

Intro

What do you do when a fellow believer sins against you?

Get even? Respond to violence with violence. Respond to vandalism with vandalism. Respond to verbal abuse with verbal abuse. Maybe tell everyone you can. Great opportunity to ruin someone's reputation.

Leave the church? Who wants to be part of a local church where people treat me like this? How could they allow someone like this to be a member? I'm not coming back because I don't want to be near that person. Avoiding conflict by fleeing.

You shun the person. I'm never talking to them again. They're dead to me. I'll get back by pretending they don't exist. Avoiding conflict with the silent treatment.

Let's see what Jesus advises when professing believers sin against us.

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Passage Focus

Context: what to do when a fellow believer sins against you

- Picking up Jesus' concern for the spiritual welfare of the straying little one
- Three steps are provided to help the straying little one
- Here Jesus is addressing cases where sin has actually occurred, not unclear cases
- Here Jesus is addressing cases where the sin is severe enough, that if repentance doesn't occur, the whole church must judge the matter
- My impossible goal: address all your questions

We'll go through the passage and we'll have ten application points at the end.

Step one (18:15)

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. – 18:15

Jesus is addressing this question: what do I do when a fellow member of the church sins against me? Talk to the brother individually. Don't share it with everyone you know. Maybe you are unsure if the offense is worthy of confrontation. Seek limited counsel if necessary, but don't spread the matter around.

How serious an offense?

In Matthew 7:1-5, we're warned not to correct our brother for minor offenses (speck) when we're guilty of major offenses (log). So don't correct your brother when you're guilty of significant sins. And offenses differ in level of severity. Some offenses are worthy of church discipline. Others aren't.

Romans 12:16-18 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

The goal in Christian relationships is harmony and association, not avoidance or slander or revenge. Unresolved disputes can affect us (e.g., bitterness or gossip). Unresolved disputes can affect the church: whose side are you on?

One benefit of confronting those who've sinned against us is to maintain harmony in the local church.

1 Peter 4:8 Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

In some cases the right response is overlooking the sin committed against us, extending forgiveness, and patiently bearing with our brother or sister. Nor formal correction necessary.

- 1) Some sins are too minor to require discipline, but for the relationship's sake should be discussed
- 2) Some sins simply need to be forgiven and overlooked
- 3) Some sins are severe enough to require discipline

What sort of sin requires confrontation, and if repentance doesn't happen, the whole church must get involved?

- adultery, theft, fraud, slander, threatening words, physical violence, etc. (on a case-by-case basis some offenses need to be brought to the authorities)
- these are based on the sin lists in 1 Cor 6:9-11; Gal 5:3-6; Eph 5:3-6 where a person's lifestyle reveals unbelief, regardless of what they profess
- actions worthy of discipline in the NT: sexual sin (1 Cor 5:1-13); idleness/refusing to work (2 Thess 3:6,14-15); false teaching (1 Tim 1:19-20); divisiveness (Titus 3:10-11)
- Jesus doesn't provide a list of which personal offenses require church involvement = case by case basis
- some sinful patterns are so serious they reveal unbelief, some sins are so serious because they harm the church's reputation (1 Cor 5:1-2), some sins are so serious because they can spread throughout the church (1 Cor 5:6), while other sins are stumbling...

James 3:2 For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

Is this a case of stumbling or severe rebellion against God?

The goal is to win your brother and be done with it. Jesus wants his little ones to end their straying. A brother is won when they listen and turn from their sin.

Don't begin the process casually!

Step two (18:16)

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. – 18:16

The passage doesn't say it, but it would be wise to give the brother time to repent before bringing the witnesses. Pray for him during a time of like 1-4 weeks before proceeding to step two.

What's the purpose of the witnesses?

To observe the 2nd attempt and provide a report for the church in case the brother refuses to repent. It's assumed that the charge of sin is legitimate so the witnesses are there to witness whether or not the sinning brother repents on this second attempt. It's not an investigation. Sin actually took place. In fact, the believer sinned against is one of the witnesses (1 + 1 or 2 = 2 or 3).

Caution: witnesses should determine whether or not the charges are credible before getting involved!

The charge that will be brought to the church is that the brother was confronted a 2nd time and still refused to repent.

If the brother is won and repents, the matter is over.

Step three (18:17)

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. – 18:17

Again the sinning brother could be given 1-4 weeks to repent before bringing the matter to the whole church.

This explains what to do assuming the brother still refuses to repent after the whole church has been brought into the matter. Let him be “*as a Gentile and a tax collector*” means regard as an unbeliever. This was a negative assessment. Speaking to Jews, Gentiles and tax collectors were people with assumed inferior morality. Don't regard him as a brother = remove from church membership.

What about shunning?

- 1) Consider the unrepentant brother as an unbeliever
 - consider as a believer up until this last step
- 2) Maintain contact without giving the impression they're okay with God
 - if they think they're okay that's a problem!
 - don't engage in casual fellowship
 - be happy if they're still attending services
- 3) Encourage them to repent

How should this be brought to the whole church?

- 1) Matter brought to the congregation at a members' meeting
- 2) Members given a period of time to pray and attempt to win the brother (e.g., one month)
- 3) If repentance doesn't occur, another meeting is called where the congregation removes the unrepentant brother from the church's membership

Note what's assumed here:

- 1) The believers in question identify as part of a local church (both the offended and the offender)
 - There is a local church assembly the accusations are brought to. This local church is a defined group of people in a defined location. The accuser and the accused belong to this defined body of believers (church = “an assembly of persons constituted by a well-defined membership” – Louw & Nida).
- 2) The believers in question are accountable to a local church

- Who ultimately holds the accused accountable? The defined group of people that compose the local church.

