

## **Matt 18:15-20 Tell It to the Church**

The first time that we find the word “church” in the NT is when Jesus asserted that he would build his church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Mt 16:18). I spoke on that passage in 2020, as I’m sure all of you remember.

The second time Jesus uses the word “church” in the NT is in Mt 18:17. In this passage, Jesus provides a pattern to use to address sin issues within the church. He says that if a professing believer is guilty of sin and refuses to hear the church, the church should remove the person from membership.

That’s the final, radical end of a long process. There are a few other steps that the church needs to pursue that hopefully will resolve the conflict and promote unity within the church.

This passage provides principles for us to apply when we experience conflict in the church. Life is full of conflict. Sometimes the friction is someone else’s fault; sometimes it’s our own fault. Sometimes it’s a combination; each person contributes to the conflict. Sometimes our reaction to a problem becomes a problem. Sometimes the conflict is unintentional and is easily resolved. Sometimes the only solution is separation. Whatever the source of the conflict, the process of resolution is the same. We should try to follow the process when we encounter conflict. Let’s consider several principles for conflict resolution in the church.

### **I. Conflict is nearly unavoidable.**

#### **A. .15 “if thy brother shall trespass against thee”**

1. Jesus brings up a common scenario—a brother sins against you. Sadly, conflict is a common experience, even among Christians in the context of the church.
2. How does this happen? Why do we have conflicts? It happens because of sin. It happens because nobody is perfect; we all fail and stumble occasionally. We fail to be like Jesus. We are imperfect and prone to error.

Jesus uses one of the most common and basic words for sin (ἁμαρτάνω)—to err, to be mistaken, to wander off the path, to do wrong, to miss the mark, to violate the law. It's a generic, general word for any kind of moral failure.

3. Notice that this sin comes from a “brother.” Jesus is referring to conflict among believers. If you participate in the life of a church, it is almost certain that a fellow believer will sin against you or offend you in some way.

4. However, sins are of varying degrees of significance.

a) The Bible tells us to freely forgive some sins *without* confronting the offender. Such offenses are slight and minor; they are not serious. We can simply overlook them, forgive them, and pretend they did not happen. We can let them go without comment. No action is necessary; we freely forgive without strings attached.

*Proverbs 17:9 He who covers a transgression seeks love, But he who repeats a matter separates friends.*

b) In the next part of this passage (.21-22), Jesus deals with Peter's question about how many times we are to forgive others when they sin against us—70 x 7—i.e., we continually extend grace and forgiveness to others.

c) So in many cases, we can simply forgive those minor frictions, insults, and offenses. Probably we should seek to forgive people on this basis much or most of the time. Probably most of the interpersonal conflict that we experience is of this kind—we simply let it go.

We should assume the best of people, not the worst. We should give people the benefit of the doubt. We should normally believe that people are not trying to hurt us on purpose. So we normally extend grace and mercy toward those who offend us. We try to be charitable. That's what we would want others to do for us.

5. But in some cases, the problem is more significant. Someone sins against us in a way that we cannot merely overlook. Someone sins in a way that requires further action from us or from others. The sin is of a significant level that requires a response. The sin has harmed our relationship and we need to resolve the issue.

**Trans:** What do we do?

## II. Confront the offender personally and privately.

In those cases where the issue is a significant violation of biblical standards, the first thing to do is confront the offender *personally*.

- A. .15b You “tell him his fault.” The word (ἐλέγχω) means “to admonish, to convict, to rebuke.” You go to the person and tell him what he did wrong. You rebuke him for his sin.

That is, you confront him *with the standard of God’s word*. Show the person how he violated a biblical command or expectation. Tell him that he failed in some way; confront him with his sin; rebuke him over his offensive behavior.

That assumes that he did something wrong. He may deny it. He may claim that he never intended to offend. Perhaps you misunderstood or misperceived his actions. Perhaps there was no offense where you thought there was one.

You have to be able to show the person how he violated clear biblical standards. You have to have something to rebuke him about.

So you confront *personally*, and...

- B. .15b You confront *privately*—“between thee and him alone.” Before you tell anyone else about it, you go to that person in private first.
  1. This is where people go wrong at the beginning of this process. Instead of rebuking the offender, you tell everyone else what he did wrong.
  2. The key here is that you are obligated to confront the offender first and privately—“you and him *alone*.” You don’t tell anyone else about it before you confront the offender.

Obviously, there may be exceptions to this rule. When minors are involved, or if the sin involved is a crime, the victim may indeed have to tell others instead of confronting the perpetrator personally.

