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Matthew 18:15-22  
7/25/10

"You Have Gained Your Brother"

Today we continue our series on biblical counseling. Let's recap what we've covered so far over the last few weeks. Our first message called every Christian to aspire to grow in their ability to biblically counsel one another. Our second message talked about the importance of gathering adequate data before you give out any counsel. Our third message talked about how we grow and change biblically, to be used in counseling. We talked about the need to be born again as a Christian. We talked about looking to the heart for real biblical change. And we talked about the put on, put off, dynamic of biblical change.

In today's message we're going to think through the biblical processes for dealing with different categories of sins. These processes need to guide us. In other words, the Bible will tell us when it is an appropriate time to step in and give biblical counsel, and when it's not. The Bible will guide us on the processes to follow in different circumstances. Often you may even have to counsel some about these processes; in other words encouraging people to go through them.

The main two processes we will be talking about today are Matthew 18 and Galatians 6:1. We'll also mention a few other Scriptures that address some other more public and extreme circumstances. Now, we mentioned Matthew 18 and Galatians 6:1 briefly in our sermon from two weeks ago. But today we will work through these processes more thoroughly, and discuss our involvement in them.

And so what this all means is that we need to follow the appropriate process in dealing with offenses and sins. The Bible tells us the process to follow. The Bible tells us different processes for different kinds of offenses. The nature of the offense will dictate the process. You have personal offenses and non-personal offenses. You have public offenses and you have private offenses. Both personal and non-personal offenses can be either public or private. The nature of the offense will dictate which biblical process you need to follow in different categories of sin.

Let's think about personal offenses first. A conflict of this sort is when one person believes someone has committed an offense against them. They believe someone has sinned against them. This is what we call a "personal offense." If you lie to someone, you've committed a personal offense against them. If you steal something from someone, you've committed a personal offense against them. There are countless ways you could sin against your neighbor. The last six commandments, for example, summarize different kinds of sins you could do against your neighbor.

Well, the Bible is very clear on how to deal with a personal offense. Matthew 18 is the general process. If you believe your brother or sister has sinned against you, then Matthew 18 is the process for reconciliation. However, even before someone initiates the steps of Matthew 18, there's a question they have to answer first. Simply, is this sin serious enough to warrant Matthew 18? You see, there is another option. The first option is that the offended person can simply overlook the sin. Proverbs 19:11 says it is to our glory to overlook an offense. In other words, it's generally

commendable if someone sins against you, and you just overlook it. You forgive them in your hearts; you don't bring it up again, and you continue in your relationship with them as if nothing ever happened.

However, don't use Proverbs 19:11 as an excuse for not dealing with serious sins. If someone uses that to just run away from the matter, but are still bitterly angry about it, then they shouldn't just overlook it. This is a common counseling issue that someone says they want to just overlook a matter; yet in reality they aren't able or willing to really do that; they are just trying to avoid further conflict with the person. They don't want to have to go and confront the person. And yet if the person claims to overlook the sin, and his heart is not reconciled with his brother, then he hasn't overlooked it at all. That's when Matthew 18 still needs to be followed. Of course, even if someone can overlook a matter, it may not always be to the spiritual well being of the person if the issue isn't dealt with it. In that case, Matthew 18 again must be followed. When we counsel someone who has been personally sinned against by another, you should advise them on both Proverbs 19:11 and Matthew 18.

So if Matthew 18 is pursued, the first step in the process is a private confrontation. This is verse 15 in our passage. The offended person shouldn't go telling the world about it at that point. They should try to be reconciled with the other person. One of two things can happen at this point. Step 1 will result in either the accused person "hearing" them, or not "hearing" them. In other words, the offended person presents his case, and the accused person will either acknowledge the truth of the matter, repent and be reconciled, or not. If he does not heed the plea, if he won't listen to this plea for reconciliation, that's when you go to step 2. Realize that step 1 doesn't necessarily have to happen all in one meeting. Matthew 18 presents this pretty briefly. We should have a spirit that really desires reconciliation. If the offended party tries to be reconciled with the other, and they sense that they aren't getting anywhere in the heat of the moment, they might try to wait a few days and try again. Maybe they are just having trouble getting their concern across. But if ultimately the accused brother remains refusing to listen to them, that's when you go to step 2.

