

The Procedure to Follow If a Fellow Believer Sins Against You

Matthew 18:15-20

Matthew 18:15-20 - *“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. ¹⁶ 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.’ 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.*

¹⁸ “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

Background Notes

The Church is not mentioned by name in the Old Testament. The second time the Church is mentioned in the Bible is in Matthew 18:17. You will recall that the Church is first mentioned in Matthew 16:18, when the Lord Jesus said, *“...on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”* The Church did not begin in Old Testament times. The Church began at Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The Church is composed of all true believers in Jesus Christ. He is our Savior and Lord. The Church is the body and bride of Christ. *“And He [God] put all things under His [Christ’s] feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:22-23).* Ephesians 5:30-32 says: *“For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak about Christ and the church.”*

The Church is also the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. *“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16).* In other words, Paul was saying, “You Corinthian believers, gathered together as a church - you’re the temple of God. The Spirit of God dwells in you!” The Holy Spirit not only indwells each individual believer, but the Holy Spirit dwells in the midst of God’s people, the Church.

Both the universal Church and the local church are seen in Scripture. The universal Church is composed of **all** true believers in our Lord Jesus -- **worldwide**. The universal Church crosses all geographical and denominational lines. It is the universal Church that is in view in Matthew 16:18, *“...on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall*

not prevail against it." Many Christians around the world are facing severe persecution for following Jesus, and we need to pray for them. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are part of the worldwide body of Christ - the universal Church.

The local church is also seen in Scripture. The local church is any group of Christians who meet together in the name of Jesus Christ for worship, teaching, prayer, accountability and discipline. A local church is more than just a Bible study. The local church is view here in Matthew 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."* The phrase *"tell it to the church"* doesn't mean you should spread the names of people who have wronged you to the universal Church. No. In verse 17, *"tell it to the church"* means that the leadership of the local church should be involved here, particularly concerning discipline.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Lord gives Christians the authority to confront believers who sin.

Has a fellow believer ever "sinned against you"? What should you do when a fellow-Christian deliberately does something to hurt you, or takes advantage of you, or wrongs you in some way? Should you try to get revenge? No! Should you tell everyone in the church about it? No! Should you just "take it," and say nothing? No! What does the Bible say? In Matthew 18 the Bible gives us the procedure that we should follow, and there are three steps to follow.

Step 1: You go to the person who has wronged you, and you talk to that person in private. Notice who takes the initiative here - you do! *"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" (v15).* The other person may not even realize that he or she has hurt you or wronged you. Most of the time, Step 1 is all that is needed, especially if you speak to the other person without anger, and with Christian love. Many times it will be just a misunderstanding or miscommunication, or a blind spot that needs to be cleared up.

Here's an illustration. Recently a student came to me and said that I had hurt her by something I said in class. I hadn't realized it, but when she shared this with me I immediately saw my mistake and apologized, and we became good friends. In that situation, Step 1 worked the way it usually works, when it's followed properly. Unfortunately, many Christians don't follow Step 1. They become angry and vindictive, and start to tell others as soon as they feel they've been wronged.

Step 2: Suppose you've tried Step 1, and the person who has wronged you doesn't respond. What now? You go to Step 2. *"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" (v16).* Step 2 is important, because it shows that you're not imagining some hurt, or being overly sensitive, or making something up. Follow the biblical principle of verifying the truth with two or three witnesses. Deuteronomy 19:15 says, *"One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by*

the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.” These two or three fellow-believers can act as arbitrators, or they can become a buffer if hostile feelings or outbursts arise. They can also see more objectively than you can at this point. In fact, they may actually be able to point out a few areas in **your** life that need some repair work!

Step 3: *“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” (v17).* If the offender refuses to listen to the two or three witnesses (notice - not you, but them), then - and only then - you take Step 3. You bring the situation before the leaders of the local church.

2. The Lord gives the church the authority to discipline believers who sin.

“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” (v17).

The highest form of discipline in the church is excommunication - **excluding the unrepentant offender from the local church fellowship**. In 1 Corinthians 5 we see that the discipline of excommunication, or excluding from church fellowship, has the good effect of moving a sinning believer to repentance. Notice here in Matthew 18 that the person who’s been sinned against does not carry out the discipline. Only the local church has the authority to discipline. Discipline in the local church is what verses 18-20 are all about.

What does the phrase *“like a heathen and a tax collector”* mean? Pagans and corrupt tax collectors were outside the sphere of the Church (unless they became believers). So that expression that means the offender is treated like those who were outside the church - who were not part of the local church fellowship.

The “binding and loosing” of sin (v18) does not refer to the eternal forgiveness of sins. The church doesn’t have that authority - only God does. But God has delegated His authority to the local church for **administrative discipline**. “Binding and loosing” here have to do with administrative discipline. When local church leaders determine before the Lord in prayer that a believer must be disciplined because of sin, the spiritual authority of those local church leaders is backed up by heaven. The decision is *“bound in heaven”* means the decision is made with God’s authority. When the local church leaders make a decision to bring a repentant sinner back into fellowship, they do so with God’s authority. The restored sinner is “loosed” in heaven as well as “loosed” on earth.

“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (v20). This verse is often applied to any gathering or get-together of believers in the name of Christ, and that’s certainly OK as an **application**. But if we want to properly **interpret** a verse or passage we must **remember the context!** The context of this verse is church discipline! Wherever and whenever church leaders are gathered together in the name of Christ to administer church discipline, they can be sure that the Lord is in their midst, providing wisdom and backing up their authority. The Lord gives the local church the authority to discipline believers who sin.

Practical Application

Go to church, not to court!

Go to church, not to court! That practical application sounds like I'm saying that if you go to church, you won't get into trouble and you'll stay out of court! But that's not my point!

1 Corinthians 6 clearly says that when Christians have a major difference of opinion in a serious legal problem, they should **not go to a civil court over it**, and they should **not bring lawsuits** against one another. Instead, they should go to the church to settle their differences. There will be some neutral believers within the church who will be willing and able to arbitrate and decide the case.

1 Corinthians 6:1 says, *"Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? If the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more matters of this life? So if you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? I say this to your shame Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren..."*

Get the point? Is there any kind of legal problem between you and another Christian right now? Follow the procedure given by our Lord here in Matthew 18. Go to the church - **not** to court!