

## When a Brother Sins Against You, Part Two

Written by Bob Stone

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Let us view a particular church. This church, by many standards, would have been considered outstanding. The grace of God was very evident, and the people had been enriched in every way. There was great knowledge in their speaking, and their testimony about Christ was confirmed in them in an obvious way. It was said of the church that they did not lack any specific gift; all the gifts were in operation in the community, and they also had an eager expectation for the coming of Christ.

Doesn't this sound like a church that would be a joy to pastor or attend? The church, on the contrary, also had unbelievable problems that would cause a pastor or leader to want to run. There were fights and divisions; you could not even address these people as spiritual. They were like a bunch of children. In addition, they were giving their founding pastor a horrible time and even tolerating incest in their midst. Interestingly, for some reason this church was so pathetic it was proud of its spiritual condition.

Well, this could be said of many churches today, but as you may have already guessed, it was the church in Corinth. The whole scene is described in detail in 1 Cor. 1-6. In this lesson, we will concentrate on how Paul instructed them; in particular, as to their disobedience to Matt. 18:15-20. This will give us great insight into why this process is so needed in churches today.

In order to understand what the Corinthians should have done, let's quickly review the Matthew passage, and then return to 1 Cor. 5.

### **The Steps of Reconciliation listed in Matthew 18:15-17**

**The Context of this passage is The Parable of the Lost Sheep—Matt. 18:12-14.**

**The Problem simply stated is: "A Brother Sins Against You..."—v. 15.**

**The Solution: What is the answer?**

The summary of the steps is:

1. Go to restore your brother by yourself in the spirit of Gal. 6:1-2. If this step fails, and sadly our expectations are not realized, we must try again by going to the next step.
2. Go with two or three witnesses. v. 6—"But if he will not listen..." In the event the second step fails:
3. Take the matter to the church. v. 17—"...but if he refuses to listen to them

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(witnesses), tell it to the church..." If the person sinning doesn't come to repentance, then we must move with great humility and love, to the last step.

4. Expel, or put out of the congregation, the offender.

Why be so harsh? It may be anything but harsh if the offender finally responds and repents. At the heart of Matthew 18:15-17 is love. The purpose of all four steps is to bring the offender to his/her senses; to help them escape the trap of sin they have fallen into; and to be restored to a living and vital relationship with Christ and His body.

In addition, 1 Corinthians 5 gives us another reason why Matthew 18 is so vital. In 1 Corinthians, we see what will happen when a congregation fails to obey the clear commands of Matthew 18.

**The results of disobedience are far-reaching in their impact.**

The following will happen when Matthew 18 is ignored.

**There will be an infiltration of sin into the whole church.**

1 Cor. 5:1-11

*1 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. 2 And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? 3 Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit.*

*And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present.*

*4 When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, 5 hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature[1] may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. 6 Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?*

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7 Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast--as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 8 Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth. 9 I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- 10 not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. 11 But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.

Paul was trying to explain that sin unrepented and unconfessed is like yeast working its way through the whole batch of dough. v. 6—"Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast (sin) works through the whole batch of dough (the church)?"

In other words, sin starts small, but if allowed to continue, it will grow in its impact. Eventually, every part of the church is affected. The result is that some churches are thus rendered ineffective and contaminated because the church refuses to deal with the sin. Verse 7 expands on this, pointing out that unrepentant sin can cause the church to live far below its potential and, in a real sense, cause the believers of that church to disregard or treat lightly what Christ has accomplished on the cross.

Here's the command: "Get rid of the old yeast (sin) that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed"—v. 7. Paul drew upon the Passover, a supper celebrated by all Jews in remembrance of their deliverance from Egypt. A Jew was very familiar with every part of the meal.

Paul was declaring to the Corinthians that Jesus should be seen as their Passover lamb, because He was sacrificed that they might apply His blood to their sins. In other words, as the Jews in Egypt applied the blood of the perfect lamb to the doorpost of their house, so Jesus' blood was to be applied to their sin, so they wouldn't receive the penalty of their sin: death.

If the Corinthians ignored the work of Christ, they were showing disregard for the sacrifice of Jesus. In the middle of the controversy, there seems to have been a disregard for who

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Jesus is, and what He came to do. The more basic question then became, "Are they going to disregard what Jesus did on the cross?" If they allowed sin to continue unchecked, they were treating lightly and showing no appreciation for Christ's sacrifice, and the power of His blood to cleanse sin—1 Cor. 6:9-11.

