

SEEKING TO GAIN A BROTHER

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In Luke 17:2-3, Jesus Christ gives his disciples instructions about how to handle the situation when a fellow Christian sins against them personally: “*Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.*” These instructions begin with the warning to first take heed to ourselves, not to that other person. There are several commandments given to the one who has been sinned against that must be obeyed.

A sin against a brother

Luke 17:3 says, “If thy brother trespass against thee, *rebuke him*, and if he repent, forgive him.” We must first rebuke our brother. 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*. The definition of sin is breaking one of God’s commandments: “*Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law*” (1 John 3:4). Irritating, or annoying someone is not the same as sinning against them. An innocent oversight is also not a sin, and someone using bad judgment is also not necessarily a sin. The Lord also says, “If your brother shall trespass against *you*.” The context of Matthew 18:15-17 and Luke 17:2-3 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 given in those passages for dealing with those matters. To try to apply Matthew 18:15-17 to any other situation is to take the passage out of its context and to completely misapply it.

Step one to regain the brother in sin

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, write a letter, 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 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 two to regain the brother in sin

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

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(continued)

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 three and beyond

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.” But even when this Matthew 18:17 action is taken, there should be follow up work done to try to gain him back. Jesus ate with the publicans and sinners, but for only one purpose: to call them to repent of whatever sins they had not repented of (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 must specifically deal with that matter in meeting with him. We are not authorized to meet with him for any other purpose than to call him to repentance. 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.

Forgiving our repentant brother

In Luke 17:3, Jesus also says “If he (thy brother) repent, *forgive him.*” In the next verse, the Lord teaches us the extent to which this teaching applies. He says, “And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.” Each sin is a separate issue and we must treat it as such, even if it is seven times in a single day. Actually, Jesus does not limit it to seven times in a day. Peter asked Jesus, “*Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus says unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven*” (Matt 18:21-22). “Seventy times seven” shows us that forgiveness must be given without limit. Every time someone sins against us, if they repent we *must* forgive them. In Matthew 18:23-35 Jesus taught a parable of a king that had compassion and forgave one of his servants a debt of 10,000 talents. That same servant would not show mercy and forgive his fellowservant a debt of 300 pence (an insignificant sum in comparison to the debt of which he had been forgiven). When the king heard of this, he *unforgave* this servant of his 10,000 talent debt. Jesus says, “So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses” (Matt 18:35). If we do *not from our hearts forgive every one* of our brother’s sins against us, God will not only refuse to forgive us of any future sins that we commit (Matt 6:15; Mark 11:25-26; Luke 6:37), but God will also do like this king in the parable and *unforgive our past sins* which He has previously forgiven. That is extremely serious as we would then have every sin that we have ever committed on our account on Judgment Day. From the teachings of Luke 17:4 and Matthew 18:21-35, we see the great necessity of forgiving our brother every time he sins against us and repents.