

**Matthew 18:15-20**

If you had a good friend living in New Orleans and you knew how bad hurricane Katrina was going to be, would you have warned him or her to get out of the city? Even if you had to wake your friend up with a phone call at night, because you are a friend, you would have made the call. That's what friends do. How much more so when that friend is a brother or sister in Christ. If you were driving down the road and saw smoke coming out of the house of a fellow church member, would you help? Would you make sure that family was safe? Would you wake them up from a deep sleep by banging on their door if necessary? If your answer is "yes," and I'm sure it is, then answer this question: If that same church member, that brother or sister in Christ, was in spiritual danger—if their eternal soul was in jeopardy—would you also confront them and warn them?

Friend, that's exactly what Jesus urges us to do in our Gospel for today. "If your brother sins against you," He begins. Yes, it is true—we sin against each other...member against member, member against pastor, pastor against member. What kind of sins? Jesus doesn't say. It doesn't really matter. What does matter is the person's attitude toward their sin. If I have an unrepentant heart; if my attitude is that I don't care that I sinned against you—I am in spiritual danger; my eternal soul is in jeopardy, because faith cannot live in such a heart.

And so Jesus is quite clear: Go and confront that brother or sister. Not, "go and get even." Not, "leave them alone and hold a grudge." Go to them. Not to everyone else in the congregation. Not to anyone who will listen. Out of love for that erring brother or sister, speak to them about their sin.

Now there are more steps that Jesus prescribes in Matthew 18. But let's focus on just this one for now. If we would do that—if we would, in love, confront those who sin against us, instead of ignoring it or getting angry over it—we would see God's love in action among the members of this congregation.

And having said that, I'm going to be the first to admit that I struggle with Matthew 18. I have a hard time with confronting God's people with their sin. It would be so much easier to do anything but that—ignore it and hope that things will get better in time—that would be easier. Talk about their sin, but not to them—to someone else—that would be easier. You know why it's tough to do what Jesus commands here? For one thing, I'm a sinner too. I have probably done the same wrong to someone else which was done to me. I'd feel like a hypocrite if I confronted them with their sin. I'd be condemning myself. But Jesus says to go and speak to them.

For another thing, I don't want a big argument. What if they jump all over me? No, it would be a whole lot easier to just walk away. Jesus says to go and speak to them. And this one may be the toughest of all—I may really be hurting inside. I may really be upset at that person. I don't want to go and talk to them. I just want to be angry.

Is it any wonder why every Christian congregation has problems? None of us wants to follow Matthew 18. In fact...none of us can follow Matthew 18—because the strength to do so is not in us. The strength to lovingly confront a sinner belongs to God alone. And when I say, "lovingly," I don't necessarily mean "gently." To confront someone in love

means to confront that person for the sole purpose of winning them back to Christ; of leading them to repentance so that you may say these words: I forgive you.

You know why Jesus says: Go and speak to the one who sins against you? Because that is where Jesus works among us. When you show your brother his fault, it's not your word to him, it's Jesus' word. It's Christ who is working to convict him of his sin when you go and speak to him. And it's Christ who is forgiving when that person repents and you say, "I forgive you." It is Jesus at work through you to bring that person back to the faith. To bring God's Law, and His Good News of forgiveness to an erring brother or sister is not us—it's Christ in us and through us. It's God in action among His people.

And He knows what He's doing. He's been doing this since time began. Since sin entered our world God has been confronting us with our sin, so that He can say the words, "I forgive you." For you, it began in your baptism. You came to the water a wretched little sinner, and God confronted you. You had sinned against Him—you were born in that sin—and He confronted you. He did not get angry. He did not ignore your sins against Him. He dealt with you in love. In the washing of Holy Baptism He led you to repent of your sin, and there He forgave you.

Did He stop with that? No, you keep on sinning against Him, and so He keeps confronting you. He preaches His Law to you through the mouth of His preacher to lead you to repentance, so that you can hear and believe the words: I forgive you all your sins in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. He leads you to His Table so that He can place into your mouth the Savior's body and blood which died and rose again for you; which guarantees you a place in heaven—for to receive Jesus is to receive eternal life.

"If your brother sins against you," Jesus says. And He should know. Because every person He created sins against Him many times each and every day. But God is love. In love He died for us sinners. There on the cross He confronted our sins by claiming them as His own. He became the wretched sinner. He became the one who gets angry. He became the one who holds a grudge. He became the one who is afraid to speak to others about their sins. He became sin for us, so that we would become right with God in Him.

Does God see your anger...your grudge? No, He sees His Son who died for you. Does God see a weak-kneed individual who is afraid to speak to erring Christians? No, He sees His Son who took your weaknesses and who gives you His strength.

And in that strength, you and I—God's baptized, forgiven people—will present Christ to those around us. To those we live with and work with. To those who sin against us. We will not show anger and grudges to them—those things are gone—washed away from us by the waters of baptism. We have Christ now. It is He who lives in us. And He who forgives you will, through you, confront and forgive those around you. In Jesus' Name. Amen.