

# Dealing With a Sinning Brother

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It is obvious that a brother, no matter how spiritually mature or well-intentioned, may someday sin against us. It is inevitable. Our heart-level response, of course, is to forgive them of their sins against us lest we find ourselves handed over to the tormenters. (see Mt. 18:34-35)

In an age of lawlessness, however – where nearly everyone is pursuing only their own agendas and not the agenda of Christ – it is becoming increasingly difficult to know where forgiveness ends and complicity in their sins begins. That is, when are we truly helping our brother grow in grace and righteousness and when are simply enabling our brothers and sisters to practice their sin without consequence and with our unspoken, silent consent and approval? It is very popular – and convenient – to simply overlook the sinfully immature behaviors and believers and call this “forgiveness” or “bearing one another’s burdens.” But is this really how we ought to deal with one another’s sins?

No, it is not. Forgiving our brother is an *interactive* part of a healthy, mature relationship. *Ignoring* our brother’s sins is a refusal to interact with him in honesty and integrity and creates a shallow, dysfunctional, deceptive relationship. In this age of lawlessness, most relationships are too shallow and superficial to withstand the weight of honest and open confrontation – and most individuals are so emotionally and spiritually immature that they prefer the darkness of deceptive “fellowship” at “church” to the glaring and blinding light of reality and our responsibility to walk in self-sacrificing love and holiness with one another.

Let us look again at the remedy Christ *commands* us to perform when our brother sins against us. He said, “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. But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the ekklesia. But if he refuses even to hear the ekklesia, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.” (Mt. 18:15-17)

This is a personal interaction. Jesus did not leave us the convenient out of ignoring our brother’s sin against us while we continue to smile, hug our brother and act as if nothing were wrong while we bide our time until we explode or enact our vengeance or “discuss” the matter as darkly as possible with our favored “confidants.”

In this age of lawlessness, however, we find a second and very real problem to be in *the ekklesia* to whom we are to present the matter once it reaches the third phase of confrontation. One is hard pressed to find even one or two witnesses who know *how* to judge a matter and who *can* come into agreement with one another according to the leading of the Spirit of God – *let alone* an entire assembly of believers. Most people these days have their religious traditions, theological paradigms, cultural presuppositions, emotional immaturities and family dysfunctionalities that prevent them from taking an uncompromising stand for truth and righteousness. Expecting the whole assembly, the ekklesia, to come together in unity in this age of lawlessness is like expecting a candle to stay lit while exposed to gale-force winds. It *could* happen – but don’t hold your breath (unless the Lord performs some miraculous changes in His people after the time of writing this).

So, what *is* one who has been sinned against supposed to do? Simply this: Make every effort to follow Jesus’ commands but also recognize that you can’t force the other or even the ekklesia to obey Christ. There comes a point when you must shake the dust off and abandon

these others to their lawlessness. We must treat those who refuse to recognize their sins (but still insist on being received as full-fledged brothers) much like we treat someone in a coma – they are neither dead nor alive to us. They do not bear the fruit of righteousness and we lack the medical expertise to declare them dead.

Paul gave us this instruction many times. To the Romans, he wrote, “Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.” (Rom. 16:17) “Divisions” (Greek – “dichostasia” [1370]) is the double standard of saying, “You must believe exactly as I teach or you must leave this circle of fellowship and go find or start your own circle.” “Offenses” (Greek – “skandalon” [4625]) are “stumbling blocks” or “opportunities to fall.” The man who steadfastly refuses to compromise the truth is not the divisive one – the ones who choose any side but the truth are the ones causing division. One causing offenses here is not one whose stand for truth and righteousness pricks the thin skin of others – one causing offenses is the one who causes anyone to fall away from the truth and righteousness of Christ in any way, something which will occur to “many” in the last days. (Mt. 24:5, 10-12) And “contrary to the doctrine you received” is not a reference to whatever “church” teachings or denominational creeds you happened to grow up with – it is a reference to the original faith delivered once for all to the saints of God. Note these ones who divide and offend contrary to the only Christ and *avoid* them – not continue to “fellowship” with them in the hope they will someday outgrow their divisiveness and stumbling of others - *avoid* them.

To the Corinthians, Paul wrote, “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person... Therefore ‘put away from yourselves that wicked person.’” (1 Cor. 5:11, 13) A brother, a fellow Christian, whom you know commits sexual immorality, is greedy for things or money, has someone or some thing in a place of higher value than God in his life, speaks evil and gossips about others, habitually and excessively drinks or takes mind-altering drugs, or uses manipulation and coercion to obtain his own desires is not to be associated with. Don’t even have lunch with him. *Put away from yourselves* that one. We are not to pretend he doesn’t do these things – we are to confront him in love, particularly when his sin is against us but even when it is not, genuine agape love requires us to make great effort to rescue this one from his sin. If he won’t repent and cease from these activities, we are to *have nothing to do with him*.

