

IF YOUR BROTHER SINS AGAINST YOU

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God's word contains "*all things that pertain unto life and godliness*" (2 Pet 1:3). In it we find all necessary instruction in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). This includes all the teachings that we will ever need to be able to handle difficult situations that may arise between us and our brethren. One of those situations that we need to know how to handle properly (i.e. in the way that the New Testament teaches us to) is when one of our brothers or sisters in Christ commits a sin against us personally.

Personal trespasses

In Luke 17:3, Christ says, "*If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him, and if he repent, forgive him.*" According to the Lord's commandment, the first step to take when a brother in Christ has committed a sin against us is to rebuke him. This passage in Luke does not give the specific procedure to follow in rebuking our brother who sins against us, but that procedure is found in Matthew 18:15-17. In both Luke 17:3 and Matthew 18:15-17, the Lord says, "if your brother shall *trespass*." The context of these passages is limited to matters of *sin*. Irritating, or annoying someone is not the same as sinning against them. An innocent oversight is also not a sin, and neither is bad judgment. By definition, sin is transgression of God's law (1 John 3:4). The Lord also says, "if your brother shall trespass against *you*." This excludes all types of sins except for personal sins against another brother in Christ. General moral transgressions (1 Cor 5; Gal 6:1; 1 Tim 1:20; 2 Thes 3:6-15) and false teaching (Rom 16:17; 1 Tim 6:3-5; Titus 3:10-11) are not personal trespasses and there are other procedures to follow for dealing with those matters. These scriptures are dealing with the situation when a fellow Christian does something against us that is in violation of God's commandments. To apply Matthew 18:15-17 to any other situation is to take the passage out of its context and to misapply it.

Step 1: Going alone

As to the specific procedure to follow when our brother has sinned against us personally, Jesus says, "*Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother*" (Matt 18:15). The first step is to go to our brother alone and tell him his fault. The one sinned against (the victim) must *go*, and not merely send someone else, write a letter, send an email, or make a telephone call. He also must *go alone* to the one who sinned. Though some may say, "He did me wrong. He needs to come to me!," the Lord puts the responsibility for going upon the innocent party. And the first attempt to call the guilty brother to repentance *must* be made *alone*. The purpose of going is to "tell him his fault." The brother who has been wronged must explain

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exactly what sin has been committed. If the guilty party hears, then the matter is finished, the brother has been gained. The victim is then required to forgive his brother (Luke 17:3). Only if the guilty party refuses to repent (i.e. refuses to “hear”) does the matter proceed to the next step.

Step 2: Taking one or two witnesses

For step two, the victim then goes back to the guilty party with either one or two others, making the total number, including the victim, two or three witnesses (Matt 18:16). Taking either less than one or more than two is not permitted. The function of the one or two others is to be witnesses, not a “lynch party.” In the presence of the witnesses, the victim must again tell his brother specifically what he has done wrong. If the guilty brother repents at this point, then the brother has been gained and he must be forgiven and the matter put to rest for all time. If the guilty party still neglects to “hear” (does not repent), only then does the matter proceed to step three.

Step 3: Going to the church

At this point, the victim must take the matter before the church (Matt 18:17). Again, if the guilty brother repents, then the brother has been regained and that sin is not to be held against the brother ever again. But if the brother refuses to repent again, then the church is to make the unrepentant sinner to be as “a heathen man and a publican.” Even when the matter reaches the step in Matthew 18:17 where action must be taken by the church, there should still be follow-up work done to try to regain the erring brother. Too often is the case that when the church does take action against a sinner, the sinner is from that point forever ignored. But Jesus did not ignore the publicans and sinners. He ate with them, but only for the purpose of calling them to repentance (Matt 9:10-13). Therefore, even if our brother is made as a heathen man and a publican to the church, we should still go to him on occasion to continue to call him to repentance. We can only go to him for the purpose of calling him to repent of the sin that he committed against his us. We do not have the option of ignoring his sin, because the Lord will certainly not. We must *walk in the light* to have fellowship with both God and our fellow Christians (1 John 1:5-7). Therefore, we must specifically deal with the unresolved matter in any future meetings with our brother. If he refuses to discuss the matter with us, then that is on him. But it is our obligation to try (Jas 5:19-20). And in every attempt to regain the brother, the proper attitude must be exhibited (Eph 4:15), as the aim is to gain the brother, to restore the lost one to the ninety-nine (Matt 18:10-14). Finally, each individual sin is a separate matter, even if seven times in one day (Luke 17:4). This procedure must be followed without substitution, addition, deletion, deviation, or alteration each and every time.