In step 2, the offended party then brings one or two witnesses to go with them; verse 16. If you are counseling them, that's where you generally come in. You really shouldn't have entertained any of the intimidate details about the situation until this step 2. These one or two witnesses shouldn't go into that situation already having their mind and counsel made up. They should come first to hear both sides; to gather data. After the witnesses have heard both sides and gathered adequate data, then they should weigh in on the matter. Look at verse 17. It says that if the person refuses to listen to "them," then you proceed to step 3. In other words, this is how we know the witnesses end up in this situation being counselors. The witnesses will hear out both sides, but then give counsel. If after this counsel, there is still not reconciliation between the two parties, that's when the last step happens. You bring it to the church.

Now this last step is stated pretty broadly. Other scriptures help to flush this out for us. Essentially at this point, the offended party brings their accusation to the elders of the church to deal with. Often the elders might have some informal meeting to see if reconciliation can yet happen. But ultimately if reconciliation doesn't happen, then the dispute is to be decided on in a church court. The elders will hear the matter. The accused

will make their case. The witnesses will be called to testify. That's when you as a counselor who was also a witness will play a part. But at this point, you won't be bringing counsel. At this point, you'll be a witness. Then the counsel and judgment will come from the elders who will decide on the dispute. The accused will have an opportunity to defend themselves and examine the witnesses. At the end a judgment is made.

If the accused is found guilty, a censure is passed. The OPC Book of Discipline, in light of several passages identifies four possible censures: admonish, rebuke, suspension, and excommunication. These are escalating levels of censure. All of these censures are calling the person to repentance. The fourth, however, is usually reserved for the most egregious unrepentant sins. However, when the lesser levels of censure are ignored, then the person's censure can be increased to excommunication. That's what verse 17 says. That if they don't listen to the church, then they are to be excommunicated; treated like an outsider and unbeliever; like a tax collector or Gentile. When the church rules against them with a censure less than excommunication, it's giving them one more opportunity to repent, prior to being removed from the church.

So in each of these steps of Matthew 18, you'll notice there are some things in common. You never move to the next step until its clear the accused person is refusing to listen to you. You should stay on each step until it's clear they understand the charge but clearly refuse to accept it. Next, you'll notice that in each step there's yet an opportunity for repentance and reconciliation. When verse 15 talks about gaining your brother, it's talking about winning him over from sinful, unrepentant, rebellion. That can happen at any step. Even if excommunicated, that can still happen and repentance and reconciliation can be achieved.

It would be fitting to mention a little bit here about what reconciliation and repentance will look like, regardless of which step in the process you are in. First, real reconciliation between the two parties is going to require real repentance, and real forgiveness. The person needs to admit they have sinned against the person and ask for forgiveness. At that point, the offended person needs to grant forgiveness. Granting this forgiveness doesn't mean you'll instantly forget the sin ever happened. But it does mean that you won't hold it against them anymore; you won't bring it up again; you'll resume your friendship with them and pursue growing in that relationship. If you're the one who repented of sin, you should also look to see if there are any amends that you should make in the situation. For example, if your sin was that you slandered the person to others, you should go to those other people and tell them that you said slanderous things and retract those statements.

Another thing you'll notice about the Matthew 18 process is that the confidentiality of the matter is decreased as the process goes along. At first, the matter is just kept one-on-one. Then one or two additional witnesses are brought in. When the matter is brought to the church, it's going to start with the elders, but the Scriptures make clear that a guilty judgment against the accused is to be announced to the whole church. This is because the whole church needs to enforce the judgment. Essentially the whole church is to act out the censure against the person. That's the church calling them to repentance, per verse 17. This means the Bible sets the guidelines on confidentiality on all of this. This keeps us on guard from gossip and slander. James 4:11 warns us, most literally, not to speak

against one another. The Bible tells us the process here in Matthew 18 on when to bring in others on a matter. To bring them in earlier is to put yourself in a position to gossip or slander.

You'll also notice that following this process will keep us from meddling in a situation. 1 Peter 4:15 warns us against being a meddler. Following this process in a personal offense is the biblical way to respect boundaries and to not fall into a trap of getting into someone else's business that's not your own.