To Timothy, a young apostle, Paul wrote, “If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself.” (1 Tim. 6:3-5) Throughout this letter, Paul has been speaking of things that pertain to *sound doctrine* (see also Tit. 2:1-15) and here he says that those who teach otherwise and those who will not consent to such teaching (see also 2 Tim. 4:3-4) are proud, argumentative and greedy for financial gain. From such *withdraw*.

Writing again to Timothy, Paul wrote, “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come. For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure

rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!” (2 Tim. 3:1-5) If we know someone who claims to be a believer who regularly practices any of these things, particularly if they sin against us but even when it is not, *turn away* from them.

To Titus, Paul wrote, “Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.” (Tit. 3:10-11) Again, the divisive man (Greek – “*hairetikos*” [141], “schismatic, factious, a follower of false doctrine, heretic) is not the one who refuses to compromise the truth. *Jesus* brought division *precisely* because He did everything He saw the Father doing. (Lk. 12:51; also see Jn. 7:43; 9:16; 10:19) and anyone who is not with Him is against *Him*. (Mt. 12:30) *Reject* the one who divides people away from Christ.

Jesus Himself gave a similar command to His disciples when He said, “Leave the Pharisees alone. They are blind leaders of the blind...” (Mt. 15:14) The Pharisees were those whose smug, self-centered religious arrogance enabled them to be so deceived that, what they considered wise and proper, Jesus compared to straining out gnats while swallowing camels. (Mt. 23:24) Their religious hypocrisy (Lk. 12:1) caused them, in the name of God, to stand as a blockade against anyone entering into the true way to God. (Mt. 23:13) Anyone who followed the teachings and practices of the religiously hypocritical Pharisees became doubly a son of hell. (Mt. 23:15)

Christ’s instructions were not to rebuke or correct them – though He indeed did both when they came in front of Him and the Spirit moved Him to rebuke them, both for their own sakes and for the sake of any foolish enough to listen to them. But to go looking for Pharisees to rebuke, correct and argue with is contrary to Christ’s command and it is a complete waste of time and energy. (2 Tim. 2:14, 23) and it would ultimately leave one frustrated, exhausted and perhaps insane. There is so much more to the abundant life of Christ than spending one’s time arguing with the Pharisees. If we are truly living the life of Christ, sooner or later, they will come looking for us. In the meantime, *leave them alone!*

This list of instructions -

- avoid,
- have nothing to do with,
- put away from yourselves,
- withdraw,
- turn away,
- reject,
- let alone –

is very clear. Simply ignoring the sins of our brother – both those which are against us and those which are against God and others – and continuing to “fellowship” with that brother as if nothing were wrong is simply not an option if we are going to truly obey God. “Ignore your brother’s sin” is simply not in the list of New Testament instructions.

Of course, it is also true that withdrawal from this sinning brother must not be done without first confronting him in love – making every effort to follow each phase of confrontation as Jesus *commanded*. But we must remember that there are *two* things of nearly equal value in a conflict between believers. The first priority is the truth that Christ reveals to us. The Holy

Spirit of God has shown us an area of sin in our brother. If the brother will not receive that truth after being confronted by us, then by witnesses and then by the ekklesia, then he is to be as a heathen and a tax collector to us, both of which were ostracized and hated by the people to whom Jesus was speaking. (see Mt. 18:15-17) The second thing of value in a conflict between believers is the brother. These are so nearly equal in value that, in the early phases, we pursue both simultaneously. Only when the sinning brother refuses to cling to the truth does the truth gain its superior value to us. Whatever the fight was originally about – money, property, personal rights, whatever – has absolutely no value to Christ. Only the truth, first, and the love between brothers, a very close second, have any value to Him.

The one who obeys the instructions to confront and, if necessary, abandon our brother to his lawlessness is going to be very lonely in this age of lawlessness. These descriptions of those we should leave in their stubborn sinfulness encompasses the behavior patterns of most who today claim to be believers. It is precisely this lawlessness (doing what is right in one's own eyes) that causes the love of most to grow cold and why those who would be saved must *endure* to the end. (Mt. 24:12-13) He who would truly be one of Christ's saints, a holy one set apart for His use only, may have many miles and many years to walk in loneliness and isolation.

The command upon the people of Christ is to “preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of the peace.” (Eph. 4:3) The unity of the Spirit has no elements of deceit or dysfunctionality in it as no lie is of the truth. (1 Jn. 2:21) Any unity that fails to objectively recognize and peacefully and lovingly confront the sinful ways of our brother is a false unity and is not the unity of the Holy Spirit of God. The kingdom of God is *righteousness*, peace and joy in the *Holy Spirit*. (Rom. 14:17) Anything else is simply the same tolerance the world practices and it is simply someone else's kingdom.

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