

You're Offended. Now What?

(Matthew 18:15-18)

GOD'S GUIDELINES FOR DEALING WITH SIN ARE RADICAL

Dealing with disagreement is difficult. Disagreements often produce a bushel of poisonous fruit that harm the health of the entire fellowship. This is true even when the disagreements are limited to a handful of individuals. Once this forbidden fruit is shared and consumed by others, it affects the health of the whole fellowship.

In His wisdom and mercy, God has given us instructions—revealed in His word—for dealing with disagreements that lead to sinful, hurtful actions and poisonous fruit. Handling this fruit in a way which promotes health and not harm is a benevolent benefit. However, at times God's instructions suggest a course of action that may seem severe, radical, or harsh. Part of the reason they seem so is that we live in a permissive, politically correct culture where dealing with toxic fruit deliberately and decisively is frowned upon. In modern American culture, there is no truth, only opinions, and no sin, only preferences.

Another reason God's instructions may seem radical is because God is never satisfied addressing fruit problems while ignoring their root causes. His instructions to us may hurt when they address not only surface behaviors, but deep-seated attitudes. God cares about roots, not just fruits, and provides instructions on how to deal with both. That may be why these instructions appear severe or harsh or radical.

The word "radical" comes from the Latin *radix*, which means root. Radical is not a synonym for severe or harsh, although it is frequently misused that way. A *radical* solution is neither harsh nor severe, but one that gets to the root (*radix*) of the problem. It is foundational to a problem's resolution, whether it be the problems caused by stealing, adultery, lying, slander, or gossip.

If you had a tree in your yard that produced poisonous fruit that could seriously harm your children and your dog if consumed, you might choose to pick up the fruit every year when it fell from the tree as a solution. It would be work, but it's simple and straightforward. Removing the tree all the way down to the root that produced the fruit would be a more complex and exhausting option, but much more necessary if the tree continues to bear bad fruit repeatedly.

Our passage today, Matthew 18:15-18, contains one such set of radical instructions. God gave them to help us deal with sinful behaviors that occur around disagreements within a Christian fellowship. In the New International Version (NIV), the verses are

introduced by the header: “Dealing with Sin in the Church.” The actions are the fruit, while the underlying attitudes are the roots.¹ The text reads:

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.” [Deut. 19:15] 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. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

A Three-Step Process

The instructions lay out a clear, biblical, three-step process to follow when confronting sin in a Christian fellowship. They are radical and you may find them alarming.

- **Step 1**

The first step is found in verse 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.* When one person—male or female—sins against, harms, or offends another within the fellowship, **the injured party is responsible to confront the perpetrator.** The boldness or meekness of the offended party doesn’t matter. The boldness or meekness of the alleged perpetrator doesn’t matter. The content of the sin doesn’t matter. It is left imprecise deliberately so that a broad variety of offenses can be included. However, given the three steps that follow—which ultimately includes excommunication from the fellowship—it seems evident that the sin being considered is not trivial, but substantial.

When this “sin” occurs, the sinned against must go to the sinner and “rebuke” them. That is the force of the word kindly translated, *point out their fault* by the NIV. They are not to scold the perpetrator or “abuse them verbally for their conduct but rather to bring the offensive matter to their attention in hope that they will repent of their actions and be restored to the community.”²

You’ll also notice that this first step is to be carried out in private: *go and point out their fault, just between the two of you.* This is to avoid spreading knowledge of the person’s sin

¹ “Roots” can be complex and multi-layered. Often the deeper you dig the more roots you discover. In this illustration however, fruits are largely restricted to action and roots to underlying attitudes

²Word Biblical Commentary

among unaffected parties and unwarranted shame to the perpetrator. When possible, the confrontation is to be conducted one-on-one. The desired response and results of this confrontation are also described. *If they listen to you, you have won them over.* The “listening” being described is not merely hearing. It’s an appropriate listening response on the part of the perpetrator confronted, that leads to repentance and a request for forgiveness, so that reconciliation and restoration may occur. It’s important to note that when you go, you go for the purpose of winning over your brother or sister, not winning an argument. It’s always possible to win the argument and lose the person.