Now most of what I've talked about in this process of Matthew 18 assumes that this personal offense is of a private nature. This process as I just mentioned handles the privacy in an escalating matter. But sometimes a personal offense becomes publically known. How do you handle that? Well, if it's only known to a few individuals, as I mentioned a few weeks ago, it's probably best to just let those people know Matthew 18 is underway. Then you can report back to them upon its completion. Other times, the public nature of a personal offense becomes so public or is so egregious, that more extraordinary actions need to be taken. An example of this is in 1 Corinthians chapter 5. There you have a blatant case of sexual immorality that involved a personal offense of a son against his father. Paul says everyone knew about it; it was not secret; yet the church hadn't yet done anything about it. Paul called for the immediate excommunication of the son. That clear public and egregious sin was not consistent with a Christian's testimony, and needed to be dealt with in this urgent way. The elders of the church needed to act in extraordinary ways in that situation. When a matter of personal offense can be dealt with privately per Matthew 18, that's the normal process. Hopefully, a case of the more extreme public and personal offense is more the exception than the norm.

So Matthew 18 is the general process in Scripture for dealing with personal offenses. Let's think then about the process for handling a non-personal offense. When someone is committing some offense or sin, but it's not personally directed at someone, then that is a non-personal offense. This could be some destructive habit they have against themselves, like the sin of drunkenness. It could be some sin directly against God, like not going to church, or having idols in your life. It's a sin, it's just not directed specifically against any one person; that's a non-personal offense.

At that point Matthew 18 doesn't directly apply because it's a passage dealing with a personal offense; how to handle someone who has sinned against you. In this case, the passage of Galatians 6:1 becomes the process, especially if the matter is generally a private sin. Go ahead and flip over to Galatians 6 now. Now of course, you wouldn't always just go straight to the Galatians 6:1 process. Sometimes, this would also be a time where it's best to overlook an offense. Sometimes it's the wisest action for us to overlook our brother's sin; again in the spirit of Proverbs 19:11. It takes wisdom to know when this is the case. You see, Christians are going to struggle with sin. We need forgiveness and grace. What we don't want is to have so much confrontation of any and every sin that you start getting the false impression we're just some legalistic and judgmental group. The sins that you'll typically want to confront someone on in the fashion of Galatians 6:1 are the sins that are chronic, or especially destructive or shameful. You'll need wisdom to decide when it's in their best spiritual interest to overlook a sin, and when it's best to proceed with Galatians 6:1.

Take a simple example. If you catch your brother in a small bit of false flattery, it might be best to just overlook it. However, if you see that your brother has a pattern of regular false flattery, then it might be best for them to discuss it with them. This would especially be the case if you see that this false flattery is damaging their relationship with others.

So then, if you proceed with Galatians 6:1 you will go privately to the individual. You will gently admonish them to repentance. That's biblical counsel in the best sense. You'd lovingly confront them and call them to biblical change. But Galatians 6 tells us the sort of attitude we must have in this. It describes the tone and character of how we confront someone in this way. It says we are to have a spirit of gentleness. We are to gently, humbly, meekly, kindly, admonish them. This is so very important. How you do this will make all the difference.

You see, that's why this passage warns about the dangers inherent in this process. It warns us not to fall into temptation ourselves when we confront a sinning brother. Now certainly the specific sin the individual is struggling with could be this temptation. But I think the temptations that will especially come before us have to do with our attitude and approach. If we don't go to them gently and meekly, then that means we are going with the wrong spirit. You might be going to them instead hypocritically, having these same sins in our life. The same dangers I mentioned before are common in this as well; temptations to slander, gossip, or meddle. If we are not careful to examine and guard ourselves, we can fall into these temptations. Humility is especially important since you've not heard their defense yet.

And remember, Jesus' counsel on these matters. Matthew 7:3 reminds us that we can go to a brother concerned about the speck in their eye and miss the log in our own. That's a huge danger in this. Jesus also said in that chapter that, "With what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you." In other words, we should not come in a spirit of condemnation or works-righteousness to our Christian brothers. That's not how we want Christ to treat us. We want our sins to be treated with grace and forgiveness. That's how we approach our brothers who are in sin. Look to restore them in God's grace and forgiveness. That's the attitude we need. That's the concern we should have. We should look to see them restored through repenting of their sins and returning to Christ. Again, our attitude, tone, and approach will make a tremendous difference in how are comments are received. Galatians 6 warns us to pay careful attention to how we approach our brother.

Now of course, if you do humbly confront your brother on this sin, and they refuse to repent, it's not wrong to still follow the general process of Matthew 18 from that point on; to have a step involving the bringing of additional witnesses. Usually, if they won't heed your counsel, it usually becomes a sort of conflict between you and the other brother anyways. Galatians 6:1, in other words, often brings you into the steps of Matthew 18. Of course, you'd want to let them know, before you just show up with some witnesses. But, ultimately, either way the matter would eventually need to be brought to the attention of the pastor and elders, if the person continues to not repent. There an official charge could be placed against the unrepentant brother in the courts of the church. The elders would then make an official judgment, and if the person is found guilty, they'd be officially called to repentance by the whole church. Again, it basically follows the same steps at that point as what you find in Matthew 18.

