

Show Love to Fellow Sinners Matthew 18:15-20

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his sin just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And, if he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as an unbeliever or a tax collector. 18 Amen I tell you: Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Amen I tell you again: If two of you on earth agree to ask for anything, it will be done for them by my Father who is in heaven. 20 In fact where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am among them."

How do you react when someone wrongs you? Certainly, you're hurt by it. It may seem natural to try and get even. But how would Jesus have you react? He certainly set the prime example for us to follow when men were sinning against him. He prayed, *"Father, forgive them..."* Forgiveness is something God wants us to offer others. But won't our forgiveness at times seem worthless to some, like pearls before swine. Forgiveness can only mean something to a person who is truly repentant. That person recognizes the terrible offense he or she has made. They regret ever doing that to you. They realize they have earned God's eternal punishment for their sin. That's the kind of repentance that the Apostle Paul speaks of in his 2nd letter to Corinthian Christians when he writes, *"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret"* (2 Corinthians 7:10). But how do you get someone to the point of godly sorrow so they will appreciate forgiveness? In the Scripture before us our Savior shows us some simple steps that we can follow so we can win over a Christian brother or sister who sins. Jesus shows us what power we have to win over a brother or sister. So let's follow our Savior's direction when a person sins. Let's follow our Savior's way to show love to fellow sinners.

The first thing we should remember is that we are dealing with Christians who sin. Our Lord is not talking about unbelievers. Jesus had just told his disciples how much his heavenly Father didn't want to lose a single soul. He used the parable of a shepherd to explain this. The shepherd left his 99 sheep in safety and searches for a lost one. Once he finds his lost sheep he is overjoyed. And then our Lord reminds us, *"In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these littles ones should be lost"* (Matthew 18:14). That leads into our text where our Lord reminds us to treat someone who sins against us as a brother or a sister. It doesn't matter what the sin is. It doesn't matter if that sin was committed against you or not. Sin is a serious matter to our Lord. Sin ruins relationships that we share as Christians. And more importantly, sin ruins your relationship with God.

So what can you do when a brother or sister in Christ sins? Plenty. Jesus tells us first to visit that person ourselves. Go to them in private, just the two of you. You do this out of love. You have one goal in mind. You want to win your brother or sister over to repent of their sin. If they repent, wonderful! You forgive them. You forget it. And you move on. But what if your erring brother or sister does not take you seriously and tells you to mind your own business. What then? Do you just forget the whole matter because you didn't get through to them. No, Jesus tells us to move on to the next step. *"But if he will not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three*

witnesses.' Certainly, there is strength in numbers. But you're not trying to intimidate your brother or sister in Christ. You want them to see the seriousness of sin. You take one or two others along who share the same love that you have for that person. If they listen to your little group and repents, then wonderful! You forgive and everyone forgets the matter.

But what if your erring brother or sister is so bold as to turn all of you away, then what? You're not quite done yet? Jesus says, "*If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And, if he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as an unbeliever or a tax collector.*" You can see the matter is getting serious. Your brother or sister refuses to repent. You have brought the whole matter before your church leaders. Again, you're not trying to intimidate or embarrass. You simply want this person that you love deeply to see how serious sin really is. Your church leaders will verify the witnesses' testimonies. They will encourage the offending brother or sister to repent. If he or she repents, they too will forgive and forget the whole matter. But what if an erring brother or sister still won't listen to the church. Then you must out of love exclude your brother or sister from the body of believers. This is done out of love. Yes, it is tough love. And we pray it will be effective. We maintain the same goal throughout the process. You're trying to win the person over to repentance.