That's why Paul went on to remind them in verse 7 that in the Passover meal, the Christians should be likened unto the unleavened bread of the Passover feast "...a new batch without yeast (that's what they) really are..." Just as any Jew would never think of celebrating Passover with bread that had yeast in it, so they were not to allow sin to continue unchecked in their church. They were to get rid of the yeast of the old life. (See 1 Cor. 6:9-20.)

This is why Paul continued to elaborate on the Passover theme with a challenge in v. 8—*"Therefore, let us keep the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth."*

1. Paraphrase #1: "Let us celebrate our salvation with Christ, and our relationship to each other, without the unchecked sin of our past lives i.e., the sins of malice and wickedness; instead, let the church be characterized by sincerity and truth."

2. Paraphrase #2: "We cannot celebrate and live the Christian life by mixing together Christ's work (He's the Passover lamb), the church (we're the unleavened bread of the Passover), and sin (sin is leaven or yeast). Celebration and freedom come only through cleansing."

3. Paraphrase #3: "So let's live out our part in the Feast, not as raised bread swollen with the yeast of evil, but as flat bread—simple, genuine, unpretentious"—Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*.

The Corinthian Christians who had Jewish backgrounds really understood what Paul was saying, and now so should we. If the Corinthians chose to ignore this instruction, what kind of sin would be present in their church? Verses 6-7 and the previous paraphrases show very clearly the results. Paul said there would not only be general infiltration and contamination, but in particular:

**There will be unchecked impurity and/or open sin increasing in the**

### individuals in the congregation.

In Paul's words, because the people of the Corinthian church did not follow Christ's instruction, malice and wickedness would increase in the church. The malice of the offenders will be like yeast. Malice means badness, and generally includes every form of evil, physical and moral. What an awful prospect for the Corinthians!

Paul said their wickedness would also be like yeast. Wickedness means about the same thing as malice... delighting in evil, the wicked acts of the mind. That's the effect of unchecked sin. It not only destroys the individual(s) it starts in; it is also like a highly contagious virus that spreads rapidly through the congregation, so subtle it won't be noticed at first. Soon, however, it will work into people's lives. Those who haven't had a problem with malice and wickedness will, and many will succumb to it.

We can see then that it's in everyone's best interest to obey the command of Jesus. The Matthew 18 process is designed to protect us, by stopping the spread of sin's virus.

The yeast of sin will also prevent the church from eating of the bread of sincerity and truth. Sincerity means "clearness, pureness, genuineness." Truth means "the veritable essence of a matter..." the true picture of things. Can you imagine a church that loses its clearness, pureness, and genuineness; and the true picture of things is lost under a covering of deception? Again, we see Christ's command in Matthew 18 is to protect and provide for us.

### **A spiritual leader will have to publicly address individual sins because individual members are unwilling to obey.**

Why was Paul publicly addressing the sin of the man found in 1 Corinthians 5? He bypassed the first three steps of Christ's command, because no one was willing to take even the first step to reconciliation. When the congregation refuses to take its responsibility, the leader must publicly and directly confront the sinful person. This is often the case in churches today too, but it is not the best or most biblical course of action. When Matthew 18 is ignored, it is a sign of defeat and disobedience in a congregation as a whole.

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The instruction of Matthew 18 intends that the members of the congregation would watch out for each other. Why bring a person's sins to the group before the individual involved has had a chance to be confronted and work it out privately? Why risk misunderstanding or emotional responses, both good and bad? It is much more effective on a one-to-one basis to show concern and love by confronting the sinner privately. It allows for a much more efficient, personal, and loving means of communication and follow-up.

The congregation's obedience to Matthew 18 also allows the pastor to concentrate on what God intends him to do, and that is to pray and equip the saints to do the work of the ministry. Sadly, many have conflicting expectations of the pastor/spiritual leaders of a church.

Many uninstructed Christians really believe it is the main job of the pastor/leaders to publicly condemn the sins of the members and call those members to repentance. In fact, some believers take that a step further and don't feel they have been in church unless they have been "preached at" and made to feel really uncomfortable by the pastor.

Others want the pastors to be the chief confronters and correctors of the church, because they are aware of the pastor's limitations in knowing everything that is going on. They think they can probably hide their own sin.

It is also much easier to expect, even demand, that the pastor take care of all confrontation in fellow attenders and members of the church, because its member never have to admonish one another, risking misunderstanding and the loss of a friendship.

But is this what God intends? Galatians 6:1 and Matthew 18 say, *"if a brother sins against you..."* or, *"if a brother (or sister) is caught in a sin..."*

That places the responsibility on anyone who sees unconfessed sin in another believer.

If, on the other hand, we all take responsibility for what we know, the outcome will be very beneficial. This process will change the content of church services and the pastor's role, and will place the caring and gentle confrontation of each sinning member in the hands of those (for the most part) who are closest to him.

We need to have the positive side of godly confrontation clearly in mind.

**The positive reasons for obedience to Christ's teaching in Matthew are very exciting.**

**Gossip, slander, and divisions will be drastically lessened in the church.**

Second Corinthians 12:20 shows us the result of disobedience—*"For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder."*

(Wouldn't it be fun to be part of this church?) Obedience to Christ's command will eliminate this state of disorder, because differences and hurts will be handled Christ's way.

**There will be a maintenance of purity in the body.**

There will be more purity in our actions. As Paul puts it in 1 Cor. 5:8, *"there will be the sharing together of the bread of sincerity and truth."*

As we saw, that means clearness, pureness, genuineness, and no deception as to the true picture of things. In addition, there will be purity in church relationships. Those who are living impure lives will be gently confronted and led to repentance. Those who are unrepentant will be removed, e.g., 1 Cor. 5. In addition, those who are Christians and living impure lives will not be associated with.

1 Cor. 5:9-13—*"I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—10] not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case, you would have to leave this world. 11] But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. 12] What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? 13] God will judge those outside. 'Expel the wicked man from among you.'"*

**The Christians in the congregation will be more careful to weigh their actions, attitudes and relationships, and thus have a healthy fear.**

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They have seen the results of those in the church who participated in unrepentant sin. Any time there is correction in the body, it will cause others to take a warning (e.g. Acts 5:1-11—Ananias and Sapphira; and 1 Tim. 5:19-21—the elder who sins). What does this kind of correction say to the members of the congregation? They know they will lovingly be held accountable for their actions, not only from the preaching and teaching up front and by the conviction of the Holy Spirit, but also by their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

Therefore, disputes between Christians will be handled quickly (1 Cor. 6:1-8) and marriages will improve—1 Cor. 7:1-40. Our church has sadly had to take the Matthew 18 process through the fourth step twice. The positive side was that many who were wavering in their commitment to their mates or in obedience to Scripture, quickly took the initiative to repent of their own sinful lives.

Closely related to that:

### **The sinner will also feel the weight of his sin.**

He/she will not be able to continue in rebellion to God without a great deal of pressure. Look at the process. Each step is designed to add a little more consequences to sin. If the person responds to the first or second step, his/her heart will be softened, and he will respond more easily the next time.

If, however, he fights and resists, the heat of the process will get hotter and hotter, with each step adding more pressure and helping him see the gravity of his sin.

If on the other hand he chooses to ignore the process altogether, the final act of removal from the church will add a greater weight than anyone can realize. Remember, the idea is not to be harsh and unloving, but to bring the person to his senses. Some people are so hard that it takes a tragedy, ruin, or expulsion to get their attention (e.g., the prodigal son and the person corrected in 1 Corinthians—see 2 Cor. 2:5-7).

The removal of a person from the church is a way of taking away the body's protection of the unrepentant sinner, and he/she will eventually, if not immediately, feel the impact of that loss of covering. It is a great loss to not be a part of a body of believers once you've

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known what it is like (if you have truly been a believer in Christ). We may not know that until we have lost it in a Matthew 18 process,

### which eliminates:

- fellowship—1 Cor. 5:9-13
- rejoicing, sharing in affliction, mourning, loneliness
- community worship services—Heb. 10:19-22
- hope—Heb. 10:23
- encouragement—Heb. 10:25
- ministry potential—1 Peter 4:10-11
- truth spoken to us in love—Eph. 4:11-16

In addition to this disassociation, the pressure is seen in another sphere we wouldn't expect. The removal of a person from the church makes him/her vulnerable to an unrestricted assault by Satan—1 Cor. 5:4. Listen to what Paul says to the Corinthians, for this gives us a clearer picture of what it means to be removed from a body of believers.