So Galatians 6:1 is the general process for handling a non-personal sin; especially if it's a private sin. But sometimes this sort of sin is publically known. In some cases then, there may be reason why an immediate public rebuke is in order. Again, often Galatians 6:1 is still the right process to follow. But under certain extreme circumstances, more immediate action might be needed. For example, in Galatians 2 Peter committed a non-personal public offense when he stopped eating with the Gentiles, and so Paul immediately publically rebuked him. Paul didn't go through all the steps we talked about today. It was a clear public sin of a serious nature, and so Paul immediately spoke out against it. In such a case though, the accused party should still be given the right to defend and vindicate himself before the church courts if he disagrees with any such accusations. Either way, great caution would need to be taken in all this; this would be best left this to those in official roles of authority.

Of course, you could imagine a situation where you might be in that role too, even as a lay person. Say you are having people from church over to your house for dinner, and all of a sudden one of the guests gets up at the dinner table and starts taking the Lord's name in vain, cursing in front of everyone. It would be appropriate then for the head of the house to stand up and *meekly* confront the person right then, letting them know that is not acceptable speech for a Christian.

So we've talked about the general guidelines in Scripture for handling personal and non-personal offenses, and we've talked about some of the differences between private and public offenses. We've warned about some common temptations to sin that exist when you go through these processes. What I'd like to do now in closing is to remind us of the goal of all of this.

You see, what we don't want to do in looking to correct offending brothers is to promote legalism in the church. We don't want to promote moralism or pharisaical living. We don't earn our way to heaven by righteous works. Period. Nor do we want to promote the false doctrine of perfectionism. Christians will not live perfect lives of righteousness in this life. Period. None of these things are our goal.

Our goal in all of this is actually to advance and promote the gospel. We want every Christian to grow in clinging to Christ's grace through faith. We want us all to be living a life of repentance and faith. Repentance and faith that keeps living out what Christ achieved for us on the cross.

When brothers and sisters sin against each other, it usually leaves their relationships damaged. We want them to find the reconciliation with each other in light of the reconciliation we all have with God. That's when Matthew 18 applies. It will showcase the gospel because reconciling with one another will require forgiveness for each other. We forgive others as God in Christ forgave us.

And when brothers or sisters are stubbornly holding on to sins, not willing to admit that they are sins, or not willing to let them go, we should become concerned about them. The gospel of Christ calls us to turn from our sins and look to his grace. When we see a professing Christian not doing that, we should become concerned for their spiritual well being. Are they really a believer? That's when Galatians 6:1 applies. If they were living in ignorance about a sin, and you bring it to their attention via Galatians 6:1, then the real Christian should thank you. Instead it brings concern to us

for their spiritual well being when you bring a matter to their attention and they refuse to acknowledge the sin. We want others to really experience the gospel, and when their life suggests that they don't have real saving faith, we should become concerned for them. We want to gain our wayward brothers for Christ!

Remember, Christ died for sinners. Elders cannot excommunicate someone just on the sole fact that a person has sin in their life. None of us can. Even if it's serious sin. All of us are sinners, even as Christians. Christ died to pay for these sins. What elders do, and what you should do in lay counseling, is help people to live Christianly. To live out the gospel of faith. That means we want people to acknowledge sins, confess them, and look to turn from them by the power of God. No Christian will turn from them perfectly in this life. We are not looking for perfection. We are looking for faith. We are looking for faith lived out that genuinely confesses sin and strives against it. We are looking for real faith that trusts their sinful lives to the grace of Jesus. We are looking for faith that desires to grow through following Jesus. Real faith will do these things the Bible says.

And so in light of all this, the church must deal with people graciously; patiently; humbly; in love. We may at times need to admonish or rebuke. We may even have to excommunicate. But we only wield the sword of the Spirit. The church doesn't throw people in prison; we don't issue fines. We call people to faith in Christ and to live that out. Sin will be present in the church. It will be present in *this* church. But God has told us ways for dealing with sin. We've talked about these processes today. Let us learn these processes; let us trust these processes. God gave them to us. His wisdom is above all. Let's use these processes ourselves, and counsel others to use them as well. May Christ and his grace be exalted in all of it. And let's look forward to his return when every Christian will be perfected in our godly living. Amen.

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