

“If Your Brother Sins”

“Can you believe what he did?” “Did you see what she did?” A conversation that starts this way is usually not a good thing. It means that gossip is about to go on. It means that something unflattering at best or downright embarrassing at worst is about to be shared about another person. It’s a fairly common way that we tend to react to sin. When we see someone else do something that they shouldn’t do, we tend to react with a prideful, “I wouldn’t do that” sort of attitude. Then, to make ourselves feel even better about it, we go ahead and share with others how we wouldn’t do that, but someone else did.

That is the wrong way to handle the sins of others. Or at the very least, it is one wrong way to handle the sins of others. In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells us about the right way to handle the sins of others. Unfortunately, we tend to be very good at not following the directions Jesus gives here. So it is good for us to review what he says and also why he says it. It is good for us to know what to do when our brother or sister sins.

Allow me one quick word of apology for the way this sermon’s theme is listed in the worship folder. The NIV Bible that I tend to know translated the first line of our sermon text “If your brother sins against you, go...” And that is a fair translation. The Greek word there is the word for brother, and there is not a corresponding word for sister in the original text. The translation that we are using today, which is a little newer NIV, says, “brothers and sisters.” The translators who made that decision rightly realized that Jesus was not limiting his instructions to what to do when a man sins. These words are applicable for all Christians, male and female, dealing with any sin, no matter who commits it. If I had been a little more careful, I probably should have listed the sermon theme as “If your brother or sister sins.” That change simply reflects the way people tend to speak today.

What Jesus offers is a multiple-step approach to dealing with that sin. The first step is to speak with the person directly. Let’s just use an example to illustrate: you see another member of the congregation in the store, and they don’t notice you. While you’re trying to decide whether to interrupt their shopping experience to say hello, you notice that person takes an item from the shelf and slips it into a pocket and then leaves the store. Clearly, this is a sin. It is stealing. It is a sin against the seventh commandment. So what do you do? According to Jesus’ instruction here, you find a time to go to that person directly and to tell them that you are concerned. You don’t go to someone else. You don’t go to anyone else. You don’t head to the pastor’s office and say, “I saw this happen, and you should know about it.” You go to that person. You point out their fault.

And do you see why Jesus would be so concerned about this? Jesus wants you to be concerned with the reputation of your brother or sister. God tells us plainly that reputations are important, and that we should value ours. And just as we value our reputations, so also we value those of our neighbors. To gossip about sin or to do something similar to involve others would be to add sin to sin. Instead, we will protect our neighbor’s reputation by following the steps that Jesus lays out.

Step two, he says, is to take one or two people along with you. Now, step two may never be necessary. Step one may be enough. If our hypothetical sinner acknowledges his or her sin, returns the stolen goods, and apologizes, step two won’t be needed. But if it is needed, the next step is to take another believer or two as witnesses. As witnesses, these individuals are able to corroborate that the sin is being properly rebuked. They can back up your claims about what the Bible says concerning sin, and if necessary, they can also be witnesses to the reaction of the sinner. But it is still just one or two others. We are still not telling anyone else. We are still being careful to respect our neighbor’s reputation. Perhaps we’ll repeat either of these steps, but only when they have both been unsuccessful will we tell others.

That’s our third step. Now we tell it to the church. Now it would be alright to involve the pastor or an elder. This is still not an opportunity for haphazard gossip, but an official approach to the congregation, involving the body of believers in the call to repentance.

That call to repentance, as we have seen repeatedly today, is important. It is absolutely vital. So yes, when our brother or sister sins we will be concerned with their reputation, but we will be even more concerned with their soul. That is why all of the steps we have listed so far, as well as the one to come may be necessary. Sin that goes unchecked and is not met with repentance, damages our relationship with God. It threatens our faith. It leads us away from our Savior.

That's why God called Ezekiel to be a watchman. He was to turn the hearts of people back to their Lord, back to their Savior. To continue to live in sin and to refuse to repent is unbelief. Unbelief separates people from God. God wants people to turn away from sin and to turn to him. He wants them to turn to Jesus who died for those sins. That's also why God has given us the example of Peter and Paul from our Galatians reading (Galatians 2:11-21). Peter's living as though works were more important than faith was a sin that needed to be rebuked. It could lead not only him, but also others astray. So Paul rebuked that sin. He called Peter to repentance.

Repentance is always our goal—turning people back to Jesus and to trusting in him for their salvation. As they do repent and believe, they will seek to put away their sin and not to live in it.

That would be our goal when we approach our friend directly by ourselves- remember step one of our process. Jesus says, **"If they listen to you, you have won them over."** We have the same goal when we follow through with the next step and take one or two others along. We never want it to have to go to the next step, but we need to be more concerned with the soul of our friend than we are with avoiding confrontation. While we are often tempted to gossip and tell others about someone's sin, it is just as real a temptation not to confront the sin with the individual sinner. So Jesus needs to remind us: do it! Go and talk to your brother or sister. If you need to, take someone else along. Don't stop. Don't allow them to become complacent in their sin. Don't become complicit in their sin yourself by knowing about it and doing nothing.

And because that person's soul is so important, don't stop even if they refuse to listen to the church. If it gets to that point and beyond, then we need to be ready to take the final step that Jesus lays out: **"treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."** These notorious sinners of Jesus' time would be treated as unbelievers. They are not a part of the church. The church would go so far as to say, "We do not consider you a believer anymore, because you refuse to listen to what God has said. Because you have by your actions demonstrated that you are not concerned about God's will and his Word, you cannot be a part of this congregation." This formal declaration is called excommunication.

Excommunication is about as harsh an action as we can take. It is like telling the person that they are indeed on the road to hell. After all, Jesus says, **"whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."** These actions that we take in dealing with a sinner are as valid and certain as God himself were carrying them out. If someone refuses to repent, they are demonstrating a lack of faith. That means that their sins will doom them.

But even that action has a loving purpose. The goal is always repentance. The goal is that the person will see how truly serious their sin is. If they haven't listened to one person, or two or three people, if they haven't listened to the warnings from the church, perhaps they will listen when this serious step is taken to show them their sin and its danger. And if it does, they will be gladly welcomed back into the fellowship. They will be assured again of the forgiveness that is theirs in Jesus.

You know, it is easy as we talk through all of these steps to be thinking about it only from the side of witnessing someone else's sin. It is important that these same words impress on us the seriousness of our sins, the seriousness of any sin. Only in Jesus is it forgiven. Only through his work can we have heaven in the place of the hell that we deserve. And any sin in which we get caught up is a danger and a threat to this, one which we will need to guard against. One that we will hope others help us through as well.

What do you do if your brother or sister sins? If you love them, you will follow these steps as Jesus lays them out. You will be careful to preserve their reputation, but you will be even more concerned with preserving their soul.

The Text: Matthew 18:15–20 (NIV)

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. ¹⁶But 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.’ ¹⁷If 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. ²⁰For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”