Consider the illustration of three men who knew each other. We’ll call them Mark, Luke, and Jonathan. Mark and Luke barely knew each other, but Jonathan knew them both well. Mark and Luke attended a Christian Bookseller’s convention where they had the chance to interact with each other one-on-one. As they conversed about their backgrounds and industry, they introduced themselves to each other by sharing bits of their resumes. It was a brief interaction that was quickly forgotten by Luke, but not by Mark.

Over two years later, Jonathan told one of Luke’s supervisors that Luke did not have what it took to be promoted within the company. When the supervisor inquired the reason for Jonathan’s opinion, he replied, “Just ask Mark.” Word got back to Luke about what Jonathan had said, so he immediately called Mark.

Mark told Luke that over two years ago, when they both attended the convention and their brief conversation, Luke had laughed “derisively” in Mark’s face about his inferior education. Mark said he was so offended, “If I had not been in a room full of people, I would have decked you.” Mark continued, “I may not have all your degrees, but I am still a successful leader in our industry.” Luke apologized profusely, asked Mark’s forgiveness, prayed with him, and tried to assure him that he never felt that way, thought those thoughts, or had anything but appreciation and respect for Mark.

Mark told Luke, he was just beginning to get over this and Luke’s apology helped. Later, Luke recalled the initial conversation in greater detail. He **was** surprised that a person with Mark’s background had progressed so far in their industry. However, he had failed to clearly communicate that. Later, Luke wondered why Mark hadn’t brought this to his attention in over two years and why their mutual friend, Jonathan, hadn’t told Mark to talk to Luke or—if he was unwilling—volunteer to go with Mark to confront Luke. The whole misunderstanding would have been cleared up and solved much earlier. That’s Step 1.

- **Step 2**

Once step one has been tried and proven fruitless, a second step is to be implemented, described in verse 16, *But if they will not listen, take one or two others along.*

In step two, step one is repeated, but now in the presence of 1-2 additional members of the community. Why? Because **God wants bad behavior addressed**. He desires it be dealt with. When sin isn't dealt with it always spreads. People gossip under the guise of gaining support; they confide in their closest friends how they were hurt, offended, and sinned against. Too often, these close friends respond with outrage, sympathy, support, understanding, and prayer: all appropriate. They may do everything except what they must—**send the offended party back to the offender**.

When someone comes and shares their offense with you, often they have not completed Step 1. Your job in that moment is to remind them of that step and encourage them to take it. If they are too weak or unwilling, then offer to go with them.

God wants the first step in resolution to be linear, not triangular. If A hurts B, and B confronts A, a clear LINE of communication has been established. That's what God desires; but all too often, A hurts B, and B tells C. C then goes and tells A or D, E, and F. Within hours, one TRIANGLE after another has created a mess of triangles.

Consider the previous illustration. Luke hurt Mark. What should Mark have done? Within a reasonable time, he should have told Luke. *“If your brother sins, rebuke him” (Lk 17:3)*. If Mark was unwilling, then Jonathan should have accompanied him. First, to determine *what* happened and *why* it happened: to seek clarification and understanding. Second, for the purpose of helping facilitate repentance and reconciliation, if warranted. That did NOT happen, so Mark wallowed in his own anger and bitterness for over two years.

This step is rooted in a pattern established in Deuteronomy 19:15, which is quoted by Matthew: *so that “every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”* The application of the principle is not meant to be identical, because in Deuteronomy, the witnesses are witnesses of the deed itself. Here, they serve as witnesses of the rebuke and—through their presence—add weight to the reproof and appeal for repentance. They also witness the response of repentance or the refusal to repent.

