

How to Deal with Trespasses in the Body of Christ

Mat 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.

18:16 "But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.'

18:17 "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."

Many noted Christian scholars agree that the passage above contains one of the most neglected truths in the entire Bible. It is said that if all Christians would simply obey what Jesus said to do when a brother causes an offense against us, it would solve over half of all problems which exist in the church.

Why should we resolve differences between our brethren?

(1) To maintain peace in the body of Christ (Eph. 4:1-3). Whenever there is friction and turmoil in the body it hinders people from entering into worship and receiving from God's Word. It hinders people from coming to Christ, creates an uninviting atmosphere for visitors, and can even grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30-32).

(2) So Satan cannot gain advantage over us (2 Cor. 2:10-11). For our own spiritual well-being, we must be quick to resolve our differences with brethren and forgive. Satan can hinder our spiritual life, and even deceive us into apostasy, through harbored bitterness or unforgiveness (Matt. 18:35).

(3) To restore a Fallen Brother (Gal. 6:1). Christians must make every attempt to restore brethren who fall into sin. Especially when the transgression has been committed against you personally, your love for your brother's spiritual well-being demands that you confront the brother so that he might be reconciled to God.

First, go to your brother privately (Matt. 18:15)

If a fellow Christian has sinned or brought an offense against you, Jesus said for you to first go to the offending party, confront them with the offense, and keep the matter private between yourselves. Remember, the objective is to not merely to seek justice for a violation against us, but to seek "reconciliation" between our brother, and his restoration to a right relationship with God.

Why is the matter to be first kept private between you two? Because our love for our brother requires it. If we are sincerely committed to love for our brethren as Jesus commands (John 13:34), then even if a brother has sinned against us or has done us wrong, we would not want to hinder his restoration by damaging his reputation within the body. If this person's transgression against you is circulated within the body, but later he repents, many in the body will have already judged this brother and the accusations will have damaged their opinion of him. By spreading our accusation against an offending party, it builds a consensus against them and makes it difficult, if not nearly impossible, to restore that person to the body should they repent and desire to make things right.

Also, many alleged trespasses between brethren are a result of "misunderstandings." We

need to first investigate the facts and find out for sure whether a trespass has really occurred. This is another reason why you are to first go privately to the brother in question -- to confront him with the alleged offense and hear his side of the story. If we disclose the offense to friends in the body, we may later discover that the matter was only a misunderstanding. But by then, their reputation will have been damaged by our allegations.

Many people foolishly allow themselves to become offended by misinterpreting other's intentions, or listening to rumors and second-hand information which always contain distortions or exaggerations. Many offenses could be immediately resolved by confronting the offending party and hearing their explanation. You'd be surprised how many people are so immature that they don't even bother to investigate the facts or hear the other side of the story. Don't ever forget, "There's always two sides to a story!" Never assume you know the truth of a matter until you've heard both sides!

There would be far fewer misunderstandings in the body of Christ if people would be firmly devoted to love for their brethren. Love for the brethren gives us a desire to believe the best in our brother. Love gives them the "benefit of the doubt," instead of jumping to conclusions and always expecting the worst. The Bible says "If you love someone... you will always believe in him, always expect the best of him" (1 Cor. 13:7 -- The Living Bible).

If the trespass is proven valid, and they repent for their misdeed, you are to express your forgiveness (Luke 17:3-4). Let the matter be forever ended, and carry no resentment toward them. Remember, if they repent, but you

continue to harbor bitterness, you too become a perpetrator of sin (Matt. 6:14-15, Acts 8:23, Eph. 4:31-32).

Second, take another brother (Matt. 18:16)

If your private attempt fails to resolve the issue, you are then to take one or two other Christians and again, confront the offending party. The presence of another Christian is as a witness to strengthen the serious effect of confrontation, to collaborate the exhortation of scripture, to amplify the Lord's presence in the meeting, and to verify the exchange of testimony.

Third, tell church leadership (Matt. 18:17)

If the first and second attempts fail, Jesus said then to "tell it to the church." This doesn't mean the "entire" church body, as this could cause unrest or damage the faith of young believers. The meaning is that the church pastors or elders are then to become involved in dealing with the offending party.

Finally, only after these three prescribed attempts fail, we are no longer required to entreat them with the same courtesies shown to other brethren. According to Jesus, they may be dealt with in the same fashion as we would a heathen or publican.

What to do if "you" Trespass

If you are aware of sins or trespasses you have committed against your brother, you have a responsibility to go to him and seek his forgiveness. Should you not attempt reconciliation, this will hinder your relationship with God. Your worship, your prayers and service to the Lord will not be acceptable. "There-

fore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, "leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:23-24).

Note that the scripture says "if your brother has something against you." In other words, you might not feel that you have legitimately violated your brother -- or you may have done so inadvertently. But if you are aware that "they" harbor an offense against you, you still are obligated to go and try to resolve the issue. Be willing to be humble and submissive to others, even if you don't feel you're at fault. Try to understand their point of view. Don't be so rigid and self-righteous that you stand in the way of a brother's reconciliation with you or with God (Rom. 15:1-3). Offer your sincere (not pretentious) apology for any offense, whether unintentional or not, and make every effort to reconcile so that your relationship with God will not be hindered. Whether or not they pardon you, you have done your part and released your soul from blame.

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