthew 18, Jesus says His words carefully, *“If your brother sins against you...”* (Matthew 18:15a). Jesus says “brother.” A brother is not a natural enemy. A brother is family. So, there is a loving purpose to Jesus’ words.

Every once in a while, a fellow Christian – *a brother or sister in Christ* – is guilty of a deliberate sin and shows no desire to forsake that sin and make amends for it. When that happens, we must follow Christ’s example of confronting that sin by making a special effort to bring that fellow Christian to repentance.

And even if that person’s sin does not harm you directly, it should still concern you. It is still a sin against you in the sense that it disrupts your relationship with that fellow Christian, for you cannot simply ignore another’s deliberate sin. So, if you know about it, your Lord wants you to go to your fellow Christian in private and discuss that sin. If he listens to you and repents of his sin, you have gained a brother, and no one else needs to know anything about it. The matter is settled. There is forgiveness and reconciliation. The straying sheep has returned back to the fold.

But if you are unsuccessful, as Christ says, then *“take two or three others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses”* (Matthew 18:16). Now, these witnesses should be mature Christians who have respect of your erring brother. If reconciliation is unsuccessful, then the matter goes to the Church. Now, the Church is Christ’s family in a particular place. Our particular place is Prince of Peace Lutheran Church. Christ’s family, the Church, are all those who have been joined to Him by faith in Him through Holy Baptism. The purpose of calling attention to the Church is to impress upon the brother the seriousness of his sin and to bring him to repentance. If that fails, as Christ says, *“let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”* (Matthew 18:17b).

So, if the sinner refuses to repent, then Christ says to treat him as no longer your brother or sister, but we never give up on the erring brother as we now see him as one in need of restoration to Christ's family. Sadly, this does mean we can no longer view him or her as a fellow Christian. But, if the sinner eventually repents, our Lord says that we must welcome him back into the church with open arms.

Now, Christ's commands in Matthew 18 are not three mechanical steps, but guidelines. So, we may repeat our efforts a number of times. But all the while, we need to keep in mind that this is an exercise in Christian love so that we gain a brother.

So, would you confront a sinner by saying: *"What's the matter with you! I can't believe you did this to me!"* Well, if you did, you most likely lost a brother. That is not speaking well of your neighbor or explaining everything in the kindest way with gentleness and humility.

But what about this way: *"I know that I am a sinful man, and I know that I have sinned against you, I hope you always come and tell me my sin when that happens so that I can repent and seek your forgiveness, but now I'd like to do the same with you, because I believe that you have sinned against me. Can I talk to you about that?"* Do you hear the difference?

Matthew 18 is all about reconciliation. It's about confronting sin and gaining a brother. Christ's concern here is that none ***"one of these little ones should perish"*** (Matthew 18:14). If God never gave up on humanity falling the Fall into sin, we shouldn't give up on our erring brothers and sisters in Christ. So, we must not be afraid of confronting sin, since we are all called by the Gospel to be concerned about an erring brother and his spiritual welfare, so the erring brother is brought back into Christ's fold.

Through the Church, God continuously confronts sin, so that sinners would be given His precious gift of forgiveness. This precious gift was won for all sinners upon the cross. Jesus suffered and died for all your sins so that the door of heaven would be opened to each repentant sinner. Jesus died and rose to grant you forgiveness so that He would gain you as His brother or sister in the kingdom of heaven. May we follow Christ's command as we confront sin in humility so as to gain a brother. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +