

The Steps to Correcting Offending Brothers



Matthew 18:15-20 TEXT, EXPOSITION AND PRACTICAL HELPS

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THE MESSIAH'S DISCIPLES AND THEIR BEHAVIOR TOWARD ONE ANOTHER, [Matthew 18:1-35](#)

The Steps to Correcting Offending Brothers, [Matthew 18:15-20](#)

[\(Matthew 18:15-20\)](#) **Introduction— Division— Church Discipline:** sinning against a brother is a matter of great concern to God. It is so serious that if the offending brother refuses to rectify the matter, he is to be severely disciplined ([Matthew 18:17](#)).

However, when dealing with discipline, **two critical points are to be noted.**

1. The sinning brother *is a brother, a genuine believer*. He sins against another brother. The breach is between two genuine believers who are *in the church*.

2. The trespass is a personal offense; that is, the wrong and harm are done against another person. A fellow Christian believer is injured, hurt, and damaged in some way.

God has one great concern: He wants peace restored. He wants peace between the brothers, and He wants peace within the church. The disturbance caused by two offending brothers is so damaging that God lays down very specific steps as to how the matter is to be handled; and if the sinning brother refuses to be reconciled and to rectify the wrong, *God says the disturbance is not to be tolerated any longer*.

1. **Step 1: attempt reconciliation (v.15-16).**
2. **Step 2: discipline the brother (v.17-18).**
3. **Step 3: the essential step—bathe the matter in prayer (v.19-20).**

1. [\(Matthew 18:15-17\)](#) **Believers, Sin Against— Reconciliation: the first step in correcting an offending brother is to attempt reconciliation** (see [Deeper Study #1—Matthew 18:15](#) see page # 5 for more discussion).

Note when a brother disturbs or offends us, we do not wait on the *offending brother* to come to us. We are to go immediately to him.

There are **three specific steps** to be taken.

1. Go to the brother alone and "**tell him his fault.**" This seems to indicate that he may not know that he has done wrong and offended us. If we do not go to him, he may never know or be able to correct his behavior. If he does know he has offended us and we do not approach him, then the breach remains, and the guilt of the sin continues. The division and damaging effects of the division can only grow and deepen.

Something else can happen: our own heart and mind can brood, be poisoned, become resentful, even bitter and grudging and revengeful. We desperately need to do all we can to resolve the matter.

- a. He is to be approached alone. We are not to share the matter with anyone else, nor are we to openly rebuke him. This only deepens and hardens the feelings and division, and causes bitterness and hostility.
- b. The words "**between thee and him alone**" hint at how he is to be approached:
 1. humbly; searching our own heart (to see if we did anything to cause the offending behavior—knowing that we too can offend others ever so easily).
 2. being soft spoken and gentle.
 3. expressing our desire for understanding and straightening out the matter so that we may be reconciled.

"Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" ([Matthew 5:24](#)).

"Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves" ([Phil. 2:3](#)).

"Of these things put them in remembrance, charging them before the Lord that they strive not about words to no profit, but to the subverting of the hearers" ([2 Tim. 2:14](#)).

"And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient" ([2 Tim. 2:24](#)).

Thought 1. When a brother offends us, our response becomes critical to Christ.

There are four responses common to human flesh that we are to guard against with all diligence.

- 1) ***A self-centered response:*** acting babyish, innocent, or as a martyr; brooding, hatching, and pondering the evil and hurt done to us; being consumed with the wrong done; keeping our minds on the personal injury until the whole divisive affair poisons our hearts and minds. Remember: this is common to human flesh, a tendency among us all.
- 2) ***A withdrawing response:*** avoiding the brother; being apprehensive, perhaps even fearing to face or associate with him; showing displeasure or getting back at him by ignoring or neglecting him.
- 3) ***A gossiping response:*** a self-justifying sharing; a self-vindicating sharing; a tendency to share hurt and evil and wrong done, to share with close friends in order to picture ourselves as blameless. The problem with sharing the division with others is that Christ says we are to go to the person first. Then if he does not respond to our appeal, we are to seek loving and wise counsel.
- 4) ***A retaliating response:*** becoming embroiled in the divisiveness and wrongdoing ourselves; reacting and lowering ourselves to the level of the wrongdoer; getting back at the wrongdoer.

Thought 2. When a brother offends us, the most important response (after prayer, of course) is to go to the brother alone. There is great wisdom in this instruction, wisdom that teaches both brothers to subject the flesh and to give prominence to the spirit.

- 1) **Wisdom for the *offended* brother.** Human nature tends to react, brood, share the evil, and seek retaliation—whether simply withdrawing or attacking. Christ demands that we conquer the urges of the flesh to react and that we control the situation through the Spirit. We are to keep quiet and pray and then go to the brother and discuss the matter, seeking reconciliation. Simply put, we are to be spiritually minded.
- 2) **Wisdom for the *offending* brother.** Human nature avoids and is slow in admitting wrong. A humble, loving, and caring visit to seek reconciliation is *an encouragement* for a brother to confess, apologize, and be reconciled.

Thought 3. Note just how wise the Lord's instruction really is. Just think what enormous lessons and qualities are learned and developed by three brothers sitting down to seek reconciliation, **the very qualities of the Spirit's fruit.....**

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| 1. Love | 6. Goodness |
| 2. Joy | 7. Faith |
| 3. Peace | 8. Meekness |
| 4. Longsuffering | 9. Self-control |
| 5. Gentleness | |

Thought 4. Think what a different world this would be if this step alone was practiced by all: the difference in human relationships personally, nationally, and internationally; the difference in health emotionally and physically (ulcers, blood pressure, heart attacks, etc.).

2. Go to the brother with witnesses. Some Christian brothers are stubborn; others are immature; still others are gripped by selfish and sinful motives and behavior. Therefore an offending brother may not be willing to be reconciled nor willing to admit his wrong. In such cases one or two loving and wise brothers are to be taken with us to the offending brother.

This act does several things.

- a. It shows the brother that there is deep concern; a number of people do care and want to help.
- b. It also shows that the offense is known by more than one or two people. At least several know.
- c. It also provides objective and wise counsel between the two differing parties. Agreement and reconciliation are more likely to arise from this.
- d. It helps to prevent bias, selfish reaction, and partial interest.

Thought 1. This step should never be taken until the brother has been approached alone. We are not to talk about or share a brother's wrong with anyone else—not ever—not until we have sat down with him personally in the love of Christ.

However, this step *is* to be taken if he persists in his divisiveness. But it is always to be done in a spirit of humility, love, care, and personal unworthiness.

Thought 2. There is sometimes a tendency to give up after a divisive brother refuses reconciliation—to let him suffer whatever punishment follows. However, Christ says, "**Keep on; stay after him. Don't give up.**" Note: this is the demand of Christ throughout the whole course of discipline. Christ never gives up reaching out to the sinning brother. Therefore, the church is never to give up (see [Deeper Study #2—Matthew 18:17](#) see page # 9 for more discussion). The divisiveness of the Galatian church and its personal attack upon Paul are prime examples of this fact. Paul was constantly reaching out to those who were so imperfect and ever failing (cp. [Galatians 4:19](#)).

3. Go before the church (see [Deeper Study #2—Matthew 18:17](#) see page # 9 for more discussion).

DEEPER STUDY #1 (Matthew 18:15) Believers, Sin Against— Reconciliation (Matthew 18:15) Believers, Sin Against— Reconciliation: how does a Christian brother trespass or offend another brother?

There are many ways.

1. By his behavior and Christian liberty: doing that which is allowed but is offensive and misunderstood by a weaker brother. (Cp. [Romans 14:1-23](#); [1 Cor. 8:12](#).)

- a. Offending his conscience
- b. Grieving his spirit
- c. Being a stumbling block
- d. Being a bad example

2. By confronting him face to face.

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| a. Insulting | f. Showing disrespect |
| b. Abusing | g. Showing bitterness |
| c. Humiliating | h. Being angry |
| d. Degrading | i. Being hostile |
| e. Arguing | |

3. By tearing him down behind his back.

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| a. Talking about | d. Murmuring |
| b. Lying | e. Criticizing |
| c. Gossiping | f. Spreading rumors |

4. By encroaching on his rights or property.

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|--------------|--------------|
| a. Deceiving | d. Lying |
| b. Cheating | e. Envy |
| c. Stealing | f. Bypassing |

2. (Matthew 18:17-18) Church Discipline: the second step in correcting an offending brother is to discipline the brother.

Christ discusses **two points** in dealing with the actual disciplining of an offending brother.

1. The earthly discipline. If the offending brother refuses to be reconciled after the appeal by two or three believers, then the matter is to be carried to the church.

Why would Christ say that personal offenses are to be taken before the church and made public?

- a.** The offending brother has already refused two humble and loving appeals: the first appeal of the offended person, and the second appeal by one or two loving and wise witnesses.
- b.** The offending brother's refusal to be reconciled is a serious threat and danger. If the breach continues unresolved, it will cause more division and harm both within and without the church. Other lives will be seriously affected, both among the saved and the lost. The testimony of the church and of those involved in the division will be weakened, and the interest of the almost saved will be soured and dampened, perhaps extinguished. The tongues of the carnal believers and of the lost will be set aflame. A brother who trespasses against another brother and causes division within the church (and who refuses to be reconciled) commits a serious offense that affects many lives. Because of this, the matter has to be dealt with step by step. It cannot be ignored and left unresolved.

Taking a person's behavior before the church, whether the church as a whole or some official committee of the church, is a very serious matter. It is as serious a matter as can be imagined. But what Christ is after must be kept in mind: Christ wants to keep the sin, division, and devastation from spreading and destroying the lives and testimonies of others.

- c.** Christ wants the two brothers to be reconciled with each other and with God, and He wants the offending brother to be restored into the care and fellowship of the church.
- d.** Christ wants to keep the sin, division, and devastation from spreading and destroying the interest of the *nearly saved*, perhaps causing them to be lost forever.
- e.** Christ wants to prevent giving the world a reason for setting their tongues on fire and spreading rumors that damage the image and work of His church.
- f.** Christ wants the two brothers and their close friends and fellow church members to build a strong witness, not a divisive witness. He is not willing for a single person to perish. He wants the world saved, every person in the world

([2 Peter 3:9](#)), and **two things are essential** for a church to reach the maximum number of people which it should be reaching:

1. Love—brother loving brother in the Lord ([John 13:33-34](#)).
 2. A strong witness and testimony by the brothers of the church.
- g. Christ wants differences and divisiveness settled among His people, and not by the world's legal system of carnal or godless philosophies and arguments. The atmosphere of law settles nothing; it only produces more trouble and deeper feelings and rifts. Among God's people, disputed relationships and differences are to be settled between the two involved persons *alone*. If that fails, then one or two loving and wise persons are to be called in. Then and only then, if these fail to settle the matter, is the matter to be taken before a number of official representatives from the church. This procedure is clearly the wish of our Lord ([Matthew 18:15-17](#). See outline—' [1 Cor. 6:1-8](#) and notes—' [1 Cor. 6:1-8](#).)
- h. Christ wants every member to work and build, not destroy the church. The church exists for worship, fellowship, ministry, and witness. Harmony, peace, love, and purpose build the church; sin and divisiveness destroy the church. For this reason alone divisiveness must not be allowed to prevail within the church. It has to be dealt with if the church is to remain the church and be the Lord's.

What is said above bears repeating. Taking a person's behavior before the church is a very serious matter. It is as serious a matter as can be imagined. **Several facts make it extremely serious.**

- a. A person's life is involved. The person can be damaged, turned off and pushed away from the Lord and God's people forever.
- b. Public discussion of personal behavior is a very, very sensitive subject. It can easily arouse emotions and cause more division. It can even turn some of the spiritually minded away from the church.
- c. Personal behavior and *juicy news* are what the carnal nature of man enjoys discussing. It is the subject of which rumors are made. It sets aflame the tongues and imaginations of most people. Few are spiritually free of the urge to talk about the faults and rumors surrounding others. The very nature of man enjoys knowing and sharing the faults of others with close friends. Why? It is the downing of others that elevates self and gives some justification (excuse) to sinful behavior and flesh-feeding habits. And most follow and revel in sinful flesh, not in God's Spirit. This is true even among many professing believers.
- d. Few can keep confidences. Few can keep quiet. Even the most trusted and loving and wise do not keep confidences. A person who will keep confidences is more rare than a rare gem that takes many lifetimes to discover. Therefore, when a matter is shared, it must always be remembered and understood that it will be spread around. What will the effects be as it spreads around? The effects must always be measured as one considers sharing personal behavior and

differences with others, whether with just another individual, or with the church as a whole.

- e. The world—both the public and the lost within and without the local community—will hear about personal behavior being carried before the church. Again, the effect upon the world's thoughts, talk, attitudes, and openness of heart to the gospel must be carefully considered before rushing before the church with matters that concern personal behavior.

Now, when should a personal matter and difference be taken before the church? (Perhaps a more appropriate question would be, when should a personal matter concerning a brother ever be discussed with another individual?)

- a. When we are ***absolutely sure*** that God does not want us to continue bearing the hurt and injury any longer as a learning experience. **When we are absolutely sure there is no more need for us to be.....**
 - 1. learning more trust
 - 2. learning more patience
 - 3. learning more endurance
 - 4. learning more humility
 - 5. learning more love
 - 6. learning more experience
 - 7. learning more hope
 - 8. learning more conformity to His image (or suffering)
 - 9. learning more glory
- b. When we are ***absolutely sure*** that the Lord's Spirit is leading us to share the matter of personal behavior.
- c. When we are ***ready to acknowledge*** our own failures and sinfulness and potential for failing ([Romans 14:4](#); [1 Cor. 10:12](#)).
- d. When we are gripped by a spirit of prayer, softness, tenderness, warmth, love, and humility.
- e. When we are gripped by the spirit of "**bearing one another's burdens**" ([Galatians 6:1-3](#)).
- f. When we are ***absolutely sure*** that we have followed the steps spelled out by Christ ([Matthew 18:15-17](#)).

2. The heavenly support of the discipline. Note that heaven's discipline of the divisive brother is the same as the earthly or church discipline. What does it mean to "**bind**" (*dēsēte*) someone on earth? One thing is sure—it cannot mean that any man or any church has the power to forgive or not forgive sins. No man or church has the power to doom or save and set free a person.

What it probably means is this: when a brother chooses sin and refuses to be reconciled after the church reaches and reaches out after him, he is lost to the church. There is no relationship between him and the church. The church failed to reach him; therefore he is *bound to the earth* and to being treated as an outsider. Thus heaven—God Himself—will reckon him to be bound by sin as an outsider just as the church binds (reckons) him. Similarly, if he is ever reached by the church and "loosed" (*lusēte*) from the bondage of sin, heaven will reckon him loosed. God will receive him back as a redeemed brother, as an insider.

Thought 1. In the final analysis, divisiveness and those who cause divisiveness have to be confronted and handled. "A house divided against itself cannot stand" ([Matthew 12:25](#)).

Christ insists that a divisive brother be disciplined and treated as an outsider.

(But we must *always* remember: this action is to be taken only after reconciliation has been attempted at least three times.)

Why must divisiveness and the brother who caused the divisiveness be handled?

- 1) Divisiveness threatens survival. A body, an organization, even the church itself can stand only if it is unified and functioning in peace and harmony.
- 2) Divisiveness threatens purity and character. The church is seen as corrupt and weak if such things as divisiveness and grumbling are allowed.
- 3) Divisiveness threatens order and mission and ministry. Divisiveness can threaten and cause failure of any purpose, mission, or ministry. Disorder assures defeat and failure.

Thought 2. This passage is a wonderful thing: Christ Himself, our wonderful Lord, has given us the very procedure (steps) to take in dealing with divisive brothers. How much we need to follow His instructions!

Thought 3. Discipline of a divisive brother is necessary in order to preserve the church and all that it stands for.

DEEPER STUDY #2 (Matthew 18:17) Discipline, Church

(Matthew 18:17) Discipline, Church: the outlines and preceding notes of this Scripture should be read before reading this note in order to have a complete picture ([Matthew 18:15-20](#)).

A brother who has a personal quarrel with another brother is to be disciplined **if three things exist.**

1. If he continues in open rebellion against the Lord.
2. If he continues to be gripped by the selfishness, covetousness, and worldliness of this earth.
3. If he refuses reconciliation with his brother after three attempts at reconciliation have been made as spelled out by Christ.

What is the discipline? The divisive brother is to be treated just as he is acting: as an outsider—just as a heathen and a publican. The heathen or sinners and publicans were the very people for whom Christ reached out. They were outside the fold, but they were reachable. The divisive brother is acting as an outsider: he will not listen and respond to the humble and loving appeals for reconciliation. Therefore, he is to be left alone and not bothered until he is ready to listen and be reconciled. He is refusing reconciliation and living as an outsider, just as the lost live. Accordingly, the church can do nothing but treat him as an outsider.

