

When Brethren Sin Against Brethren

*“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something **against you**. Leave your gift before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift,”* Matt. 5:23-24.

*“Moreover if **your brother** sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector,”* Matt. 18:15-17.

Brethren in the Lord should be “*knit together in love*,” Col. 2:2, and “*love does no harm to a neighbor*,” Rom. 13:10. Each Christian should strive to “*be perfect*” just as our “*Father in heaven is perfect*,” Matt. 5:48. But try as we may, each of us falls short of the divine standard of perfection. The plain truth is this; we **do** sin! In fact, “*If we **say** that we have **no** sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*,” I John 1:8.

Inasmuch as sin, biblically defined, involves a “*transgression against the law*” of God, I John 3:4, then ultimately and primarily all sin is against God. However, the fact remains that people in general sin against people, and sometimes brethren in the Lord sin “*against*” each other. Cf. Luke 17:3. The scriptures cited at the beginning of this article deal with that very issue, and sets forth the action that ought to be taken. Let us now consider these verses in the order cited.

Matt. 5:23-24.

*“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something **against you**,”* v. 23. In this case “*your brother has something against you*” because **you** have sinned against your brother. So what should be done? Deny it? Ignore it? Complain to others? Obviously not! Look now at the next verse.

*“Leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. **First** be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift,”* v. 24.

“Leave your gift there before the altar,” v. 24a. Something needs to be done even before following through with the worship — the reason being because God will not accept our worship if we knowingly have sinned against our brother, but have refused to make correction!

*“**First** be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift,”* v. 24b. At this point, reconciliation has been made with the sinned against brother; hence, Jesus said “*then come and offer your gift.*”

Please observe that in these verses, the offender, the one who has sinned against his brother, takes the initiative. He does not wait until his sinful actions are brought to his attention. Sin — one’s own sins — should be “nipped in the bud!” A sober minded, God-fearing Christian is not too proud to admit wherein he has sinned, and he should be willing to make amends both to God, and to all “*against*” whom he has sinned. One who is too proud to take such action is too proud to go to heaven!

Matthew 18:15-17

*“Moreover if your brother sins against **you**, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother,”* v. 15.

Note: in this verse “*your brother*” has sinned “*against you.*” What should you do? Ignore it? Drop the matter? Gossip, and spread rumors? No, no, no! Jesus said “*go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.*” If possible, keep it private. “*If he hears you,*” that is, if he makes correction, then “*you have gained your brother,*” which should be the primary concern in the first place.

“*But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established,*” v. 16. His refusal to “*hear,*” or make amends, necessitates the taking of step two (which would not have been necessary if he had properly responded to step one). You now “*take with you one or two more.*” Ideally, the “*one or two more*” should be spiritually minded Christians (cf. Gal. 6:1), who are honest, open minded, and mature enough to weigh and examine the facts. By taking “*one or two more,*” you now have “*witnesses*” who are able to validate the charges, and hopefully will be able to reason with the brother who has sinned “*against you.*” Keep in mind, the primarily objective in this is the gaining of your brother. At this point, his soul is at stake, and one soul, in the eyes of God, is worth more than the “*whole world!*” Matt. 16:26.

But what if “*he refuses to hear them?*” Jesus then said “*tell it to the church.*” Step one has been taken, but to no avail. Step two has been taken, but to no avail. Now step three must be followed. Jesus said “*tell it to the church.*” Ideally speaking, had the brother responded as he should have, “*the church*” would never have known that he had sinned “*against you,*” but his stubbornness, or pride, anger, or hard heartedness, etc. has necessitated further action — action intended to bring about his repentance.

But what “*if he refuses even to hear the church?*” In such cases, Jesus said “*let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector,*” v. 17. In other words, all fellowship with that brother must cease! Again, we stress that the objective is that of gaining “*your brother,*” or that of bringing him to repentance so that his soul might be saved! From the standpoint of what should be the primary objective, this reminds us of James 5:19-20, wherein the inspired writer wrote, saying, “*Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, Let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.*”

The action cited in Matthew 5:23-24 and Matthew 18:15-17 does not constitute “*church of Christ doctrine.*” To the contrary, inasmuch as Jesus Christ commanded that such action be taken, then this action constitutes a part of “*the doctrine of Christ,*” 2 John 9, “*doctrine*” in which we ought to “*abide*” and which we should never transgress.

Once such action has been taken, we should not “*wash our hands*” of that brother! To the contrary, with reference to one from whom the church has ceased to “*keep company,*” the apostle, Paul wrote, saying, “*Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.*” There is always the possibility that once some time has passed, and the brother has had more opportunity to examine his conduct, that he will still make amends. Evidently the brother toward whom the church at Corinth had taken such action (I Cor. 5:1-11), later repented as is indicated in 2 Cor. 2:6-8, and the inspired apostle exhorted them to “*forgive and comfort him,*” lest he might be “*swallowed up with too much sorrow.*” You see, even after the required disciplinary action has been taken, the objective is still that of gaining your brother! Hence, in view of these facts, then the action that Jesus mandated should never be interpreted as spite action, or that of “*kicking*” someone out of the church! Properly understood and carried out, it is **motivated by love**, not by anger or hostility. We must love our brethren so much that we will take action which we deplore in a genuine effort to save their souls. If Jesus loved us enough to go to the cross in our behalf,

then we should have enough love for our brethren who have sinned against us to do whatever the Lord has required to reclaim them for the Lord, and to snatch them out of the clutches of the devil.

Concluding thoughts: The instructions Jesus gave in our opening verses are not that difficult to understand. But they are so often ignored, and that to the detriment of all concerned. Sadly, in all too many instances brethren in local churches have a falling out; they refuse to do what Jesus commanded, and then they “withdraw their membership” from the local church and go their way, “placing membership” elsewhere, without anyone repenting of his or her sins against their own brethren in the Lord! We ask, how will such people fare in the judgment to come?

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