



ST PAUL'S LUTHERAN

Matthew 18:15-20 "Sometimes Love Is Not Easy" September 23-25, 2017
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¹⁵ "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸ "Truly 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 "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

Introduction

What is the most challenging thing for you in being a Christian? The struggle to give up things that are sinful? Striving to love God with my whole heart and to love my neighbor as myself. Dealing with the ridicule and persecution. Believing in a God we do not see and a heaven we can't see. Being a generous giver or getting involved in ministry. Sharing my faith with others. All are challenging.

But isn't one of the big challenges for us Christians the very thing Jesus talks about in today's gospel – lovingly confronting a fellow Christian from our church family who is obviously caught up in some sin and doesn't seem to get the importance of repentance? By repentance I'm talking about acknowledging sin, confessing it to God, turning from it, and turning to Jesus for forgiveness. I'm talking about sins that are open and obvious to us and not trying to see what is in a person's heart. It brings home the fact, **"Sometimes Love Is Not Easy."**

The Reasons for Not Acting in Love.

Even though sin is obvious we may turn our back on sin. We may say nothing. We may think, "Everyone's doing it." Or, "Who am I to confront anyone about their sin." "I'm no better." "It's none of my business." "If I say something, I may be cut off from my children or grandchildren." "I want our family to live in harmony." "I want to get along."

The Sins We Ignore

As a result Christians may have fallen into the pattern of gossip and gouging reputations and nobody says anything. Christians may be involved in obvious substance abuse and nobody says anything. Christians from our church family may be living together and sexually intimate outside of marriage and nobody says anything. Christians may be caught up in some obvious anti-Christian philosophy and nobody warns them. Christians may be hateful and holding a grudge and nobody does anything. Christians may be abusing others, and nobody says anything.

What's at Stake

But what's at stake? When people who profess to be Christian and yet knowingly persist in a pattern of sin without turning from it in repentance, they are in danger of losing out on eternal life. Their insistence on holding to sin chokes off the forgiveness that flows from the gospel to them through faith. It kills faith. To impenitent people in the church in Rome the Apostle Paul wrote: **"But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed."** (Romans 2:5) Eternal life is at stake. What's more when people refuse to repent, while short-term everything seems okay, long-term they lose out on the peace, purpose, power, joy, and hope that is the repentant Christian's through faith.

So when we are hesitant to lovingly talk a fellow Christian caught up in sin, what's more important? Our tacking some flack or their suffering eternal torment? Enjoying peace with them or their enjoying peace with God? Our having a place in their lives or their having a place in God's family and God's glory?

The Motive and Goal

In v. 15 Jesus emphasizes that that the goal of reaching out to an erring Christian from your family of believers is to win them over. **"If they listen to you, you have won them over."** It's a matter of love. But love is not always easy.

A Patient Process

Reaching out to a erring fellow Christian takes patience. Jesus points out that it may involve a process.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus points out that the process needs to begin with us and our own self-examination. **"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ...⁵ You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."** We need to see our own sin and deal with it before we deal with someone else.

Then pray. Confess your sins to God and ask for his forgiveness in Christ. He forgives you in Christ. Pray that God gives you humility and guidance. Ask God to give you clarity in what you say about sin and its consequences as well as about Jesus and his forgiveness. Ask God for courage to call your brother or sister to repentance. Ask God to touch and turn the heart of your brother or sister back to Jesus.

Then Jesus lays out the next steps. First of all, **"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you."** (v. 15) This is sin that is open and obvious to you. You've seen it or you've heard it. But maybe no one else has. So rather than ruining that person's reputation and creating unnecessary turmoil in the family of God, talk to that person privately.

You may call the person or talk to him or her in person and say, "Could I get together with you soon and discuss something really important?" Maybe you find yourself in a setting where you can say, "Could I talk to you about something important?"

Assuming you get the opportunity, you may say, "God loves you and I care a lot about you. So it's out of concern that I am talking to you. I want to say right up from that I know I'm sinful and no better than anyone else. At the same time, I am concerned that you are caught up in ... (whatever it is – a life-style contrary to the Eight Commandment, Ninth Commandment, Sixth Commandment, etc.)." You may have to explain what you mean. "If this is the case that you are caught up in this is and have not repented, your gambling with your eternal destiny and are forfeiting God's love and blessing in the here and now. God calls on you to see your sin, confess it to him, turn from it, and turn to Jesus. God promises that when people do this he will not turn them away or condemn them. Please think and pray about this. I will pray for you. If there's anything I can do, let me know." Then keep praying for that person.

Sometimes, you don't get the opportunity to speak in person. If not, then write a letter. In some circumstances, this may be the better way to begin with.

But then give things time. While the Holy Spirit can work immediately, sometimes he lets things take time. You may find that a follow-up is necessary to show that you haven't given up. Keep praying.

"If they listen to you, you have won them over." Then assure that person of God's forgiveness in Jesus. Praise God. Pray for God's power to help bring about that change. It is my experience that in most cases this works.

Two or More

"¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'" A member might ask a pastor or a member of the Board of Elders to go with them. The

purpose of this is to show that God's love and your love for this person is faithful and persistent. It emphasizes the seriousness of sin. It provides evidence of repentance or the lack of it, should this come into question.

This doesn't have to be a one-time step. Those involved may feel it appropriate to go back because you sense that there was a softening of the heart being hardened by sin, and encouragement is in place.

But, **"If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church."**

Tell It to the Church

If someone caught up in sin, ultimately doesn't listen to the small group who lovingly reached out to them, in love that group is to take it to the church – to the local congregation. We don't deal with everyone in society but God gives us responsibility to care for our own.

So the matter may go to the Board of Elders who recommend that the Council recommend to the Voters that unless the person repents, they will be declared to be outside the family of God. In love and patience the Voters may direct the Elders and ministry staff to reach out to the person again calling them to repentance and indicating that they will be excommunicated – be declared to be outside the family of God – if they don't. This is what it means when Jesus said, **"Treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector"**? In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul described this as **"handing them over to the devil."**

What We Declare on Earth Is Done in Heaven

Jesus goes on to say that what we declare on earth is done in heaven – that is when we follow his direction – what we do on earth is what he is doing in heaven. **"Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."**

So when we tell the impenitent sinner, "You are outside the family of God and if you do not repent you will be eternally lost," that is what God is saying too. On the other hand, when we say to the repentant sinner, "Christ died for your sins. God forgives you," that's what God is saying in heaven.

Jesus Is With Us

What are you thinking? This isn't easy is it. **Sometimes love is not easy.** Jesus knew that in talking to his disciples then and he knows it now. So he tells us, ¹⁹**"Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven."** ²⁰**For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."**

Jesus is saying, "When my people work together to do my will out of faith in me and to the glory of my name, as they work they can pray to our Father in heaven and he will answer their prayers and bless their work." At the same time, just as the Lord is with us individually, he will be with us whether we are two or three, two hundred or three hundred.

Even though sometimes love is not easy, our Lord in love promises to be with us in these things.

As we contemplate what Jesus says, all of us can think of situations where for whatever reason we have turned our back on sin rather than confront it. Take comfort that Jesus didn't turn his back on your sin, but removed it with his suffering and death. But also take to heart the responsibility Jesus gives us to love one another. Remember, sometimes love isn't easy. Yet, Jesus is with us when it isn't, to help, to bless, and to bring results. I have seen people who have been excommunicated, who as a result saw the seriousness of their sin, but also the zeal of their Savior that they be saved, and repented. So love one another even when it isn't easy.