3) Jesus doesn't envision a scenario where an individual believer doesn't belong to a local church

- The accuser has a local church they can bring their accusations to. The accused has a local church that his actions will be reported to.

- In Jesus' mind there's no such thing as a believer that isn't connected to a local church!

4) Jesus doesn't envision a scenario where one could leave for another church to avoid consequences

- The local church the sinning member belongs to holds the brother accountable

5) The local church will make the right verdict.

- Established charges results in removal from membership.

Why am I pointing this out? In the New Testament there's no such thing as a Christian who doesn't belong to a defined body of believers. There's no such thing as a Christian who's unaccountable to a local church. There's no such thing as a Christian who doesn't have elders watching over their soul (Heb 13:7, 17). The New Testament assumes if a person is a Christian, they belong to a particular local church.

Where are the elders in this?

Elders shepherd, keep watch over the flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2; Heb 13:17), exercise oversight (1 Pet 5:2), rule (1 Tim 5:17), and give an account to God for their work (Heb 13:17).

Jesus doesn't specify elder involvement, but it's only reasonable given the NT data that elders would be involved and oversee the church discipline process. **Matthew 18:15-17 provides some brief principles, not every last detail. These principles can be used in situations that aren't identical.**

Binding & loosing (18:18)

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. – 18:18

Jesus gave Peter authority to bind and loose (Matt 16:19). Now Jesus gives this authority to the whole congregation = binding and loosing isn't limited to the pope. The church binds when they remove the unrepentant brother from the church. The church looses when the brother repents and experiences forgiveness. When the local church judges properly, God stands behind the church's judgment. If the church errs in judgment, God isn't in agreement.

Whatever you ask

Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. – 18:19-20

Again = repeating what was just said. The context is God's agreement with the church in their sound church discipline decisions, so when the church is engaged in discipline matters God will answer their prayers. For example, requests for wisdom. The condition is God's agreement with their assessment.

For indicates Jesus reasoning. When two or three are present Jesus is there with them. The two or three = the witnesses. When the witnesses are engaged in God's work of church discipline, Jesus is in their midst = God with us and Jesus is omnipresent.

Illustrations

1) WBC student walking naked at night.

▪ Didn't know what to do. Too cowardly or shocked to confront. Asked for advice. They said Matthew 18:15. I told the missionary in residence who rebuked the individual. Nothing was done.

2) General cases: sexual sin; adultery; divisiveness; drug use; drunkenness

3) No leader wakes up hoping they'll have a church discipline case today!

Application 1: God instituted church discipline

Church discipline wasn't created by immoral leaders lustful for vindictive power. Jesus instituted this responsibility.

Application 2: Church discipline protects straying little ones

The goal of this process is that Jesus' little one repents and is no longer gone astray.

Application 3: Church discipline protects against the spread of sin in the local church

1 Corinthians 5:6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

Application 4: Church discipline protects the local church's reputation

We're called to be salt and light!

1 Corinthians 5:1-2 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

Application 5: Church discipline protects against corrupt leadership

1 Timothy 5:19-20 Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁰ As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

▪ a plurality of elders and congregational authority guards against abusive leaders!

Application 6: The membership has authority in matters of discipline

2 Corinthians 2:6 For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough,

Church discipline is the basis for congregational church government. This is the strongest argument! In the Corinthian church, church discipline was conducted by "majority vote."

Application 7: God stands with the local church in discipline

...when the charges are appropriate

...whatever you ask

Application 8: Church discipline defines who's a Christian.

▪ Unrepentance after a prolonged process requires us to judge the brother is in fact not a brother.

▪ They may or may not prove themselves to be a brother later on.

Application 9: Church discipline assumes church membership

- A defined group of people committed to the spiritual welfare of a defined group of people
- A defined group of people accountable to a defined group of people
- Church membership = built-in spiritual protection!

Application 10: Church membership makes formal what Jesus envisions

Church discipline can only occur when a defined group of people has entered into covenant with each other.

Membership is required because the people who compose this local church body must be identified. Who's the sinning believer accountable to? A defined body of believers. Which brothers are we responsible to confront? The individuals among this defined group of believers. Who makes the final call? This defined body of believers, the local church.

Church membership, when functioning properly, leaves no believer unprotected! Church membership seeks restoration through the church discipline process. This is Jesus' intent!

Christianity is lived out in community!

I wouldn't want to sell cars or hotel conferences or time shares. It's not my thing. But I can sell church membership. Is Jesus for or against church discipline? If he's for it, we should be for it. Don't forego church membership because you fear church discipline. Embrace what Jesus embraced. Our church constitution patterns our discipline around this passage.

To non-Christians

- God cares about our spiritual well-being
- Our problem is sin (guilt and nature)
- Jesus came to rescue us from our sins by dying on the cross
- He rescues sinners to bring them into community with one another
- Do you fall under the category of discipline? Jesus says follow me. Receive my mercy, and I'll change you.

Conclusion

Church discipline serves you. Church discipline serves your brothers and sisters. Church discipline serves Palermo Christian Church. Church discipline requires church membership. Consider church membership. See the beauty of Jesus' instruction!