*"When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, 5] hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord."*

Paul implies that to remove a person from the fellowship, is to hand that person over to Satan, removing any protection from the body of Christ and making that unrepentant person vulnerable to Satan's attacks and schemes. Paul says this is for two reasons: so the sinful person will receive a death blow to their sinful nature—v. 5a; and so the person can be saved—v. 5b. You see, even this is designed for the good of the person, but it sure won't seem good as they are walking through it.

The removal doesn't always cause immediate results, and in some cases we may never see positive results. God will work it out on Judgment Day. Also, the sinner may not have been a believer in the first place. In that case, we just acknowledge that, and leave it with God.

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Several years ago we had a man in our church who was a real basket case. He was a sharp, intelligent guy, but his life was a total mess. We couldn't help him. One day as I was talking to him, I discovered he had been expelled from a church in California. Once we knew that, we were able to lead him to repentance and his life changed, not instantly but very slowly. He has since gone back to that church, and the last time we heard a report he was reconciled to them.

Scripture also tells us what happened to the man described in 1 Cor. 5. Most students of Scripture see a reference to this man in 2 Cor. 2:5-11—*"If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely. 6] The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. 7] Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8] I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. 9] The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. 10] If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, 11] in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes."*

He was overwhelmed by excessive sorrow, and the Corinthians were to forgive and comfort him, reaffirming their love for him—v. 8. They were to do so because the punishment had been sufficient (v. 6), the Corinthians had stood the test and were obedient in everything (v. 9), and the man had been forgiven in the sight of Christ—v. 10. There was a need to bring an end to Satan's activity and schemes, so he wouldn't outwit the Corinthians and Paul—v. 11.

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In case that isn't enough, and even if it is, the Lord continues on after the steps of Matthew 18:15-17 to give us some powerful reasons for obedience beyond what we have observed. This is some of the most significant instruction Jesus gives the church anywhere, and it is all related to the process we have been discussing. These four steps work, because there is a whole lot of strength/power behind them.

**The Lord gives us three powerful reasons to obey His teaching in Matthew 18:18-20.**

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Most people miss the power of these reasons because they don't read them in context. Why does Jesus say we should obey His explicit commands in Matt. 18:15-17?

### **As believers united in Christ, we have unbelievable power.**

v. 18—*"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* What an awesome promise! As believers, we have the promise that what needs to be bound can be bound both on earth and in heaven. If it is sinful activity in the church, we can tie that activity up so it will no longer hurt the individual or the church, if we follow the process as a church united. If Satan's activity is strong in the church, by united prayer and the use of this process, what we bind on earth will be bound in the heavenly realms.

We are seated in heavenly places with Christ, far above all rule, and power, and dominion, and every name that is named—Eph. 2:6. We can resist Satan and tie up his activities and schemes—Matt. 12:25-29; 16:19.

The promise is, we can also loose anything that is bound. If a brother or sister is bound by sin and wants to be free, by following this process we are guaranteed the power to see complete freedom from sin. If, on the other hand, a believer does not repent, we can release him/her from the protection of the church, to do what they want. The result, however, is that they will in essence be turned over to Satan—1 Tim. 1:18-20.

### **Jesus has given a powerful promise for each step of the process.**

v. 19—*"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."* (Notice the context.) If we agree about a specific request while we are seeking to bring reconciliation, Jesus says He will do what we ask. For instance, if in the process of seeking to see someone delivered from sin, the two parties (the one who has sinned and the one who has injured) pray together and ask for help and forgiveness, God will grant it.

If in the process the one or two witnesses, along with the injured party, pray for wisdom and a gentle spirit, God will give it. Whatever is needed to carry out the process will be given as we pray.

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We should have faith in our prayer, obey the instruction of Jesus, and go with confidence to the individuals involved, because Jesus will be present all the way through. v. 20—*"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."*

Why is this process so powerful? Why does it work, gaining intensity with each step? Jesus is there, giving special attention to those who will seek reconciliation in His body.

Remember, He's the head of the body, the shepherd of the sheep. His presence, therefore, gives us a real sense of awe and power as we partner with Him in bringing back the wandering sheep.

Let's trust this instruction and not fear it. Don't expect the worst; expect the best. Jesus is with you. The Lord wants us to be obedient to His instruction, and He has given us powerful reasons to obey.

### Application

1. Do you have someone in mind who has sinned against you?
2. Do you know someone who is overtaken by a sin?

Prayerfully consider the instruction of Matthew 18:15-17.

Go in the spirit of Galatians 6:1.

Rely on the promises of Matthew 18:18-20.