But those are fairly rare exceptions. Normally, in the life of church members, the sins involved are the kind that individuals should be able to resolve personally and privately.

3. If it's an offense that you don't want to confront the person about, then let it go; don't say anything about it—unless, of course, it's a crime. Criminal behavior is different—you must always report that.
4. Once you have confronted the offender and rebuked him for his sin, then the ball is in his court; he must respond appropriately. If he's a genuine Christian, he will most likely respond appropriately. One of the marks of a genuine Christians is that he responds appropriately to biblical rebuke.
5. .15c If the offender will hear you—that is, if he responds appropriately to your confrontation/rebuke, then “thou has gained thy brother.” I.e., he admits that what he did was wrong, and he apologizes. He's sorry for what he did. He asks for forgiveness, and you grant him forgiveness.

Perhaps he didn't realize that he had caused the offense. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever hurt someone's feelings without meaning to?

Or perhaps he knew that what he did was offensive, but now he's sorry about it.

6. If he admits that what he did was sinful and apologizes, that ends the process. You accept the apology; you forgive the sin. You put it behind you. You have resolved the problem and your relationship is restored—you have gained your brother.

7. .22 And you may have to go through this process repeatedly—70 x 7. We must extend gracious forgiveness to those who offend us. We don't keep track of offenses. We do not allow ourselves to get bitter about these things. That's the key to good fellowship—forgiving others, extending grace and charity to others.

You go through this process and resolve the problem. That's the best outcome. You handle it quickly and privately; you resolve it between the two people involved. No one else needs to know about it. You restore the relationship with the offender and put it behind you. All is well; you go back to normal.

**Trans:** But, sadly, sometimes this first step does not work. You confront the person about the behavior and he does not respond appropriately. Maybe he denies the sin. Maybe he is unrepentant. Maybe he does not care. He does not apologize or change his ways. The next step is...

- III. .16 Enlist the help of one or two others.

The next step would be to get others involved. *After* you have confronted the offender personally and privately, after you've given the offender an opportunity to explain himself, and the conflict is not resolved, you have to tell others what happened. You've given the offender an opportunity to respond, and he has not responded properly.

- A. .16 At this point, you take "one or two more." You don't start calling up all your friends to complain about what happened. You tell one or two other people in the hopes that these people can help you resolve the problem.
- B. You don't tell others who are not involved in solving the problem. If a person is not part of the problem or part of the solution, he should not be involved. You bring in to the situation only those who are going to help you solve the problem; no one else needs to know.

**Illus.:** "Needs to know" basis for military security clearance

- C. Why do you seek out one or two other people? Two main reasons:
1. to verify before several witnesses that the sin is occurring and that the individual refuses to repent. They interview the offender and conclude that the offense was real, and the offender refuses to repent.

They agree that the person is guilty of a significant violation of biblical standards. They agree that the victim did not misperceive this offense; it's legitimate.

BTW, when you get others involved, they might not agree with you that the behavior was intentionally sinful. They might not see the offense like you see it. If the other people evaluate the situation and do not agree with you about it, then you should let it drop. If they do not verify that the sin happened, or that it was significant enough to confront over, then drop it.

2. to further motivate the offender to forsake his sin and seek a solution. The involvement of one or two other people may help the offender to see the error of his way. It may convince him of his error—if he's guilty of the offence.

I would think this would be especially powerful if the victim shows up with the pastor, or with the pastor and a deacon, to confront him. If you are a Christian, and your pastor and a deacon show up to talk to you about your behavior, would you not get the sense that this is a fairly serious thing? Any godly, committed Christian would be sensitive to that kind of confrontation.

**Trans:** The best outcome would be that the person admits his sin and asks for forgiveness. If that happens, then that's the end of the process—you have gained your brother. You extend grace and forgiveness; put it behind you and move forward.

But if that is not the outcome, the next step is ...

## IV. .17 Tell it to the church.

Sadly, in some cases, the offending person still fails to repent. He will not admit his sin or ask forgiveness. He will not change his behavior. So in that case, we take another step—“tell it to the church.”

- A. Now the whole congregation becomes aware of the situation and can pray about it and apply more pressure to the offender.
- B. Perhaps when the offender sees that the whole church agrees that what he did was wrong, he'll come to his senses and repent.
- C. Again, we keep the situation as private as possible. The information should stay within the church family. No one else needs to know about it—unless we are talking about criminal activity. If it's not criminal activity, then no one outside the church needs to know about it.
- D. Two common errors to avoid:
  - 1. Telling people outside the church about it. This is a family matter; you tell the church, not anyone outside the church.  
A potential exception to this would be telling Christian family members.
  - 2. A second common error is that some people in the church take the side of the offender. People in the church start making excuses for the guilty person, the offender; they feel sorry for him. “We're all sinners; Nobody is perfect; Why is the church being so hard on the person? We should be more loving and gracious.”