Beyond this difference in application, the quote is the same in meaning and authority. As in the first step, the hope here is for repentance and reconciliation. The fact that the situation is growing more serious is highlighted by the presence of others. Paul highlights this increasing seriousness in both 2 Corinthians 13:1 and 1 Timothy 5:19. The apostle also calls upon a third party to help intervene and calls out the disagreeing parties by name—Euodia and Syntyche—in Philippians 4:2-3. That's step 2.

- **Step 3**

The final step is the most radical. Step three is instituted when the offending party does not listen to the individual in Step 1 or the small group in Step 2. The words *refuse to listen* are one Greek word meaning “disregard” which is used twice in verse 17. It describes the offending party’s refusal to repent in steps two and three. If the offending party disregards the content of the confrontation, refuses to listen, or using modern terms, “pooh-poohs, brushes aside, brushes off, turns a deaf ear, or discounts” the attempted communication, Jesus instructs *tell it to the church*. The meaning of “*the church*” is the elders, the leaders of the local church of which the offending member is a part.

In step three, the elders are informed of the offending party’s refusal to repent. They then become the voice of appeal. They issue the call to repent with all the authority of Jesus: *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 (18)*. This may seem extreme, but more extreme is the refusal to repent, be reconciled, and act in ways that promote restoration. It is the refusal to accept responsibility that makes the elders’ involvement necessary. Again, at this stage the goal is not winning a case but winning a brother or sister. However, the offending party may not even respond to the appeal of the elders.

At that point—a point that no one in the community ever desired to reach—all appeals have been refused and all options have been exhausted. The only course of action remaining is ostracism from the community, described in bitter terms too familiar to Matthew’s Jewish readers: *if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector*. Matthew is tapping into prevailing prejudices of his day as an illustration of the social and emotional cut-off **the offending party has imposed upon himself by his refusal to repent**. Note that the unrepentant offender is not simply asked to *leave* the community—put out as it were—but in addition they are treated as the worst sort of person: all because of their unwillingness to repent and make things right. They must not be despised or hated, but they cannot be held close. They are to be treated as the previously cited examples of despicable people.

Remember that the original twelve disciples were raised in the Jewish synagogue, so they were familiar with congregational discipline as it was practiced faithfully in the synagogue. Church discipline is seriously neglected by most churches in the present day, but it is clearly taught here and in the epistles.³ Just as children in the home require constant discipline, so God’s children in the church need discipline, no matter what their age, level of experience, or station in life.

³ See 1Corinthians 5; 2Thessalonians 3:6-16; 2Timothy 2:23-26; Titus 3:10

Consider the father whose son who is about to attend his senior prom. The son has rented his tux, purchased flowers, and hired the limo. His date has her dress. They ordered the carnation and corsage. They've purchased tickets. Everything is in place.

But then the son disobeys his father through an act so significant that the father tells the son that unless he repents, apologizes, and makes things right, he is not permitted to go to the prom. It is a hard line, but it is fair considering the offense. (Use your imagination!) If you were the son, would you be motivated to do all in your power to repent, apologize, and make things right, whatever it took?

That's what we're dealing with in Step 3.

Response

These guidelines seem shocking in a culture as lenient as our own. They appear too radical in a culture that overlooks offensive behavior, treats truth as a matter of opinion, and considers offensive actions and disparaging words of no consequence. However, these instructions are not given to the culture, but to the church. We are to demand a different standard of conduct from ourselves and our brothers and sisters because God demands it of us.

We read this and can only imagine the disruptive consequences of obediently following these confrontational steps. So, we ask ourselves and each other:

“What if we hurt their *feelings*?”

“What if we *offend* them?”

“What if they *leave*?”

“What if they bad mouth us around town?”

These instructions must be carried out with deliberation, with humility, with prayer and consecration, and with hearts that are broken, not eager, but they must be carried out.