1. The offending brother himself made the choice not to be reconciled. He stood at the crossroads of reconciliation on three specific occasions. He is personally responsible for his decision.

2. The church reached and reached out for the dear brother. It made every attempt to lead the brother to stop the divisiveness and to be reconciled.

3. The life the brother has chosen to live is his discipline. It is his decision to be an outsider instead of being reconciled to his brother and his church. It is his decision to live in the world of "*sinners and publicans*" instead of living in the presence and reconciliation of God's people.

4. The discipline of the brother is a discipline which allows the church to continue to reach out for the backslidden brother. *Sinners and publicans* are the very people to whom Christ went and to whom the church is to go. The discipline of the brother is: "Let him be unto thee as a heathen and a publican." Apparently Christ is saying this: the church is to continue seeking after him *as it deems wise*, just as they seek after all outsiders. Realistically, however, the attempts at future reconciliation would probably be much less often. The dear brother's heart will have fewer opportunities to be stirred by those who love and care for him so deeply.

"And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea" ([Mark 9:42](#)).

"Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way" ([Romans 14:13](#)).

"But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died" ([Romans 14:15](#)).

"It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak" ([Romans 14:21](#)).

"Giving no offence in any thing" ([2 Cor. 6:3](#)).

"He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him" ([1 John 2:10](#)).

3. ([Matthew 18:19-20](#)) Prayer: the third step in correcting an offending brother is the essential step—to bathe the matter in prayer.

The words, "**Again, I say unto you,**" stress the importance of this step. The matter must be *bathed in prayer*, but how we go about praying is critical.

1. We must seek agreement about the matter of correcting a brother ([Matthew 18:19](#)). The matter of correction is an awesome responsibility. It is not to be left in the hands of a single person. *There are always to be at least two persons involved.*

2. We must seek God's will and approval, making sure correction is His will ([Matthew 18:19](#)). No correction should ever be attempted that is not God's will and is not according to the explicit statement of His Word. Any correction of an offending brother must demonstrate God's love, compassion, and mercy.

3. We must seek unity "**in Jesus' name,**" not just human agreement, not just following human thoughts and rules governing discipline. The unity must be "**in His name,**" brought about by His Spirit and in accordance with the whole counsel of God's Word (not just a section taken out of context or interpreted without considering all of God's teaching about a matter) ([Matthew 18:19](#)).

If these steps are truly pursued, the Lord promises His presence in the decision made and in the correction of an offending brother.

"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" ([Matthew 7:7](#)).

"And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" ([Matthew 21:22](#)).

"Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints" ([Ephes. 6:18](#)).

"Seek the LORD and his strength, seek his face continually" ([1 Chron. 16:11](#)).

DEEPER STUDY #3 ([Matthew 18:19-20](#)) Prayer

([Matthew 18:19-20](#)) Prayer: this passage shows us the power of united prayer—even if the number praying is only two persons.

1. Christ says, "Anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them" ([Matthew 18:19](#)).

2. Christ also says, "There am I in the midst of them" ([Matthew 18:20](#)). Note: Christ did not say, "I will be there." *He is already there.* This is a very special presence, the real, actual presence of Christ. It is equivalent to the Shekinah glory, the very special presence of God that dwelt in the tabernacle and temple. It is a deep sense, a

consciousness, an intense awareness of God's Spirit communing with our spirit. God manifests His presence in a very special way to the believer.

However, **two things are absolutely essential** to experience the power of united prayer.

1. "If two of you **shall agree** [*sumphōnēsōsin*]" : the words *shall agree* mean to be in complete accord; to harmonize together like that of a symphony; to sound together; to act together in each other's nature. It is the very opposite of wandering thoughts, half-hearted commitment, disconnected purpose, disjointed and misplaced understanding, unsynchronized spirits, and incomplete and piece-meal knowledge.

2. If "two or three are gathered together **in my name** [*eis to emon onoma*]" : literally this says "**into my name.**" The idea is close and intimate union with Christ. It is a "**getting into**" the Spirit of Christ; a longing to be in union with Him and to act only for His glory. It is a depth of *spiritual union* demonstrated by so few. **Note:** it comes not only from private prayer, but from prayer with others.

This says something of critical importance. We should never attempt to correct a brother unless we first have a deep spiritual union with Christ—a union so deep that we can act only for His glory. We must be free of all fleshly urges to *get at a brother*. We must act only for God's glory.