Remember that you've already determined that the person is guilty of serious sinful behavior and is unwilling to repent. He's been confronted over his sin/error, and he will not change. So the church should not take the side of the offender. The church should stand united in helping the offender see that he needs to repent. The church should rebuke the offender, not coddle him or take his side in the conflict.

- E. The church should show mercy and be as compassionate as possible. The church should give the offender some time to think about this. The church as a whole should agree that what the individual did was a significant sin. If the church agrees that this is a clear-cut matter of sin, then the procedure has to go forward.
- F. Will the offender “hear the church”? Will he respond appropriately when the entire congregation confronts him, when they all agree that what he did was wrong?

**Trans:** I would think that any sensitive Christian would respond humbly and with contrition when the entire church agrees that what he is doing is wrong. When your spiritual leaders and the entire congregation agrees that what you are doing is sinful, I would think that it would make an impact.

Maybe the offender will respond appropriately when the whole church confronts him. If so, then “you have gained your brother.” The offender listens to the church, repents, and changes his ways. The problem is resolved, the relationships are reconciled, and things go back to normal. That is certainly the outcome we desire—we are seeking reconciliation and resolution.

But sometimes it doesn’t happen that way. If the person does not care what spiritual leaders and the entire congregation think, the final step is that we...

- V. Excommunicate the unrepentant offender.

If a resolution is not possible, if the offender will absolutely not repent, then the final, radical step is to excommunicate the offending person—put him out of the church.

- A. Obviously, we would not excommunicate someone for minor matters of interpersonal conflict. The issue would have to be of a rather high degree of sin for matters to get this far.

However, a small conflict may become a serious issue if it blows up into something far larger. If someone involved uses this matter to cause division and discord in the church, then it becomes a serious issue.

It sometimes happens that the victim responds sinfully and makes the problem even worse. If the offended person becomes a cause of conflict and disunity, then the church may have to deal with that.



- B. Further, in some cases, we would not have to put the offender out of the church. We could impose other forms of church discipline without excommunicating the offender.
- C. .17b But, if we've gone through the proper steps up to this point, if the sin is of a fairly serious nature, and if the offender refuses to repent or to "hear the church," then the next step is to "let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." I.e., consider him to be an unbeliever and put him out of the church.

In some cases, we would work through this process rather quickly, especially in cases of criminal activity. But in other cases, the process would move rather slowly and take some time.

In the worst cases, the sin involved would constitute a repudiation of the faith. The offender is guilty of a sin that puts his eternal soul in danger. He's acting like an unbeliever ("heathen" ἔθνικός—a pagan Gentile, a foreigner). He's acting like a "publican" (τελώνης)—a tax collector, a class of people universally detested by almost everyone.

He's like a heathen *and* a publican. A foreign tax collector is just about the worst kind of person an ancient Jew could imagine. He's acting like a rank, pagan unbeliever, so we can safely assume that he is.

This would be true especially in cases where the sin involved is listed as a soul-damning sin—those who commit such sins will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Hopefully, the person is more like a Prodigal Son than like a heathen publican. Maybe he'll come to his senses; we certainly hope so. But if the Prodigal Son were part of a church during his riotous living phase, we would expect the church to excommunicate him. And we would expect the church to receive him back into membership if he repents.

Throughout this process, the goal is always to restore the offending person. The goal is to resolve the conflict. We want to reconcile the relationships. As soon as the offender admits his sin and asks forgiveness, the process ends. As Jesus says, “thou has gained thy brother.” The goal of this whole process is restoration and reconciliation, not revenge or retaliation. This process is for the benefit of both the offender and the church.

We all wish that we could live without conflict. But in our sinful world, conflict is virtually inevitable. Even in the church, conflict happens. Someone offends you; he says something unkind; she snubs you or insults you. How do you respond? Either forgive and put it behind you or start this process—go to your brother and tell him his fault. And if you are the offender, respond appropriately to such confrontation. That’s the proper way to deal with interpersonal conflict within the church.

The best way to avoid this whole process is to avoid causing offenses; to be kind and gracious to one another. If we have caused an offense, admit it and apologize.

**Col 3:13** *bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.*