By following our Savior's steps, you do show love to fellow sinners. How sad when we fail to show such love to a brother or sister caught in a sin. Maybe we make light of it. Maybe we just ignore what they did. We may make excuses. We may leave it alone hoping someone like a pastor will deal with it. Maybe we've forgotten what sin does to us, how it separates us from God. And then consider what sin will do to a person, even a fellow Christian, who fails to repent. If you die in unrepentant sin, you are lost forever. And consider what we are telling our Lord when we don't follow his steps to win that person over. We're telling him that we don't trust that his way will work. We're actually accusing him of being unloving for commanding us to address another person's sin. And then we have the gall to call the most desperate act of love totally unloving if we must excommunicate someone from our body so they can see the seriousness of sin and repent. But can there possibly be anything more unloving than to allow a brother or sister to continue in sin knowing that when they die they will be condemned eternally. For our lack of love and for such lack of trust in our Savior's command we should die the same death.

But our Savior would have none of that. Our souls are too precious to him. That's why he took on human flesh and lived among us sinners. And he wasn't ashamed to associate with sinners. He dined with tax collectors and "sinners" all the time. He called on all of them to repent and turn to him for forgiveness. He'd then show the greatest love for us sinners when he took the guilt for every sin and all the punishment that each sin earned. He endured nothing short of hell's punishment for everyone. He died that death for you, for me, for everyone including some who may still be caught in sin. That's why our Lord wants us to go to them. We don't want them lost in unrepentant sin. So we'll patiently follow our Savior's steps. We'll exhaust each of them before we move to the next. With complete humility we'll approach them in private. We'll show them from Scripture how they have sinned. We'll go back as often as we can to win them over to repentance. And if our efforts in one step don't work, we move on to the next. We won't quit, we'll bring with us a couple more Christians who can keep the matter

private and point them to the Scriptures. We're not trying to shame. We're trying to win a soul. And when we've exhausted that possibility, we bring it to our church leaders, possible our Board of Elders and let those spiritual men deal with the person in a loving way. The goal remains the same throughout—to win them over to repentance. And if that does not work then we must perform the most difficult act of love. We exclude them from our body. Before that separation takes place, we once again remind them how serious sin is. If only they'd repent, we'd gladly forgive and forget the matter. You want that person to have godly sorrow that brings repentance. Since godly sorrow is something only God can produce, then we must follow our Savior's steps to win a brother or sister over.

But let's look at reality. Will any of these steps really work? Won't the person resent us for nosing into their private life? And if we dare to make the private sin public before the congregation, won't he or she just jump to another church that doesn't seem to follow such harsh rules? Our Savior gives us confidence to follow his direction in leading our erring brother or sister to repent. He shows us what power we possess to win our brother or sister over.

Our goal in approaching a brother or sister who sins is to get them to repent of their sin. That way we can offer them free and full forgiveness that Christ won us by his death and return to life. But what if they don't repent? What can we do for them? Our Lord tells us, *"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* The binding key is the refusal to forgive. It's a key that locks heaven to a person. It is used on those who refuse to repent. That refusal will show them sin's deadliness and hopefully lead them to repent. The loosing key opens heaven. It's for every repentant sinner. It's the comforting announcement that your sins are completely forgiven. That God no longer keeps any record of them. They are as far away from you as east is from west. They've been dropped into the deepest of oceans, never to be recovered again.

When you use these keys the way Christ commands them, you have power to win your brother or sister over. Jesus explains, *"Amen I tell you again: If two of you on earth agree to ask for anything, it will be done for them by my Father who is in heaven. In fact where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am among them."* The One who authorized our use of these heavenly keys is the same person who made prayer to God possible. Because our Savior has removed the barrier of sin, we can use prayer as a powerful tool when approaching a person who sins against us. Think of what it will mean when you open your visit with a prayer asking God to show us his will for our lives. And consider the power that believers have who gather in Christ's name. Their pastor has used those keys publicly to announce God's forgiveness to them. And they may use those keys on occasion to exclude the impenitent from their fellowship. They do this with the prayer that God's Spirit will convince them to repent, so they can also receive forgiveness from them, from the pastor, and from God himself.

Dealing with another person's sins can be troubling. But not dealing with sin is far worse. Follow our Savior's steps to win a brother or sister over. Recognize the power you have to win them over. And when we in love go to an erring brother or sister in the name of Christ and Christ does bring them godly sorrow so they repent, then we'll rejoice with the angels over the sinner who repents. That's showing true love to fellow sinners.