I want to assure you as a congregation that we have these kinds of issues here at Mount Joy. We are not a perfect church. But you can be sure that we are taking steps to extend both a listening ear and tough love where needed. We want to promote repentance, salvage relationships, and restore unity in this community of believers. That is our prayer; that is our goal. We do not always succeed, but:

- I assure you: you are here for a reason. You may only be here for a season, but no matter how long that season, you are here for a reason

- I am here for a reason. I don't know how long my season will be, but I know that I have not fulfilled my reason and I'm staying until I do
- Your leaders—elders, deacons, trustees—are here, in place, for a reason. They serve God and you faithfully, sometimes at great personal expense and sacrifice, so they should be held in honor and held up in prayer among you

We are all here to fulfill the purpose of God at this time, in this place, for these people, and the next generation. We could always do better, and we are helped by critical feedback, but not by critical spirits. WE are helped most when you lead with questions and not conclusions. YOU are most helped when you assume the best, ask clarifying questions, and then become part of any solution.

Though we may not know all the specifics of God's purpose for us, we know that it includes the faithful spreading of the Gospel so the next generation comes to saving faith in Christ, the faithful teaching of the word of God in all its breadth and depth, the faithful obedience to and application of that teaching, and the relevant, exuberant, and reverent worship of the God we seek to love with all of our hearts, with all of our minds, with all of our souls, and with all of our strength.

Not included in God's sovereign purpose for us—we are certain—is to make everyone happy, comfortable, or pleased with our methods, music, or ministries. Your leaders are committed to serve an audience, but it is an audience of One.

We are continually in negotiations to salvage relationships with those who have left or are considering leaving, but reconciliation requires participation and communication between two parties. Whenever either party refuses to communicate, to respond, or to repent, reconciliation is thwarted.

I would also remind you that these issues are never about one party, even the pastor, the elders, or the Council, "winning" or "getting their way." They are about us all seeking God's way, God's will for us. Daily we are in prayer discerning His direction and we need your prayers, encouragement, feedback and participation. In addition, we are seeking to handle criticism, offense, anger, disagreement, disgruntlement, and departure in accordance with the explicit, clear guidelines revealed in passages like Matthew 18:15-18.

Commenting on this text, one scholar wrote, "A basic premise to this pericope [this text] is the importance of personal relationships between members of the community.... It is so important that one not impudently sin against another. Accordingly, Jesus outlines a procedure for cases where one sins in this way and displays a hard-heartedness about it. It would be a mistake to think that in similar

circumstances this procedure could be applied today, primarily because excommunication or ostracism today has nowhere near the same effect as it did in the first century. That is, in Matthew's day to be cast out left one with no other options for Christian community. Today a person may simply walk down the street to the next church or next denomination. This is not to say that the church must give up on the possibility of church discipline but simply to say that the process will take on its own character appropriate to the present-day situation. It is also worth pointing out that the notion of an 'isolated, individual Christian' (e.g., a 'TV' Christian) was not then considered a possibility. The Christian is always to be accountable to a community."⁴

As your pastors and elders, we are committed to following these guidelines. Together, with one voice, we declare to you today that we are committed to:

- Keeping open the possibility of reconciliation through all three steps and beyond
- Recognizing that the process of reconciliation may involve repentance on the part of both parties
- Acknowledging to ourselves—and others—that reconciliation does *not* require others to return to this fellowship
- However, it does require:
 - Repentance for any patterns of sinful, offensive behavior
 - Acknowledgement of the damage one's actions have inflicted on others
 - Seeking forgiveness from God and us
 - And a cessation of those practices that brought the initial disagreements

We, the authoritative leaders of the church to whom God has given authority, are committed to:

- Confronting poisonous fruit with the Fruit of the Spirit
- Speaking the truth in love
- Valuing and loving our members
- Longing for the reconciliation that God alone can provide in this life
- And considering those who remain in their sin not our enemies, but victims of our Enemy, the devil

We press on together.

PRAY.

⁴Word Biblical Commentary